



You were created by God.

In His image.

By His power.

By His love.

You are His workmanship.

You were also created *for* God.

To reflect His glory.

To know Him.

To love Him.

To enjoy Him forever.

Augustine (AD 354-430) summarized it well:

Thou has made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.

You will never know true peace...you will never know true joy...you will never know true life...until you experience the width, length, depth, and height of the incomprehensible love of God.

This is what you were made for.

This is what you are longing for.

This is what life is all about.

The Great Commandment summarizes the life that God created us for. All the commandments of God find their root in these two commands—love God and love others. This is what it means to live for the glory of God. This is what it means to live a God-centered life.

And one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him: “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”

And He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Upon these two commandments hang the whole Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22:35-40)

The God of relationship designed us for relationship and only in relationship can we live out our true identity. The Bible says, *He has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother* (1 John 4:21). It is impossible to love God without, at the same time, learning to love others. Thus, in a very real way, our love for God can be measured by our love for others.

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. (1 John 4:7-8)

This study is part of a four-part curriculum (entitled S.E.A.R.C.H.) designed to cover the basics of the Christian life. This study is the third of four modules in this curriculum.

1. **What Do I Believe?** The basic doctrines of the Christian faith.
2. **The Drama of Scripture.** An overview of the story of the Bible (Genesis-Revelation).
3. **The God-Centered Life.** How to live the Christian life in relationship.
4. **The Defense of Christianity.** How to present the truth of Christianity to others.

Each weekly study in the S.E.A.R.C.H. curriculum consists of three primary sections:



Scripture Exploration (SE). Each week will feature the reading, contemplating, and studying of various Bible passages. The biblical principles that emerge from this study will help define what it means to love God and to love others.



Additional Resources (AR). An excerpt from a Christian book or article will help clarify and further solidify the teaching of the Bible.



Changed Hearts (CH). Personal evaluation, reflection, and practical exercises will help to apply the teaching of the Bible so that we can live for God and experience the joy of relationship with Him.

To maximize the effectiveness of this study, go through it with another believer, with your family, or in the context of a community group for encouragement, interaction, and prayer. The *Changed Hearts* section of each lesson is an ideal section to discuss each week with others.

Overview of the Study. This study consists of twelve lessons divided into five sections:

Being Loved by God

1. GRACE: Being Loved Unconditionally
2. SURRENDER: Being Loved Completely

Loving God

3. THE WORD: Hearing God
4. PRAYER: Speaking with God
5. REST: Enjoying God

Loving One Another

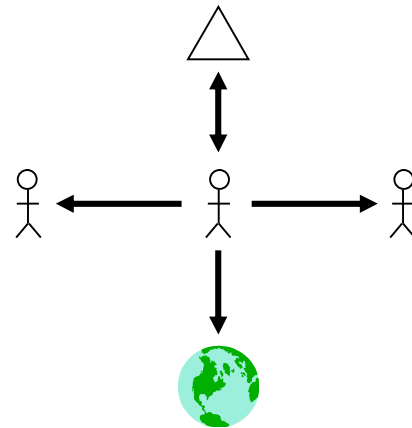
6. FAMILY: Building Up the Home
7. CHURCH: Connecting to the Body
8. GIFTS: Serving in the Body

Loving Your Neighbor

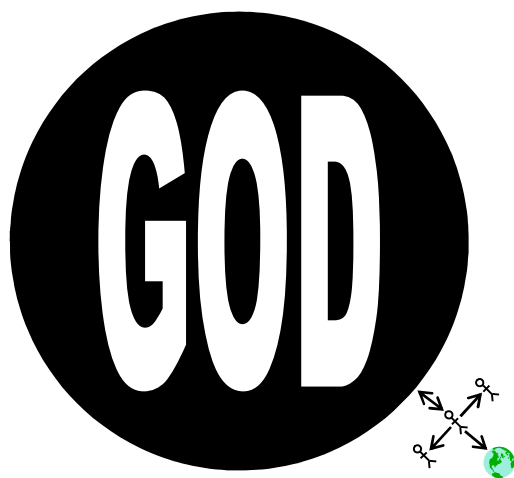
9. GOOD WORKS: Shining the Light of Christ
10. EVANGELISM: Sharing the Gospel of Christ

Living in the World

11. STEWARDSHIP: Using One's Resources
12. VOCATION: Knowing One's Calling



We are created for relationship with God, relationship with others (family, church, neighbor), and faithful stewardship in God's created world. These relationships can be pictured in the simple graphic above. However, a more accurate depiction would look more like the graphic below.



God is the center of everything in the universe.

For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be the glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:36).

He is the Creator of all things, the Sustainer of all things, and the Goal of all things. Indeed, *we live and move and have our being in Him* (Acts 17:28).

Thus, the true life is the **God-centered life**. It is a life that is lived in love, dependence, communion, and devotion to God...and in a growing love for others. Such a life can only be lived through the reconciliation available through faith in Jesus Christ and the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Each lesson of this study should take around 1-2 hours to complete. You can complete a lesson in one sitting or you can divide it up into a five-day format. Here is a suggested five-day format:

Day One: Introduction to Lesson; Scripture Exploration (section one)

Day Two: Scripture Exploration (section two)

Day Three: Scripture Exploration (section three)

Day Four: Additional Resources

Day Five: Changed Hearts

The most important thing is to be intentional about spending time in God's Word each day, praying for God to open your eyes to His Word and responding in faith and obedience to Him.

The first four words of the Bible may be the most important words: "In the beginning, God..." These are four thunderously important words. They really do change everything, from the way that you think about your identity, meaning, and purpose to the way that you approach even the most incidental of human duties. Everything that was created was made by God and for God. All the glories of the created world were designed to point to his glory. The universe is his, designed to function according to his purpose and plan. That includes you and me. We were not made to live independent, self-directed lives. We were not meant to exist according to our own little self-oriented plans, living for our own moments of glory. No, we were created to live for him.

—Paul David Tripp

Write out a short prayer to God as you begin this study.

This study guide was written by Pastor Steve Foster for use with the God-Centered Life sermon series at Community Bible Church, Baton Rouge, LA. You are welcome to reproduce any part of it for your own personal study. For any other use, please contact pastor@516church.org.

1

GRACE: Being Loved by God

Mark 12 takes place during the last week of Jesus' life. After three years of public ministry, Jesus has created quite a stir among the people and the religious leaders. The religious leaders (Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes) are particularly perturbed with Jesus. He has contradicted their traditional teachings, condemned their pride, and threatened their power and prestige. In their minds, Jesus has to go.

In Mark 12, the religious leaders are testing Jesus. They are asking Him questions designed to trap Him. If they can catch Jesus saying something blasphemous or revolutionary, then they may be able to turn the tide of public support and the wrath of Rome against Him. Thus, in Mark 12, they ask Him about paying taxes and about marriage (12:13-27). In the midst of this questioning, one religious leader, impressed by Jesus' answers, asks Him a more honest question:

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" (Mark 12:28)

The Jews, at this time, had delineated 613 commands (*mitzvot*) of God. To know, memorize and follow all of these commands was an arduous, overwhelming task. This scribe apparently wanted to simplify things. What is following God all about? What do I need to really focus upon? What is the priority?

Jesus answers these questions in Mark 12:29-31, giving him what has been called the "Great Commandment."

"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

This is what following God is all about. This is what life is all about. To miss this is to miss everything. We are created, called, and commanded to love God and to love others. Love is the priority. Everything in our lives must flow out of love.

The Great Commandment is both simple and complicated—simple in concept, complicated in practice. After all, what does it mean to love God? What does this look like in everyday life? And what does it mean to love others? How do you love someone who hurts you, disappoints you, frustrates you, or annoys you? The purpose of this study is to answer these questions through an examination of God's Word, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and through interaction with others.

We begin with grace...

DAY ONE

Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647)

Question 1:

What is the chief end of man?

Answer: Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

Question 42:

What is the sum of the ten commandments?

Answer: The sum of the ten commandments is, To love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind; and our neighbor as ourselves.

Scripture Exploration



Our love to the Lord is not worth speaking of but His to us can never be enough spoken of.
—Matthew Henry

We all have some little bit of insecurity where we would be tempted to misrepresent ourselves.
—Jennifer Beals

I have the show because I'm insecure. It's my insecurity that makes me want to be a comic, that makes me need the audience.
—Ray Romano

I'm always described as 'cocksure' or 'with a swagger,' and that bears no resemblance to who I feel like inside. I feel plagued by insecurity.
—Ben Affleck

THE NEED FOR GRACE

Loving God does not begin with our love but with God's. In other words, to truly love God we have to begin with *being loved by God*.

Look up 1 John 4:19 and write out this verse: _____

Deep down we do not see ourselves as being loveable. There is something inside of us that tells us that we are not right, that something is wrong with us. We mask over this inner insecurity and guilt with things like success, competence, beauty, power, or fame. We desperately want others to see our value, to love us, so we project the best image in order to attract others to us. Unfortunately, the image never lasts and the attraction of others is short-lived and unsatisfying. Thus, over time, our hunger intensifies. Some try to satiate the hunger with more and more things. Some try to numb it with distraction or addiction. Some try to deny it with science or philosophy. Others just grow sick of it and become hardened, cynical, angry or depressed people.

The Bible identifies this inner hunger, insecurity, and guilt as a result of sin. Adam and Eve were created to be in relationship with God and with others (Genesis 1-2). However, their disobedience to God's commands brought sin into the world and passed on a sin nature to their children...to us.

Something is wrong with the human heart. We are made in the image of God with a sense and desire for righteousness. But we are also born with a sin nature that pulls us away from God, rejects His authority, and seeks its own way.



Read Ephesians 4:17-19. Mark words or phrases that stand out to you as you read.

With the Lord's authority I say this: Live no longer as the Gentiles do, for they are hopelessly confused. Their minds are full of darkness; they wander far from the life God gives because they have closed their minds and hardened their hearts against Him. They have no sense of shame. They live for lustful pleasure and eagerly practice every kind of impurity.

How does Ephesians 4:17-19 describe a person's life apart from God?

Read Romans 3:9b-12. Mark words or phrases that stand out to you as you read.

All people, whether Jews or Gentiles, are under the power of sin. As the Scriptures say, “No one is righteous—not even one. No one is truly wise; no one is seeking God. All have turned away; all have become useless. No one does good, not a single one.”

Who is under the power and control of sin? _____

Apart from God’s work in the human heart, how many people are seeking God?

What else does Romans 3:9b-12 teach about the human heart apart from God?

THE STORY OF GRACE

As humans, we are all in the same boat—separated from God, stubborn in our will, confused in our minds, and controlled by our pride and lusts. Not a pretty picture! But how does God see us? Luke 15 gives us the answer.

Read Luke 15. Pray and ask God to speak to your heart as you read.

A *parable* is a true to life story meant to teach a truth for life. Jesus loved to tell parables to illustrate spiritual truths.

Fill in the following chart for the first two parables in Luke 15.

	What Is Lost?	How Does the Owner Respond When It Is Lost?	What Happens When the Object Is Found?
15: 4-7			
15: 8-10			

How would you summarize the message of these two parables?

Sin is man’s declaration of independence from God.

—Anonymous

Simple observation of children tells us that from birth we have a desire for our own way, a resistance to authority, and a claim on everything as “mine.”

DAY TWO

Righteous persons who do not need to repent (15:7)— Jesus is using irony to describe those who think they are righteous and feel no need to repent (Pharisees).

Ten silver coins (15:8)— A *drachma* was a Greek coin equal to a day’s wages, roughly about \$250. Often ten silver coins were worn by women as a wedding necklace.

Wild living (15:13)—

Greek, *asotos*, literally, an “unsaveable” life. Living wastefully, with reckless abandon.

THINK ABOUT:

Why do we often have to hit “rock bottom” or come to the “end of our rope” before we are willing to change our ways?

God loves each one of his people as if there was only one of them to love.

—Anonymous

Robe...ring... sandals...feast (15:22-24)—

Each is a sign of position and acceptance. Robes gave distinction. Rings indicated authority. Sandals were worn by heirs (slaves were barefoot). And feasts were reserved for the most special of occasions. Each is also undeserved since the son has forfeited all that he could claim as his own.

Jesus’ third parable captures the story of our lives (15:11-32). The “lost son” wants the father’s goods but he does not want the father. By asking for his inheritance, he is saying to his father, “You are dead to me. Give me *now* what I will get when you die.”

How does the son live once he leaves the father’s authority and care?

What caused the lost son to “come to his senses” and desire to return home?

Write out the speech that the lost son has prepared to say to his father (15:18-19)?

There are five verbs/actions used in 15:20 to describe what the father did when the lost son returned. **Write down these five actions of the father below. Beside each one, write down one thing that the action teaches you about the father.**

Action	What It Teaches Me about the Father
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

The father throws a party in celebration of the lost son’s return. **How does the older son react to this party and to the news that his younger brother has returned?**

Why do you think he reacts this way? _____

Who do you think the following people represent in Jesus’ parable?

The Father _____

The Lost Son (Leaving Home) _____

The Lost Son (Returning Home) _____

The Older Brother _____

THE RECEPTION OF GRACE

The Greek word for **grace** is *charis*. It is related to the Greek words—*chairō*, “to rejoice,” *charisma*, “gift,” and *eucharisteo*, “to give thanks.” Biblically, the word **grace** means “unmerited favor.” It is receiving that which you do not deserve.

The Christian life does not begin with our efforts or our works but with God’s grace. *We love Him because He first loved us* (1 John 4:19). Thus, the first step in living for God and loving Him is to allow oneself to be loved by God, to receive His grace.

Read the following passages. Mark the words or phrases that stand out to you.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)

But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4:10)

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:4-7)

How did God show His love and grace toward us? _____

How are we to respond? _____

Have you received God’s grace in Jesus Christ? If you honestly evaluate your heart, which son would you be in Jesus’ parable in Luke 15?

- ☐ **The Lost Son.** Doing my own thing, living the way I want.
- ☐ **The Older Brother.** Doing “good” with an attitude of pride and superiority.
- ☐ **The Found Son.** Humbly acknowledging my sin and my need for God and receiving the gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ.

We do not just receive God’s grace at salvation. Each day is a day lived under God’s grace. Each day we are to acknowledge our need for God and grow in His grace.

DAY THREE

Grace is getting what we do not deserve.

Mercy is not getting what we do deserve.

I'd be in big trouble if Karma was going to finally be my judge. It doesn't excuse my mistakes, but I'm holding out for Grace. I'm holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the Cross, because I know who I am, and I hope I don't have to depend on my own religiosity.

—Bono of the rock band, U2

Everything is of grace in the Christian life from the very beginning to the very end.

—D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

If salvation could be attained only by working hard, then surely horses and donkeys would be in heaven.
—Martin Luther

Additional Resources



Read the following excerpts from Jerry Bridge's book, *The Discipline of Grace* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994), pages 13-27.

Some years ago I wrote a book titled *The Pursuit of Holiness* in which I strongly emphasized our responsibility for holiness as opposed to the concept of just turning it all over to God. Thirteen years later I wrote another book, *Transforming Grace*, in which I urged believers to learn to live by grace, not by performance. After *Transforming Grace* was published, many people asked me how it related to *The Pursuit of Holiness*. The question always seemed to carry the suggestion that grace and the pursuit of holiness are incompatible. One lady even went so far as to wonder how the same person who wrote the book on holiness could possibly have written a book on grace.

Grace and the personal discipline required to pursue holiness, however, are not opposed to one another. In fact, they go hand in hand. An understanding of how grace and personal, vigorous effort work together is essential for a lifelong pursuit of holiness. Yet many believers do not understand what it means to live by grace in their daily lives, and they certainly don't understand the relationship of grace to personal discipline.

Consider two radically different days in your own life. The first one is a good day spiritually for you. You get up promptly when your alarm goes off and have a refreshing and profitable quiet time as you read your Bible and pray. Your plans for the day generally fall into place, and you somehow sense the presence of God with you. To top it off, you unexpectedly have an opportunity to share the gospel with someone who is truly searching. As you talk with the person, you silently pray for the Holy Spirit

to help you and to also work in your friend's heart.

The second day is just the opposite. You don't arise at the first ring of your alarm. Instead, you shut it off and go back to sleep. When you finally awaken, it's too late to have a quiet time. You hurriedly gulp down some breakfast and rush off to the day's activities. You feel guilty about oversleeping and missing your quiet time, and things just generally go wrong all day. You become more and more irritable as the day wears on, and you certainly don't sense God's presence in your life. That evening, however, you quite unexpectedly have an opportunity to share the gospel with someone who is really interested in receiving Christ as Savior.

Would you enter those two witnessing opportunities with a different degree of confidence? Would you be less confident on the bad day than on the good day? Would you find it difficult to believe that God would bless you and use you in the midst of a rather bad spiritual day?

If you answered yes to those questions, you have lots of company among believers. I've described these two scenarios to a number of audiences and asked, "Would you respond differently?" Invariably, about 80 percent indicate that they would. They would be less confident of God's blessing while sharing Christ at the end of a bad day than they would after a good one. Is such thinking justified? Does God work that way? The answer to both questions is no, because God's blessing does not depend on our performance.

Why then do we think this way? It is because we do believe that God's blessing on our lives is somehow conditioned upon our spiritual performance. If we've performed well and had a "good day, we assume we are in a position for God to bless us. Oh, we know God's blessings come to us through Christ, but we also have this vague but very real notion that they are also conditioned on our behavior. A friend of mine used to think, *if I do certain things, then I can get God to come through for me.*

Such thinking is even stronger when we've had a "bad" day. There is virtually no doubt in our minds that we have forfeited God's favor for some period of time, most likely until the next day. I've asked people why they think God would probably not use them to share the gospel with someone on a "bad" day. A typical reply is, "I wouldn't be worthy," or "I wouldn't be good enough."

Such a reply reveals an all-too-common misconception of the Christian life: the thinking that, although we are saved by grace, we earn or forfeit God's blessings in our daily lives by our performance.

A BAD DAY

So what should we do when we've had a "bad" day spiritually, when it seems we've done everything wrong and are feeling very guilty? We must go back to the cross and see Jesus there bearing our sins in His own body (1 Peter 2:24). We must by faith appropriate for ourselves the blood of Christ that will cleanse our guilty consciences (see Hebrews 9:14).

For example, in the bad-day scenario I've described, we might pray to God something like the following:

Father, I have sinned against You. I've been negligent in the spiritual disciplines

that I know are necessary and helpful for my spiritual growth. I've been irritable and impatient toward those around me. I've allowed resentful and unkind thoughts to lodge in my mind. I repent of these sins and claim Your forgiveness.

You have said You justify the wicked (Romans 4:5). Father, in view of my sins today, I acknowledge that in myself I am wicked. In fact, my problem is not merely the sins I've committed, some of which I may not even be aware of, but the fact that my heart is sinful.

These sins I am so painfully conscious of now are merely the expressions of my sinful heart.

But despite my sins and my sinfulness, You have said, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Given my acute awareness of my sin just now, that seems to be an incredible statement. How can I be without condemnation when I have so flagrantly and willfully sinned against You today?

O Father, I know it is because Jesus bore the sins I've committed today in His body on the cross. He suffered the punishment I deserve, so that I might experience the blessings He deserved. So I come to You, dear Father, and in Jesus' name I ask You to enable me to effectively share the gospel with this friend just now.

You can readily see by the spirit of humility expressed in that prayer that I am not proposing a cavalier attitude toward sin. Rather, I am saying that God's grace through Christ is greater than our sin, even on our worst days. To experience that grace, however, we must lay hold of it by faith in Christ and His death on our behalf. Now, your particular prayer may not be as long as the one I've written. The issue is not how long your prayer is; it is the attitude of your heart. Do the sentiments expressed in that prayer

reflect your heart attitude? I have read that every time the great nineteenth-century preacher Charles Spurgeon stepped into the pulpit, he did so with the silent prayer, "God, be merciful to me a sinner" (Luke 18:13). Spurgeon's one-sentence prayer captures all I've expressed in four paragraphs.

You can pray a prayer like this whenever you are acutely aware of your need of God's intervening grace and at the same time are painfully aware of your total undeservedness of that grace. In fact, we obviously should not wait until we have a need for God to bless us. We should pray such a prayer of repentance and faith just to have our consciences cleansed from all sin and to walk in fellowship with God.

A GOOD DAY

Now, let's go back to the good-day scenario, the day when your spiritual disciplines are all in place and you are reasonably satisfied with your Christian performance. Have you thereby earned God's blessing that day? Will God be pleased to bless you because you've been good? You are probably thinking, *Well, when you put it like that, the answer is no. But doesn't God only work through clean vessels?* To which I reply, "Let's assume that is true. How good then do you have to be to be a clean vessel? *How good is good enough?*"

When one of the Pharisees asked Jesus, "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:37-39).

Using Jesus' response to the Pharisee as a standard, how good has your good day been? Have you perfectly kept those two command-

ments? If not, does God grade on a curve? Is 90% a passing grade with God? We know the answers to those questions, don't we? We know that Jesus said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). And we remember that James wrote, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it" (James 2:10).

The point of this good-day-bad-day comparison is this: Regardless of our performance, we are always dependent on God's grace, His undeserved favor to those who deserve His wrath. Some days we may be more acutely conscious of our sinfulness and hence more aware of our need of His grace, but there is never a day when we can stand before Him on our own two feet of performance, when we are worthy enough to deserve His blessing.

At the same time, the good news of the gospel is that God's grace is available on our worst days. That is true because Christ Jesus fully satisfied the claims of God's justice and fully paid the penalty of a broken law when He died on the cross in our place. Because of that the Apostle Paul could write, "He forgave us all our sins" (Colossians 2:13).

Does the fact that God has forgiven us all our sins mean that He no longer cares whether we obey or disobey? Not at all. The Scripture speaks of our grieving the Holy Spirit through our sins (Eph. 4:30). And Paul prayed that we "may please [God] in every way" (Col. 1:10). We grieve God and we please God. Clearly, He cares about our conduct and will discipline us when we refuse to repent of conscious sin. But God is no longer our Judge. Through Christ He is now our heavenly Father who disciplines us only out of love and only for our good.

If God's blessings were dependent on our performance, they would be meager indeed.

Even our best works are shot through with sin—with varying degrees of impure motives and lots of imperfect performance. We are always, to some degree, looking out for ourselves, guarding our flanks, protecting our egos. It is because we do not realize the utter depravity of the principle of sin that remains in us and stains everything we do, that we entertain any notion of earning God's blessings through our obedience. And it is because we do not fully grasp the fact that Jesus paid the penalty for *all* our sins that we despair of God's blessing when we have failed to live up to even our own desires to live a life that is pleasing to God.

Here is an important spiritual principle that sums up what I've said thus far:

Your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the *reach* of God's grace. And your best days are never so good that you are beyond the *need* of God's grace.

Every day of our Christian experience should be a day of relating to God on the basis of His grace alone. We are not only saved by grace, but we also live by grace every day. This grace comes through Christ, “through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now *stand*” (Romans 5:2, emphasis added).

A significant part of the Mosaic Law was the promise of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience (cf. Deut. 28). Some Christians live as if that principle applies to them today. But Paul said that “the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith” (Galatians 3:24). Christ has already borne the curses for our disobedience and earned for us the blessings of obedience. As a result, we are now to look to Christ alone—not Christ plus our performance—for God's blessings in our

lives. We are saved by grace and we are to live by grace alone.

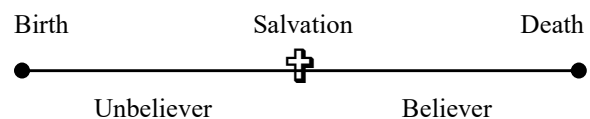
When we pray for His blessing, He does not examine our performance to see if we are worthy. Rather, He looks to see if we are trusting in the merit of His Son as our only hope for securing His blessing. To repeat:

We are saved by grace, and we are to live by grace every day of our Christian lives.

If it is true that our relationship with God is based on His grace instead of our performance, why then are we so prone to fall into the good-day-bad-day type of thinking? It is because we have relegated the gospel to the unbeliever.

A LIFETIME MESSAGE

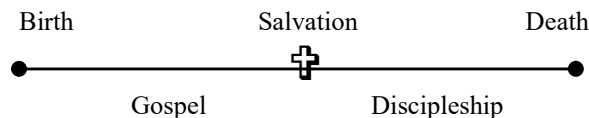
Consider a simple time line of your life as shown by the following illustration. It has only three points of time: your birth, your death, and the day of your salvation. Regardless of your age when you trusted Christ, the Cross divides your whole life into two periods:



With this time line in mind, what one word describes the Bible message you most needed to hear as an unbeliever? I suggest that word is the *gospel*. It is the gospel that is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16). We need to hear that Jesus died for sinners and that if we come to Him in faith, we will receive the forgiveness of our sins and the gift of eternal life. The message may be “packaged” in any number of ways, but it must always be the gospel. That is what we need to hear and respond to as unbelievers.

What one word describes the message we most need to hear as believers? I get a lot of different answers to that question, but most of them can be summed up with one word, *discipleship*. After all, Jesus did say, “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). As believers we are continually challenged with the demands and duties of discipleship. These demands and duties include such things as the spiritual disciplines (Bible study, prayer, worship, etc.); obedience to God's moral will set forth in the Bible or, as I call it, the pursuit of holiness; and service or ministry for the Kingdom of God. Almost everything we need to do as believers is probably included in the three words *disciplines*, *holiness*, and *service*.

So now our time line looks like this:



This time line illustrates how we tend to view the Christian life—the gospel for unbelievers and the duties of discipleship for believers. I don't question our emphasis on discipleship. As I have already observed, Jesus did say, “Go and make disciples.” If anything, we need more challenge and instruction on this threefold emphasis of disciplines, holiness, and service. But there is something more basic than discipleship, something that actually provides the necessary atmosphere in which discipleship can be practiced. The one word that describes what we must continue to hear is *gospel*.

We need to continue to hear the gospel every day of our Christian lives. Only a continuous reminder of the gospel of God's grace through Christ will keep us from falling into good-day-bad-day thinking, where we think our daily relationship with God is based on how good we've been.

It is only the joy of hearing the gospel and being reminded that our sins are forgiven in Christ that will keep the demands of discipleship from becoming drudgery. It is only gratitude and love to God that comes from knowing that He no longer counts our sins against us that provides the proper motive for responding to the claims of discipleship.

SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS AND GUILT

We must remember, however, that the gospel is for sinners. Jesus said, “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32). The gospel is meaningful for us only to the extent that we realize and acknowledge that we are still sinful. Although we are new creations in Christ, we still sin every day in thought, word, and deed, and perhaps even more importantly, in motives. To benefit from the gospel every day, then, we must acknowledge we are still sinners.

Without a continual reminder of the good news of the gospel, we can easily fall into one of two errors. The first is to focus on our external performance and become proud like the Pharisees. We may then begin to look down our spiritual noses at others who are not as disciplined, obedient, and committed as we are and in a very subtle way begin to feel spiritually superior to them.

The second error is the exact opposite of the first. It is the feeling of guilt. We have been exposed to the disciplines of the Christian life, to obedience, and to service, and in our hearts we have responded to those challenges. We haven't, however, been as successful as others around us appear to be. Or we find ourselves dealing with some of the sins of the heart such as anger, resentment, covetousness, and a judgmental attitude. Perhaps we struggle with impure thoughts or impatience, or a lack of faith and trust in God. Because we have put the gospel on the shelf

as far as our own lives are concerned, we struggle with a sense of failure and guilt. We believe God is displeased with us, and we certainly wouldn't expect His blessing on us. After all, we don't deserve His favor.

Because we are focusing on our performance, we forget the meaning of grace: God's unmerited favor to those who deserve only His wrath. Pharisee believers unconsciously think they have earned God's blessing through their behavior. Guilt-laden believers are quite sure they have forfeited God's blessing through their lack of discipline or their disobedience. Both have forgotten the meaning of grace because they have moved away from the gospel and have slipped into a performance relationship with God.

Most of us probably entertain either of these attitudes on different days. On a good day, we tend toward self-righteous Pharisaism. On a not-so-good day we allow ourselves to wallow in a sense of failure and guilt. In fact, it may be more than not-so-good days—it may be weeks or months. But whether it is weeks or days, the problem is the same. We have moved away from the gospel of God's grace and have begun to try to relate to God directly on the basis of our performance rather than through Christ.

God never intended that we relate to Him directly. Our own performance is never good enough to be acceptable to Him. The only way we can relate to God is through the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ. It is only the blood of Jesus that will cleanse us from a guilty conscience and I give us the confidence to enter into the presence of God (Hebrews 10:19-21).

The gospel, applied to our hearts every day, frees us to be brutally honest with ourselves and with God. The assurance of His total forgiveness of our sins through the blood of Christ means we don't have to play defensive

games anymore. We don't have to rationalize and excuse our sins. We can say we told a lie instead of saying we exaggerated a bit. We can admit an unforgiving spirit instead of continuing to blame our parents for our emotional distress. We can call sin exactly what it is, regardless of how ugly and shameful it may be, because we know that Jesus bore that sin in His body on the cross. With the assurance of total forgiveness through Christ, we have no reason to hide from our sins anymore.

“But,” you may be saying, “is it good to keep preaching the gospel to Christians who sin over and over again, who never seem to get their spiritual act together? Won't this cause them to quit trying? Won't they say, 'What's the use of struggling with my sin and lack of discipline? I'm forgiven anyway'? Don't we need a little bit of performance mentality to keep a sharp edge on our Christian commitment? And besides, what about all those indifferent Christians who never struggle with their sin and lack of commitment to Christ? Won't this emphasis on the gospel just harden them in their abuse of God's grace, their attitude that “It really doesn't matter how I live because God loves me unconditionally?”

Let's consider the latter group of people first. It is true that God's grace can be abused. Paul anticipated that possibility (Rom. 6:1, Gal. 5:13), and Jude indicated it was already happening in the first-century church (Jude 4). But we cannot allow some people's abuse of the truth to deprive us of its value to us, especially when that truth is so necessary to our Christian lives.

As to the first group—those who may be struggling with their sin and failure—the last thing they need is to have more guilt laid upon them. Few things cut the nerve of desire and earnest effort to change like a sense of guilt. On the contrary, freedom from guilt

through the realization of forgiveness in Christ usually strengthens a person's desire to lead a more disciplined and holy life. And it is this deepened desire that will lead to earnest prayer for the Spirit's aid and a more diligent effort to pursue discipline and holiness.

Years ago I heard a godly minister say, "Discipline without desire is drudgery." What is it, then, that sparks the desire in our hearts to lead a disciplined, godly life? It is the joy of knowing that our sins are forgiven, that no matter how much we've stumbled and fallen today, God does not count our sins against us (Romans 4:8).

MOTIVATED BY LOVE

The Apostle Paul wrote that Christ died that we should no longer live for ourselves but for Him (2 Cor. 5:15). To live no longer for ourselves but for Him is the essence of discipleship. That phrase sums up all we could include under the headings of disciplines, holiness, and service. But what is it that will motivate us to live not for ourselves but for Him? Paul said it is the love of Christ: "For Christ's love compels us" (2 Cor. 5:14).

The idea behind the word *compel* is to press in upon so as to *impel*, that is, to urge or drive forward by the exertion of a strong moral pressure. Kenneth Wuest, in his expanded translation of the NT, beautifully captured the flavor of the word *compel*, as Paul used it here, when he translated, "For the love which Christ has [for me] presses on me from all sides, holding me to one end and prohibiting me from considering any other, wrapping itself around me in tenderness, giving me an impelling motive."

Notice though, what compelled Paul in such a strong manner. It was not a continual challenge to be more disciplined, or more committed, or more holy. Rather it was his

constant heartfelt awareness of Christ's love for him. It was not the thought that "I ought to do this or that" or a feeling of guilt for not doing something that motivated Paul. Rather it was his overwhelming sense of Christ's love for him that spurred him on.

We believers do need to be challenged to a life of committed discipleship, but that challenge needs to be based on the gospel, not on duty or guilt. Duty or guilt may motivate us for awhile, but only a sense of Christ's love for us will motivate us for a lifetime.

If the love of Christ for us is to be the motivating force for a life of discipleship, how then can we come to the place where we are acutely conscious of His love? The answer is, through the gospel. It is, of course, the Holy Spirit who pours out His love into our hearts (Romans 5:5), but He does this through the message of the gospel. The good news of the gospel is that Jesus paid for all our sins on the cross and that we are thereby forgiven. As we continually reflect upon that gospel, the Holy Spirit floods our hearts with a sense of God's love to us in Christ. And that sense of His love motivates us in a compelling way to live for Him.

Over the years many devoted Christians have been drawn to Paul's heartfelt desire expressed in Philippians 3:10, "that I may know him." Our hearts have resonated with Paul's as we have said, "That's my desire, too, just to know Christ in a more personal and intimate way." What then is the immediate context of Paul's words? What is it that caused him to have such intense yearning?

The context is Paul's testimony of how he renounced his own self-righteousness in order to gain the righteousness that comes from God through faith in Christ. It is in the context of recounting the gospel as it applies to him personally that Paul feels this surge of desire to know Christ more intimately...

A sense of obligation and duty never stimulates such a desire within us. Only love does that. If we are going to persevere as committed disciples of Jesus Christ over the course of our lives, we must always keep the gospel of God's forgiveness through Christ before us. We should, to use the words of my friend Jack Miller, *preach the gospel to ourselves every day*.

Preaching the gospel to ourselves every day addresses both the self-righteous Pharisee and the guilt-laden sinner that dwell in our hearts. Since the gospel is only for sinners, preaching it to ourselves every day reminds us that we are indeed sinners in need of God's grace. It causes us to say to God, in the words of an old hymn, "Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling." It helps us to consciously renounce any confidence in our own goodness as a means of meriting God's blessing on our lives.

Perhaps more importantly, though, preaching the gospel to ourselves every day gives us hope, joy, and courage. The good news that our sins are forgiven because of Christ's death fills our hearts with joy, gives us courage to face the day, and offers us hope that God's favor will rest upon us, not because we are good, but because we are in Christ.

Several months prior to writing this chapter, I was given a copy of a letter written by Mutua Mahiaini, leader of The Navigators ministry in Kenya. In his letter, Mutua addresses rather eloquently this issue of performance versus God's grace, so I wrote him asking for permission to quote his letter. He kindly consented:

We know, of course, how central the forgiveness of our sins is to salvation. We preach it, we believe in it. We see that first repentance and surrender to Christ as a glorious moment. We also accept that

having come to the Lord, we must continue to purify our lives. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." 1 John 1:9. But in talking with many believers, I get the impression that most of us consider the ongoing repentance of the saved as a not-so-glorious experience. A sort of sad necessity.

Sin grieves God. We must not downplay the seriousness of it in the life of a believer. But we must come to terms with the fact that God's Grace is GREATER THAN ALL OUR SINS. Repentance is one of the Christian's highest privileges. A repentant Christian focuses on God's mercy and His grace. Any moment in our lives when we bask in God's mercy and grace is our highest moment. Higher than when we feel snug in our decent performance and cannot think of anything we need to confess.

Whenever we fail—and fail we will, the Spirit of God will work on us and bring us to the foot of the cross where Jesus carried our failures. That is potentially a glorious moment. For we could at that moment accept God's abundant Mercy and Grace and go forth with nothing to boast of except Christ Himself, or else we struggle with our shame, focusing on that as well as our track record. We fail because we have shifted our attention from Grace and Mercy. One who draws on God's Mercy and Grace is quick to repent, but also slow to sin...

Are you and I willing to live like Mutua and the Apostle Paul? Are we willing to rely on God's grace and mercy alone instead of our performance, to boast in nothing except the Cross? If so, then we can stop living in our good-day-bad day scenarios and bask every day in the grace of God. And in the joy and confidence of that grace we can vigorously pursue holiness.

Changed Hearts



Write down one or two things that really stood out to you from this week's lesson.

The Christian life is not about doing more things or being more religious. It is about receiving the grace of God. It is about opening up your life to God. It is about allowing yourself to be loved and transformed by Him.

If you can imagine your life like an empty cup and God's love as the living water available to fill up your soul, then what would be the lid in your life that often cuts off God's flow of love? What keeps you from fully receiving and resting in the love of God?



- ☐ **Pride.** I simply do not want to acknowledge my need or submit to God.
- ☐ **Fear.** I shrink back because I do not trust the heart of God.
- ☐ **Doubt.** I cannot believe that God could love me unconditionally.
- ☐ **Selfishness.** I simply am too busy doing my own thing to consider God.
- ☐ **Other?** _____

Read Ephesians 3:14-19 out loud. This is Paul's prayer for the believers in the city of Ephesus. It would be his prayer for us today as well. Mark what stands out to you in this prayer.

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of His glorious riches He may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

How would you summarize Paul's prayer? _____

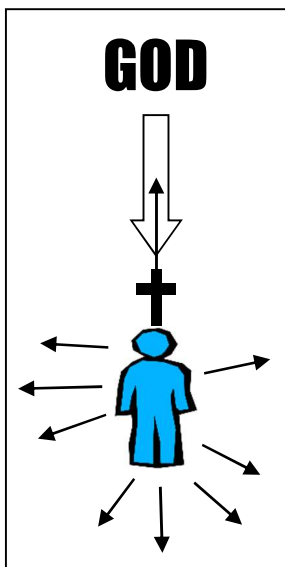
Stop for a moment. Quiet your heart. Open your hands up and lift them toward the heavens. Ask God to fill You with His Spirit. Ask Him to reveal His unconditional, incomprehensible love to you. Spend a moment allowing His love and grace to surround you and fill your soul.

2

SURRENDER: Being Loved Completely

You are a natural born lover. God created you to love Him and to love others. Love is a natural part of your being. Created in the image of God—the God of love—you have the capacity and the ability to love. Indeed, it can be said that you are always loving someone or something. The real problem you face because of sin is not so much the lack of love but rather loving the wrong things.

In other words, at this moment, you are devoted to someone or something or possibly to multiple things. The *1828 Webster's Dictionary* defines “devote” as “to give up wholly; to addict; to direct the attention wholly or chiefly; to attach.” What you are devoted to is that person, object, or activity which commands your attention, affection, thoughts, time, energy, and love. You could even say it is what you are attached or “addicted” to. These things are the **IDOLS** of your heart—**Items Dominating Our Love**.



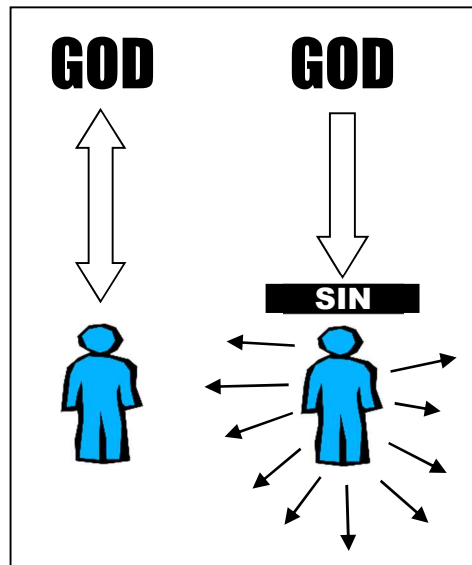
Despite your sin and idolatry, God's love continues to shower down upon you. *God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us* (Romans 5:8). Because of Christ's death, God's love is a present reality and possibility for every person in the world. No one is beyond the reach of His love. That is grace.

When a person recognizes his/her sin and responds to God's offer of grace in Jesus Christ, he/she is forgiven of all sin, delivered from condemnation, adopted into God's family, and baptized/immersed into Jesus Christ. In Christ, God does not see your sin. He only sees His Son.

However, while the barrier of sin is removed at salvation, many of the idols of your heart remain. It is after salvation—during the process of sanctification, the process of becoming like

Christ—that God begins to identify and remove these things from your heart so that you can more fully love Him.

The identification and removal of idols in your heart is a painful process. You do not give up these things easily. They are ingrained in your mind, embedded in your heart, and tied to your pride. But God will not share your heart with anyone or anything else. He wants your heart completely. Thus you must learn what it means to surrender.



DAY ONE

**Westminster
Larger
Catechism
(1647)**

Question 1:
What is the chief and highest end of man?

Answer: Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever.

Question 102:
What is the sum of the first four commandments which contain our duty to God?

Answer: The sum of the first four commandments containing our duty to God is, to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our strength, and with all our mind.

Scripture Exploration



IDENTIFYING IDOLS

The “jealousy of God” is not an attribute of God that is talked about much. We are so used to seeing “jealousy” as a negative thing, and usually, with us, it is. But there is a holy kind of jealousy that is tied to love, specifically married love which is to be exclusive and intimate.

THINK ABOUT:
When does jealousy become a bad thing?

It is preoccupation with possessions, more than anything else, that prevents us from living freely and nobly.
—Henry David Thoreau

Read Exodus 20:3. Write out the first commandment of the Ten Commandments:

The second commandment follows the first—you *shall not make for yourself an idol...you shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God* (Exodus 20:4). The Hebrew word for **jealous** is *qanna*, which is also used to describe the passionate, exclusive desire that a husband has for his wife (cf. Num. 5:14). Just as a loving husband does not want to share his wife with another man, so God does not want to share our hearts with anyone or anything else.

Jesus reiterated this thought in a different way in Matthew 6:24.

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.

Why can’t we serve two masters? _____

What does Jesus identify as one of the idols that we worship instead of God?

Why do you think this is such a popular idol? What does it offer or promise us?

Read Jeremiah 9:23-24. Circle the three idols that Jeremiah names in this passage.

*This is what the Lord says:
“The wise person should not boast in his wisdom;
the strong should not boast in his strength;
the wealthy should not boast in his wealth.
But the one who boasts should boast in this:
that he understands and knows me—
that I am the Lord, showing faithful love, justice, and righteousness on the earth,
for I delight in these things.” This is the Lord’s declaration.*

Why do you think people “boast” about these things? _____

Which one are you most tempted to pursue or boast about? _____

WRESTLING WITH GOD

One of the most unique stories in the Bible is found in Genesis 32. It is a story from the life of Jacob—the son of Isaac, the grandson of Abraham. Jacob is a twin to his brother Esau but they are as different as night and day.

Read Genesis 25:21-28. How would you describe Esau? _____

How would you describe Jacob? _____

What were these two babies doing in the womb? _____

Which one did God say would be “stronger” than the other? ☐ Esau ☐ Jacob



Esau’s name means “hairy” while Jacob’s name means “heelcatcher, supplanter, or deceiver.” Both lived up to their names—Esau became a hairy outdoorsman while Jacob became a deceptive manipulator.

Jacob was constantly “working the system” to get what he wanted. When Esau was hungry, Jacob found a way to use Esau’s hunger to his advantage (25:29-34). When Isaac, his father, was about to bless Esau, Jacob found a way to “steal” his blessing (27:1-40).

But though Jacob got what he wanted, it never brought him peace, joy, or security. In fact, it brought him just the opposite—separation from his mom, distance from his dad, extreme strife with his brother, and unrest in his soul.

While Jacob was manipulating and fighting his way through life, God was reaching out to him in love. But Jacob never seemed to stop long enough to hear God’s voice. In Jacob’s mind, if God could help him get what he wanted, then he was all for God. But if he could get what he wanted on his own, then why did he need Him?

However, in Genesis 32, when Jacob was about sixty years old, he was hit with a major crisis. While traveling with his two wives, his twelve children, and all of his possessions, he receives word that Esau is coming out to meet him with four hundred men (32:1-6). Jacob immediately panics! His brother had wanted to kill him twenty years earlier and now it seems he is going to finally act on his violent desire.

Everything in Jacob’s life—everything he loved, everything he worked for—appeared to be in jeopardy. Jacob divided up his family and his possessions into two camps to try to minimize his losses. Then he did something that he had not done in many years, possibly ever, he prayed fervently to God (32:7-12). That night God answered him in a very unique way.

DAY TWO

Children are all different in their temperaments: some are sporty and outgoing, others are shy bookworms. ...How easy it would be to love those best whose interests and aptitudes are closest to ours. How easy, but how terrible in its consequence!
—Iain Duguid

Love comes when manipulation stops; when you think more about the other person than about his or her reactions to you. When you dare to reveal yourself fully. When you dare to be vulnerable.

—Dr. Joyce Brothers

A man wrestled with him (32:24)—

Hosea 12:3-4 says that this man was an angel. Jacob sees him as God (32:30). The man was probably the pre-incarnate Christ who often appears in the OT as the "Angel of the Lord" (see Gen. 16:7-13; 22:11-18).

Israel means "one who struggles with God." The name is seen positively. To struggle with God is to take Him seriously and to wrestle with His ways.

The greatest danger to our relationship with God is not spiritual struggle but spiritual apathy. David, in the Psalms, is a good example of a man who wrestled with God.

Read Genesis 32:22-32. Pray and ask God to give you understanding as you read.

Whom did Jacob wrestle that night (32:24, 30)? _____

How long did they wrestle? _____

How was Jacob finally overcome? _____

What did Jacob do after his strength was gone? _____

What blessing did Jacob receive? _____

What was different about Jacob that day (32:31)? _____

There are many ways to interpret Genesis 32. There is much mystery that surrounds this chapter. But one thing seems certain. Jacob was a different man after this encounter. Something changed in him.

- **He had a new name.** No longer was he called "Jacob" (heelcatcher, deceiver). Now he was called "Israel" (one who struggles with God).
- **He had a new walk.** Now he walked with a limp—a perpetual reminder of his weakness before God.
- **He had a new, stronger relationship with God.** The manipulative, independent spirit in him was broken. Now Jacob knew firsthand that any blessings in life came not through his strength but through God's.

Genesis 32 provides us with a picture of God's process of changing us. God confronts us in the difficulties and crises of life. We wrestle with Him emotionally and spiritually, fighting for control, fighting to hold on to what we hold dear. He weakens us in an area of strength, bringing us to a place of weakness and brokenness. And then all we can do is hold on to Him and seek His blessing.

Wrestling with God. Letting go of our idols, our pride, and our desire for control. And then holding on to God alone. This is the process of surrender.

Every child of God will be taken through a similar process at some time or another, in some way or another. God takes us there so that we can be loved by Him completely.

Difficulty or Crisis



Wrestling with God



Letting Go of Our Idols and Our Pride in Weakness and Brokenness



Holding on to God Alone

HOLDING ON TO JESUS

Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. The Apostle Paul describes God's process in his own life in this passage. Mark any words or phrases that stand out to you.

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given to me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

What was "given to" Paul so that he would not become conceited, self-centered, or independent from Him? _____

How did Paul initially receive this "gift"? _____

Write out God's words to Paul in the midst of his struggle and pain.

After knowing that God had a purpose for his struggles and pain, how did Paul respond to the "gift" given to him by God? _____

Finish this sentence: *When I am _____, then I am _____.*

What do you think this means? _____

Write down 2-3 things that you can learn about God, difficulties, prayer, or the Christian life in general from 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.

Paul went through the same process as Jacob did. He was confronted with a difficulty. He wrestled with God in prayer. He came to a place of brokenness and weakness. And he learned to hold on to Jesus Christ alone.

DAY THREE

Thorn in my flesh—Greek, *skolops*, is more like a "stake" or a "spike" rather than a thorn. Paul suffered from some kind of severe physical affliction. The precise nature of it is unknown. Some have speculated that it was severe headaches, eye problems, epilepsy, or possibly even panic attacks.

Before God uses a man, God will break the man.
—A.W. Tozer

Giving up an idol is similar to the stages of grief. In grief, a person often goes through the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, and depression before finally coming to terms with the loss and learning a new way of living.

Additional Resources



Read the following chapter, “The Blessedness of Possessing Nothing” in A.W. Tozer’s classic book, *The Pursuit of God* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1993), pages 21-30.

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Matt. 5:3

Before the Lord God made man upon the earth He first prepared for him a world of useful and pleasant things for his sustenance and delight. In the Genesis account of the creation these are called simply “things.” They were made for man’s uses, but they were meant always to be external to the man and subservient to him. In the deep heart of the man was a shrine where none but God was worthy to come. Within him was God; without, a thousand gifts which God had showered upon him.

But sin has introduced complications and has made those very gifts of God a potential source of ruin to the soul.

Our woes began when God was forced out of His central shrine and “things” were allowed to enter. Within the human heart “things” have taken over. Men have now by nature no peace within their hearts, for God is crowned there no longer, but there in the moral dusk stubborn and aggressive usurpers fight among themselves for first place on the throne.

This is not a mere metaphor, but an accurate analysis of our real spiritual trouble. There is within the human heart a tough fibrous root of fallen life whose nature is to possess, always to possess. It covets “things” with a deep and fierce passion. The pronouns *my* and *mine* look innocent enough in print, but their constant and universal use is significant. They express the real nature of the old Adamic man better than a thousand volumes of theology could do. They are verbal

symptoms of our deep disease. The roots of our hearts have grown down into things, and we dare not pull up one rootlet lest we die. Things have become necessary to us, a development never originally intended. God’s gifts now take the place of God, and the whole course of nature is upset by the monstrous substitution.

Our Lord referred to this tyranny of things when He said to His disciples, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake shall find it.” (Matthew 16:24-25).

Breaking this truth into fragments for our better understanding, it would seem that there is within each of us an enemy which we tolerate at our peril. Jesus called it “life” and “self,” or as we would say, the *self-life*. Its chief characteristic is its possessiveness: the words *gain* and *profit* suggest this. To allow this enemy to live is, in the end, to lose everything. To repudiate it and give up all for Christ’s sake is to lose nothing at last, but to preserve everything unto life eternal. And possibly also a hint is given here as to the only effective way to destroy this foe: it is by the Cross: “Let him take up his cross and follow me.”

The way to deeper knowledge of God is through the lonely valleys of soul poverty and abnegation of all things. The blessed ones who possess the kingdom are they who have repudiated every external thing and have rooted from their hearts all sense of possessing. They are “poor in spirit.” They have reached an inward state paralleling the

outward circumstances of the common beggar in the streets of Jerusalem; that is what the word *poor* as Christ used it actually means. These blessed poor are no longer slaves to the tyranny of things. They have broken the yoke of the oppressor; and this they have done not by fighting but by surrendering. Though free from all sense of possessing, they yet possess all things. "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Let me exhort you to take this seriously. It is not to be understood as mere Bible teaching to be stored away in the mind along with an inert mass of other doctrines. It is a marker on the road to greener pastures, a path chiseled against the steep sides of the mount of God. We dare not try to by-pass it if we would follow on in this holy pursuit. We must ascend a step at a time. If we refuse one step we bring our progress to an end.

As is frequently true, this New Testament principle of spiritual life finds its best illustration in the Old Testament. In the story of Abraham and Isaac we have a dramatic picture of the surrendered life as well as an excellent commentary on the first Beatitude.

Abraham was old when Isaac was born, old enough indeed to have been his grandfather, and the child became at once the delight and idol of his heart. From that moment when he first stooped to take the tiny form awkwardly in his arms he was an eager love slave of his son. God went out of His way to comment on the strength of this affection. And it is not hard to understand. The baby represented everything sacred to his father's heart: the promises of God, the covenants, the hopes of the years and the long messianic dream. As he watched him grow from babyhood to young manhood the heart of the old man was knit closer and closer with the life of his son, till at last the relationship bordered upon the perilous. It was then that God stepped in to save both father and son from the consequences of an uncleaned love.

"Take now thy son," said God to Abraham, "thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of." (Gen 22:2) The sacred writer spares us a close-up of the agony that night on the slopes near Beersheba when the aged man had it out with his God, but respectful imagination may view in awe the bent form and convulsive wrestling alone under the stars. Possibly not again until a Greater than Abraham wrestled in the Garden of Gethsemane did such mortal pain visit a human soul. If only the man himself might have been allowed to die. That would have been easier a thousand times, for he was old now, and to die would have been no great ordeal for one who had walked so long with God. Besides, it would have been a last sweet pleasure to let his dimming vision rest upon the figure of his stalwart son who would live to carry on the Abrahamic line and fulfill in himself the promises of God made long before in Ur of the Chaldees.

How should he slay the lad! Even if he could get the consent of his wounded and protesting heart, how could he reconcile the act with the promise, "In Isaac shall thy seed be called"? This was Abraham's trial by fire, and he did not fail in the crucible. While the stars still shone like sharp white points above the tent where the sleeping Isaac lay, and long before the gray dawn had begun to lighten the east, the old saint had made up his mind. He would offer his son as God had directed him to do, and *then trust God to raise him from the dead*. This, says the writer to the Hebrews, was the solution his aching heart found sometime in the dark night, and he rose "early in the morning" to carry out the plan. It is beautiful to see that, while he erred as to God's method, he had correctly sensed the secret of His great heart. And the solution accords well with the New Testament Scripture, "Whosoever will lose... for my sake shall find" (Matthew 16:25).

God let the suffering old man go through with it up to the point where He knew there would be no retreat, and then forbade him to lay a hand upon the boy. To the wondering patriarch He now says in effect, "It's all right, Abraham. I never intended that you should actually slay the lad. I only wanted to remove him from the temple of your heart that I might reign unchallenged there. I wanted to correct the perversion that existed in your love. Now you may have the boy, sound and well. Take him and go back to your tent. Now I know that thou fearest God, seeing that thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from me."

Then heaven opened and a voice was heard saying to him, "By myself I have sworn, saith the Lord, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: that in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice" (Genesis 22:16-18).

The old man of God lifted his head to respond to the Voice, and stood there on the mount strong and pure and grand, a man marked out by the Lord for special treatment, a friend and favorite of the Most High. Now he was a man wholly surrendered, a man utterly obedient, a man who possessed nothing. He had concentrated his all in the person of his dear son, and God had taken it from him. God could have begun out on the margin of Abraham's life and worked inward to the center; He chose rather to cut quickly to the heart and have it over in one sharp act of separation. In dealing thus He practiced an economy of means and time. It hurt cruelly, but it was effective.

I have said that Abraham possessed nothing. Yet was not this poor man rich? Everything

he had owned before was still his to enjoy: sheep, camels, herds, and goods of every sort. He had also his wife and his friends, and best of all he had his son Isaac safe by his side. *He had everything, but he possessed nothing.* There is the spiritual secret. There is the sweet theology of the heart which can be learned only in the school of renunciation. The books on systematic theology overlook this, but the wise will understand.

After that bitter and blessed experience I think the words *my* and *mine* never had again the same meaning for Abraham. The sense of possession which they connote was gone from his heart. "Things" had been cast out forever. They had now become external to the man. His inner heart was free from them. The world said, "Abraham is rich," but the aged patriarch only smiled. He could not explain it to them, but he knew that he owned nothing, that his real treasures were inward and eternal.

There can be no doubt that this possessive clinging to things is one of the most harmful habits in the life. Because it is so natural it is rarely recognized for the evil that it is; but its outworkings are tragic. We are often hindered from giving up our treasures to the Lord out of fear for their safety; this is especially true when those treasures are loved relatives and friends. But we need have no such fears. Our Lord came not to destroy but to save. Everything is safe which we commit to Him, and nothing is really safe which is not so committed.

Our gifts and talents should also be turned over to Him. They should be recognized for what they are, God's loan to us, and should never be considered in any sense our own. We have no more right to claim credit for special abilities than for blue eyes or strong muscles. "For who maketh thee to differ from another? And what hast thou that thou didst not receive?"

The Christian who is alive enough to know himself even slightly will recognize the symptoms of this possession malady, and will grieve to find them in his own heart. If the longing after God is strong enough within him he will want to do something about the matter. Now, what should he do?

First of all he should put away all defense and make no attempt to excuse himself either in his own eyes or before the Lord. Whoever defends himself will have himself for his defense, and he will have no other; but let him come defenseless before the Lord and he will have for his defender no less than God Himself. Let the inquiring Christian trample under foot every slippery trick of his deceitful heart and insist upon frank and open relations with the Lord.

Then he should remember that this is holy business. No careless or casual dealings will suffice. Let him come to God in full determination to be heard. Let him insist that God accept his all, that He take things out of his heart and Himself reign there in power. It may be he will need to become specific, to name things and people by their names one by one. If he will become drastic enough he can shorten the time of his travail from years to minutes and enter the good land long before his slower brethren who coddle their feelings and insist upon caution in their dealings with God.

Let us never forget that such a truth as this cannot be learned by rote as one would learn the facts of physical science. They must be *experienced* before we can really know them. We must in our hearts live through Abraham's harsh and bitter experiences if we would know the blessedness which follows them. The ancient curse will not go out painlessly; the tough old miser within us will not lie down and die obedient to our command. He must be torn out of our heart like a plant from the soil; he must be extracted in agony and blood like a tooth

from the jaw. He must be expelled from our soul by violence as Christ expelled the money changers from the temple. And we shall need to steel ourselves against his piteous begging, and to recognize it as springing out of self-pity, one of the most reprehensible sins of the human heart.

If we would indeed know God in growing intimacy we must go this way of renunciation. And if we are set upon the pursuit of God He will sooner or later bring us to this test. Abraham's testing was, at the time, not known to him as such, yet if he had taken some course other than the one he did, the whole history of the Old Testament would have been different. God would have found His man, no doubt, but the loss to Abraham would have been tragic beyond the telling. So we will be brought one by one to the testing place, and we may never know when we are there. At that testing place there will be no dozen possible choices for us; just one and an alternative, but our whole future will be conditioned by the choice we make.

Father, I want to know Thee, but my coward heart fears to give up its toys.

I cannot part with them without inward bleeding, and I do not try to hide from Thee the terror of the parting.

I come trembling, but I do come.

Please root from my heart all Those things which I have cherished so long and which have become a very part of my living self, so that Thou mayest enter and dwell there without a rival.

Then shalt Thou make the place of Thy feet glorious.

Then shall my heart have no need of the sun to shine in it, for Thyself wilt be the light of it, and there shall be no night there.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Changed Hearts



Write down two or three things that really stood out to you from this week's lesson.

In the final prayer of his chapter, A.W. Tozer describes the idols of our heart like “toys.” Imagine your young child holding on to a toy for dear life. He/she is convinced that this toy is everything to him/her. There is no sharing. There is no taking it away. It is clutched, held close to the heart, guarded from any intrusion. Interestingly, when it is clutched so tightly, it is not really enjoyed. But for some reason, you cannot convince your child to let it go.

So what do you do? To ignore this excessive possessiveness is to only encourage further selfishness (and joylessness) in the future. It is not to the child's ultimate joy or benefit to clutch onto toys, to refuse to share, to “hoard” them rather than to enjoy them. So, as a loving parent, you decide to take it away. Reaching for the toy produces cries of desperation, terror, negotiation, and anger. The toy is not released willingly. In fact, it is like extracting a bone from a hungry dog. But once the toy is removed, the child sooner or later realizes that he/she did not “die” from the extraction. The toy really was not a matter of life and death—it was simply a toy to be enjoyed, a gracious gift from your hands, an object to be shared with others.

What “toys” are you clutching onto? What “idols” are in your heart? A good test is to think back over the past day, week, or month and answer the following questions:

What have I worried about? _____

What have I gotten angry about? _____

What have I been depressed about? _____

What has been on my mind a lot? _____

What have I most feared losing lately? _____

Based on your answers, what do you think is something that you are holding onto too tightly?
_____ Why do you think this is so important to you?

Open your hands before the Lord. Imagine that item in your hands—your loved one, health, need to be right, competence, security, desire for control, hunger for acceptance, pride, whatever it is. Offer it to the Lord. Lay it at His feet. Ask for strength to trust Him. Then leave it before Him.

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting (Psalm 139:23-24).

3

THE WORD: Hearing God

Devotion to God begins by being loved by Him. *We love Him because He first loved us* (1 John 4:19). In responding to God's grace and allowing Him to remove the idols from our heart, we open up our lives to a relationship with Him. We deepen this relationship by pursuing Him in worship.

So what is worship? And how are we supposed to worship God? Jesus gives an answer to these questions in John 4.

In John 4, Jesus interacts with a Samaritan woman who is spiritually and emotionally "thirsty." Her life has been a desperate search for joy, peace, and satisfaction in a succession of marriages and sexual relationships. So far nothing has worked. Now she finds herself talking with a Jewish man named Jesus at a well in Samaria.

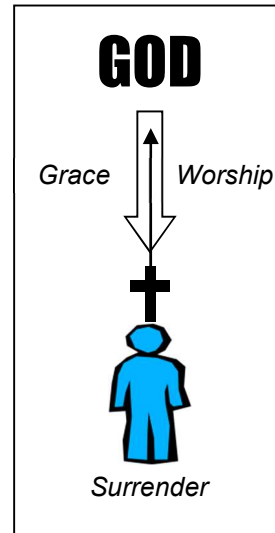
The situation is unusual enough. First of all, religious teachers did not converse with women in public. It was not deemed appropriate. And secondly, Jews, in general, had no dealings with Samaritans (4:9). The two ethnic groups despised each other. Samaritans were "half-breeds" (part Jew, part Gentile) with their own brand of worship and spirituality. Samaritans only accepted the first five books of Moses as their "scriptures," built a rival temple to the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, and were waiting for a "prophet like Moses" (not a "son of David") to come and reveal all things to them (not to the Jews). But Jesus saw past all this to minister to this woman as a precious person made in the image of God.



After Jesus had subtly exposed the thirst of this Samaritan woman's soul and her need for a relationship with God, the woman said, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship" (4:19-20). In other words, translated into today's language, she basically said, "You are right, Jesus. I am spiritually thirsty and I desperately need a relationship with God. So what religion is correct? Do I worship in the Samaritan temple or the Jewish one?"

Jesus' reply to the Samaritan woman teaches us about the nature of true worship.

Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth. (4:21-24)



DAY ONE

Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647)

Question 1:

What is the chief end of man?

Answer: Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

Question 2:

What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him?

Answer: The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.

Worship is not a matter of being in the “right place” or having the “right ritual.” It is a matter of the heart. God is actively seeking people whose hearts are tuned toward Him. God is not a physical being so the physical forms of worship are not so important. What is important and what is absolutely necessary is that a person worships Him *in spirit and truth*.

SPIRIT	TRUTH
Spirit of God	Word of God
Subjective	Objective
Heart	Head
Passion	Perception
Sincerity	Accuracy

Worship in spirit. God must be worshipped from the heart, in reality, in sincerity.

For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.
(Psalm 51:16-17)

Worship in truth. God must be worshipped for who He really is. We cannot worship a god of our own choosing or liking. We must worship God with a knowledge and understanding of His true nature as revealed by creation, His written Word, and the person of Jesus Christ.

Many of the Jews knew God in truth but failed to worship Him in spirit. Many of the Samaritans desired to worship God in sincerity but failed to acknowledge His character as revealed in the full Jewish Scriptures. Both needed a corrective to their worship. True worship must always be *in spirit and truth*. Let’s begin with knowing God in truth.

Scripture Exploration



Modernism is the belief that truth can be discovered through the scientific method. **Post-modernism** is the belief that reality is complex and uncertain thus truth is a matter of personal perspective.

Both world-views are inadequate. The modernist leaves out the supernatural while the post-modernist ignores the reality (and necessity) of absolute truth.

KNOWING THE TRUTH

The Hebrew word for “truth” is *aman* which carries the basic idea of “firmness or certainty.” It is that which can be relied upon because it corresponds with reality. The Greek word for truth, *aletheia*, has the same basic meaning. Truth is tied to reality.

The Gospel of John uses the Greek word *aletheia* (or a similar form of the word) seventy-two times. In many ways, the Gospel of John seeks to answer the question that the Roman curator, Pontius Pilate, asked Jesus at His trial. *What is truth?* (18:38)

Look up the following verses in the Gospel of John and write down what you learn about “truth” from each one (what it is, where it is found, what it does, etc.).

- 1:14, 17 _____
- 8:31-32 _____
- 14:6 _____
- 16:12-13 _____
- 17:16-19 _____
- 18:37 _____

According to the Gospel of John, truth is found in God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Word of God (the Bible). In other words, God and His Word are firm, certain, and correspond with reality. Indeed, God is reality itself since all that we see, touch, and know is the result of His spoken Word (Genesis 1). Thus, to deny God and to reject His Word is to depart not only from the truth but also from reality itself.

Read 1 Timothy 2:3-6. Mark words or phrases that stand out to you.

For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.

How is God described in this passage? _____

How is Jesus described? _____

What is God's desire for all people? _____

How did Jesus make this possible? _____

Being saved from sin and entering into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ is equated to coming to "the knowledge of the truth." Truth, life, and reality are all tied together. Salvation is coming to know the reality of who you are, who God is, who Christ is, and what Christ has done.

Read Romans 1:20-22, 25. Mark words or phrases that stand out to you.

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools...They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

Do people have a natural awareness and knowledge of God? ☐ Yes ☐ No

According to this passage, how does a person's thinking become futile and foolish?

What do people exchange God for? _____

A thousand errors may live in peace with one another, but truth is a hammer that breaks them all in pieces.

—Charles Spurgeon

Mediator—
Greek, *mesites*, "a man who stands in the middle and brings two parties together."

Ransom—
Greek, *lytron*, "a price for release." Used especially to refer to the price paid to free a slave.

THINK ABOUT:
Why do we sometimes choose to believe a lie rather than come face to face with the truth?

DAY TWO

Conform—

Present tense of Greek, *suschematizo*, “to fashion or shape one thing like another.” The emphasis is on an outward shaping of one’s “schemes” or way of acting.

Transform—

Present tense of Greek, *metamorphoo*, “to change into another form.” The emphasis is on an inner change that works its way outward in one’s actions.

THINK ABOUT:
What is a common lie that you think people hold about God? About themselves?

The Spirit is not given to make Bible study needless, but to make it effective.

—J. I. Packer

Remember God’s purpose is that we look like His Son not that we are comfortable.

RENEWING THE MIND

Look up Romans 12:2 and write out this verse below.

Put a box around the phrase that tells us *how* we are to be transformed.

Circle the words that describe God’s will for our lives.

What do you think it means to be “conformed to this world”? _____

How can you avoid being conformed to this world? _____

Practically speaking, how can you renew your mind? _____

Growth in the Christian life comes through a daily renewing of the mind with the truth of God. God’s truth exposes the lies that we hold about ourselves, about others, and about God Himself and teaches us how to truly worship and live for Him.

How is a person renewed in their mind?

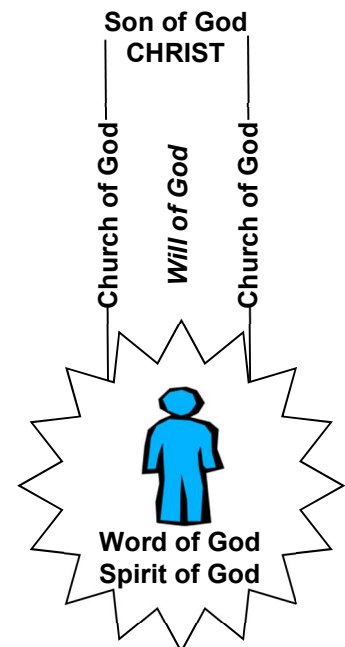
**Daily input and obedience to the Word of God
guided and empowered by the Spirit of God
within the context of the church of God
leads to a life that fulfills the will of God
looking more and more like the Son of God.**

The Word of God is *a lamp to my feet and a light for my path* (Psalm 119:105).

The Spirit of God helps me to interpret, understand, and live God’s Word in my life (1 Cor. 2:10-16).

The church of God keeps me from deceiving myself and getting off God’s path (Hebrews 3:13).

The will of God is fulfilled in my life as I look more and more like the Son of God (Romans 8:28-30).



READING THE WORD

God can speak to us in many ways. His voice is constantly speaking to us through the wonders of creation (Psalm 19:1-2), the voice of conscience (Romans 2:14-16), and the conviction of the Spirit (John 16:8-11). He may also at times direct us through circumstances, godly counsel from others, or inner promptings. But how do we know that these voices are from God? How do we know that they are not inner compulsions, worldly advice, or even demonic deceptions? Lots of people can claim to “hear” from God. We need an objective standard by which to measure these voices and promptings. This standard is the Word of God, the Bible.

Read 2 Timothy 3:12-17. What two “promises” are given in verses 12-13?

1. _____ (v. 12)
2. _____ (v. 13)

How is Timothy to live in light of these two hard facts of life (vs. 14)?

Finish the following sentences based on 2 Timothy 3:15-17.

Scripture is able to make you wise for _____

All Scripture is _____

All Scripture is useful and profitable for...

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Scripture teaches and trains the man or woman of God to be _____

Psalm 119 is the longest psalm in the Bible (176 verses). The whole psalm is a poem on the beauty, power, practicality, and priority of God’s Word. **Write down one thing you learn about God’s Word from each of the following verses in Psalm 119:**

119:9 _____

119:11 _____

119:28 _____

119:45 _____

119:71 _____

119:89-91 _____

DAY THREE

2 Timothy is the last letter written by the apostle Paul before his execution at the hands of the Roman emperor, Nero (~AD 66). He is writing to his friend and disciple, Timothy, who will be one of the primary leaders in the church after his death.

Inspired by God (3:16)— Greek, *theo-pneustos*, literally “God breathed.” Scripture is the breathing out of the very words of God.

Ignorance of the Scripture is ignorance of Christ.
—Jerome

Sin will keep you from this Book, or this Book will keep you from sin.
—John Bunyan

The Bible that is falling apart usually belongs to someone who isn’t.
—Vance Havner

Additional Resources



Read the following chapter, “Scripture: Kindling for Christian Hedonism” in John Piper’s book, *Desiring God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1996), pg. 123-134.

Every day with Jesus is *not* “sweeter than the day before.” Some days with Jesus our disposition is sour. Some days with Jesus we are so sad we feel our heart will break open. Some days with Jesus we are so depressed and discouraged that between the garage and the house we just want to sit down on the grass and cry.

Every day with Jesus is not sweeter than the day before. We know it from experience and we know it from Scripture. For David says in Psalm 19:7, “The law of the Lord is perfect, *reviving* the soul.” If every day with Jesus were sweeter than the day before, if life were a steady ascent with no dips in our affection for God, we wouldn’t need to be *revived*.

In another place David extolled the Lord with similar words: “He leads me beside still waters, he *restores* my soul” (Psalm 23:2-3). This means David must have had bad days.

There were days when his soul needed to be restored. It’s the same phrase used in Psalm 19:7—“the law of the LORD is perfect, *reviving the soul*.” Normal Christian life is a repeated process of restoration and renewal. Our joy is not static. It fluctuates with real life. It is vulnerable to Satan’s attacks...

Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:24... “We are workers with you for your joy.” The preservation of our joy in God takes *work*. It is a fight. Our adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, and he has an insatiable appetite to destroy one thing: the joy of faith. But the Holy Spirit has given us a sword called the Word of God for the defense of our joy.

Or, to change the image, when Satan huffs and puffs and tries to blow out the flame of your joy, you have an endless supply of kindling in the Word of God. Even on days when every cinder in our soul feels cold, if we crawl to the Word of God and cry out for ears to hear, the cold ashes will be lifted and the tiny spark of life will be fanned. For “the law of the Lord is perfect, *reviving* the soul.”

THE BENEFITS AND POWER OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

In the Bible are many confirmations that its purpose is to kindle, and not kill, our joy. We find them when we set our sights on the benefits of Scripture which sustain and deepen our true happiness.

The Bible Is Your Life. Moses says in Deut. 32:46-47, “Lay to heart all the words which I enjoin upon you this day, that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law. For it is no trifle for you, but *it is your life*” The Word of God is not a trifle; it is a matter of life and death. If you treat the Scripture as a trifle, you forfeit life.

Even our physical life depends on God’s Word because by his Word we were created (Ps. 33:4; Heb. 11:3), and “He upholds the universe by the Word of his power” (Heb. 1:3). Our spiritual life begins by the Word of God: “By his own will he brought us forth by the Word of truth” (James 1:18). “You have been born anew . . . through the living and abiding Word of God” (1 Peter 1:23)...

Indeed, the Bible is “no trifle for you, it is your life!” The foundation of all joy is life. Nothing is more fundamental than sheer existence—our creation and our preservation. All this is owing to the Word of God's power. By that same power he has spoken in Scripture for the creation and sustenance of our spiritual life. Therefore the Bible is no trifle, it is your life—the kindling of your joy!

Faith Comes by Hearing. The Word of God begets and sustains spiritual *life* because it begets and sustains *faith*. “These things are written,” John says, “that you might *believe* that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that *believing* you might have *life* in his name” (John 20:31). “Faith comes by hearing,” writes the apostle Paul, “and hearing by the Word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). The faith that starts our life in Christ and by which we go on living comes from hearing the Word of God.

And there is no true joy without faith. “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace *in believing*” (Romans 15:13). “I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your advancement and *joy of faith*” (Philippians 1:25). How else can we sustain our joy in dark hours except by the promises of God's Word that he will work it all together for our good (Romans 8:28)?

A great testimony to the power of the Word is found in the story of Tokichi Ichii—a man who was hanged for murder in Tokyo in 1918. He had been sent to prison more than twenty times and was known as being cruel as a tiger. On one occasion, after attacking a prison official, he was gagged and bound, and his body suspended in such a way that “my toes barely reached the ground.” But he stubbornly refused to say he was sorry for what he had done.

Just before being sentenced to death, Tokichi was sent a New Testament by two Christian

missionaries, Ms. West and Ms. McDonald. After a visit from Ms. West, he began to read the story of Jesus' trial and execution. His attention was riveted by the sentence, “And Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’” This sentence transformed his life.

I stopped: I was stabbed to the heart, as if by a five-inch nail. What did the verse reveal to me? Shall I call it the love of the heart of Christ? Shall I call it His compassion? I do not know what to call it. I only know that with an unspeakably grateful heart I believed.

Tokichi was sentenced to death and accepted it as “the fair, impartial judgment of God.” Now the Word that brought him to faith also sustained his faith in an amazing way. Near the end, Ms. West directed him to the words of 2 Corinthians 6:8-10 concerning the suffering of the righteous. The words moved him very deeply, and he wrote,

“As sorrowing, yet always rejoicing.” People will say that I must have a very sorrowful heart because I am daily awaiting the execution of the death sentence. This is not the case. I feel neither sorrow nor distress nor any pain. Locked up in a prison cell 6' x 9' in size I am infinitely happier than I was in the days of my sinning when I did not know God. Day and night...I am talking with Jesus Christ.

“As poor, yet making many rich.” This certainly does not apply to the evil life I led before I repented. But perhaps in the future, someone in the world may hear that the most desperate villain that ever lived repented of his sins and was saved by the power of Christ, and so may come to repent also. Then it may be that though I am poor myself, I shall be able to make many rich.

The Word sustained him to the end, and on the scaffold with great humility and earnestness he uttered his last words, “My soul, purified, today returns to the City of God.”

Faith is born and sustained by the Word of God, and out of faith grows the flower of joy.

God Supplies the Spirit through the Hearing of Faith. We are commanded to be filled with the Holy Spirit: “Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18). How does the Spirit come? In Galatians 3:2, Paul asks, “Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?” The answer, of course, is “hearing with faith.” Hearing what? The Word of God!

The Spirit inspired the Word and therefore he goes where the Word goes. The more of God's Word you know and love, the more of God's Spirit you will experience. Instead of drinking wine we should drink the Spirit. How? By setting our minds on the things of the Spirit: “Those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit” (Romans 8:5).

What are the things of the Spirit? When Paul said in 1 Corinthians 2:14, “The natural man does not welcome the things of the Spirit,” he was referring to his own Spirit-inspired teachings (2:13). Therefore, above all, the teachings of Scripture are the “things of the Spirit.” We drink in the Spirit by setting our minds on the things of the Spirit, namely the Word of God. And the fruit of the Spirit is joy (Galatians 5:22).

The Scriptures Give Hope. Sometimes faith and hope are virtual synonyms in Scripture. “Faith is the assurance of things *hoped* for” (Hebrews 11:1). Without this hope for the future we get discouraged and depressed and our joy drains away. Hope is absolutely essential to Christian joy. “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces... hope” (Romans 5:3-4, 15:13).

And how do we maintain hope? The psalmist puts it like this: “He established a testimony

in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children . . . so that they might set their *hope* in God” (78:5,7). In other words the “testimony” and the “law”—the Word of God—are kindling for the hope of our children.

Paul puts it so plainly: “Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by the steadfastness and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have *hope*” (Romans 15:4). The whole Bible has this aim and this power: to create hope in the hearts of God's people. And when hope abounds, the heart is filled with joy.

The Truth Shall Make You Free. Another essential element of joy is freedom. None of us would be happy if we were not free from what we hate and free for what we love. And where do we find true freedom? Psalm 119:45 says, “I shall walk in freedom, for I sought thy precepts.” The picture is one of open spaces. The Word frees us from smallness of mind (1 Kgs 4:29) and threatening confinements (Ps 18:19).

Jesus says, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you *free*” (John 8:32). The freedom he has in mind is freedom from the slavery of sin (verse 34). Or, to put it positively, it is freedom for holiness. The promises of God's grace provide the power that makes the demands of God's holiness an experience of freedom rather than fear. “Through his precious and very great promises you escape from the corruption that is in the world . . . and become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4, cf. John 15:3). Freed from corruption, freed to share the likeness of God—by the precious and very great promises!

The Testimony of the Lord Makes Wise the Simple. ...Of course, the Bible does not answer every question about life. Every fork in the road does not have a biblical arrow. We

have need of wisdom in ourselves to know the path of lasting joy. But that, too, is a gift of Scripture. "The testimony of the Lord is sure, making *wise* the simple... the commandment of the Lord is pure, *enlightening the eyes*" (Psalm 19:7-8, 119:98). People whose minds are saturated with God's Word and submissive to his thoughts have a wisdom that in eternity will prove superior to all the secular wisdom in the world. "*Happy* is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gets understanding" (Proverbs 3:13).

Written that You Might Have Assurance. Nevertheless, our perverted will and imperfect perceptions lead us time and again into foolish acts and harmful situations. The day this happens is not sweeter than the day before, and we need restoration and comfort. Where can we turn for comfort? We can follow the psalmist again: "This is my *comfort* in my affliction, that thy *promises* give me life... When I think of thy *ordinances* from of old, I take comfort, O Lord" (Psalm 119:50, 52).

And when our failures and our afflictions threaten our assurance of faith, where do we turn to rebuild our confidence? John invites us to turn to the Word of God: "I *write* this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may *know* that you have eternal life" (1 John 5: 13). The Bible is written to give us assurance of eternal life.

The Evil One Is Overcome by the Word of God. Satan's number-one objective is to destroy our joy of faith. We have one offensive weapon: the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God (Ephesians 6:17). But what many Christians fail to realize is that we can't draw the sword from someone else's scabbard. If we don't wear it, we can't wield it. If the Word of God does not abide in us (John 15:7), we will reach for it in vain when the enemy strikes. But if we do wear it, if it lives within us, what mighty warriors we can

be! "I write to you, young men, because you are strong and the Word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one" (1 John 2:14).

This has been the secret of God's great spiritual warriors. They have saturated themselves with the Word of God. ...The Sword of the Spirit is full of victory. But how few will give themselves to the deep and disciplined exercise of soul to take it up and wield it with joy and power!

An Earnest Exhortation. So the Bible is the Word of God. And the Word of God is no trifle. It is the source of life and faith and power and hope and freedom and wisdom and comfort and assurance and victory over our greatest enemy. Is it any wonder then that those who knew best said, "The precepts of the Lord are right, *rejoicing* the heart" (Psalm 19:8)? "I will *delight* in thy statutes, I will not forget thy Word" (Psalm 119:16).

"Oh, how I *love* thy law! It is my meditation all the day" (Psalm 119:97). "Thy testimonies are my heritage for ever, yea, they are the *joy* of my heart" (Psalm 119:111). "Thy words were found, and I ate them, and thy words became to me a *joy* and the *delight* of my heart; for I am called by Thy name" (Jeremiah 15:16).

But are we to pursue this joy like Christian Hedonists? Are we to throw the kindling of God's Word every day on the fire of joy? Indeed, we are! Not only every day, but day and night: "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but *his delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night*" (Psalm 1:1-2). This delight is the very design of our Lord in speaking to us: "These things I have *spoken* to you, *that my joy may be in you and your joy may be full*" (John 15:11). Not to pursue our joy every day in the Word

of God is an abandonment of the revealed will of God. It is sin.

To Wield It We Must Wear It. But if we intend to wield it, we must wear it. We must be like Ezra: “The good hand of God was upon him. For *Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord*, and to do it, and to teach his statutes and ordinances in Israel” (Ezra 7:9, 10). And we must get a heart like the saint who wrote the great love song to the law in Psalm 119, “Oh, how I love thy law! It is my meditation all the day” (verse 97). Let us labor to memorize the Word of God—for worship and for warfare. If we do not carry it in our heads, we cannot savor it in our hearts or wield it in the Spirit. If you go out without the kindling of Christian Hedonism, the fire of Christian happiness will be quenched before mid-morning.

I close this chapter with a testimony from a great man of prayer and faith. George Mueller (1805-1898) is famous for establishing orphanages in England and for joyfully depending on God for all his needs. How did he kindle this joy and faith? In 1841 he made a life-changing discovery. The testimony of this from his autobiography has proved to be of tremendous value in my life, and I pray it will also bear fruit in yours:

While I was staying at Nailsworth, it pleased the Lord to teach me a truth, irrespective of human instrumentality, as far as I know, the benefit of which I have not lost, though now more than forty years have since passed away.

The point is this: 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 might be nourished. For I might seek to set

the truth before the unconverted, I might seek to benefit believers, I might seek to relieve the distressed, I might in other ways seek to behave myself as it becomes a child of God in this world; and yet, not being happy in the Lord, and not being nourished and strengthened in my inner man day by day, all this might not be attended to in a right spirit.

Before this time my practice had been, at least for ten years previously, as an habitual thing, to give myself to prayer, after having dressed in the morning. *Now* 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, that thus my heart might be comforted, encouraged, warned, reproved, instructed; and that thus, whilst meditating, my heart might be brought into experiential communion with the Lord. I began therefore, to meditate on the New Testament, from the beginning, early in the morning.

The first thing I did, after having asked in a few words the Lord's blessing upon His precious Word, was to begin to meditate on the Word of God; searching, as it were, into every verse, to get blessing out of it; not for the sake of the public ministry of the Word; not for the sake of preaching on what I had meditated upon; but for the sake of obtaining food for my own soul. The result I have found to be almost invariably this, that after a very few minutes my soul has been led to confession, or to thanksgiving, or to intercession, or to supplication; so that though I did not, as it were, give myself to *prayer*, but to *meditation*, yet it turned almost immediately more or less into prayer.

When thus I have been for awhile making confession, or intercession, or supplication, or have given thanks, I go on to the next words or verse, turning all, as I go on, into prayer for myself or others, as the Word may lead to it; but still continually keeping before me, that food for my own soul is the object of my meditation. The result of this is, that there is always a good deal of confession, thanksgiving, supplication, or intercession mingled with my meditation, and that my inner man

almost invariably is even sensibly nourished and strengthened and that by breakfast time, with rare exceptions, I am in a peaceful if not happy state of heart. Thus also the Lord is pleased to communicate unto me that which, very soon after, I have found to become food for other believers, though it was not for the sake of the public ministry of the Word that I gave myself to meditation, but for the profit of my own inner man.

The difference between my former practice and my present one is this. Formerly, when I rose, I began to pray as soon as possible, and generally spent all my time till breakfast in prayer, or almost all the time. At all events I almost invariably began with prayer.... But what was the result? I often spent a quarter of an hour, or half an hour, or even an hour on my knees, before being conscious to myself of having derived comfort, encouragement, humbling of soul, etc.; and often after having suffered much from wandering of mind for the first ten minutes, or a quarter of an hour, or even half an hour, I only then began *really to pray*.

I scarcely ever suffer now in this way. For my heart being nourished by the truth, being brought into experimental fellowship with God, I speak to my Father, and to my Friend (vile though I am, and unworthy of it!) about the things that He has brought before me in His precious Word.

It often now astonishes me that I did not sooner see this. In no book did I ever read about it. No public ministry ever brought the

matter before me. No private intercourse with a brother stirred me up to this matter. And yet now, since God has taught me this point, it is as plain to me as anything, that the first thing the child of God has to do morning by morning is to *obtain food for his inner man*.

As the outward man is not fit for work for any length of time, except we take food, and as this is one of the first things we do in the morning, so it should be with the inner man. We should take food for that, as every one must allow. Now what is the food for the inner man: not *prayer*, but the *Word of God*: and here again not the simple reading of the Word of God, so that it only passes through our minds, just as water runs through a pipe, but considering what we read, pondering over it, and applying it to our hearts....

I dwell so particularly on this point because of the immense spiritual profit and refreshment I am conscious of having derived from it myself, and I affectionately and solemnly beseech all my fellow-believers to ponder this matter. By the blessing of God I ascribe to this mode the help and strength which I have had from God to pass in peace through deeper trials in various ways than I had ever had before; and after having now above forty years tried this way, I can most fully, in the fear of God, commend it. How different when the soul is refreshed and made happy early in the morning, from what it is when, without spiritual preparation, the service, the trials and the temptations of the day come upon one!

Changed Hearts



Write down two or three things that really stood out to you from this week's lesson.

Read and meditate on Psalm 19:7-11. Mark words or phrases that stand out to you.

*The law of the Lord is perfect,
refreshing the soul.
The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy,
making wise the simple.
The precepts of the Lord are right,
giving joy to the heart.
The commands of the Lord are radiant,
giving light to the eyes.
The fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring forever.
The decrees of the Lord are firm,
and all of them are righteous.
They are more precious than gold,
than much pure gold;
they are sweeter than honey,
than honey from the honeycomb.
By them your servant is warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.*

Psalm 19 lists some of the blessings of the Word of God in our lives. **Which blessing do you desire in your life right now? Why?** _____

Reading Scripture is like physical exercise. It takes discipline, consistency, and work! Some days we are motivated and excited as we exercise. Some days are just the opposite. The motivation is not there but we exercise anyway because we know that it is good for us and we know that, in the long run, we will reap the rewards. Just as physical health is tied to a good diet and regular exercise, spiritual health is tied to the diet and discipline of reading God's Word.

Based on your daily discipline of reading and feeding on God's Word, how would you evaluate your own spiritual health right now?

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ I am healthy and in great shape | ☐ I am a little out of shape but getting stronger |
| ☐ I have lost some spiritual muscle lately | ☐ I am basically a spiritual couch potato |

To get stronger in the Christian life, you need to get into God's Word! Here are some ways to make daily Bible reading a regular part of your life. Which one of these will you choose to do?

- ☐ Read a chapter a day from Proverbs. There are 31 chapters—one for each day of the month.
- ☐ Read daily from a *One Year Bible* which provides readings for each day of the year.
- ☐ Download the Bible app and listen to a portion of Scripture on your way to or from work.
- ☐ Pick a book of the Bible and read and study a paragraph or chapter each day.
- ☐ Find a devotional study on the Bible and commit to doing it on a daily basis.
- ☐ Print out a portion of Scripture and focus on memorizing it.

4

PRAYER: Speaking with God

What things are necessary in order to have a good relationship with another person? Write down three to five things that come to your mind.

An essential ingredient to any relationship is *communication*.

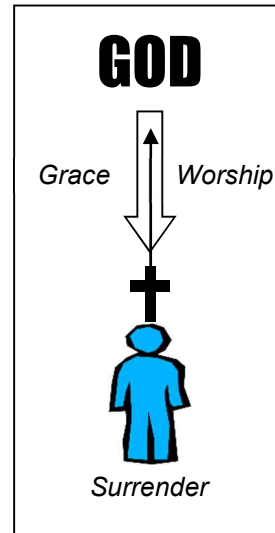
I must listen to you in order to hear your thoughts and to know you better. And I must speak to you in order to share my thoughts and give you the opportunity to know me better. This is the basic foundation of relationship. Without active, honest, love-based communication, a relationship is non-existent, illusionary, destructive, or dying.

The word “communication” shares the same verbal lineage as several other key relational words: common, communal, communion, and community. Hence, the experience of community, communion, and commonality is intricately tied to the practice of good communication.

The same is true with our relationship to God. We must listen to God in order to hear His heart and know Him better. And we must speak with God in order to share our heart with Him and allow Him greater access into the depths of who we are. Reading and meditating on God’s Word is the primary way to hear from God. And prayer is the primary way that we communicate back to Him.

Of course, the challenge of communicating with God is different than our human relationships because of the fact that God is spirit. We do not see God with our physical eyes and we did not speak to Him with just our physical mouth. Since God is spirit, our communication with Him must be spiritual. It must take place within the depths of our heart and be empowered and directed by the Spirit of God. Instead of “face-to-face” communication; it is “spirit-to-Spirit” communication.

Though this sounds “mystical” and complicated, spirit-based communication is simple enough that even a child can do it. Indeed, from our earliest ages, we are able to commune with ourselves through inner “self-talk” and even “converse” with inanimate objects, such as dolls and stuffed animals. These simple examples illustrate our human capacity for an inner life, a “spirit life,” that makes us unique among God’s creatures. Because of sin, this “spirit life” was cut off from communication with God. But now, in Christ, we once again have the ability and privilege to commune with God, spirit-to-Spirit, in prayer.



DAY ONE

**Westminster
Shorter
Catechism
(1647)**

Question 98:
What is prayer?

Answer:
Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies.

Question 99:
What rule hath God given for our direction in prayer?

Answer: The whole Word of God is of use to direct us in prayer; but the special rule of direction is that form of prayer which Christ taught his disciples, commonly called the Lord's Prayer.

Scripture Exploration



THE PRIVILEGE OF PRAYER

To give prayer the secondary place is to make God secondary in life's affairs.
—E.M. Bounds

A prayer in its simplest definition is merely a wish turned Godward.
—Phillips Brooks

Peace of God—“The opposite of anxiety, it is the tranquility that comes when the believer commits all his cares to God in prayer and worries about them no more” (NIV Study Bible).

THINK ABOUT: Why do you think we often choose to hold on to our cares and anxieties rather than turning them over to God in prayer?

The Greek word used most often for prayer is *proseuchomai*. It is from two words—*pros*, “toward” and *euchomai*, “to wish, desire, pray.” So the basic idea of prayer is directing our wishes and desires toward God. We all have wishes and desires. Sometimes we ignore these wishes and desires. Sometimes we pursue them on our own. Sometimes we place their fulfillment on some other object or person. Prayer is learning to direct these wishes and desires toward God—presenting them to Him, submitting them to Him, and allowing Him to answer or redirect them.

Read Philippians 4:6-7. Mark words or phrases that stand out to you.

*Do not be anxious about anything,
but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving
let your requests be made known to God.
And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,
will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

According to this passage, what is the antithesis to prayer? In other words, what are we often doing instead of praying to God? _____

Why do you think we do this instead of praying? _____

How is prayer described in this passage? _____

What is the promised “answer” to prayer in this passage? _____

What is something that you personally learn about prayer from Philippians 4:6-7? _____

Prayer is the privilege of presenting our needs, desires, wishes, worries, and hurts directly to the God of the universe—the only One who fully understands them (because He created us) and the only One who has the power to answer them.

Read Hebrews 4:14-16. Mark words or phrases that stand out to you.

Therefore, since we have a great High Priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet He did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Who gained us access into God’s throne room in heaven? _____

What makes Him different from other priests? _____

How should we approach God in prayer? _____

Why should we approach God in prayer? _____

In your opinion, why don’t we often approach God in prayer? _____

THE PRACTICE OF PRAYER

Jesus is the ultimate model of prayer. His whole life was lived in communion with God. He lived out the command in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 to *pray without ceasing*. He obviously did not spend every moment on His knees. But every moment of His life He had the knees of His heart bent before the Father. And every moment of His life He enjoyed and drew strength from His spirit-to-Spirit communication with God.

Write down one thing you learn about prayer from the following verses:

Mark 1:35 _____

Luke 5:15-16 _____

Luke 6:12-16 _____

Jesus provided extended teaching on prayer in His Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7).

Read Matthew 6:5-15 and answer the following questions regarding prayer.

How *shouldn’t* we pray? _____

We talk about heaven being so far away. It is within speaking distance to those who belong there.

—D. L. Moody

Boldly—

Greek, *parresia*, “freedom of speech, speaking openly and frankly.”

DAY TWO

He faced all of the same testings—

Jesus experienced every category of temptation while on earth: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. Since He experienced it all, He can identify with us. Since He did not sin, He can give us the strength to endure and overcome.

Vain repetition, babbling—

Greek, *battalogese*, “to babble, to speak without thinking.” It is not the length of our prayer or the number of words we use but rather the reality and fervency of our prayer that God desires.

It is necessary to draw near unto God, but it is not required of you to prolong your speech till everyone is longing to hear the word “Amen.”

—Charles Spurgeon

Hallowed be Your name—

Or “Let your name be sanctified, set apart above all other names.”

Do not lead us into temptation—

Or possibly, “do not lead us into the place of temptation” (see Matthew 4:1). James 1:13-15 makes it clear that God does not tempt us to sin but He can lead us into places of testing.

What false view of prayer do the people in Matthew 6:5 have? _____

What false view of prayer do the people in Matthew 6:7 have? _____

Why do you think Jesus instructs His followers to pray in secrecy? _____

Jesus provides the “manner” of prayer in 6:9-13. Commonly called the “Lord’s Prayer,” this prayer is not meant to be said half-heartedly or repetitiously. Instead it is a model of the attitude, simplicity, and elements that should characterize our communication with God. There are seven basic requests in the “Lord’s Prayer” with an opening address to God and a closing acknowledgement of His sovereignty, power, and glory. **Beside each of the seven requests below, write down one word that summarizes it.**

Our Father in heaven,

- ❶ *Hallowed be Your name.*
- ❷ *Your kingdom come.*
- ❸ *Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*
- ❹ *Give us this day our daily bread.*
- ❺ *And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.*
- ❻ *And do not lead us into temptation,*
- ❼ *But deliver us from the evil one.*

For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Which request stands out to you the most? Why? _____

Why do you think it is important to start the prayer with “our Father in heaven”?

Why do you think it is important to end the prayer with “Yours is the kingdom...”?

THE PURPOSE OF PRAYER

Many people look at prayer as a “blank check.” I ask God for what I want and He is supposed to “come through” for me. When prayer does not work this way, it is easy to get angry and disappointed at God and to give up on prayer. But the problem is that many people focus on the *power* of prayer while ignoring the *purpose* of prayer. Prayer is not like a spoiled child sitting on Santa Claus’ lap and asking for all the things he wants. The true picture of prayer is of a child interacting with his father. The child shares his needs and wants with his father, but the father has the ultimate prerogative on how to respond to the child’s requests. A loving father does not give his child everything he wants because he knows that...

1. Not everything is good for the child to have.
2. The child may need to learn to wait or to persevere.
3. There may be something different and better that the child needs.

Read Luke 11:11-13. Mark the words or phrases that stand out to you.

Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!

Based on this passage, how would you describe God’s heart when we pray to Him?

Based on this passage, what is the best gift that God can give us when we pray?

Read Matthew 26:36-46. This passage describes the most intense prayer during Jesus’ life. It takes place the night before His crucifixion in the Garden of Gethsemane

Write out the words of Jesus’ prayer in 26:39: _____

How many times did Jesus pray this same basic prayer? _____

Did God answer Jesus’ prayer? ☐ Yes ☐ No

In contrast to the intensity of Jesus’ prayer, the disciples can’t stay awake! What can you learn about prayer from the disciples in this passage? _____

Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane teaches us a simple truth about prayer. *Ultimately prayer is not about conforming God’s will to our own but about conforming our will to His.*

DAY THREE

We ask for silver and God sometimes sends His denials wrapped in gold.

—Anonymous

To pray effectively we must want what God wants—that and that only is to pray in the will of God.

—A.W. Tozer

Prayer is a mighty instrument, not for getting man’s will done in heaven, but for getting God’s will done in earth.

—Robert Law

Gethsemane—

The name means “oil press.” It was an area where olive trees were grown and the oil squeezed out of the olives. It is an appropriate place for Jesus’ prayer which was so intense that Luke says that Jesus’ “sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground” (Luke 22:44).

Additional Resources



Read the following excerpt from J. C. Ryle's book, *A Call to Prayer* (Published in 1865).

I trust that some who read this tract know well what prayer is, and have the Spirit of adoption. To all such, I offer a few words of brotherly counsel and exhortation. The incense offered in the tabernacle was ordered to be made in a particular way. Not every kind of incense would do. Let us remember this, and be careful about the matter and manner of our prayers.

Brethren who pray, if I know anything of a Christian's heart, you are often sick of your own prayers. You never enter into the apostle's words, "When I would do good, evil is present with me," so thoroughly as you sometimes do upon your knees. You can understand David's words, "I hate vain thoughts." You can sympathize with that poor converted Hottentot who was overheard praying, "Lord, deliver me from all my enemies, and above all, from that bad man—myself." There are few children of God who do not often find the season of prayer a season of conflict. The devil has special wrath against us when he sees us on our knees. Yet, I believe that prayers which cost us no trouble, should be regarded with great suspicion. I believe we are very poor judges of the goodness of our prayers, and that the prayer which pleases us least, often pleases God most. Suffer me then, as a companion in the Christian warfare, to offer a few words of exhortation. One thing, at least, we all feel: we must pray. We cannot give it up. We must go on.

I commend then to your attention, the importance of reverence and humility in prayer. Let us never forget what we are, and what a solemn thing it is to speak with God. Let us beware of rushing into his presence

with carelessness and levity. Let us say to ourselves: "I am on holy ground. This is no other than the gate of heaven. If I do not mean what I say, I am trifling with God. If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me." Let us keep in mind the words of Solomon, "Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart be hasty to utter anything before God; for God is in heaven, and you on earth." Ecclesiastes 5:2. When Abraham spoke to God, he said, "I am dust and ashes." When Jacob spoke to God, he said, "I am vile." Let us do likewise.

I commend to you the importance of praying spiritually. I mean by that, that we should labor always to have the direct help of the Spirit in our prayers, and beware above all things of formality. There is nothing so spiritual that it may become a form, and this is especially true of private prayer. We may insensibly get into the habit of using the fittest possible words, and offering the most scriptural petitions, and yet do it all by rote without feeling it, and walk daily round an old beaten path. I desire to touch this point with caution and delicacy. I know that there are certain things we daily want, and that there is nothing necessarily formal in asking for these things in the same words. The world, the devil, and our hearts, are daily the same. Of necessity we must daily go over old ground. But this I say, we must be very careful on this point. If the skeleton and outline of our prayers be by habit almost form, let us strive that the clothing and filling up of our prayers, be as far as possible of the Spirit. As to praying of a book in our private devotions, it is a habit I cannot praise. If we can tell our doctors the state of our bodies without a book, we ought to be able to tell the

state of our souls to God. I have no objection to a person using crutches when they are first recovering from a broken limb. It is better to use crutches, than not to walk at all. But if I saw them all their life on crutches, I should not think it matter for congratulation. I should like to see them strong enough to throw their crutches away.

I commend to you the importance of making prayer a regular business of life. I might say something of the value of regular times in the day for prayer. God is a God of order. The hours for morning and evening sacrifice in the Jewish temple were not fixed as they were without a meaning. Disorder is eminently one of the fruits of sin. But I would not bring any under bondage. This only I say, that it is essential to your soul's health to make praying a part of the business of every twenty-four hours of your life. Just as you allot time to eating, sleeping, and business, so also allot time to prayer. Choose your own hours and seasons. At the very least, speak with God in the morning, before you speak with the world: and speak with God at night, after you have done with the world. But settle it in your minds, that praying is one of the great things of every day. Do not drive it into a corner. Do not give it the scraps and parings of your duty. Whatever else you make a business of, make a business of prayer.

I commend to you the importance of perseverance in prayer. Once having begun the habit, never give it up. Your heart will sometimes say, "You will have had family prayers: what mighty harm if you leave private prayer undone?" Your body will sometimes say, "You are unwell, or sleepy, or weary; you need not pray." Your mind will sometimes say, "You have important business to attend to to-day; cut short your prayers." Look on all such suggestions as coming direct from Satan. They are all as good as saying, "Neglect your soul." I do not

maintain that prayers should always be of the same length; but I do say, let no excuse make you give up prayer.

Paul said, "Continue in prayer and, "Pray without ceasing." He did not mean that people should be always on their knees, but he did mean that our prayers should be like the continual burned-offering steadily preserved in every day; that it should be like seed-time and harvest, and summer and winter, unceasingly coming round at regular seasons; that it should be like the fire on the altar, not always consuming sacrifices, but never completely going out. Never forget that you may tie together morning and evening devotions, by an endless chain of short ejaculatory prayers throughout the day. Even in company, or business, or in the very streets, you may be silently sending up little winged messengers to God, as Nehemiah did in the very presence of Artaxerxes. And never think that time is wasted which is given to God. A nation does not become poorer because it loses one year of working days in seven, by keeping the Sabbath. A Christian never finds he is a loser, in the long run, by persevering in prayer.

I commend to you the importance of earnestness in prayer. It is not that a person should shout, or scream, or be very loud, in order to prove that they are in earnest. But it is desirable that we should be hearty and fervent and warm, and ask as if we were really interested in what we were doing. It is the "effectual fervent" prayer that "avails much." This is the lesson that is taught us by the expressions used in Scripture about prayer. It is called, "crying, knocking, wrestling, laboring, striving." This is the lesson taught us by scripture examples. Jacob is one. He said to the angel at Penueel, "I will not let you go, except you bless me." Genesis 32:26. Daniel is another. Hear how he pleaded with God: "O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord,

hearken and do; defer not, for your own sake, O my God.” Daniel 9:19.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is another. It is written of him, “In the days of his flesh, he offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears.” Heb. 5:7. Alas, how unlike is this to many of our supplications! How tame and lukewarm they seem by comparison. How truly might God say to many of us, “You do not really want what you pray for.” Let us try to amend this fault. Let us knock loudly at the door of grace, like Mercy in Pilgrim’s Progress, as if we must perish unless heard. Let us settle it in our minds, that cold prayers are a sacrifice without fire. Let us remember the story of Demosthenes the great orator, when one came to him, and wanted to plead his cause. He heard him without attention, while he told his story without earnestness. The man saw this, and cried out with anxiety that it was all true. “Ah,” said Demosthenes, “I believe you now.”

I commend to you the importance of praying in faith. We should endeavor to believe that our prayers are heard, and that if we ask things according to God’s will, we shall be answered. This is the plain command of our Lord Jesus Christ: “Whatever things you desire, when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you shall have them.” Mark 11:24. Faith is to prayer what the feather is to the arrow: without it prayer will not hit the mark. We should cultivate the habit of pleading promises in our prayers. We should take with us some promises, and say, “Lord, here is Your own word pledged. Do for us as You have said.” This was the habit of Jacob and Moses and David. The 119th Psalm is full of things asked, “according to your Word.” Above all, we should cultivate the habit of expecting answers to our prayers. We should do like the merchant who sends his ships to sea. We should not be satisfied, unless we see some return. Alas, there are few

points on which Christians come short so much as this. The church at Jerusalem made prayer without ceasing for Peter in prison; but when the prayer was answered, they would hardly believe it. Acts 12:15. It is a solemn saying of Robert Trail, “There is no surer mark of trifling in prayer, than when men are careless what they get in prayer.”

I commend to you the importance of boldness in prayer. There is an unseemly familiarity in some people’s prayers which I cannot praise. But there is such a thing as a holy boldness, which is exceedingly to be desired. I mean such boldness as that of Moses, when he pleads with God not to destroy Israel “Wherefore,” says he, “should the Egyptians speak and say, ‘For mischief did he bring them out, to slay them in the mountains?’ Turn from your fierce anger.” Exodus 32:12. I mean such boldness as that of Joshua, when the children of Israel were defeated before men of Ai: “What,” says he, “will you do unto your great name?” Joshua 7:9. This is the boldness for which Luther was remarkable. One who heard him praying said, “What a spirit, what a confidence was in his very expressions. With such a reverence he prayed, as one begging of God, and yet with such hope and assurance, as if he spoke with a loving father or friend. This is the boldness which distinguished Bruce, a great Scottish divine of the seventeenth century. His prayers were said to be “like bolts shot up into heaven.” Here also I fear we sadly come short. We do not sufficiently realize the believer’s privileges. We do not plead as often as we might, “Lord, are we not your own people? Is it not for your glory that we should be sanctified? Is it not for your honor that your gospel should increase?”

I commend to you the importance of fullness in prayer. I do not forget that our Lord warns us against the example of the Pharisees, who, for pretense, made long prayers;

and commands us when we pray not to use vain repetitions. But I cannot forget, on the other hand, that he has given his own sanction to large and long devotions by continuing all night in prayer to God. At all events, we are not likely in this day to err on the side of praying too much. Might it not be feared that many believers in this generation pray too little? Is not the actual amount of time that many Christians give to prayer, in the aggregate, very small? I am afraid these questions cannot be answered satisfactorily. I am afraid the private devotions of many are painfully scanty and limited; just enough to prove they are alive and no more. They really seem to want little from God. They seem to have little to confess, little to ask for, and little to thank him for. Alas, this is altogether wrong. Nothing is more common than to hear believers complaining that they do not get on. They tell us that they do not grow in grace as they could desire. Is it not rather to be suspected that many have quite as much grace as they ask for? Is it not the true account of many, that they have little, because they ask little? The cause of their weakness is to be found in their own stunted, dwarfish, clipped, contracted, hurried, narrow, diminutive prayers. They have not, because they ask not. Oh, we are not straitened in Christ, but in ourselves. The Lord says, "Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it." But we are like the King of Israel who smote on the ground thrice and stayed, when he ought to have smitten five or six times.

I commend to you the importance of particularity in prayer. We ought not to be content with general petitions. We ought to specify our needs before the throne of grace. It should not be enough to confess we are sinners; we should name the sins of which our conscience tells us that we are most guilty. It should not be enough to ask for holiness; we should name the graces in which we feel most deficient. It should not be enough to tell the

Lord we are in trouble; we should describe our trouble and all its peculiarities. This is what Jacob did when he feared his brother Esau. He tells God exactly what it is that he fears. Genesis 32:11. This is what Eleazar did, when he sought a wife for his master's son. He spreads before God precisely what he needs. Genesis 24:12. This is what Paul did when he had a thorn in the flesh. He besought the Lord. 2 Corinthians 12:8. This is true faith and confidence. We should believe that nothing is too small to be named before God. What should we think of the patient who told his doctor he was ill, but never went into particulars? What should we think of the wife who told her husband she was unhappy, but did not specify the cause? What should we think of the child who told their father that they were in trouble, but nothing more? Christ is the true bridegroom of the soul, the true physician of the heart, the real father of all his people. Let us show that we feel this by being unreserved in our communications with Him. Let us hide no secrets from Him. Let us tell Him all our hearts.

I commend to you the importance of intercession in our prayers. We are all selfish by nature, and our selfishness is very apt to stick to us, even when we are converted. There is a tendency in us to think only of our own souls, our own spiritual conflicts, our own progress in religion, and to forget others. Against this tendency we all have need to watch and strive, and not the least in our prayers. We should study to be of a public spirit. We should stir ourselves up to name other names besides our own before the throne of grace. We should try to bear in our hearts the whole world, the heathen, the Jews, the Roman Catholics, the body of true believers, the professing Protestant churches, the country in which we live, the congregation to which we belong, the household in which we sojourn, the friends and relations we are connected with. For each and all of these we should

plead. This is the highest charity. They love me best who loves me in their prayers. This is for our soul's health. It enlarges our sympathies and expands our hearts. This is for the benefit of the church. The wheels of all machinery for extending the gospel are moved by prayer. They do as much for the Lord's cause who intercede like Moses on the mount, as they who fight like Joshua in the thick of the battle. This is to be like Christ. He bears the names of his people, as their High Priest, before the Father. Oh, the privilege of being like Jesus! This is to be a true helper to ministers. If I must choose a congregation, give me a people that pray.

I commend to you the importance of thankfulness in prayer. I know well that asking God is one thing and praising God is another. But I see so close a connection between prayer and praise in the Bible, that I dare not call that true prayer in which thankfulness has no part. It is not for nothing that Paul says, "By prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God." Philippians 4:6. "Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving." Colossians 4:2. It is of mercy that we are not in hell. It is of mercy that we have the hope of heaven. It is of mercy that we live in a land of spiritual light. It is of mercy that we have been called by the Spirit, and not left to reap the fruit of our own ways. It is of mercy that we still live and have opportunities of glorifying God for that free grace by which we live, and for that loving kindness which endures forever. Never was there an eminent saint who was not full of thankfulness. St. Paul hardly ever writes an epistle without beginning with thankfulness. Men like Whitefield in the last century, and Bickersteth in our own time, abounded in thankfulness. Oh, reader, if we would be bright and shining lights in our day, we must cherish a spirit of praise. Let our prayers be thankful prayers.

I commend to you the importance of watchfulness over your prayers. Prayer is the point in religion at which you must be most of all on your guard. Here it is that true religion begins; here it flourishes, and here it decays. Tell me what a person's prayers are, and I will soon tell you the state of their soul. Prayer is the spiritual pulse. By this the spiritual health may be tested. Prayer is the spiritual weather-glass. By this we may know whether it is fair or foul with our hearts. Oh, let us keep an eye continually upon our private devotions. Here is the path and marrow of our practical Christianity. Sermons and books and tracts, and committee-meetings and the company of good people are all good in their way, but they will never make up for the neglect of private prayer. Mark well the places and society and companions that unhinge your hearts for communion with God and make your prayers drive heavily. There be on your guard. Observe narrowly what friends and what employment leave your soul in the most spiritual frame, and most ready to speak with God. To these cleave and stick fast. If you will take care of your prayers, nothing shall go very wrong with your soul.

I offer these points for your private consideration. I do it in all humility. I know no one who needs to be reminded of them more than I do myself. But I believe them to be God's own truth, and I desire myself and all I love to feel them more.

I want the times we live in to be praying times. I want the Christians of our day to be praying Christians. I want the church to be a praying church. My Heart's desire and prayer in sending forth this tract is to promote a spirit of prayerfulness. I want those who never prayed yet, to arise and call upon God, and I want those who do pray, to see that they are not praying amiss

Changed Hearts



Write down two or three things that really stood out to you from this week's lesson.

Prayer is essential to our relationship with God. To love God we must be in communion with Him. We hear Him through His Word and we respond back through the avenue of prayer. Thus, setting aside time to read Scripture, meditate, and pray is a priority for all believers. This is hard to do, especially in our busy and hectic culture. Surveys have indicated that the average American Christian spends only five minutes a day in prayer.

What are the main challenges you face in your daily devotion to prayer? Think through this past day/week. What are some of the things that have kept you from prayer? _____

To cultivate a life of prayer takes time and discipline. There are three types of prayer that we need to cultivate:

- **Prayer on Our Feet.** Learning to commune with God throughout the activities of the day. Brother Lawrence referred to this type of prayer as “practicing the presence of God.” It is going through the day thinking about God, conversing with God, thanking God, and seeking His direction. Every activity, event, interaction, and circumstance can be an occasion for prayer if we are walking in the Spirit and sensitive to the presence of God.
- **Prayer on Our Knees.** In addition to daily communion with God, we need to set aside times to spend on our knees with Him. Apart from this discipline, it is easy to forget God and to place our own activity above dependence on Him.

Read Daniel 6:10. Mark what stands out to you about Daniel's prayer life.

Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.

- **Prayer on Our Face.** There are times in our life, just as Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, when we fall flat on our faces before God in utter brokenness and simply submit our lives to Him.

Make it your aim this week to focus on prayer. Begin each day reading a passage of Scripture and meditating on it. Get on your knees and let your prayer for the day flow out of your reading and meditation. Start a personal journal or notebook to record your thoughts for each day.

Consider adding the *Operation World* or *Open Doors* prayer app to your phone so that you can pray each day for a nation of the world and for the persecuted church.

If you are physically able, spend one day this week in a partial fast. Skip at least one meal or go from lunch one day to lunch the next (skipping dinner and breakfast). Concentrate the time in prayer and meditation. Make a point to try to avoid TV or internet surfing. Instead feed on God's Word. Listen to His voice. Focus on any urgent prayer requests in your own life or in the lives of others. Read. Sing. Walk. Share time with others.

Write down any thoughts you have from the experience. What did you learn?

Write out a prayer to God. What is on your heart that you want to express to Him?

5

REST: Enjoying God

We are a busy culture. The invention of “time-saving” devices, rather than simplifying our lives, has actually made them more hectic and frantic. Now we try to squeeze as much activity into one day as possible. We have lost our sense of balance. We have lost our sense of limits.

Two hundred years ago, people were limited in how far they could travel (no cars or planes), how much news and information they were exposed to (no TV or internet), and how much they could accomplish in a day (no electricity or automation). Today we have the ability to go anywhere at any time, constant access to news from around the world, and the means and tools to accomplish a multitude of tasks at any time during the day or night. In many senses, we are out of control—unable to focus and unable to experience rest in the midst of a myriad of options and activities.

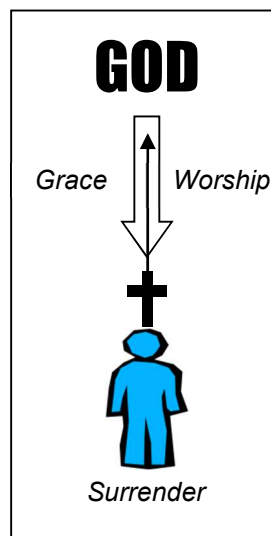
This addiction to busyness impacts our spiritual lives. We are either too busy to have time for God or we bring our busy mindset into the Christian life, packing our “spiritual to do list” with so many things that we forget God in the process. Jesus’ message to the church at Ephesus still rings true today.

I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love (Revelation 2:2-4).

Jesus’ words remind us that Christianity is not a religion of activity but rather a relationship of intimacy. I can do a multitude of things for Christ—Bible study, prayer, evangelism, singing, fasting, etc.—but without a love for Him, they are empty ritual. As the Westminster Catechism states, “Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to *enjoy* Him forever.” We glorify Him by enjoying Him.

What do you think it means to “enjoy God”?

God loves us so that we can love Him. And we love God by knowing Him in truth (the Word), communing with Him in spirit (prayer), and enjoying Him in rest.



DAY ONE

**Westminster
Confession of
Faith (1647)**

**Chapter XXI.
Of Religious
Worship and
the Sabbath
Day.**

VII: As it is the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in His Word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment binding all men in all ages, He hath particularly appointed one day in seven, for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto Him; which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week; and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which, in Scripture, is called the Lord’s Day.

Scripture Exploration



THE GOD OF REST

God has been supremely and eternally happy in the fellowship of the Trinity. In creation God “went public” with the glory that reverberates joyfully between the Father and the Son! There is something about the fullness of God’s joy that inclines it to overflow.

—John Piper

The ancient Hebrews did not have a concept of a 40-hour work week away from home. Work was intimately tied to family life. The industrial revolution in the 1800’s marked the beginning of a major shift of work away from the home and from family relationships.

THINK ABOUT:
What does a life of rest look like to you?

Read Genesis 1:31-2:3. What was God’s assessment of His six-day creation?

What did God do on the seventh day? _____

What do you think this means? Was God tired and needed a break? _____

What did God do *to* the seventh day (2:3)? _____

From the beginning of creation, God established a pattern of work and rest. It is a rhythm woven into our very being as humans. Each day our physical bodies are designed for activity during the day and rest/sleep at night. This same pattern is to characterize our seven-day week. We are to work and be active for six days of the week and then spend one day in physical rest, refreshment, and spiritual renewal.

The Hebrew word for “rest” in Genesis 2 is *shabath*, from which we get our English word “Sabbath.” God placed such a high value on rest that the principle of the Sabbath was the fourth command of God’s Ten Commandments.

Read Exodus 20:8-11. Mark any words or phrases that stand out to you as you read.

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Write down two things that you can learn about the Sabbath from Exodus 20:8-11.

1. _____
2. _____

We are to rest because God is a God of rest. He is a God who perfectly balances work and rest, activity and intimacy, accomplishment and enjoyment. He creates a great universe and then spends time enjoying His creation. He is at peace within Himself, never in a hurry, unbound by time, yet always available and active in the universe and in our lives. Jesus modeled this perfect balance while on earth. There was no sense of hurry, panic, or frantic behavior in Jesus’ life yet He ministered to people, healed diseases, and fully accomplished God’s purpose for His life.

THE PURPOSE OF REST

Read Exodus 23:12. What reason is given for resting on the seventh day?

The principle of Sabbath rest is for (see also Ex. 23:10-11): ☐ People ☐ Animals ☐ Land

What can you learn from this?

Sabbath rests were not only to be observed on a weekly basis but also at special times during the year, such as the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles. Look up the following verses and write down what a person was to focus on or do during the Sabbath rests commanded during these times.

Leviticus 16:29-31

Leviticus 23:39-41

The most unique time on the Jewish calendar was the Sabbath year. Every seventh year the people were to give the land a “rest” and only eat what remained from the years before or which grew naturally. In addition to this seventh year, every seventh “seventh year” (year 49-50) was to be a Jubilee year. This was to be a celebratory time when debts would be canceled, slaves released, land returned, family gathered, and God worshiped and enjoyed as the Restorer of our lives and our souls (Leviticus 25).

Historically it appears that the Jews never celebrated a Sabbath year or Jubilee year. Why do you think they failed to obey God, rest their land and rest during this year?

Write out Psalm 46:10. This verse gives us the ultimate reason to take time to rest.

Unfortunately, by the time of Jesus, the Jewish nation had taken the principle of Sabbath rest and turned it into a burden of legalism. The purpose of the Sabbath had been lost. Jesus had to remind the religious leaders that *the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath* (Mark 2:27). In other words, God does not require us to rest to meet some need in Himself. He commands us to rest because He knows if we do not, then we will ultimately harm ourselves. Just as a person who does not get enough sleep begins to wear down physically, emotionally, and spiritually, so does a person who refuses to carve out time each week to focus on the Lord and rest in Him.

DAY TWO

Take a rest; a field that has rested gives a bountiful crop.
—Ovid

It is not God who loads us until we bend or crack with an ulcer, nervous breakdown, heart attack, or stroke. These come from our inner compulsions coupled with the pressure of circumstances.
—Charles Hummel

Leviticus 25:10 is inscribed on the Liberty Bell.

The institution of the sabbatical year provided a real test of Israel's faith in God's promises. In that period, they were asked deliberately to forego one year's harvest, trusting that God would supply enough in the previous years to tide them over.
—Gordon Wenham

DAY THREE

Sat at the Lord's feet—

A place of submission, worship, and learning. Mary of Bethany is seen three times in the gospels. All three times she is seen "at the Lord's feet." In Luke 10, she listens at the Lord's feet. In John 11:32, she cries at the Lord's feet. And in John 12:3, she anoints the Lord's feet in worship.

Whenever we criticize others and pity ourselves because we feel overworked, we had better take time to examine our lives. Perhaps in all our busyness, we have been ignoring the Lord.

—Warren Wiersbe

[God] will not speed His pace to catch up with ours; we need to slow our pace in order to recover our walk with Him.

—Charles Swindoll

THE PRACTICE OF REST

Read Luke 10:38-42 slowly and carefully. Mark key words or phrases as you read.

Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word. But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me."

And Jesus answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her."

Contrast Mary and Martha in the chart below. Write down what you can observe about each one from Luke 10:38-42 (actions, attitudes, emotions, words, etc.).

MARTHA

MARY

Why do you think Martha was the way she was in this story? _____

What response do you think Martha expected from Jesus when she pointed out Mary's lack of help? _____

In your own words, paraphrase or summarize the response Jesus did give to her.

What do you think Jesus would tell you if He were to observe your lifestyle?

THE INVITATION TO REST

Read, meditate upon, and memorize the invitation of Jesus in Matthew 11:28-30.

*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke 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.*

Write down five things that you can learn about “rest” from this passage.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

The invitation to spiritual rest is still open today. However, we must choose to receive it and live it in Jesus Christ.

He says, “My yoke is easy.” The word easy is in Greek *chrestos*, which can mean well-fitting. In Palestine ox-yokes were made of wood; the ox was brought, and the measurements were taken. The yoke was then tailor-made to fit the ox. ...There is a legend that Jesus made the best ox-yokes in all Galilee.

—William Barclay

Additional Resources



Read the following excerpt from Dr. Richard Swenson’s book, *Margin* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2004), pages 193-203.

Three year-olds seldom sit still. Bundles of energy tightly wound, they dash from here to there, leaping over toys and ricocheting off walls. Church services were not designed with these squirmers in mind. Each Sunday the rear of the sanctuary witnesses the sixty-minute ritual of parent against child; the one trying to survive; the other trying to escape.

Our eldest son, Adam, was once such a wiggly three-year-old, and I was more than once the embarrassed parent. A particular service stands out vividly. His restless noisiness was not in the least malicious, but it was distracting nevertheless. Attempting to maintain quiet, I lifted him onto my lap and held him loosely in my arms. The wiggling,

however, didn’t stop. Now, instead of random wiggling, there was willful wiggling. He and I were soon doing battle. Adam was intent on freedom. I was intent on containment.

Finally, after twenty minutes, that blessed moment arrived. As if someone had thrown a switch, he suddenly melted into my arms and fell asleep. The tug of war ended. Adam had yielded and was now at rest. As the struggling ceased, my attitude changed. The frustration of the previous moments vanished, and in its place was a deep protective love. This, I thought, is as it should be—not striving, but nestling. I would have moved mountains at that moment to defend him.

Rest. In the arms of a loving Father.

WEARINESS

The patients who came to my office never seemed rested. For that matter, neither do most physicians. Many people I meet look haggard and worn-out.

Often-used descriptors of our society include active, busy, driven, fatigued, tired, exhausted, weary, burned out, anxious, overloaded, or stressed. But seldom do you hear our society described as “well rested.” We are a tired generation, one for which Matthew Arnold’s “hurry sickness” has become a way of life. Our carburetors are set on high, and our gears are stuck in overdrive. Our lives are nonstop.

We have leisure but little rest. The pace, the noise, the expectations, and the interruptions of modern life have not soothed the soul nor brought refreshment to the burdened spirit...

When abroad in more primitive conditions, I often miss modern conveniences—like a cold glass of milk or bathrooms without cockroaches. But what I don’t miss are phones, televisions, stoplights, video games, watches that beep during pastoral prayers, and boom boxes on the beach.

I have not gone so far as to suggest that the way of life in developing countries is superior or preferable to that of developed countries. I am only making the observation that these gracious and hospitable people are not exhausted in body and spirit, whereas we often are. Those who would maintain that progress brings rest are wrong. We may have education, affluence, technology, leisure, and conveniences—but no rest.

God, however, has commanded us to rest. A biblically authentic and balanced life will

include time to be still, to remember, to meditate, to delight in who He is and what He has made. But a large obstacle stands in our way: There is no glory in rest. No social acclaim. We are never a hero because we rest. We can only be still and wait upon the Lord. We can only meditate upon the Word more. We can only have more margin with which to serve our neighbor. These things, however, are not socially reimbursable.

BURNING UP THE ENGINE

The healthiest lifestyle comes equipped with four gears.

The first gear is park for the contemplative times. This gear is used for rest and renewal, and to recharge our batteries. This is where we do much of our thinking about values and spirituality, as well as our study and prayer. It is the gear we use as we pick up a novel and head for the hammock, or as we sit on a stump and watch the wildlife.

The second gear is low. This gear is for relationships, for family and friends. This is the gear we use when talking with someone, and it prevents us from being distracted and nervously moving on to the next activity while still in the middle of a conversation. This is the gear we use when the children ask for a story. Or when they ask about the death of pets, or sex, or God. No hurry here: just quality.

The third gear is drive. This is our usual gear for work and play. This gear uses lots of energy, and the faster speed feels good because it is productive. It gets us from place to place quickly. This is the gear we mow the lawn in or exercise in.

The fourth gear is overdrive. This gear is reserved for times that require extra effort. If we have a deadline coming, we kick into this

gear. If we are playing a basketball game, we call upon overdrive to energize us. This is the gear doctors use during flu season when schedules are double-booked.

Unfortunately, many in our society do not shift down from overdrive. Our cars are not meant to race at high speeds continuously. Neither are our bodies or spirits. Yet to slow down for some is unthinkable and for others, impossible.

In our everyday lives, most of us need rest in three areas:

- Physical rest, which is important.
- Emotional rest, which is more important.
- Spiritual rest, which, though widely neglected, is of supreme importance.

PHYSICAL REST

Constant activity is a characteristic of our age. If we are not active, we feel slothful. If we are not productive, we feel guilty. A healthy twenty-eight year old man sitting on a lawn swing for an entire Sunday afternoon would likely feel the need to apologize to neighbors should they discover him.

Such busyness does not come because our bodies can't help themselves. We cannot blame our thyroid or adrenal glands. Nor does it result from a theological teaching. It comes from a cultural value system that idolizes productivity. I am not saying that productivity is wrong. I am only saying it must not be idolized.

As a physician, I clearly affirm that physical activity is not only good, it is necessary. But so is physical rest. Our bodies were designed to need rest. Sleep is the clearest example, and one that cannot be violated. Many Americans, however, get the activity-rest cycle out of balance. Millions get too little

activity, and millions more get too little rest. Type A's, as an illustration, refuse to rest: to them it is an enemy. Also, those around them are made to feel weak if they desire a pause. Consequently, life is lived full speed ahead. They work hard, they play hard, and they even Sabbath hard.

Work in our culture often dominates other areas of life. To be sure, work is very important. But other activities are more important. The people who work the hardest and rest the least naturally rise to the top, from where they drive the entire work system. They set the rules, which maximizes productivity. Even love and relationship come down the list. Little wonder rest cannot find a resting place.

"People in the Western world have leisure. We do not need to slave every minute in order to eat. But only a few appear to have rest," observes Mennonite author Doris Longacre. "Profit-making work began to swallow Sundays and holidays. Obviously much of this fatigue takes place in the name of making more money, even though the pantry's already stocked. After all, by burning a little more gas and working one more evening a week, it is possible to chase down one more account, open another store, or farm another field. But it may not be possible to love a spouse, children, and the friendless poor at the same time."

God has told us that life is more than work. It includes relationships, worship, and yes, even rest. "A restless work style produces a restless person," notes Gordon MacDonald. "We do not rest because our work is done; we rest because God commanded it and created us to have a need for it."

Leisure might be the name we give our time away from work, but it is not a synonym for rest. Many can't understand why they are so

tired after a vacation. The reason is because even our vacations and weekends have ceased to be restful.

Americans do not tolerate an activity vacuum well. The slow, contemplative life is largely foreign to our experience. Therefore, when “leisure time” appears on our schedule, we select from the many activity options society offers. This is not inherently wrong. Neither is quiet, introverted reflection always right. But when we work hard and then play harder, no wonder we feel fatigued so often.

Technology does not answer our need for physical rest. Labor-saving devices help in some respects, but curiously, those cultures that have the most labor-saving devices are the most hectic and the least rested. We often wonder why the homemaker remains so tired despite all the household appliances and conveniences. We forget to calculate that for every minute of time saved, our society offers hours of new activities, each with noise, expectations, and complexities of its own.

Although progress may not approve, *it is okay to rest physically.*

EMOTIONAL REST

More important to our overall health than physical rest is the resting of our emotions. Ask physicians about the frequency of anxiety or depression they find in their patients, and you will be stunned to learn how few in our midst are emotionally healthy and rested. We worry about our jobs, our marriages, our children, our looks, our age, our health, and our future. The high rate of tranquilizer use is an indicator of our lack of emotional rest.

Physical rest and emotional rest often go hand in hand, but we have no guarantee the resting of our bodies will produce rested

psyches. The stilling of outward activity does not always assure a commensurate quieting of inward activity. Nevertheless, if we would rest our emotions, a wise first step would be to seek out quiet. Unfortunately, Walden is rarely found; lights and noise are to our right, people and action are to our left. With each successive decade, the ambient environmental noise level increases...

If you think about it, you can find many reasons for the absence of emotional rest in our midst—so many, in fact, that it would be surprising to discover true restedness among us. Noise deprives us of rest, yet we have more noise today than ever before. Activity overload deprives us of rest, yet we are busier than ever. Inappropriate expectations deprive us of rest, yet our culture advertises: “You deserve the best.” Pride deprives us of rest, as we worry about every wrinkle we have and every piece of clothing we wear. Discontent and covetousness deprive us of rest, yet our culturally sanctioned advertising intentionally stimulates discontent. “The proud man and the covetous man never rest,” noted Thomas a Kempis, “but the meek man and the poor in spirit live in great abundance of rest and peace.”

Preoccupation with success deprives us of rest—always climb a little higher and get a little more. So does preoccupation with power. Yet success and power are two cogs of the “American dream,” and we are reluctant to let them go. Debt deprives us of rest, yet our debt is at unprecedented levels. We worry about our image and our reputation until we have no rest.

As A.W. Tozer observed, “The heart’s fierce effort to protect itself from every slight, to shield its touchy honor from the bad opinion of friend and enemy, will never let the mind have rest.”

Perhaps the greatest root cause for the absence of emotional rest in our society is fractured relationships. When there is fighting in the workplace, contention in the community, bitterness in the church, and combat in the home, we won't find rest. The saddest of these, of course, is the home. It was intended by God as a haven of peace and security. But when strife enters, rest flees.

"If we don't deal with our unresolved conflicts, they'll deal with us," counsels Tim Kimmel. "Are there people whom you need to forgive? Do yourself a favor. Give them something they don't deserve but desperately need. Give them the gift of forgiveness. It's a gift that, once given, offers something in return. Your spirit gets a rest."

If we would avoid the many unexpected pains of our day, we must discipline our expectations, tame our discontent, and mend our relationships. For *it is important to rest emotionally*.

SPIRITUAL REST

When our bodies find rest, we feel refreshed. When our emotions find rest, our countenance is lifted. Yet relaxed muscles and minds are of little worthy unless our souls also find rest in the acceptance of God. Such a rest transcends the problems of our world and shelters us where no injury can follow. As the psalmist writes, "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, 'He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.'" The shadow of the Almighty is impregnable; His rest is ultimately the only dependable rest.

We should be concerned with at least two types of spiritual rest. God calls us to Sabbath rest. And He offers us surrendered rest.

Someone once remarked, "God rested—and He wasn't tired." After creating, even the Almighty rested: "God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done." He looked on what He had made and delighted in it, and He has commanded us to do the same.

At Sabbath rest we don't simply rest the body—although that is important. Also, we don't primarily rest the emotions—although we would be wise to discover such rest in our Sabbaths. Instead, it is a remembrance. Moses writes, "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day." This same God who rescued the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt is the One who rescues us from our bondage to sin. Remember!

At Sabbath time we suspend dominion work and instead worship the Dominion-Maker. We cease reaping for our own cupboards and instead bring an offering to Him. We rest not because we are tired. We don't cease our labor because it is finished. We don't worship because now there are grapes on the vine and cattle in the stalls. We rest and worship one day in seven simply because He is the Lord.

Remembering, worshipping, and resting are acts of contemplation. Yet churches today, for the most part, have not developed a practical theology of contemplation nor a practical theology of rest. The Sabbath rest is an opportunity for contemplation, an opportunity to remember our roots.

"Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling"—but the world is shouting and waving its hands. Sometimes, over the din, it is hard to hear the invitation: "Ye who are weary come home."

High on my list of favorite Scriptures are Jesus' words in Matthew 11:28-30: "Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke 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." These words draw weary people everywhere. Yet, per usual, Jesus leaves us scratching our heads. What does He mean, to take His yoke? I'm not sure that sounds restful. It sounds more like suffering.

The answer lies in meekness. In this passage, Christ calls Himself "gentle and humble."

We can live with love even when others hate—all the time knowing that love wins. We can respond with grace when others fight, knowing that grace wins. When we come to

Him and surrender, accepting His yoke, we accept full vulnerability to the onslaught of the world. Yet, at the same time, we are assured that nothing can separate us from the victorious love of Christ. This rest is self-weakening unto God-strength. It is self-emptying unto God-fullness. It is the rest of full surrender...

In an age of strife and unrest, when our bodies are weary and our spirits frenzied, "Don't worry, be happy," will not rescue us. I prefer Corrie ten Boom's "Don't wrestle, just nestle." Even when I feel inferior, even when I have been victimized, even when the pace and pressures of life bring me to the point of collapse, Christ brings me to His rest. When my surrender is completed and His yoke is accepted, then my soul will find rest.

Changed Hearts



Write down two or three things that really stood out to you from this week's lesson.

Resting in God takes faith. We have to believe that 1) God is in control 2) we are not in control and 3) God can accomplish His will in our lives apart from our frantic and hurried schedules.

Spend time quieting your heart and meditating on the verses below from Psalm 37:3-5:

*Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.
Delight yourself in the LORD and He will give you the desires of your heart.
Commit your way to the LORD; trust in Him and He will do this.*

Commit one day this week to a Sabbath rest. Try not to accomplish anything on this day except delighting in God, enjoying your family and friends, and enjoying creation. Read through one of the psalms. Go on a prayer walk. When schedules, appointments, worries, responsibilities, and deadlines come up in your mind, try to turn those things over to the Lord. Ask yourself why you have the pressure and stress to do and accomplish these things. What do you think will happen if you fail to do these things? Does your stress and worry reflect faith in God or faith in yourself?

As a way of rejoicing in God, write down one thing that you can praise God for or one thing that you are thankful for beginning with every letter of the alphabet.

A _____

B _____

C _____

D _____

E _____

F _____

G _____

H _____

I _____

J _____

K _____

L _____

M _____

N _____

O _____

P _____

Q _____

R _____

S _____

T _____

U _____

V _____

W _____

X _____

Y _____

Z _____



6

FAMILY: Building Up the Home

Up until this point in this study, the emphasis has been on God's love for us (Grace and Surrender) and our love for God (The Word, Prayer, and Rest). In this lesson, the emphasis shifts from our vertical relationship with God to our horizontal relationship with others.

Biblically speaking, love for God and love for others are intertwined. They cannot be separated. The Great Commandment (singular) ties them together as one.

"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?" Jesus replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:36-40)



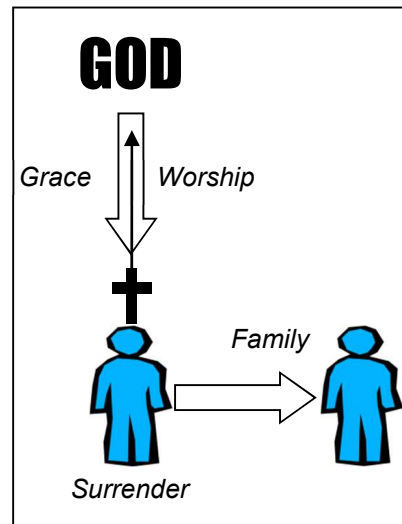
In case someone might miss the point that loving God and loving others must go together, the apostle John states it as clearly as possible in 1 John 4:20-21:

If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And He has given us this command: Whoever loves God must love his brother.

Thus, according to Scripture, the reality of my love for God is evidenced in my relationship with others. It is easy to say, "I love God!" No one can really evaluate my heart relationship with the unseen God. But "where the rubber meets the road" is in my love for those around me—my spouse, my children, my parents, my brothers, my sisters, my neighbors, my co-workers, my waiter/waitress, my grocery clerk, etc.

In these relationships, it is easier to see if I am selfish or giving, bitter or forgiving, demanding or submissive, grumbling or gracious, self-consumed or compassionate, isolated or involved.

Loving my "neighbor" means loving the one who is "near to me," the one God has placed in my path. I cannot love everyone in the world but I can love those whose lives intersect with my own—those I interact with every day and those I encounter on a particular day (see story of Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-37). These are my "neighbors." And of particular priority in my "neighborhood" is my physical family.



DAY ONE

**Westminster
Confession of
Faith (1647)**

Chapter XXIV Of Marriage and Divorce

I: Marriage is to be between one man and one woman: neither is it lawful for any man to have more than one wife, nor for any woman to have more than one husband, at the same time.

II. Marriage was ordained for the mutual help of husband and wife, for the increase of mankind with legitimate issue, and of the Church with an holy seed; and for preventing of uncleanness.

Scripture Exploration



THE PRIORITY OF FAMILY

As God by creation made two of one, so again by marriage he made one of two.

—Thomas Adams

[A man] must choose his love, and then he must love his choice.

—Henry Smith

Be joined.
Hebrew, *dabaq*, “to cling, stick, adhere, firmly, as with glue.” (Gesenius)

The woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam; not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled on by him; but out of his side to be an equal to him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be loved.

—Matthew Henry

To be created in “God’s image” is to be created for relationship. Just as God abides in eternal, intimate fellowship as Father, Son, and Spirit, so He created us with the capacity for deep, abiding relationship with one another. Marriage between a man and a woman was designed to be the pinnacle and supreme model of this relationship.

Read Genesis 2:18-25. Pray and ask God to speak to your heart as you read.

What reasons do you see for God’s creation of Eve? _____

How would you describe Adam’s reaction to seeing God’s creation of Eve? (2:23)

Write out Genesis 2:24. _____

What are three things you can learn about marriage from this verse?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Why do you think the writer of Genesis adds verse 25? What is God trying to tell us about Adam and Eve’s relationship? _____

The first relationship that God instituted and blessed on earth was marriage. The love between man and woman was to reflect God’s love for us. And the procreation of children within a loving marriage was intended to provide every child with an understanding of God’s love through the love experienced from his/her parents. Thus, marriage is a high priority in God’s eyes. It is the foundation upon which family and society are built. The strength of the marriage bond determines the strength of the family bond; the strength of the family bond determines the strength of a society.

The priority of marriage is seen clearly in the words of the prophet Malachi. Malachi ministered to the nation of Israel in approximately 400 BC. His words are the last words to the nation of Israel in the Old Testament and they are intended to explain why the nation was experiencing God's discipline and not His blessing.

Read Malachi 2:13-16. Pray and ask God to speak to your heart as you read.

Why did God not listen to the "weeping and crying" of His people at the altar?

How is a man's wife described in 2:14? _____

What is one reason that God desires a man to remain faithful to his wife? (2:15)

What is God's opinion of divorce? _____

God says twice, "Guard yourself in your spirit." What do you think this means?

The priority of one's marriage and family is also reflected in the New Testament. The apostle Paul makes it clear that a leader in the church must be a "one-woman man" who leads his household well (1 Timothy 3:1-12). Paul also says that "if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for his own household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever (1 Timothy 5:8). These verses are good reminders that the priority of one's family is not to be ignored, even for the sake of "ministry."

Note: Divorce is never God's intent or ideal. However, in Matthew 19:3-9, Jesus recognized that because of the hardness of man's heart sometimes divorce is permitted—particularly in cases of sexual immorality or desertion (see 1 Cor. 7:15). It takes two to make a good marriage and unfortunately sometimes one person in the marriage is simply unwilling to remain faithful.

HUSBANDS AND WIVES

Read Ephesians 5:21-33. This passage describes how husbands and wives are to act toward each other in marriage. Pray and ask God to speak to your heart as you read.

What is the wife's primary responsibility to the husband (5:22-24, 33)?

What is the husband's primary responsibility to the wife (5:25-28, 33)?

1 Peter 3:7 teaches a similar principle as Malachi 2. Peter tells husbands to live with their wives with respect and understanding "so that nothing will hinder your prayers."

[Christians] regard divorce as something like cutting up a living body, as a kind of surgical operation. Some think the operation so violent that it cannot be done at all; others admit it as a desperate remedy in extreme cases. They are all agreed that it is more like having both your legs cut off than it is like dissolving a business partnership or even deserting a regiment.

—C.S. Lewis

DAY TWO

No service for God is of any value which is contradicted by the life at home.
—G. Campbell Morgan

The Puritan ethic of marriage was to look not for a partner whom you love passionately at this moment but rather for one whom you can love steadily as your best friend for life, then to proceed with God's help to do just that.

—J. I. Packer

Marriage counseling sessions would end if husbands and wives were competing in thoughtful self-denial!

—Walt Chantry

DAY THREE

Home is a mighty test of character. What you are at home you are everywhere, whether you demonstrate it or not.

—Thomas D. Talmadge

The best time to tackle a minor problem is before he grows up.

—Anonymous

What reason(s) are given for the wife's responsibility to the husband?

What reason(s) are given for the husband's responsibility to the wife?

In Genesis 3, immediately after Adam and Eve sinned against God, they began to feel shame and insecurity which resulted in blame-shifting and self-protection. Genesis 3:16 further described the struggle that would take place in marriage because of sin: *You will want to control your husband but he will dominate you* (NET Bible).

How does Ephesians 5:21-33 counteract this "struggle for control" in a marriage?

PARENTS AND CHILDREN

Read Ephesians 6:1-4. Pray and ask God to speak to your heart as you read.

What is the child's responsibility to his parents? _____

What reason(s) are given for this responsibility of children to parents?

What is the parents' (specifically fathers) responsibility to their children?

Why do you think Paul directs his comments directly at fathers? _____

In Deuteronomy 6:4-9—the *Shema* repeated day and night by many Jews—loving God with one's heart is to flow directly into teaching and training one's children.

Thus, the home becomes the *proving ground* of one's love for God and the *training ground* for children to learn what it means to follow after God.

Additional Resources



Read the following excerpt from John MacArthur, Jr.'s book, *Your Family* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), pages 13-33.

No one needs to tell us that our generation may be watching the death of marriage and an attempt to obliterate the family as we know it. ...Surprisingly, opinions vary about whether this remaking of the family is good or bad. Some say that marriage and the traditional family structure ought to change.

I once had the privilege of going to the hospital to pick up a baby for a couple who were to adopt it. While I was there a nurse said to me, "You know, it really doesn't matter anymore who the parents are. It has no bearing on the child anyway." I was shocked, so I asked her, "You mean you don't think it's important that there be a loving father and mother in the home?"

"No, that really isn't the issue at all," she replied.

"Do you think it's important for a child to have a strong spiritual influence and model in his parents?"

"No, I don't know that that matters."

Much of our society has a frightening mentality about marriage and the family. Having lost their base of authority, they are groping to figure out how to make human relationships meaningful in a culture that is disintegrating. With all the confusion, it is time to reiterate the divine pattern for marriage and family living. And the revival of the family has to begin in the church, because the world's confusion on marriage and the family has made itself at home in the Body of Christ. I believe God has a standard that can make marriage and the family what

they ought to be if we as Christians follow it. Then we can reach the world.

If the family is not preserved, all of society will collapse; it is inevitable. The family is the basic unit of human society. When it crumbles everything will come crashing down with it, because man will have lost the ability to pass on any meaningful thing to the emerging generation. With no common ground of communication and discipline, every generation carries within it the seeds of its own destruction.

THE BASIS OF FULFILLMENT

The presupposition. We need to recognize a basic presupposition: in order to know the divine pattern that can make a marriage and family life meaningful, in order to establish a home that can bring security, one must be a Christian. It needs to be said at the beginning that if you are not a Christian there is little hope you can make your marriage and family what God intended them to be. That does not mean that people who are not Christians can't have meaningful relationships. They can—up to a point. But they will never know total fulfillment, because as an individual finds fulfillment only in a relationship with God, so also a family finds fulfillment only in Him.

The family is designed and authored by God Himself. He is the one who created us, He invented the family and marriage, and He has written the book on how it is to function. But there is no reason to follow His guidelines, no constraint, if we have no commitment to Him. It all begins with salvation.

The power. But there's more to it than just the basic relationship, because a lot of Christians know the Lord Jesus Christ, but they are not living according to His moral law, His marital law, or His family law. Why? Because they are not filled with the Holy Spirit. It is one thing to possess the Spirit of God, to be a believer, but a necessary second dimension can be discovered in Ephesians 5:18: *And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit.*

...Every Christian possesses the Holy Spirit but is not always controlled by, or filled with, the Spirit. Consequently, we have family and marital problems in the church. A disobedient or fleshly believer will have discord in his family just as he will have discord in his own heart, because there is discord between himself and God. Being a Christian is definitely the starting point, but being controlled by the Spirit makes the ideal a reality.

The problem is not a lack of information. Have you noticed that we're drowning in a sea of marriage information today—marriage seminars, marriage conferences, marriage encounters, marriage books, and marriage counselors *ad infinitum, ad nauseum*? And many people think the first thing to do when they have a marital problem is go see a counselor, visit a psychiatrist, collect a pile of books, go to a seminar, listen to tapes, learn some sure-fire principles, or whatever. I don't want to oversimplify the matter, but a person can do **all** of those things, and if he is not filled with the Spirit none of it is effective!

When the Holy Spirit fills a life He controls all relationships. And then those activities can provide helpful principles on how the power of the Holy Spirit can work itself out in right relationships...

All the teaching on family in Ephesians 5 flows from the power of the Spirit in verse 18. The filling of the Holy Spirit produces at

least three results. The first is directed generally toward ourselves, in vs. 19: *Speaking to [yourselves] in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord.* The first thing a Spirit-filled person should possess is a sense of inner peace, inner contentment, inner joy that results in song. That wellspring comes from an inward sense that all is well, and bursts forth in the joy of the Lord.

The second result is directed toward God: *Always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father* (v. 20). A Spirit controlled person not only sings within himself, but gives thanks to God as well...

Verse 21 reveals a third result of a Spirit-filled life, toward others: *And submitting to one another in the fear of Christ.* When a person has reverence and fear and stands in awe of God, and when he really worships Him, that person will be one who submits to others. Submission is vital in the family and in the church. James 4:1 says, *What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?* Conflicts come because we won't submit; we want to get the upper hand, we want our rights, we want our way, we want our opinion to dominate. But the Spirit-filled life is not a fight for the top; it is a fight for the *bottom*! It is every man looking out not for his own interests but for the interests of others (Phil. 2:4). Throughout Scripture we are called upon to submit to one another (1 Cor. 16:16; Heb. 13:17; 1 Peter 2:13; 5:5)...

Where there is the control of the Holy Spirit and a worshiping heart there will be the right foundation for the family, and that brings us back to the real key—submission. And submission will only occur in a heart that is controlled by the Holy Spirit and flowing with praise to God. It is the secret to all right and fulfilling relationships.

THE CONCEPT OF SUBMISSION

Submission explained. The word *submit*—*hupotasso* (*hupo*, “under;” *tasso*, “to line up, to get in order, to be arranged”)—means “to get in order under something.” In a military sense the idea is “to rank beneath, to rank under.” As Christians we are to rank ourselves under one another. The whole mentality of the Christian life as we relate to each other should be one of humility and submissiveness.

Submission examined. Now you may be saying, “But what about the elders and pastors of the church who are supposed to lead? Since we are to submit to them (Hebrews 13:17), should they also submit to us?” Yes. In terms of structure and function we are to submit to them in the church, but in terms of interpersonal relationships there is to be *mutual* submission. Of course there is submission to authority in the church, just as there is submission to authority in government and in the home, but that in no way negates the responsibility of our submission to one another on a personal level. That is exactly what the apostle Paul is really after here. The principle of submission is the theme of Ephesians 5.

Notice what Paul uses to illustrate the truth of mutual submission: the family. That is why Eph. 5:22-6:4 deals with the family. It illustrates the thesis of vs. 21, because we might read about submission and ask ourselves, “What is he talking about? What does he mean, *submit to one another*?” He invites us to take a look at the microcosm of the family to see the application of the principle of mutual submission. Each relationship in the family is explored. We see wives addressed in 5:22-24, husbands in 25-33, children in 6:1-3 and finally in vs. 4, Paul speaks to parents.

Note how submission works, beginning with verse 22: *Wives, [submit yourselves] to your*

own husbands, as to the Lord. I find it interesting to note that the verb *submit* does not appear in the original manuscript in verse 22. It is only implied. That might surprise you. What is the significance of its omission? He is pointing out that everyone is to practice submission—not just the wives. In verse 25, he goes on to remind husbands of their responsibility to their wives. In what way is a husband to respond to his wife? Keep reading in verse 25: *Just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her.* There is no greater act of submission than to die for someone, and that is precisely the way we husbands are to treat our wives. A husband is to do for his wife what Christ did for the church: He gave Himself for us in history's greatest act of submission. He bore our sins, He took our place, and He died for us.

A husband's submission to his wife does not mean that he abdicates his responsibility of leadership in the home, but that he helps her to bear her burdens, he “gets underneath” to carry her cares, he's always ready to meet her needs and to sacrifice his own desires for what helps fulfill those needs. And the children are to submit too, in obedience to their parents. But do you want to see something more? *Parents* are also to submit (Eph. 6:4). The word translated “fathers” can mean “parents,” and parents are to submit *by not provoking your children to anger; but bringing them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.* That means you are to “get under” your child, as it were, and be a caring, supportive teacher.

We are all submitting at some point. Wives are to submit to the loving leadership of their husbands. Husbands are called to bow to the needs of their wives. A father has to bend to the sensitivity and needs of his child so that he does not provoke the child to anger. Every family member is an illustration of submission. There are homes where the husband understands the wife's submission but has no

idea what it means for him to submit to her needs, to sacrifice himself for her. He's missed the point of Ephesians 5—it calls us all at some point to submit to everyone else in the circle of our relationships.

So before we emphasize the authority in the family we are faced with a beautiful mutuality in marriage. Compare 1 Corinthians 7. Verses 1-2 set the background: *Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman. But because of immoralities, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband.* Paul is answering some of their questions about the issues of marriage and the marital relationships. The key idea is in vs 3: *Let the husband fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband.* Both partners in a marriage are to submit by fulfilling each other's needs. Do you see the mutuality there? Verse 4 continues, *The wife does not have authority over her own body but the husband does: and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body but the wife does.* There is mutuality in marriage, a beautiful mutuality that does not negate the need for leadership but recognizes the mutual submission that must characterize a marriage, and a family, at every point.

Submission illustrated. The principle of submission is illustrated in many ways. Men and women are equal in the sight of God, according to Galatians 3:28: *There is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* There is no second-class spiritual citizenship. Before God, there is only oneness; a man is not spiritually superior to a woman in any way. The best illustration of that is found in 1 Corinthians 11:3, which says it in a very graphic way: *But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman.* That should be obvious—within the home there has to be leadership, and by God's

design the head of the woman is the man. But read on: *And God is the head of Christ.*

That is interesting. Does Paul mean to say that God is superior to Christ? Not at all. Are they not one? Didn't Jesus say, *If you have seen Me you have seen the Father? I and the Father are one?* What about John 1:1?

In what way, then, is God the Father the head of Christ? Never in essence (or nature), but only in function. Within the function of the Godhead it was deemed necessary that Christ should submit Himself to the Father. The same Jesus who said, *All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth* (Matthew 28:19) also said, *My food is to do the will of Him who sent me* (John 4:34). In their nature or essence the members of the Trinity are equal, but by God's design their functions demanded that the Son submit to the Father in a selfless humiliation. Does that make us think less of the Son? Of course not; it makes us think more highly of Him! It is part of His wondrous beauty.

Now here's the point: the same kind of structure is necessary in marriage. The partners' spiritual natures are the same, their positions before God are equal, but in order for the family to function in harmony, the woman, with no loss of dignity, takes the place of submission to the headship of her husband. Her tenderness and gentleness, given by God, are to come alongside to support the strength of the man. The issue is not superiority or inferiority. Mutual submission in marriage blends without confusion or contradiction with the concepts of headship and authority. As she submits to follow, so he submits to lead her. Both authority and submission are still preserved, which is essential for proper function in marriage...

Probably the largest single unit of human relationships is the national government. Nations must function with authority. There

will be kings, governors, police, soldiers, and other leaders, and there will be those of us who follow their leadership (cf. 1 Peter 3). Is it because they are superior to everyone else? No! There simply has to be authority and submission or else anarchy, and no society can survive anarchy.

In the smallest unit of human relationships, the family, the same principle holds true. There cannot be anarchy in a family, with no one responsible for discipline, earning wages, controlling behavior, or giving direction, without creating chaos. And chaos is precisely what exists in American families today. The dissolution of the family is the beginning of the dissolution of the nation, the beginning of anarchy. Mankind cannot function apart from the principle of authority and submission. God has designed things that way, and only as we rely on His Word and His power can we make marriage and the family the blessing He intended.

THE DEMISE OF MARRIAGE

Today's marriages. I believe that the message of Ephesians 5:21-6:4 is one we particularly need to hear today. I'm deeply concerned about the future of marriage. We are being told that about half of the couples who get married each year end up in divorce courts. Of course the epidemic of divorce also contributes to many other problems, such as loneliness, poverty, unwanted children, or children living in broken families.

Abortion is as common now among married as among unmarried people. One-third of all couples of child-bearing age are now sterile. Couples are choosing not to have children. Why? Selfishness. In too many cases it is only because children complicate things; they tend to get in the way. If a couple has no children, they can dissolve the marriage and

leave much easier. How tragic! The result of all this is a generation of children growing up in decimated families, saying, "The last thing I want to do is get married. I don't want to repeat that mess." Many have had chaotic and totally unfulfilled family lives, and they want out. There exists a serious lack of commitment to others. A society is forming based totally on selfish desires. The children of our generation's crumbling marriages are looking for cheaper options than marriage, so when the thrill burns off they can find another person to rekindle it. Even some marriages that manage to hang together are characterized by unfaithfulness, loss of respect and trust, pride, self-centeredness, materialism, laziness, and loneliness...

The same was true in Paul's day. Let's step back for a moment and examine those cultural conditions that he challenged. It will open the passage up to our understanding.

Marriage in Paul's day. The Jews of Paul's day had a rather low view of women. To them women were just like slaves. In fact, the morning prayer of a Jewish man might be, "God, I thank you that I'm not a Gentile, a slave, or a woman." Divorce had long been common. In Deuteronomy 24:1, Moses describes a man who married a woman and she lost favor with him because he found uncleanness in her. He wrote her a bill of divorce and sent her away. Apparently, if there was any uncleanness on the wife's part, divorce was commonly sought. Of course, everything hinged on what "uncleanness" involved.

One rabbi said that only adultery could be suitable grounds for divorce under the term uncleanness. But another rabbi said "uncleanness" could be anything, and Rabbi Hillel taught that a wife was unclean if she spoiled her husband's dinner or put too much salt on it. If she burned the bagels, talked with men in the streets, or said something against her mother-in-law, that was enough! Rabbi

Akiba even insisted that if a man found a woman who was prettier than his wife, the latter became unclean in his eyes. He could write her a bill of divorce, send her out, and marry the pretty one. So the people of Israel were offered two views of when it was acceptable to end a marriage: for adultery only, or for almost anything! Which view do you think they accepted? The second one. By the time Paul began preaching, the Jews were divorcing their wives almost at will. That wasn't what the Bible taught, but that was the corruption that came about.

The pagan Greek world was even worse. In fact, there was no legal procedure for divorce in Greek society, since wives were simply the ones who cleaned the house and bore legitimate children. Men found their sexual enjoyment outside of marriage, so they didn't bother to divorce their wives. The Athenian orator Demosthenes said, "We have courtesans for the sake of pleasure, we have concubines for the sake of daily cohabitation, and we have wives for the purpose of having children legitimately and being faithful guardians for our household affairs."

That is why Paul, writing in the midst of the Greek culture, refers so often to *porneia*, "fornication." Fornication was very much a part of Greek society. The word *porne* means "a woman for sale," and the word *pornos* means "a man for sale." Female and male prostitution were rampant in the Greek world because people found their sexual pleasure outside of marriage. In addition, historians note that Athenian society was also dominated by pedophilia, which is sexual abuse of children. Paul faced that as well.

Divorce in the Jewish community was common. Prostitution, homosexuality, lesbianism, and pedophilia abounded in the Greek world. And we are not surprised to learn that the Romans' view of marriage was just a culmination of all this earlier perversion.

Jerome, an ancient writer, tells us of one Roman woman who married her 23rd husband, and she was his 21st wife! Marriage in Roman times became little more than legalized prostitution. There was also a strong women's liberation movement. Women didn't want to have children because they thought it hurt the appearance of their bodies. Some of them wanted to be able to do everything that men did, so they developed women wrestlers, women sword-throwers, etc. One writer, Juvenal, says the women began to lord it over their husbands, but before long they would vacate the home and flit from one marriage to another, "wearing out their bridal veils!"

So now we understand that when Paul said, *Wives, [submit yourselves] to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ...Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church*, he was not simply reminding them of something they already knew. He was saying, "Listen. This is a call to a new standard of living. I'm telling you to live in a way you don't know anything about." He was calling on them to rebel against their culture. Those new believers in Ephesus and everywhere else this letter was read had come out of that chaotic culture, and Paul was telling wives to give themselves to their husbands and husbands to give themselves to their wives as Christ gave Himself to His church. That was radical, dynamic new information. The Christian home was to be a place where authority and submission were so couched in love that they melted together in the mutuality of love and respect. That is the divine standard. Let me illustrate it for you from the OT love song.

Marriage as God designed it. The Song of Solomon contains a beautiful picture of a right marriage relationship. You don't sense an obvious authority and an obvious submission. All you see is a beautiful, tender love, with authority and submission quietly at work. In the biblical record, the great king is married to the Shulamite woman, and they

are deeply in love. Notice each of their functions in the marriage.

In Song of Solomon 2:3-16, the Shulamite describes her husband as the head of the home. She pictures him as her protector in verse 3. Here is a woman finding shelter, protection, security, confidence, comfort, and rest in her husband. That is a recognition of his headship, but it all flows from their love, and there is nothing threatening there—no one has to “knuckle under.” He is also her provider (v. 4), her sustainer (v. 5), her security (v. 6), and her leader and initiator (vv. 10-15). Her husband takes the lead, and there is no oppression or dictatorial spirit in the passage. In fact, this section closes with a beautiful statement. Even though she sees him as her protector, provider, sustainer, security, and her leader and initiator, she says in verse 16, *My beloved is mine and I am his*. The relationship never loses its mutuality.

In chapter 5, the Shulamite woman responds to her husband's strength and leadership with a marvelous portrait of him through her eyes of love. He is ruddy and handsome (v. 10). His skin is bronzed, and his eyes are soft and tender (vv. 11-12). There is color in his

cheeks, and his lips are fragrant (v. 13). His hands are like gold (that is, bronzed), and his stomach and legs are muscular and strong (vv. 14-15a). She sees him as handsome and rugged but also with character. According to verse 16, when he opens his mouth he isn't crass or rude. Then at the end of the verse she says, *This is my beloved and this, my friend*. I love that. She doesn't see him as a dictator but as a beloved friend. There is the mutuality again. When love bathes a relationship, everything fits together...

We need to understand what the Bible has to say about a meaningful marriage relationship. There are two things to keep in mind: (1) We all are to submit to one another in a beautiful mutuality; (2) Functionally, there has to be authority and submission. When we learn the fullness of those two dimensions of truth, our families are going to be what God wants them to be. It isn't easy because to apply these truths is to go upstream against the current of our Christless culture and human nature. We can be successful only to the degree we are transformed by the Lord Jesus Christ and controlled by the Holy Spirit.

Changed Hearts



Write down two or three things that really stood out to you from this week's lesson.

A growing, deepening relationship with God should evidence itself, first and foremost, in a growing and deepening love for one's family. A person's spouse and children are his/her closest “neighbors.” To neglect one's family, even for the sake of “ministry” to others, is to overlook the greater responsibility and ministry that God has given us—to lead, love, and care for the ones living in our own household. When the gospel penetrated the heart of an individual in the New Testament, it was to penetrate that person's whole household (see Acts 11:14, 16:15, 31, 18:8).

This is not to say that loving one's own family is easy or that salvation for one's household is guaranteed. The Bible does not present an idyllic view of family life. Indeed, very few "Clever" families grace the pages of Scripture. Jealousy, strife, anger, adultery, immorality, lust, lying, favoritism, incest, abuse, and even murder characterize many of the families in Scripture. The Bible is realistic about family life but also optimistic about the power of God's grace and love.

What is one of the biggest blessings that you have experienced in your family?

Thank God now for this blessing.

What is one of the biggest heartaches that you have experienced in your family?

Ask God to give you strength to grieve and wisdom to grow from this heartache.

What is one of the biggest challenges that you face now in your family?

What do you think God is trying to teach you through this challenge?

FINAL NOTE: Though God intended every person to be a part of loving, caring family, this is seldom the reality in our sin-cursed world and in our present culture. Sin complicates, hinders, and destroys family life. Exodus 34:7 reminds us that the sinful patterns of one generation will impact the children to the "third and fourth generation." The sin of our parents, grandparents, and even great grandparents affects us and our sin, in turn, affects our children and grandchildren. But Exodus 34:7 (cf. 20:6) also reminds us that God's grace extends to "a thousand generations." Even in the midst of a sin-impacted family, God can reach us, redeem us, restore us, remake us, and then reflect His love and healing through us into the lives of others.

To the single, it must be noted that though marriage is important and good, it is not to be over-emphasized or romanticized. The apostle Paul makes it clear in 1 Corinthians 7:32-35 that remaining single provides a person with "undistracted" time to serve the Lord. His point is not to deride marriage and the family but to present the practical reality that a married person must, to some degree, limit his/her ministry involvement in order to care for his spouse and children. Of course, in our sexually charged society, remaining single and pure is a challenge, but God can give grace and strength for such a life dedicated to serving Him.

To the divorced, the issue of divorce and remarriage has been debated throughout church history. However, since the Reformation, the church has generally recognized two permissions for divorce and remarriage—in the cases of sexual infidelity and desertion by an unbeliever. For more information, consult Jay Adams' book, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible*.

7

CHURCH: Connecting to the Body



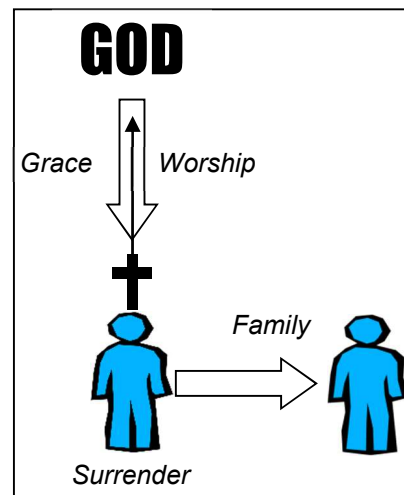
The more we open up our hearts to God's love, the more it flows through us into the lives of others. We become "spigots" of God's grace, so to speak. The converse is also true. If there is no love for others flowing out of our hearts, then it is evident that the love of God has been shut out from our hearts. There is a "clog" somewhere in our lives. *And He has given us this command: **Whoever loves God must love his brother*** (1 John 4:21).

When it comes to loving our "neighbors," our first priority is to our physical family. 1 Timothy 5:8 is clear: *If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.* The gospel working in our hearts should have its first effects in our household—specifically with our spouse and with our children.

However, not everyone has a spouse and children. And some families have been so disfigured and destroyed by sin that the remnants of the family are hard to discern. Though God's original design was for every person to be a part of a loving, stable family, God's Word recognizes the reality of broken homes and broken lives in this sin-cursed world. And God has brought about a solution...a spiritual family.

When a person trusts in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, they not only gain eternal life; they also gain a new family. We are "born" into a physical family and we are also "born again" into a spiritual family. *You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household* (Ephesians 2:19).

In God's household, He is our Father. Jesus Christ is our older brother (Hebrews 2:11). The Holy Spirit is our common DNA. And other believers in Jesus Christ are our sisters and brothers. We are members of God's family—the church.



What can you learn about the church from the fact that we are called a family?

Just as God calls you to love your physical family, He also calls you to love your spiritual family. They are both priorities in the Christian life. You cannot love God without loving your family.

DAY ONE

Westminster Confession of Faith (1647)

Chapter XXV Of the Church

I. The catholic or universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all.

III. Unto the catholic visible Church, Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and doth, by His own presence and Spirit, according to His promise, make them effectual thereunto.

Scripture Exploration



THE PRIORITY OF FELLOWSHIP

I have been at the bedside of many people in their final moments ...and I have never heard anyone say, "Bring me my diplomas! I want to look at them one more time. Show me my awards, my medals...."

When life on earth is ending, people don't surround themselves with objects. What we want around us is people—people we love and have relationships with. In our final moments we all realize that relationships are what life is all about. Wisdom is learning that truth sooner rather than later.

—Rick Warren

It is possible to give without loving, but it is impossible to love without giving.

—Richard Braunslein

Loving God is not a solitary journey. Many people like to claim “spirituality” today. But true spirituality—true life in the Spirit—is lived in fellowship with other believers.

The local church is the community in which we are to pursue a closer relationship with God. The church is called both the body of Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23) and the bride of Christ (5:25-27). Thus, to claim to “love Jesus” but to despise the church is basically to say, “I love you, Jesus, but I can’t stand Your body” or “I can’t stand Your wife.” The reality of our love for God is seen in our love for others in Christ.

Read Matthew 5:21-24. Mark key words and phrases as you read.

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’²² But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire.²³ Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you,²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

How does God view our anger at others and our slander against them?

What does God say to do if you are at the altar worshipping Him and suddenly realize that your brother has something against you? _____

Why do you think God puts a priority on reconciliation before a person worships?

Read 1 John 3:11-18. Pray and ask God to speak to your heart as you read.

What is the message that we have heard from the beginning? _____

How do we know that we have passed from death to life (i.e., been saved in Christ)?

Complete this sentence: *Anyone who hates his brother is a* _____.

Based on 1 John 3:16 (and John 3:16), what is love? How would you define it?

Write John 13:35. _____

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to love all people, even our enemies (see Matthew 5:43-47). However, we have a specific calling to “love one another”—to love others in the body of Christ, to love our brothers and sisters in God’s household.

Read Galatians 6:9-10. Mark any words or phrases that stand out to you as you read.

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

Write down four observations that you can make from Galatians 6:9-10.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

THE PRACTICE OF FELLOWSHIP

It is easy to talk about the importance of fellowship with other believers but so much harder to live it out. Though we are “in Christ,” we still struggle with sin. We still struggle to submit, to bend, to admit we are wrong, and to give up our own agenda and rights for the benefit of others. It is only through personal humility and the power of the Spirit that we can truly love each other and experience the blessings of fellowship.

Read John 13:1-17. This passage takes place during Jesus’ last supper with His disciples, the night before He is crucified. Ask God to speak to your heart as you read.

What motivated Jesus to wash the feet of His disciples (13:1-3)? _____

How did Peter react to Jesus washing feet? _____

Why do you think he reacted this way? _____

THINK ABOUT:
Why do you think “loving one another” is such a powerful witness to the world that we are Christ’s disciples?

What other things do we often emphasize as being the “true mark” of being Christ’s disciple?

Brotherly love is the badge of Christ’s disciples.
—Matthew Henry

DAY TWO

Washing a person’s feet, in the NT culture, was one of the lowest tasks reserved for one of the lowest servants. It was a dirty, but necessary, job in the dusty environs of Palestine where people picked up a lot of grime and smells on their feet. On this occasion, none of the disciples volunteered for the task.

THINK ABOUT:
One of the disciples who had his feet washed by Jesus was Judas. What do you think Judas thought of this whole affair? What does Christ washing Judas' feet teach you about love and servanthood?

You never so touch the ocean of God's love as when you forgive and love your enemies.
—Corrie Ten Boom

Spur one another to love and good deeds—Greek, *paroxusmos*, a strong word typically used in rousing a person to anger, irritating them, or provoking them. In this case, a person is to rouse a person up to love, to keep prodding them to show good works to others.

What does it mean to “wash one another’s feet”? What lesson was Jesus trying to teach His disciples? _____

Complete this sentence: *Now that you know these things, you will be _____ if you do them* (John 13:17). What does this verse teach you? _____

The New Testament has approximately thirty “one another” commands. These commands tell us what we must do in order to live in unity and fellowship together.

Look up each verse below and write down the “one another” command(s) given.

Romans 15:7 _____

Galatians 5:13 _____

Galatians 6:2 _____

Ephesians 4:2 _____

Ephesians 4:32 _____

Ephesians 5:21 _____

1 Thessalonians 5:11 _____

Hebrews 10:24-25 _____

James 5:16 _____

1 Peter 4:9 _____

Put a star (✱) by the “one another” command above that you really need from your brothers and sisters in Christ right now. Circle the “one another” command that you believe God wants you to practice more with your brothers and sisters in Christ.

All of these commands are an essential aspect of “loving one another” in Christ. Loving one another not only means doing certain actions, it also means *not* doing certain actions. **What actions should we avoid doing in the church, the body of Christ?**

Romans 14:13 _____

James 4:11 _____

James 5:9 _____

THE PRAYER FOR FELLOWSHIP

DAY THREE

Read John 17:13-23. This passage is part of Jesus' final prayer to God for His disciples before He was crucified. Ask God to speak to your heart as you read these verses.

Write down what Jesus prayed for His disciples before He left this earth.

17:15 _____

17:17 _____

17:20-21 _____

According to Jesus' prayer, how will the world know that God loves them and sent His Son, Jesus, for them (17:23)? _____

Fellowship and unity among believers is not just a "nice addendum" to the Christian life. It is absolutely essential! We are saved to be in community. We are adopted into a spiritual family. We are joined together in the body of Christ. And the world will never fully understand or know the love of God in Christ unless they see it in us.

John 17 is Jesus' longest recorded prayer. It is sometimes referred to as Jesus "high priestly" prayer since Jesus interceded to God on behalf of His disciples. This prayer reveals what was on Jesus' heart before He was arrested and crucified.

Additional Resources



Read the following excerpt from John Ortberg's book, *Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), pages 13-25.

In certain places you will find a section of merchandise available at greatly reduced prices. The tip-off is a particular tag you will see on all the items in that area. Each tag carries the same words: *as is*.

This is a euphemistic way of saying, "These are damaged goods." Sometimes they're called *slightly irregular*. The store is issuing you fair warning: "This is the department of Something's-Gone-Wrong. You're going to find a flaw here: a stain that won't come out; a zipper that won't zip; a button that won't butt—there will be a problem. These items are *not normal*."

"We're not going to tell you where the flaw is. You'll have to look for it. But we know it's there. So, when you find it—and you will

find it—don't come whining and sniveling to us. Because there is a fundamental rule when dealing with merchandise in this corner of the store: No returns. No refunds. No exchanges. If you were looking for perfection, you walked down the wrong aisle. You have received fair warning. If you want this item, there is only one way to obtain it. You must take it as is."

When you deal with human beings, you have come to the "as-is" corner of the universe. Think for a moment about someone in your life. Maybe the person you know best, love most. That person is *slightly irregular*.

That person comes with a little tag: *There's a flaw here. A streak of deception, a cruel tongue, a passive spirit, an out-of-control*

temper. I'm not going to tell you where it is, but it's there. So when you find it—and you will find it—don't be surprised. If you want to enter a relationship with this model, there is only one way. "As is."

If you were looking for perfection, you've walked down the wrong aisle.

We are tempted to live under the illusion that somewhere out there are people who are normal. In the movie *As Good As It Gets*, Helen Hunt is wracked by ambivalence toward Jack Nicholson. He is kind and generous to her and her sick son, but he is also agoraphobic, obsessive-compulsive, and terminally offensive. If rudeness were measured in square miles, he'd be Texas. In desperation, Helen finally cries to her mother: *I just want a normal boyfriend.*

Oh, her mother responds in empathy, everybody wants one of those. There's no such thing, dear.

When we enter relationships with the illusion that people are normal, we resist the truth that they are not. We enter an endless attempt to fix them, control them, or pretend that they are what they're not. One of the great marks of maturity is to accept the fact that everybody comes "as is."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said people enter relationships with their own particular ideals and dreams of what community should look like. He wrote surprising words:

But God's grace quickly frustrates all such dreams. A great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves, is bound to overwhelm us as surely as God desires to lead us to an understanding of genuine Christian community.... The sooner this moment of disillusionment comes over the individual and the community, the better for both.... Those who love their dream of a Christian

community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial.

EVERYBODY'S WEIRD

Of course, the most painful part of this is realizing that I am in the "as is" department as well. Throughout history human beings have resisted owning up to that little tag. We try to separate the world into normal, healthy people (like us) and difficult people. Sometime ago the title of a magazine article caught my eye: "Totally Normal Women Who Stalk Their Ex-Boyfriends."

The phrase that struck me was "totally normal women." What would one of these look like (or a totally normal man, for that matter)? And if the obsessive stalking of a past lover is not just normal but *totally* normal, how far would you have to go to be a little strange?

We all want to look normal, to think of ourselves as normal, but the writers of Scripture insist that no one is "totally normal"—at least not as God defines normal. "*All* we like sheep have gone astray," they tell us. "*All* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

This explains a very important aspect of the opening pages of Scripture.

One of the most ironic remarks about the Bible I hear from time to time is when someone says that it's a book about pious, stained-glass characters who do not reflect the real world.

I always know that means they haven't read it. Have you ever noticed how many messed-up families there are in Genesis?

Here's a quick summary:

Cain is jealous of Abel and kills him. Lamech introduces polygamy to the world. Noah—the most righteous man of his generation—gets drunk and curses his own grandson.

Lot, when his home is surrounded by residents of Sodom who want to violate his visitors, offers instead that they can have sex with his daughters. Later on, his daughters get him drunk and get impregnated by him—and Lot is the most righteous man in Sodom!

Abraham plays favorites between his sons Isaac and Ishmael; they're estranged.

Isaac plays favorites between his sons Jacob and Esau; they're bitter enemies for twenty years. Jacob plays favorites between Joseph and his other eleven sons; the brothers want to kill Joseph and end up selling him into slavery.

Their marriages are disasters.

Abraham has sex with his wife's servant, then sends her and their son off to the wilderness at his wife's request. Isaac and Rebekah fight over which boy gets the blessing. Jacob marries two wives and ends up with both of their maids as his concubines as well when they get into a fertility contest.

Jacob's firstborn son, Reuben, sleeps with his father's concubine.

Another son, Judah, sleeps with his daughter-in-law when she disguises herself as a prostitute. She does this because she is childless since her first two husbands—both sons of Judah—were so wicked that God killed them both; and Judah reneged on his obligations to her.

These people need a therapist. These are not the Waltons. They need Dr. Phil, Dr. Laura, Dr. Ruth, Dr. Spock, Dr. Seuss—they need somebody. (Feel any better about your family?)

Why does the writer of Genesis include all this stuff?

There's a very important reason. The writer of Scripture is trying to establish a deep theological truth: *Everybody's weird*.

Every one of us—all we like sheep—have habits we can't control, past deeds we can't undo, flaws we can't correct. This is the cast of characters God has to work with. In the way that glass is predisposed to shatter and nitroglycerin is predisposed to explode, we are predisposed to do wrong when conditions are right. That predisposition is what theologians call "depravity." We lie and sacrifice integrity for the sake of a few dollars ("I don't understand, Officer—my speedometer must be broken.") We gossip for the sake of a few moments' feeling of superiority. We try to create false impressions of productivity at work to advance more rapidly. (A new software package allows you to surf the net at work, then with one click switch to a fake screen that makes it look as if you're working on a project; it's called "boss screen.") We seek to intimidate employees or children to gain control, or simply to enjoy the feeling of power.

Everybody's weird. This is such a fundamental insight, you may want to close the book for a moment and share this thought with the person closest to you. Or the person it most reminds you of. Or perhaps these are the same person.

Because we know in our hearts that this is not the way we're supposed to be, we try to hide our weirdness. *Every one of us* pretends to be healthier and kinder than we really are; we all engage in what might be called "depravity management."

Every once in a while somebody's "as is" tag becomes high profile. A Pulitzer Prize-winning historian is guilty of plagiarism; a

politician's career explodes in sexual scandal; a powerful CEO resigns in disgrace over illegal document shredding. What's surprising is not that such things happen; it's that the general public response is, "Can you believe it? And they seemed so *normal*." As if you and I, of course, would be incapable of such behavior.

The problem with the human race is not that we have just a few bad apples in our midst. Writers in the field known as abnormal psychology work hard to distinguish the abnormal from the normal among us. One of the dangers in studying the topic, sometimes called the "intern syndrome," is that students start to see themselves in every diagnosis. "There is almost no one who has not harbored secret doubts about his or her normality," a recent textbook says. But writers of Scripture say that when it comes to the most important form of pathology, we are all in the same diagnostic category: "All we like sheep have gone astray..." From a spiritual perspective, our "secret doubts about our normality" have something important to tell us. As Neil Plantinga puts it, "In a biblical view of the world, sin is a familiar, even predictable part of life, but *it is not normal*. And the fact that 'everybody does it' doesn't make it normal."

From the time of Adam in the Garden of Eden, sin and hiding have been as inevitable as death and taxes. Some people are pretty good at hiding. But the weirdness is still there. Get close enough to anyone, and you will see it. *Everybody's normal till you get to know them*.

THE LONGING TO CONNECT

And yet...

The yearning to attach and connect, to love and be loved, is the fiercest longing of the soul. Our need for community with people and the God who made us is to the human

spirit what food and air and water are to the human body. That need will not go away even in the face of all the weirdness. It marks us from the nursery to the convalescent home. An infant lifts up her face hopefully, she holds out two stubby little arms in her desire to be held, she beams a smile of delight when she is picked up and rocked—what heart can keep from melting?

At the other end of the spectrum, the widowed father of a man I know falls in love with a woman at his church. He proposes, she accepts. They walk down the aisle. He is eighty-four, a retired doctor; she is eighty-one, a retired missionary. It is her first marriage. She kissed dating good-bye during the Truman administration. You would think she might have given up on the whole marriage deal by now; yet she finds not only Mr. Right but *Dr. Right*. They throw off the age curve of the Newly Married class by six decades.

As frustrating as people can be, it's hard to find a good substitute. A friend of mine was ordering breakfast during a recent trip in the South. He saw grits on the menu, and being a Dutchman who spent most of his life in Michigan, he had never been very clear on the nature of this item. So he asked the waitress, "What exactly is a grit?"

Her response was a classic, "Honey," she said (in the South, waitresses are required by law to address all customers as "honey"), "Honey, they don't come by themselves."

Grits don't exist in isolation. No grit is an island, entire unto itself. Every grit is a part of the mainland, a piece of the whole. You can't order a single grit. They're a package deal.

"Call it a clan, call it a tribe, call it a network, call it a family," says Jane Howard. "Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one." It is not good for man to be alone.

Dallas Willard says, “The natural condition of life for human beings is reciprocal rootedness in others.” Honey, you don’t come by yourself.

Edward Hallowell (Harvard Medical School) speaks of the basic human need for community. He uses the term *connection*: a sense of being part of something that matters, something larger than ourselves. We need face-to-face interactions; we need to be seen and known and served and do these things for others. We need to bind ourselves to each other with promises of love and loyalty made and kept. These connections involve other people, of course (and especially God); but Hallowell observes that people draw life even from connecting to pets, music, and nature.

There is a reason for this. Neil Plantinga notes that the Hebrew prophets had a word for just this kind of connectedness of all things: *shalom*—“the webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight.” *Try to imagine*, the old prophets told people then, and tell us still, *what such a state of affairs would look like*.

In a world where *shalom* prevailed, all marriages would be healthy and all children would be safe. Those who have too much would give to those who have too little. Israeli and Palestinian children would play together on the West Bank; their parents would build homes for one another. In offices and corporate boardrooms, executives would secretly scheme to help their colleagues succeed; they would compliment them behind their backs. Tabloids would be filled with accounts of courage and moral beauty. Talk shows would feature mothers and daughters who love each other deeply, wives who give birth to their husbands’ children, and men who secretly enjoy dressing as men.

Disagreements would be settled with grace and civility. There would still be lawyers,

perhaps, but they would have really useful jobs like delivering pizzas, which would be non-fat and low in cholesterol. Doors would have no locks; cars would have no alarms. Schools would no longer need police presence or even hall monitors; students and teachers and janitors would honor and value one another’s work. At recess, every kid would get picked for a team.

Churches would never split.

People would be neither bored nor hurried. No father would ever again say, “I’m too busy,” to a disappointed child. Our national sleep deficit would be paid off. Starbucks would still exist but would sell only decaf.

Divorce courts and battered-women shelters would be turned into community recreation centers. Every time one human being touched another, it would be to express encouragement, affection, and delight.

No one would be lonely or afraid. People of different races would join hands; they would honor and be enriched by their differences and be united in their common humanity.

And in the center of the entire community would be its magnificent architect and most glorious resident; the God whose presence fills each person with unceasing splendor and ever-increasing delight.

The writers of Scripture tell us that this vision is the way things are supposed to be. This is what we would look like if we lived up to the norms God set for human life—if our world were truly *normal*. One day it will be.

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “Whoever cannot stand being in community should beware of being alone.” Some people fear being hurt or losing their freedom if they get too close to others, so they withdraw into work or hobbies

or watching TV. But isolation does not work either. I didn't get here on my own, and my identity and purpose are tied inextricably to relationships: I am the son of John Sr. and Kathy, the brother of Barbie and Bart, the husband of Nancy, the father of Laura, Mallory, and Johnny. I am a pastor, friend, neighbor. I was not put on this earth merely to please or amuse myself. And people who seek to live for themselves alone, says Bonhoeffer, "plunge into the bottomless pit of vanity, self-infatuation, and despair." We are all part of the grits. And, honey, we don't come by ourselves.

This connectedness has also been called "reciprocal rootedness." We were created to draw life and nourishment from one another the way the roots of an oak tree draw life from the soil. Community—living in vital connectedness with others—is essential to human life. Researcher Rene Spitz showed that infants who are not held and hugged and touched, even if they have parents who give them food and clothes, suffer from retarded neurological development. Also, the earliest studies of suicide showed the major risk factor to be social isolation.

But the most important reason to pursue deep community is not for the physical or emotional benefits it brings, great as those may be. Community is the place God made us for. Community is the place where God meets us.

HOW TO GET CLOSE WITHOUT GETTING HURT

Here's the rub: How do you pursue this beautiful dream of community with actual, real-life people? Weird, not-normal, as-is, dysfunctional people? Your friends, your colleagues, your spouse, your children, your parents, your small group, your church, your coworkers? Can it really happen?

The North American Common Porcupine is a member of the rodent family that has around 30,000 quills attached to his body. Each quill can be driven into an enemy, and the enemy's body heat will cause the microscopic barb to expand and become more firmly embedded. The wounds can fester; the more dangerous ones, affecting vital organs, can be fatal.

The porcupine is not generally regarded as a lovable animal. The Latin name (*erethizon dorsatum*) means "the irritable back," and they all have one. Books and movies celebrate almost every conceivable animal—not just dogs and cats and horses, but also pigs (*Babe*), spiders (*Charlotte's Web*), dolphins (*Flipper*), bears (*Gentle Ben*), and killer whales (*Free Willy*). Even skunks have Pepe Le Pew. I don't know of any famous porcupines. I don't know any child who has one for a pet.

As a general rule, porcupines have two methods for handling relationships: withdrawal and attack. They either head for a tree or stick out their quills. They are generally solitary animals. Wolves run in packs; sheep huddle in flocks; we speak of herds of elephants and gaggles of geese and even a murder of crows. But there is no special name for a group of porcupines. They travel alone.

Porcupines don't always want to be alone. In the late autumn, a young porcupine's thoughts turn to love. But love turns out to be a risky business when you're a porcupine. Females are open to dinner and a movie only once a year; the window of opportunity closes quickly. And a girl porcupine's "no" is the most widely respected turndown in all the animal kingdom. Fear and anger make them dangerous little creatures to be around.

This is the Porcupine's Dilemma: How do you get close without getting hurt?

This is our dilemma, too. Every one of us carries our own little arsenal. Our barbs have names like rejection, condemnation, resentment, arrogance, selfishness, envy, contempt. Some people hide them better than others, but get close enough and you will find out they're there. They burrow under the skin of our enemies; they can wound and fester and even kill. We, too, learn to survive through a combination of withdrawal and attack. We, too, find ourselves hurting (and being hurt by) those we long to be closest to.

Yet we, too, want to get close. We meet neighbors, go on dates, join churches, form friendships, get married, have children. We try to figure out how to get close without getting hurt. We wonder if there isn't a softer, less-barbed creature out there—a mink or an otter, perhaps.

And of course, we can usually think of a number of particularly prickly porcupines in our lives. But the problem is not just them. I'm somebody's porcupine. So are you.

ATTACK AND WITHDRAW

On a Sunday afternoon as I write these words, the conflict in the Middle East is boiling again. It is striking to me that in the newspapers this morning two words from that region are becoming familiar to the West. These words express the only two ways that many of the people involved currently see for dealing with each other. The first word is an Arabic word: *jihad*, attack.

...What we see in drive-by shootings and suicide bombings is only the ultimate out-working of anger that is in all of our hearts. We get hurt, and we want to hurt back. Little *jihads* get fought every day between people who work together in the same office, between people who lead small groups in the same church; between husband and wife, between parent and child. *Jihads* go back as

far as Cain and Abel: "While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him."

The second word is a Hebrew word, *hafrada*. *Hafrada* is a word for separation and withdrawal. ...We know about walls, too. The Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain are expressions of the same impulse that causes all of us to withdraw and withhold ourselves. Sometimes the wall is a newspaper at a breakfast table that expresses an emotional distance that cannot be bridged. Separation is as old as Adam and Eve: "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid...so I hid."

It's early in my marriage. My wife brings our three small children to my office. I have an argument with her along the general lines of *my life is harder than your life so you should serve me more*. My side doesn't do so well. I don't verbally attack her; I just create distance. I pay a little less attention to her, a little more attention to the kids. I give them a little more energy than usual. I don't look at her or touch her as I normally would, though I am civil and polite. When you know someone well, you can calibrate this behavior precisely. I am cold enough so she can feel my displeasure. But it's subtle enough so that if she asks, "What's wrong?" I can say, "Nothing. Why—what's wrong with you?" I understand about withdrawal.

Jihad and hafrada. Attack and withdrawal. It is an ironic thing that the Middle East—home of many of the world's great religions—should bequeath these two words to the art of human relationships.

But these are not just problems faced by strife-torn populations in a distant part of the world. Dallas Willard writes that assault and withdrawal are the two essential forms of relational sin. We assault others when we act against what is good for them. This is true even if it happens with their consent—to give

a whiskey to an alcoholic, for example. We withdraw from someone when we regard their well-being as a matter of indifference to us. Attack and withdrawal are practiced by every human being on earth, and they damage every marriage and family and workplace and church.

At root, they are the two expressions of the one great sin, which is a lack of love, the violation of the one great commandment. All of our relational mismanagement is really a variation on these two tendencies of the fallen human heart. When we feel threatened, we want to hurt others or hide from them. We, too, head for a tree or stick out our quills.

But there is a better way.

Things don't have to be that way.

THE DANCE OF THE PORCUPINES

Miracles of miracles: Relationship does happen—even for porcupines. On rare occasions, one porcupine will share space with another, and they become friends. Once in a great while, one gets raised in captivity and will eat directly from a human hand. Porcupines learn to keep their barbs to themselves. Not only that, they figure out how to get together at least long enough to make sure that another generation will come along. In an image too wonderful to be made up, naturalist David Costello writes, “Males

and females may remain together for some days before mating. They may touch paws and even walk on their hind feet in the so-called ‘dance of the porcupines.’”

Only God could have thought up two porcupines fox-trotting paw-to-paw, where no one but they and he will ever see. It turns out there really is an answer to the ancient question, how do porcupines make love? They pull in their quills and learn to dance.

Porcupines learn that they and their fellow porcupines come “as is.” Like people...

The writers of Scripture speak about God's dream of community primarily in terms of the church. This includes local congregations, with their services and programs. But God's dream of community encompasses the redemption of all spheres of life, so this also includes the way you relate to your family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers; the people you golf with or go shopping with; the man behind the counter where you stop to fill up the gas tank and grab a cup of coffee...

God has not given up on his dream. And you and I have a role to play in it. Our task is to create little islands of shalom in a sea of isolation.

It's time to pull in your quills and start dancing!

Changed Hearts



Write down two or three things that really stood out to you from this week's lesson.

You are born into a physical family; you are “born again” into a spiritual family. Both families have their challenges but we are called to love those in our family regardless of the challenges.

Not only are we called to love others in the body of Christ, but we are also called to be loved in the body of Christ. Others need us and we need others. Isolation and withdrawal from relationships, particularly difficult ones, may seem like “safe” options but in the end the damage is always greater. We were created for community and we suffer when we are separated from it.

Pursue fellowship. It is not enough to read about fellowship or study it or talk about it. We must pursue it in our lives. We must actively seek it. This involves connecting to a local church body and pursuing avenues of fellowship within it (e.g., small groups, men’s or women’s ministries, support groups, ministry teams, etc.).

Are you presently connected to two or more believers with whom you can share your struggles and burdens and in turn encourage them in their struggles and burdens? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If no, then what steps could you take to begin connecting with other believers more closely?

If yes, then on a scale of 1-10 (with 10 being “extremely close”), how would you rate the level of closeness within your fellowship group? _____ How could this level of fellowship be increased?

Preserve fellowship. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3). Scripture makes it clear that it is impossible to worship God while our hearts are embittered toward another brother or sister in Christ.

As you examine your heart, are you presently holding a grudge or harboring anger in your heart toward another brother or sister in Christ? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If no, then pray that God continues to teach you to “keep short accounts” with other believers and helps you to be a peacemaker as you have the opportunity with other believers.

If yes, then Scripture would encourage you to do three things...

1. **Repent.** Letting the sun go down on your anger is a sin (Ephesians 4:26). Do not rationalize it or minimize it. Confess it. Ask God to reveal your own contribution to the conflict and to replace your heart of bitterness with His grace, forgiveness, and peace.
2. **Reconcile.** *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone* (Romans 12:18). Reconciliation with another person is not always possible. Sometimes the other person does not want it or see the need for it. Nevertheless, God tells us that whether we have wronged someone (Matthew 5:23) or feel wronged by someone (Matthew 18:15) we have a responsibility to go to them and seek reconciliation.

3. **Release.** Regardless of whether reconciliation with another person is achieved or not, God calls us to forgive, to release the debt that someone has against us. This is not easy. It requires God's strength and grace. And it requires us to remember our own sin and God's gracious forgiveness to us. *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ Jesus God forgave you* (Ephesians 4:32). In the end, forgiveness not only heals relationships, it also heals us.

Practice encouragement. Keep reading Hebrews 3:13 until you have memorized it. Mark words or phrases that stand out to you as you meditate on this verse.

*But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today,
so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.*

"Today" is a key word in this verse. We must encourage each other "today." We need encouragement from others "today." Part of the problem in relationships is that we are always planning on encouraging someone or forgiving someone or writing to someone or reconciling with someone "tomorrow." Tomorrow usually never comes. God calls us to act **today**.

Who is someone who has encouraged
you in your Christian life?

How have they encouraged you?

**Write that person a thank you note
or call them today to encourage them.**

Who is someone that you think needs
encouragement in their Christian life?

What are they going through?

**Write them a note of encouragement
or give them a call today.**

8

GIFTS: Serving in the Body

Being part of God's family is a superabundant blessing! We have a Father who loves us unconditionally; a big Brother, Jesus, who has given His life for us; a Comforter, the Holy Spirit, who walks with us and strengthens us in the daily challenges of life; and a multitude of brothers and sisters who give us support and encouragement.

But being part of God's family is not only a blessing; it is also a responsibility. Just as in a physical family we have "chores" and responsibilities to help in the proper functioning of the family, so, in a similar way, we each have a responsibility and a role to play in the strengthening of our spiritual family.

Of course, the term "chores" does not typically bring joy to our hearts ☺. Washing dishes, taking out the garbage, balancing the checkbook, cleaning the bathrooms, mowing the lawn, doing laundry, etc. can be tiresome, mundane, and burdensome, especially when we feel like we are shouldering the burden alone. Yet these tasks are necessary and they can bring joy to our lives when we see them not so much as "chores" but rather as "ministries."

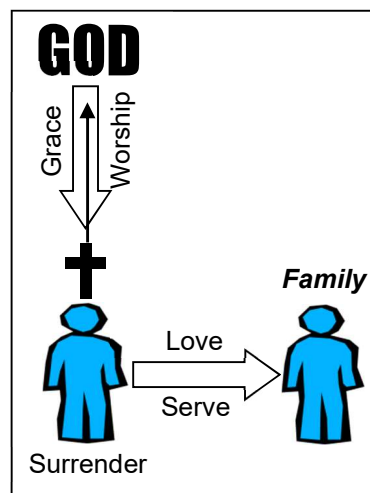
What do you think is the difference between a "chore" and a "ministry"?

Is there a particular "chore" at home that you don't mind doing but actually enjoy? If so, what is it and why do you think you enjoy it most of the time?

God has given us each a ministry in His family. And God has gifted and equipped us with certain abilities, passions, and opportunities to fulfill this ministry for His glory and for the benefit of others in the body of Christ.

Finding and fulfilling your role in God's family is a vital part of loving Him and loving others. It is also a pathway to greater joy and satisfaction. When we refuse to help or shirk our responsibility in God's family, we not only place an extra burden on our brothers and sisters in Christ but we also miss out on the joy of seeing God work in and through us.

Galatians 5:13b commands us—*Through love, serve one another*. Understanding and using our spiritual gifts helps us to serve our brothers and sisters in Christ in the most effective ways.



DAY ONE

**Westminster
Confession of
Faith (1647)**

**Chapter XXVI
Of the
Communion
of Saints**

I. All saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their Head, by His Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with Him in His graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory; and being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other's gifts and graces, and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man.

Scripture Exploration



UNDERSTANDING SPIRITUAL GIFTS

*By God's grace
you are given a
gift that when
used correctly
will bring joy to
others.*
—Ed Hindson

THINK ABOUT:
Samuel
Chadwick, 19th
century pastor
and author,
noted, "Spiritual
gifts are no
proof of
spirituality." If
that is the case,
then what is the
true measure
and proof of
spirituality?

*To consider
spiritual gifts as
intended
merely to adorn
and benefit the
person
endowed would
be just as
absurd as to
say, "I light the
fire to warm not
the room but
the fireplace."*
—Abraham
Kuyper

THINK ABOUT:
What other
truths can the
operating of the
human body
teach you
about ministry
in the church?

The term "spiritual gift" in the New Testament comes from the Greek word, *charisma*, which literally means a "gift of grace." Thus, in simplest terms, a spiritual gift is an ability or empowerment given by God through the Holy Spirit to a believer for the purpose of ministry. It is a "gift"—not earned but given. And it is "of grace"—not a source of pride and boasting but rather of gratitude and humility.

The most extensive teaching on spiritual gifts occurs in 1 Corinthians 12. Paul wrote extensively on spiritual gifts to the Corinthians because, as a local church, they misunderstood, misused and mistakenly elevated certain gifts (and their possessors) to a level of superiority. One must keep this in mind while reading this chapter.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:1-31. Pray and ask God to speak to your heart as you read.

What are three basic things that you can learn about spiritual gifts from this chapter?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Complete these sentences from 1 Corinthians 12:4-6.

There are different kinds of _____ but the same _____.

There are different kinds of _____ but the same _____.

There are different kinds of _____ but the same _____.

What do you think Paul is trying to teach or emphasize from these verses?

Write out 1 Corinthians 12:7. _____

Paul compares the different gifts to the different functions in the body. Beside each section of verses, write down one truth that Paul taught the Corinthians about ministry.

12:12-13 _____

12:14-20 _____

12:21-25 _____

12:26 _____

Paul lists a number of miraculous gifts in 1 Corinthians 12. These gifts were apparently the ones most prized, admired and sought after in the Corinthian church. Paul ends the chapter by reminding the Corinthians that gifts are not the most important thing in the Christian life. The most important thing, the “most excellent way” of living the Christian life, is _____ (see 1 Corinthians 13).

Note: There is much discussion and disagreement today among Christians regarding the “sign gifts”—the gifts of a more “miraculous” nature such as speaking in tongues (foreign languages) and physical healing. “Charismatic” churches often emphasize these gifts as normative for today and, in many cases, as expected and available for all believers. Other churches see these gifts as having served a specific purpose (to validate the apostles and their message, 2 Cor. 12:12) at a specific point in the church’s history (before the completion of the New Testament), thus they are no longer needed or available today. Perhaps a mediating approach is best. God can utilize these gifts in certain people at certain times for His glory and for the benefit of the body of Christ. However, in the New Testament, their importance is often downplayed, their usage is limited, and their duration is temporary. God seems very aware that if a person were able to use such miraculous gifts on a consistent basis then they would easily be filled with pride and inappropriately exalted in the church (cf. 2 Cor. 12:7).

Read Romans 12:3-8. Mark any words or phrases that stand out to you as you read.

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. ⁴Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. ⁶We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. ⁷If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; ⁸if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

Write down four observations you can make from Romans 12:3-8.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

List the seven gifts mentioned in Romans 12:6-8. _____

What are we supposed to do with the gifts that we have? _____

“Gifts of healings” (12:9)—Both are plural in this verse. The implication is that there are different types of illnesses and different types of healings (e.g., physical, emotional).

Though able to heal at times, the apostles did not have this gift to exercise at will. Paul had an illness that was not healed (Gal. 4:13-14, 2 Cor. 12:7-10), could not heal Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:27), and left another friend, Trophimus, sick (2 Tim. 4:20).

Romans 12:1-2—The proper exercise of spiritual gifts begins with a life dedicated to God, separated from the sins of this world, and renewed daily through the truth of God’s Word.

THINK ABOUT: How could conformity to this world (12:2) hinder a person from using their spiritual gifts properly?

DAY TWO

There is often confusion regarding how spiritual gifts relate to natural talents. From Scriptural examples, it seems that our spiritual gifts can be a natural talent dedicated to God (Apollos, Acts 18:24), an enhanced talent (Bezalel), or a new ability given by the Lord and recognized by others (Timothy, 2 Tim. 1:6).

What you are is God's gift to you, what you do with yourself is your gift to God.

—Danish Proverb

2 Corinthians 1:3-4 teaches that God often takes us through difficult experiences so that we then can minister to others who go through these experiences.

For God to use your painful experiences, you must be willing to share them.

—Rick Warren

DISCOVERING YOUR SPIRITUAL GIFT(S)

The first question that many Christians ask regarding spiritual gifts is, “What is my spiritual gift? How do I discover it so that I can know how to serve the Lord?” In other words, we want to discover our gift first so that we can know what ministry we should pursue. The Bible does not follow this approach. The implication in Scripture is that, as we begin serving the Lord, we will naturally gravitate and be led by the Spirit toward the ministry that God has for us. We serve and God leads.

We should not view spiritual gifts as mysterious, hidden abilities that are hard to find. Rather they are typically a reflection of who we are and of how God designed us.

Read Exodus 35:30-36:2. This passage is an example of how God used spiritual gifts in the Old Testament to accomplish the work of building the tabernacle.

What gifts and abilities did Bezalel possess? _____

Where did these gifts/abilities come from? _____

How do you think Bezalel “discovered” these gifts? _____

What can you learn from the fact that, along with the gift of craftsmanship, God also gave Bezalel (and Aholiab) the ability to teach others? _____

What can you learn about spiritual gifts from Exodus 36:2? _____

The acronym **SHAPE** captures the aspects that often shape our ministry for the Lord...

- **Spiritual gifts.** Special empowerment from God.
- **Heart.** Our passions, burdens, and motivations.
- **Abilities.** Our natural and developed skills and talents.
- **Personality.** Our particular temperament and design.
- **Experiences.** The things that we have gone through and experienced in life.

God uses all of these things to prepare us and use us in ministry. As we yield ourselves to God, remain open to His leading, and involve ourselves in the ministry of a local church, we will soon discover the avenues by which God wants to use us.

USING YOUR SPIRITUAL GIFT(S)

DAY THREE

Read 1 Peter 4:10-11. Mark any words or phrases that stand out to you as you read.

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

Though serving is the best way to find your spiritual gift, you can also be guided and helped through spiritual gifts inventories.

A free online spiritual gifts inventory is available at freeshapetest.com. This comprehensive test will take approximately 30-60 minutes to complete.

Who has been given a spiritual gift? _____

What two spiritual gifts are specifically mentioned in this passage? _____

How should we use our gifts? _____

Why should we use our gifts? _____

Additional Resources



Read the following excerpt from Rick Warren's book, *The Purpose-Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), pages 234-235, 249-255.

You were shaped to serve God.

God formed every creature on this planet with a special area of expertise. Some animals run, some hop, some swim, some burrow, and some fly. Each has a particular role to play, based on the way they were shaped by God. The same is true with humans. Each of us was uniquely designed, or *shaped*, to do certain things.

Before architects design any new building they first ask, "What will be its purpose? How will it be used?" The intended function always determines the form of the building. Before God created you, he decided what role he wanted you to play on earth. He planned

exactly how he wanted you to serve him, and then he shaped you for those tasks. You are the way you are because you were made for a specific ministry.

The Bible says, "*We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works*" [Ephesians 2:10]. Our English word *poem* comes from the Greek word translated "workmanship." You are God's handcrafted work of art. You are not an assembly-line product, mass produced without thought. You are a custom-designed, one-of-a-kind, original masterpiece. God deliberately shaped and formed you to serve him in a way that makes your ministry unique.

He carefully mixed the DNA cocktail that created you. David praised God for this incredible personal attention to detail: *"You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knit me together in my mother's womb. Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! Your workmanship is marvelous"* [Ps. 139:13-14]. As Ethel Waters said, "God doesn't make junk."

Not only did God shape you before your birth, he planned every day of your life to support his shaping process. David continues, *"Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed"* [Ps. 139:16]. This means that nothing that happens in your life is insignificant. God uses *all of it* to mold you for your ministry to others and shape you for your service to him.

God never wastes anything. He would not give you abilities, interests, talents, gifts, personality, and life experiences unless he intended to use them for his glory. By identifying and understanding these factors you can discover God's will for your life...

God deserves your best.

He shaped you for a purpose, and he expects you to make the most of what you have been given. He doesn't want you to worry about or covet abilities you don't have. Instead he wants you to focus on talents he has given you to use.

When you attempt to serve God in ways you're not shaped to serve, it feels like forcing a square peg into a round hole. It's frustrating and produces limited results. It also wastes your time, your talent, and your energy. The best use of your life is to serve God out of your shape. To do this you must discover your shape, learn to accept and enjoy it, and then develop it to its fullest potential.

DISCOVER YOUR SHAPE

The Bible says, *"Don't act thoughtlessly, but try to find out and do whatever the Lord wants you to"* [Eph. 5:17]. Don't let another day go by. Start finding out and clarifying what God intends for you to be and do.

Begin by assessing your gifts and abilities.

Take a long, honest look at what you are good at and what you're not good at. Paul advised, *"Try to have a sane estimate of your capabilities"* [Rom. 12:3b]. Make a list. Ask other people for their candid opinion. Tell them you're searching for the truth, not fishing for a compliment. Spiritual gifts and natural abilities are always confirmed by others. If you think you are gifted to be a teacher or a singer and no one else agrees, guess what? If you want to know if you have the gift of leadership, just look over your shoulder! If no one is following you, you're not a leader.

Ask questions like these: Where have I seen fruit in my life *that other people confirmed*? Where have I already been successful? Spiritual gift tests and ability inventories can have some value, but they are limited in their usefulness. In the first place, they are standardized, so they don't take into account your uniqueness. Second, there are no definitions of the spiritual gifts given in the Bible, so any definitions are arbitrary and usually represent a denominational bias. Another problem is that the more mature you become, the more likely you are to manifest the characteristics of a number of the gifts. You may be serving or teaching or giving generously out of maturity rather than because it is your spiritual gift.

The best way to discover your gifts and abilities is to *experiment* with different areas of service. I could have taken a hundred gift and ability tests as a young man and would have never discovered that I was gifted at

teaching because I had never done it! It was only *after* I began accepting opportunities to speak that I saw the results, received confirmation from others, and realized, “God has gifted me to do this!”

Many books get the discovery process backwards. They say, “Discover your spiritual gift and then you'll know what ministry you're supposed to have.” It actually works the exact opposite way. Just start serving, experimenting with different ministries, and then you'll discover your gifts. Until you're actually involved in serving, you're not going to know what you're good at.

You have dozens of hidden abilities and gifts you don't know you've got because you've never tried them out. So I encourage you to try doing some things you've never done before. No matter how old you are, I urge you to never stop experimenting. I have met many people who discovered hidden talents in their seventies and eighties. I know a woman in her nineties who runs and wins 10K races and didn't discover that she enjoyed running until she was seventy-eight!

Don't try to figure out your gifts before volunteering to serve somewhere. Just start serving. You discover your gifts by getting involved in ministry. Try teaching or leading or organizing or playing an instrument or working with teenagers. You will never know what you're good at until you try. When it doesn't work out, call it an “experiment,” not a failure. You will eventually learn what you're good at.

Consider your heart and your personality. Paul advised, “*Make a careful exploration of who you are and the work you have been given, and then sink yourself into that*” [Gal. 6:4b, Msg]. Again, it helps to get feedback from those who know you best. Ask yourself questions: What do I really enjoy doing most? When do I feel the most fully alive?

What am I doing when I lose track of time? Do I like routine or variety? Do I prefer serving with a team or by myself? Am I more introverted or extroverted? Am I more a thinker or a feeler? Which do I enjoy more—competing or cooperating?

Examine your experiences and extract the lessons you have learned. Review your life and think about how it has shaped you. Moses told the Israelites, “Remember today what you have learned about the LORD through your experiences with him” [Deut. 11:2]. Forgotten experiences are worthless; that's a good reason to keep a spiritual journal. Paul worried that the believers in Galatia would waste the pain they had been through. He said, “*Were all your experiences wasted? I hope not!*” [Gal. 3:4].

We rarely see God's good purpose in pain or failure or embarrassment while it is happening. When Jesus washed Peter's feet, he said, “You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand” [John 13:7]. Only in hindsight do we understand how God intended a problem for good.

Extracting the lessons from your experiences takes time. I recommend that you take an entire weekend for a *life review retreat*, where you pause to see how God has worked in the various defining moments of your life and consider how he wants to use those lessons to help others.

ACCEPT AND ENJOY YOUR SHAPE

Since God knows what's best for you, you should gratefully accept the way he has fashioned you. The Bible says, “What right have you, a human being, to cross-examine God? The pot has no right to say to the potter: ‘Why did you make me this shape?’ Surely a potter can do what he likes with the clay!” [Rom. 9:20-21].

Your shape was sovereignly determined by God for his purpose, so you shouldn't resent it or reject it. Instead of trying to reshape yourself to be like someone else, you should celebrate the shape God has given only to you. "Christ has given each of us special abilities—whatever he wants us to have out of his rich storehouse of gifts" [Eph. 4:7].

Part of accepting your shape is recognizing your limitations. Nobody is good at everything, and no one is called to be everything. We all have defined roles. Paul understood that his calling was not to accomplish everything or please everyone but to focus only on the particular ministry God had shaped him for [Gal. 2:7-8]. He said, "*Our goal is to stay within the boundaries of God's plan for us*" [2 Cor. 10:13].

The word *boundaries* refers to the fact that God assigns each of us a field or sphere of service. Your shape determines your specialty. When we try to overextend our ministry reach beyond what God shaped us for, we experience stress. Just as each runner in a race is given a different lane to run in, we must individually "*run with patience the particular race that God has set before us*" [Heb. 12:1]. Don't be envious of the runner in the lane next to you; just focus on finishing *your* race.

God wants you to enjoy using the shape he has given you. The Bible says, "*Be sure to do what you should, for then you will enjoy the personal satisfaction of having done your work well, and you won't need to compare yourself to anyone else*" [Gal. 6:4]. Satan will try to steal the joy of service from you in a couple of ways: by tempting you to *compare* your ministry with others, and by tempting you to *conform* your ministry to the expectations of others. Both are deadly traps that will distract you from serving in the ways God intended. Whenever you lose your joy in

ministry, start by considering if either one of these temptations is the cause.

The Bible warns us never to compare ourselves with others: "*Do your own work well, and then you will have something to be proud of. But don't compare yourself with others*" [Gal. 6:4]. There are two reasons why you should never compare your shape, ministry, or the results of your ministry with anyone else. First, you will always be able to find someone who seems to be doing a better job than you and you will become discouraged. Or you will always be able to find someone who doesn't seem as effective as you and you will get full of pride. Either attitude will take you out of service and rob you of your joy.

Paul said it is foolish to compare ourselves with others. He said, "*We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise*" [2 Cor. 10:12].

You will find that people who do not understand your shape for ministry will criticize you and try to get you to conform to what they think you should be doing. Ignore them. Paul often had to deal with critics who misunderstood and maligned his service. His response was always the same: Avoid comparisons, resist exaggerations, and seek only God's commendation.

One of the reasons Paul was used so greatly by God was that he refused to be distracted by criticism or by comparing his ministry with others or by being drawn into fruitless debates about his ministry. As John Bunyan said, "If my life is fruitless, it doesn't matter who praises me, and if my life is fruitful, it doesn't matter who criticizes me."

KEEP DEVELOPING YOUR SHAPE

Jesus' parable of the talents illustrates that God expects us to make the most of what he gives us. We are to cultivate our gifts and abilities, keep our hearts aflame, grow our character and personality, and broaden our experiences so we will be increasingly more effective in our service. Paul told the Philippians to *"keep on growing in your knowledge and understanding"* [Phil. 1:9] and he reminded Timothy, *"Kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you"* [2 Tim. 1:6].

If you don't exercise your muscles, they weaken and atrophy. In the same way, if you don't utilize the abilities and skills God has given you, you will lose them. Jesus taught the parable of the talents to emphasize this truth. Referring to the servant who failed to use his one talent, the master said, *"Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents"* [Matt. 25:28]. Fail to use what you've been given and you'll lose it. Use the ability you've got and God will increase it. Paul told Timothy, *"Be sure to use the abilities God has given you. ...Put these abilities to work"* [1 Tim. 4:14-15].

Whatever gifts you have been given can be enlarged and developed through practice. For instance, no one gets the gift of teaching fully developed. But with study, feedback, and practice, a "good" teacher can become a *better* teacher, and with time, grow to be a *master* teacher. Don't settle for a half-developed gift. Stretch yourself and learn all you can. *"Concentrate on doing your best for God, work you won't be ashamed of"* [2 Tim. 2:15]. Take advantage of every training opportunity to develop your shape and sharpen your serving skills.

In heaven we are going to serve God forever. Right now, we can prepare for that eternal service by practicing on earth. Like athletes preparing for the Olympics, we keep training for that big day:

"Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever." [1 Corinthians 9:25].

We're getting ready for *eternal* responsibilities and rewards!

Changed Hearts



Write down two or three things that really stood out to you from this week's lesson.

There is no exhaustive list in the Bible detailing the exact spiritual gifts that God gives His children and defining exactly how they are used. The implication in Scripture is that God uses and enables

different people in different ways to fulfill different ministries in different cultures at different times. There is no cookie-cutter model in God's household.

So how has God shaped you? What gifts, abilities, passions, experiences, and opportunities has the Lord given you? Spend a few minutes exploring and reflecting on the questions below.

Dr. Ed Hindson sees the seven gifts listed in Romans 12:6-8 as the basic motivations behind doing the Lord's work. These motivations reflect who we are and how God has gifted us. Read through the descriptions below and put a check by the one that seems to best capture your heart.

- ☐ **Prophecy/Preaching.** A love for verbally declaring God's truth.
- ☐ **Serving.** A love for meeting practical needs in practical ways.
- ☐ **Teaching.** A love for clarifying and explaining God's truth.
- ☐ **Exhorting.** A love for encouraging and motivating others.
- ☐ **Giving.** A love for investing financially in God's work.
- ☐ **Ruling/Administrating.** A love for organizing and/or leading ministries.
- ☐ **Mercy.** A love for listening to and empathizing with the hurts of others.

Ask someone close to you which of the above qualities he/she sees the most in you. What quality does he/she see in you? _____

The biblical terms "joy" (*char*), "grace" (*charis*), and "gifts" (*charisma*) are all related in the Greek language. God's gifts flow from His grace and bring us and others joy. Think through the ministries or activities in the church that you have been involved with in your life. What ministry or activity has brought you the greatest joy? What have you really enjoyed doing?

Now think through this question: In your opinion, what is the greatest need in your local church?

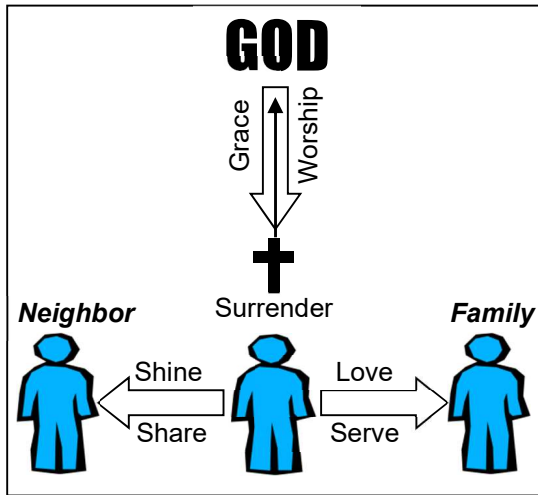
There is a good chance that whatever you see as the greatest need in your church is a reflection of your giftedness and passion. We gravitate toward our gift and long to see it more effectively done in our local church. And often God gives a burden to the person He is calling to meet it.

Looking back at your answers, are you presently serving in a ministry that reflects your passions, gifts, and abilities? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, then continue to seek the Lord's guidance in your ministry and be careful not to over-commit to things which pull you away from your primary passion. If no, then talk to a few trusted friends and/or your pastor about how you can best use your gifts, passions, and abilities in the ministry of the local church....and then start serving!

9

GOOD WORKS: Shining the Light



The diagram of the *God-Centered Life* is almost complete.

Fulfilling the Great Commandment of Jesus begins with **being loved by God**. *We love Him because He first loved us* (1 John 4:19). Thus, loving God begins with receiving His grace through Jesus Christ and surrendering to Him.

In response to God's love, we love Him in return. **Loving God** is the essence of worship and involves hearing God through His Word, speaking with God in

prayer, and resting in Him as one's Father and Friend.

Out of our relationship with God flows a love for others. *Whoever loves God must also love his brother* (1 John 4:21). It is impossible to love God and not love those created in His image (James 3:9-12). **Loving others** begins with our family—both our physical family and our spiritual family. We demonstrate love to our family by building up the home, connecting to a church, and serving others with our gifts.

Loving others continues with **loving our neighbor**. Biblically, “neighbor” refers to anyone who is “near to me,” anyone whom I come in contact with in my daily life (see Luke 10:25-37). In this regard, our physical and spiritual families are our closest “neighbors.” However, for this series, we are going to differentiate between family and neighbors. Loving others begins with our family (physical and spiritual) and extends next door to our “neighbors”—those who are not a part of our physical family and/or the spiritual family of God.

The Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) flows out of the Great Commandment (Mark 12:29-31). A vital part of loving God and loving others is sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with those who do not know Him.

All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28:18-20)

Loving our neighbors involves making disciples of all nations—helping people become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. This process includes...

- **Shining the light of Jesus Christ** wherever we go.
- **Showing the love of Jesus Christ** to whomever we meet.
- **Sharing the good news of Jesus Christ** whenever we can.

DAY ONE

**Westminster
Confession of
Faith (1647)**

Chapter XVI Of Good Works

II. Good works, done in obedience to God's commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith: and by them believers manifest their thankfulness, strengthen their assurance, edify their brethren, adorn the profession of the Gospel, stop the mouths of the adversaries, and glorify God, whose workmanship they are, created in Christ Jesus thereunto, that, having their fruit unto holiness, they may have the end, eternal life.

Scripture Exploration



SHINING THE LIGHT OF JESUS WHEREVER YOU GO

There can be no such thing as secret discipleship, for either the secrecy destroys the discipleship or the discipleship destroys the secrecy.
—Anonymous

DID YOU KNOW?

The Romans often paid their soldiers with salt since it was such a precious commodity for food preservation and cleansing. The phrase “not worth one’s salt” comes from this practice as well as our English word “salary” (salt payment).

It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.
—Eleanor Roosevelt

As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.
—Nelson Mandela

Write out Jesus’ words in John 8:12. _____

Jesus is the light of the world! When you make the choice to follow Jesus, He shines His light into your heart. You then reflect the light of Jesus to the rest of the world.

Read Matthew 5:13-16. Pray and ask God to speak to your heart as you read.

Complete this sentence. *You are* _____ (5:13).

From your own experience, write down three qualities, characteristics, or uses of salt.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What do you think it means to be the “salt of the earth”? _____

Complete this sentence. *You are* _____ (5:14).

Write down a key characteristic, quality or usage of light from the following verses.

Exodus 13:21 _____

Psalms 119:105 _____

Psalms 119:130 _____

Isaiah 42:6-7 _____

What should we not do with the light we have been given (5:15)? _____

Write down three things that you can learn about being “light” from Matthew 5:16.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Making disciples of all nations begins with shining the light of Jesus wherever you go. It is learning to be salt and light for Jesus Christ. This is not something *you do* as much as something *you are*. By virtue of being “in Christ,” you are already salt and light. However, you can lose your saltiness by intermingling with sin (the “dirt” of the world) and you can lose your brightness by hiding your faith in secrecy.

Read Philippians 2:14-15. Mark any words or phrases that stand out as you read.

Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world...

According to these verses, what hinders our ability to shine as lights in the world?

In his letter to Titus, the apostle Paul details a strategy for how a local church can make an impact on a godless, immoral society. **Read Titus 2:1-10.** Write down two or three of the qualities/actions that should characterize each type of person below.

Older Man _____

Older Woman _____

Younger Woman _____

Younger Man _____

Servant _____

Beside each verse below, write down the reason that Paul gives for living a godly life.

2:5 _____

2:8 _____

2:10 _____

According to Titus 3:1-2, what qualities/actions should characterize all believers?

SHOWING THE LOVE OF JESUS TO WHOMEVER YOU MEET

You shine the light of Jesus Christ as you allow the Holy Spirit to mold and reshape your heart and as you live each day with humility, grace, and holiness. This type of lifestyle makes you “ready for every good work” (Titus 3:1).

Read Luke 10:25-37. Pray and ask God to speak to your heart as you read.

DAY TWO

Preach the gospel at all times—if necessary, use words.

—Francis of Assisi

THINK ABOUT:
How does complaining and disputing dim our light to the world?

Titus
ministered on the isle of Crete. In Paul's day, Cretans were often characterized as liars, evil beasts, and lazy gluttons (1:12). Titus faced severe challenges as he attempted to grow a healthy local church in this culture.

“Busy at home” (2:5)—
Literally, “home-guards,” the watch or keeper of the home and its environment.

DAY THREE

“To test Jesus” (10:25)—The lawyer was not asking to get an answer but rather to test Jesus' answer.

“Do this and you will live” (10:28)—

Present tense, implying that you must love God and your neighbor at all times in order to fully meet the law’s requirements. The lawyer asked, “What must I do (one-time act)?” while Jesus emphasized a constant life-style. Thus the lawyer seeks to wiggle out of the law’s demands.

“Robbers” (10:30)—

Greek, *lestes*, one who robs through open violence or force. Different from Greek, *kleptes*, one who robs at night or covertly.

“Samaritan” (10:33)—We are so familiar with the phrase “good Samaritan” that we often miss the fact that Samaritans were generally despised and hated by the Jewish people of Jesus’ day.

THINK ABOUT: If Jesus told this parable today, who do you think He might use instead of a Samaritan?

What initial question does the lawyer ask Jesus (10:25)? _____

What answer does the lawyer give to his own question (10:27)? _____

Jesus says that his answer is correct. If this man perfectly and consistently lived like this, then he would have eternal life. The lawyer seeking to “justify himself” asks a second question (10:29) _____

Jesus answers this question by telling a parable—a true to life story meant to teach a truth for life—of a certain man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho.

What happens to this man? _____

What does the priest do when he sees this man? _____

What does the Levite do? _____

What does the Samaritan do? _____

What question does Jesus ask the lawyer (10:36)? _____

What is the lawyer’s answer (10:37)? _____

What command does Jesus give (10:37)? _____

What do you think it means to “love your neighbor as yourself”? _____

Read and meditate on the following verses. Mark key words or phrases as you read.

This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone. (Titus 3:8)

And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. (Hebrews 13:16)

Additional Resources



Read the following excerpt from Steve Sjogren's book, *Conspiracy of Kindness* (Ann Arbor, MI: Vine Books, 1993).

On a typical hot, humid, summer day in Cincinnati, Joe Delaney and his eight-year-old son were in the backyard playing catch. As the two lobbed the ball back and forth, Joe could tell something was on Jared's mind. At first they talked about Reds' baseball, friends, and summer vacation. Then the conversation took a more serious turn, and Joe felt like a backyard ballplayer who suddenly found himself in the major leagues.

"Dad, is there a God?"

Joe had the same helpless feeling he experienced on the high school baseball team when he lost sight of a fly ball in the blazing sun. He didn't know whether to move forward, backward, or just stay put. A string of trite answers raced through his mind. In the end Joe opted for honesty. "I don't know, Jared," he replied as the ball landed solidly in his glove.

Joe's agnosticism failed to stifle his son's curiosity. Jared dug a little deeper. "If there is God, how would you know him?"

"I really have no idea, Jared. I only went to church a couple of times when I was a kid, so I don't know a lot about these kind of things."

Jared seemed deep in thought for a few minutes as the game of catch continued. Suddenly, he headed for the house. "I'll be right back," he yelled over his shoulder. "I have to get something." Jared soon returned with a mylar helium balloon fresh from the circus along with a pen and an index card.

"Jared, what in the world are you doing?" Joe asked.

"I'm going to send a message to God—airmail," the boy earnestly replied.

Before Joe could protest, his son had started writing. "Dear God," Jared wrote on the index card, "if you are real and if you are there, send people who know you to Dad and me."

Joe kept his mouth shut, not wanting to dampen his son's enthusiasm. This is silly, he thought as he helped Jared fasten the card to the balloon's string. *But God I hope you're watching*, he added to his silent petition. After Jared let go of the balloon, father and son stood with their faces to the sky and watched it sail away.

Two days later I became part of the answer to this unusual inquiry. Joe and Jared pulled into the free car wash that our church was holding as part of our outreach into the community on this particular Saturday morning. "How much?" Joe asked as he neared the line of buckets, sponges, and hoses.

"It's free," I told him. "No strings attached."

"Really!" Joe exclaimed. He seemed intrigued with the idea of getting something for nothing. "But why are you doing this?"

"We just want to show you God's love in a practical way."

It was as if that simple statement opened a hidden door to Joe's heart. The look on his face was incredible. "Wait a minute!" he practically shouted. "Are you guys Christians?"

"Yeah, we're Christians," I replied.

“Are you the kind of Christians who believe in God?”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Yes, we’re that kind of Christians.”

After directing a big grin at Jared, Joe proceeded to tell me the story of releasing the helium balloon with its message only days earlier. “I guess you’re the answer to one of the strangest prayers God’s ever received,” Joe said.

THE POWER OF KINDNESS

Joe and Jared’s story is one of the thousands of examples of how servant evangelism works as a conspiracy of kindness. After eight years of demonstrating these practical expressions of God’s love to total strangers, it’s still a thrill to see their eyes light up when they realize that our deeds of kindness are actually free, with no strings attached. As we serve people in practical ways, their attitudes toward God are affected before they even realize it. During this time I’ve seen hundreds of individuals like Joe open their hearts to God.

People often ask me to explain servant evangelism in a nutshell. I’m not very good at putting anything in a nutshell, but this is the definition we use in our church: *demonstrating the kindness of God by offering to do some act of humble service with no strings attached.* Let’s tear that definition apart, one piece at a time.

Demonstrating the kindness of God. Whenever people see the love of God in action, a hot button is touched deep inside them. I’m convinced they feel God’s presence and see that he’s real even though they usually don’t know how to respond. Some people seem to hear something audible from the Lord when we serve them.

Jesus said, “By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). This verse is often interpreted as a call to unity in the Body of Christ. God certainly wants us to love other believers, but Jesus’ call goes far beyond those narrow boundaries. He called the disciples to love one another because the world instinctively recognizes us as followers of Jesus when we demonstrate that love for all to see.

By offering to do. The mere offer to serve others holds great power. For example, one of our teams was going from store to store in a large mall in Cincinnati offering to clean their restrooms. When we explain what we are doing the atmosphere around us gets quiet, like the commercial some years ago, “When E.F. Hutton speaks, everybody listens.” I admit, it does look rather odd to see a couple of people come up with bucket in hand and make this offer.

One particular Saturday morning, a female shopper couldn’t help but eavesdrop when our team asked permission to clean a store’s toilet. She later discovered that one of the engineers at her company attends our fellowship and asked him, “What kind of Christians are you who clean toilets to show God’s love? This sort of Christianity sparks my interest!”

Often the results of our projects will extend far beyond those we directly touch. When we give away soft drinks, not everyone wants a can. Sometimes just one person in a group of four receive a drink, but as they walk away the entire group would read the card and retell the story with an inquisitive look on their faces. This past week we touched about one thousand people in a variety of outreach projects, but the actual number who heard about what we did was much larger, possibly by a factor of two or three. Because the offer of service is so intriguing to people, they tend to tell their friends.

Some act of humble service. Jesus came as the suffering, humble servant. The goal in servant evangelism is to shine the spotlight on God's kingdom by coming in the spirit of Jesus. God understood that humility is one of the traits that gets the attention of the human race. As we give away deeds of humility we bring a similar influence into the world. In recent years we have been operating under a new assumption: *It is normal for Christians to serve those outside the church.* As we allow Jesus to love others through us, we will find great joy in serving.

Humility seems to make sense to everyone except veteran churchgoers. Jesus' lowly estate threw a curve ball to the religious leaders of his day. They expected him to appear as victorious Lord of Lords and King of Kings. Of course, Jesus is coming the second time in manifest power and authority, but he came the first time in humility. Today, it seems little has changed. While we look high and low for effective approaches that will touch the world around us with God's love, the most obvious one is often overlooked. Doing humble acts of service causes the world to notice our lives and to listen to our message.

With no strings attached. Our service to the community is always free. Many people offer to donate to our "cause," but we always refuse any repayment. To receive money for what we do would lessen the impact of our services. Free service offers a picture of the grace of God, a priceless gift which can never be repaid. Last fall one small group went out on several Saturday mornings raking leaves. One lady was overjoyed at our offer and said, "You've just saved me a big job." With six to eight people it doesn't take long to knock off a small yard, but that same job would have taken her hours to do alone. When we began to leave, she wrote out a check for our services. We had said earlier we were doing this for free, but our words hadn't registered

with her. We continued to load our rakes and bags into the back of a pick-up truck and she was still trying to stick her check in our pockets. It was quite a sight—right out of a Laurel and Hardy episode! Even as we were driving away, this woman was still waving her arms with her check in hand.

About a week later she got the better of us by sending a check in the mail with a short note, "I told you I wanted to pay for your raking my lawn! Please use this for whatever." We kept the letter and gave the money to our ministry to the needy.

HOW DOES SERVANT EVANGELISM WORK?

I witnessed the effectiveness of servant evangelism at a recent evangelism conference. I was one of several speakers offering different ideas for spreading the good news. My part was to teach on how to step out in simple expressions of God's love to outsiders. A friend of mine, a pastor who is gifted in speaking to strangers about Christ, spoke about sharing the gospel through friendship, prayer for the sick, and open air preaching—whatever seemed to fit each person. After talking about evangelism for a couple of days, we spent the last day actually going out to do it.

For the faint of heart, we did a free car wash, free windshield washing, and a food give-away to single moms. For the courageous, we offered more traditional approaches: going door to door, taking surveys, and preaching at a local park frequented by joggers. Unfortunately, the joggers paid no attention to what was being said. Not long after the preaching team began, the local police showed up to make sure this group had a permit to hold a meeting. Since they didn't, the police asked them to disperse. The group was disappointed, though some later admitted they were a little relieved. "At least now I don't have to talk to strangers," they reasoned.

As they started to leave, one lady announced that she had an idea, hopped into her car, and drove off. Ten minutes later she pulled up with twenty dozen popsicles! She explained, “I just thought that there was probably no law against giving out popsicles without a permit.” The group discovered that joggers who aren’t necessarily interested in listening to a stranger preaching at them are completely open to talking to a stranger offering them free refreshments.

Within twenty minutes all of the popsicles were gone. Some joggers took the popsicles and went their way without much conversation. Others were curious: “Why are you being so nice to me? I don’t even know you.” “What kind of Christians are you guys anyway?”

These were not difficult questions to answer. In fact, the former preachers were thrilled to have people asking any questions at all. One man took a popsicle and asked the “why” question with a stunned look on his face. When he was told this was to show God’s love in a practical way, he began to tell his life’s story to the Christian he had just met.

The case of the preachers turned popsicle-distributors illustrates something I’ve seen time and again: *servant evangelism works*. People on the receiving end of these simple acts of kindness come away with a more positive impression of Christianity than they previously had. With regular frequency, these deeds also open a door to deeper communication about the gospel. And those who engage in this approach to sharing God’s love with strangers don’t come away feeling like they’ve been put through a meat grinder.

Servant evangelism is one method—not the only method, nor necessarily the best one for every situation. And like any other approach, it simply doesn’t work apart from the agency of the Holy Spirit who is the only true

evangelist. Its effectiveness may vary from one cultural setting to another and there may well come a time when it has outlived its usefulness.

Nevertheless, in a society where other forms of sharing the gospel often meet a great deal of resistance—one which feels it’s heard too much “God-talk” and not seen enough “God-activity”—servant evangelism seems to be a fruitful way for Christians to share God’s love with their community. Our experience in Cincinnati has shown us that evangelism must contain the right words, but that those words must follow the demonstration of the love of God. The following equation states how this approach works:

Servant evangelism = deeds of hope + words of love + adequate time

Following this sequence of *deeds* of love before words of love practically communicates that the experience of God’s love precedes the understanding of that love. The scriptural record of his activity among the human race reflects this pattern. God does something wonderful with people, and only later—sometimes years later—do they understand or make sense of what he did....

Deeds of love. God’s love must be communicated from person to person, not just from page to person. If his love could be sent through printed information alone, we could simply flood our cities with gospel tracts and then rest assured that we have done our part. Deeds of love allow us to sneak into the hearts of those we serve. Even though people aren’t conscious of what’s happening, they are welcoming us and the God we represent into the fortress of their hearts.

Deeds of love aren’t enough on their own to bring someone to Christ, but they do create “phone wires” for transmitting the spoken message.

Words of love. Deeds of kindness get people's attention and often cause them to ask us questions. Instead of having a forced presentation of the gospel to people who really aren't interested in what we have to say, we find people are curious and ask us to explain what we're about after we've served them. Then we can present the message which is vital in bringing someone to Christ without taking a sales approach.

When we do speak we must be sensitive to the level of receptivity of each person and explain the words of God's love in whatever way the hearer can understand. These words are the cognitive or conscious element of our evangelism. If we don't follow our actions with words, they will only know that we are nice people, not that God loves them.

Adequate time. We need to allow time for deeds and words of love to have their effect on the hearts of people. If we are allowing the Holy Spirit to do his work in his way and in his timing, we must not demand instantaneous results. We can be assured that God will not allow any seed he has sown to come back without bearing fruit (Is 55:11), but he typically works over a prolonged period of time to bring sinners to himself. As we allow adequate time for seeds of love to take root, we put the expectation for results on the right spot: the Holy Spirit.

We might ask, "How long does it take for someone to come to Christ?" The only right answer to that question is, "It takes a unique amount of time for each person."

God relates to each person we contact as individuals. Our call to share the good news means loving people until they come around to relationship with Jesus Christ—regardless of how much time it takes. Those who don't give the Holy Spirit adequate time to do heart surgery will hinder his role of ripening the seeds we may have helped to plant. Our job

is to bring them the love of Jesus with all the grace he provides.

WHY DOES SERVANT EVANGELISM WORK?

I believe servant evangelism works because it respects certain important factors that influence the effectiveness of evangelism in our society. Let's consider these key factors one by one.

Sharing the good news is not a one-shot deal. American Christians tend to view evangelism as a one-shot deal—a "let 'em have it while we've got their attention" blast from both barrels of a shotgun loaded with Scripture. Sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with our neighbors is a process rather than a project. Like people everywhere, those joggers in the park were on their own journey toward or away from God. Some were already friends with God, some were alienated children, and others were already well on their way to discovering God.

Paul states: "I have planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase" (1 Cor. 3:6). Implied in his words is the notion of evangelism as a process, a sort of spiritual continuum that includes every human being. Paul's view of evangelism is quite unlike our American minds which tends to focus on the "harvesting" aspect of soul-winning rather than the planting part.

Opening hearts which have long been closed to God's love isn't something that normally happens quickly...

My own experience underscores my belief that the lion's share of bringing the good news involves the planting and watering of seeds of love through simple acts of kindness. We must be willing to plant and water before we will begin to see the harvest.

Anyone can do simple acts of kindness. For most Christians, doing evangelism is a lot like going to the dentist: no one really enjoys doing it, but it has to be done every once in a while. They often equate “being obedient to God” with doing something that is distasteful, unnatural, and even contrary to their nature. In other words, if preaching at the park scares me to death, then it must be God’s perfect will!

Some of those who went to the park at the conference admitted later on that they went along just because they wanted to “obey the Lord.” When they switched from preaching to simply offering relief from the elements to those who jogged by, every person on the team felt encouraged. They realized this was something they could do easily. Failing at an assignment like this is almost impossible. Worst case scenario: the popsicles melt because people aren’t hot and thirsty enough.

I’ve found that people are often more comfortable doing for others than they are simply talking to them. The reported number one fear of Americans is talking to strangers! When they assume they’re being asked to do the very thing they most fear in life, it’s no wonder so many Christians cringe at the prospect of evangelism.

On the other hand, serving is a reasonable task to ask of the average “coward” in the Body of Christ. I believe that most of us are cowards when it comes to sharing the gospel with strangers. When using these simple approaches to touching others, timid Christians come to realize they have nothing to lose. That’s a good feeling.

Servant evangelism is a low-risk venture. It doesn’t take a great deal of gifting, money, or even boldness to influence large numbers of people. For several years we have been looking for simple ways to influence shoppers at local grocery stores, a natural gather-

ing place for many Americans on Saturday mornings. During the winter we regularly give away fresh brewed coffee. It’s easy to attract people from our church to participate in this kind of project. After all, who can’t pour a cup of coffee!

Doing acts of kindness is “high grace.” When we step out to do simple deeds of love, God usually shows up to bless our efforts. His presence is often tangible. Time and again we have seen him convert our simple acts of service into powerful and unforgettable seeds planted in people’s hearts...

Sometimes God’s grace appears in a powerful sort of way...at other times he is present in more subtle ways.... Whenever we serve, each person is influenced in some unique way by the personalized touch of the Holy Spirit. Instead of telling the gospel in a forced way, we simply answer the questions others initiate.

Evangelism hits home when it begins with acceptance. Houston, Texas is sometimes called the “Buckle of the Bible Belt.” The prolific number of churches in that city prompts people to think of it as a bastion of conservative Christianity. To those outside the scope of the church, however, conservative Christianity is not always seen in a positive light. In fact, they often perceive believers as resembling Dana Carvey’s “Church Lady” on *Saturday Night Live*.

One skit centers around a church potluck supper where a single mom apologizes to the pastor for the small dish which she has to offer. He tells her, “Whatever you can bring is good enough for this dinner.” Moments later the Church Lady arrives carrying an elaborate casserole that everyone makes a fuss over. She points out to all present that she spent hours preparing this dish. Because it is *so* enormous, the single mom feels inferior. In her mind the Church Lady had

scored because everyone has once again recognized that she is better than most people. The skit ends with the Church Lady doing her “superior dance,” strutting about with her head bobbing and her hands on her hips. The American public finds this character funny because she embodies the way many outsiders perceive Christians...

For centuries Christians have been identified through a variety of badges which vary from one culture to another. At times they have been known by the length of their hair (or lack of hair), crosses around their neck, wearing plain clothing or dark garments, getting rid of their TVs, or avoiding certain foods. All of those “signs” are cultural identifiers, statements to their particular generation about their own personal faith.

According to the Bible, only one true and lasting sign identifies us as followers of Jesus through all times and cultures. The world around us recognizes the same sign that Jesus pointed to: our love. “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35, RSV). This love must spill over from the walls of our churches and out into the community in significant ways if we are going to make any lasting impact. It seems people don’t necessarily remember what they are told of God’s love, but they never forget what they have *experienced* of God’s love.

Evangelism must overcome a credibility gap. We live in a day when the church’s credibility is at an all-time low. When we step up to bat in sharing the good news with the unchurched public, we already have two strikes against us...

Because of the front-page publicity given to recent sex and money scandals involving several visible leaders in the church, many unchurched people feel Christians must earn the right to be heard.

Before we share God’s words of love with a hurting world, we must first be willing to do deeds of love with the heart of a servant. We must balance the speaking and the doing of the gospel—the words and the works of God—if we expect to gain an audience with the watching world...

An experience of love opens one’s heart to a message of love. A group of Christians traveled to the summer Olympics in Barcelona hoping to do significant evangelism in the large crowds gathered from around the world. Unfortunately, they received less than an enthusiastic welcome from local officials who informed them that evangelism was specifically not allowed. Instead of reacting negatively to this message, this group of believers went to work meeting whatever practical needs they saw. They began to clean up the streets, empty trash cans, and generally do whatever they could see that needed to be done around the Olympic grounds.

After a few days of watching them, the officials called the Christians in and admitted that they were pretty impressed with the attitude that they had seen displayed. They went on to ask, ‘What sort of evangelism were you hoping to do, if you were allowed?’ After the Christian leaders explained themselves, they received the OK to pursue whatever outreach they wanted as long as they kept in touch with the civic officials. What a staggering turnaround, and all because these believers were willing to *be* the good news before they began to *speak* the good news.

Who answers God’s mail? Joe and Jared’s experience makes it clear that he wants to involve us in the process. God answers his own mail, but he does it through people like you and me... We have been called to be a part of God’s conspiracy of kindness aimed at the heart of every person alive today. The easiest entrance point into someone’s life is a simple deed done in kindness....

Changed Hearts

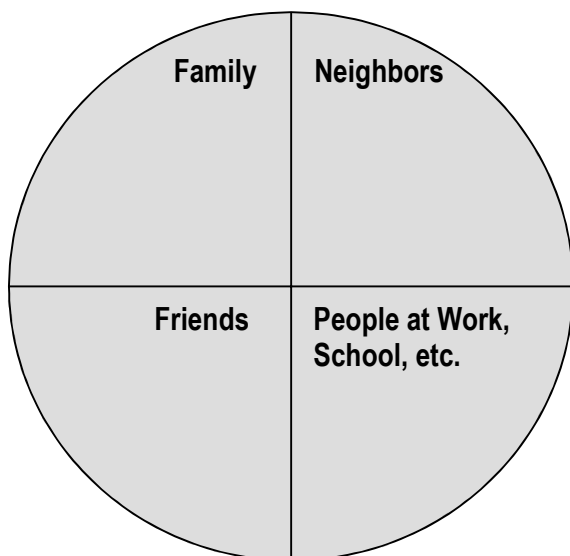


Write down two or three things that really stood out to you from this week's lesson.

Jesus came to earth as a servant and His life was characterized by serving others (Mark 10:45). The ultimate act of servanthood was displayed at the cross when Jesus gave His life for others.

As His body on earth today, we, the church, are called to the same ministry of servanthood. We serve others, seeking to meet physical, emotional, and spiritual needs, so that people will see the love of Jesus Christ and respond to the good news of salvation.

Who are “your neighbors”? Whom has God placed in your life who needs to know the love of Jesus Christ? We all have a “circle of influence”—people whom we are in contact with on a regular basis. Fill in the circle below. In each section, write the names of 1-3 people whom you know that you do not think have a relationship with Jesus Christ as Savior.



One of the simplest ways to minister to people is to **pray for them**. Make a point to pray for the people in your “circle of influence” each day this week. Ask God to work in their hearts and help you deepen your relationship with them and open doors for interaction and ministry. Ask one or two of the people in your “circle of influence” how you can specifically pray for them.

Is there a need that you are aware of with someone in your circle that you could help meet? If so, write down what you could do and when you could do it.

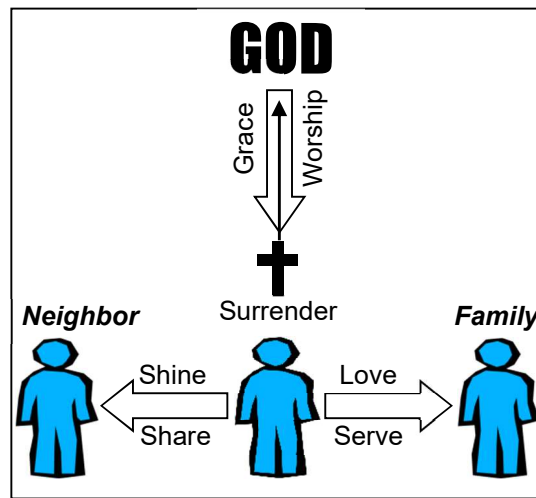
Ministering to people in the simplest ways can sometimes be the most powerful ways. Write a note of thanks, invite someone over for dinner, babysit their kids for an evening, buy tickets for a movie or fun event, etc. Keep your eyes open and God will show you practical ways to minister.

As a group, brainstorm different ministry projects that could be done in your community to show the love of Jesus Christ in a tangible way. Once you have a list of ideas, try to narrow the list down to one good idea that you could do together as a small group. Write down the ministry steps necessary to accomplish the project and work together to make it happen.

10 EVANGELISM: Sharing the Gospel

How do we reach people with the good news of Jesus Christ? For many Christians, evangelism is the most difficult (and scary) challenge in following Jesus Christ.

When you hear the term “evangelism” what images come into your mind?



“Evangelism” comes from the Greek verb, *euangelizo*, which is the combination of two Greek words—*angelos*, “messenger,” and *eu*, “good.” Thus, the idea behind evangelism is simply being a messenger of good news. We are commissioned by Jesus to share the good news of His life, death, and resurrection with others. The apostle Paul calls this commission the “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18). God speaks through us to bring people back into relationship with Himself.

If you have trusted Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, what process led you to this decision? What people were influential in sharing the message of Jesus with you? Think back through your spiritual journey and write down three significant events and/or people that led you to the decision to embrace Jesus Christ as Savior.

1.

2.

3.

Our stories of coming to Jesus are all different but they probably share one common characteristic—someone pointed us, whether by word or action or both, to the person of Jesus Christ. Usually this person is someone who cared about us and loved us enough to be a messenger of good news, a witness of Jesus Christ, and a minister of reconciliation. God now calls us to continue that ministry to others.

As we learned in Lesson 9, the process of making disciples includes *shining the light of Jesus Christ* wherever we go, *showing the love of Jesus Christ* to whomever we meet, and *sharing the good news of Jesus Christ* whenever we can.

This lesson will focus on what it means to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others. To be an effective “evangelist” (a good messenger) we need to know the *message* itself and know a few *methods* for how to share that message with others.

DAY ONE

Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647)

Question 84:
What does every sin deserve?

Answer: Every sin deserves God’s wrath and curse, both in this life, and that which is to come.

Question 85:
What does God require of us, that we may escape his wrath and curse due to us for sin?

Answer: God requires of us faith in Jesus Christ, repentance unto life...

Question 86:
What is faith in Jesus Christ?

Answer: Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation as he is offered to us in the gospel.

Scripture Exploration



THE MESSAGE OF EVANGELISM

“Repent”

(2:38)—Greek, *metanoeo*, literally “to change the mind.” Repentance involves changing one’s mind about sin, God, and Jesus. It is turning from my old ways to embrace the new way of Jesus Christ.

“Repent and be baptized” (2:38)—

Baptism is not necessary for salvation (see rest of NT) but it is a natural display of true repentance. It is similar to putting on a wedding ring as a sign of the marriage commitment.

DAY TWO

“Sin” (3:9)—

Greek, *hamartia*, “to miss the mark, to do or go wrong, to wander from the law of God.”

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-4. According to verses 3-4, what are the key elements of the “gospel,” the good news? _____

The good news we share with others centers on Jesus Christ. We are telling others about a person not a philosophy. We are inviting them into a relationship not a religion. **Look up the following verses in the book of Acts and summarize the message that was given to others, inviting them into a relationship with Jesus Christ.**

Acts 2:37-39 _____

Acts 3:19 _____

Acts 10:39-43 _____

Acts 13:38-39 _____

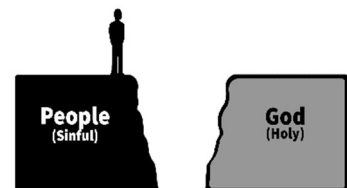
Acts 16:30-31 _____

The message is varied but carries a common theme—a person must make a conscious choice to turn from a prior mode of thinking and living and embrace Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord for the forgiveness of sins. In this sense, choosing Christ can be compared to choosing a mate in marriage. It makes no difference how a person proposes or is proposed to. What matters is that a person makes a conscious choice to say, “I want no other lover. I choose you to be my mate for life.”

The book of Romans contains a full explanation of the good news of Jesus Christ. Three major concepts must be understood, believed, and embraced for a person to enter into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

1. My sin has separated me from a holy God.

Write out Romans 3:23. _____



Read Romans 3:9-20.

What do Jews and Gentiles share in common (3:9)? _____

Write down 2-3 ways that sin manifests itself in people’s lives from 3:10-18.

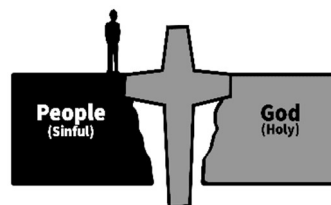
What is the purpose of the law of God, revealed in the Old Testament (3:20)?

What is the effect of the law of God? What does it cause to happen (3:19)?

Most people will admit that they are not perfect and have fallen short of God's perfect standard. But most people see this as "no big deal." However, the Bible teaches that God is holy, totally separate from sin. He hates sin. It is a cancer in His universe.

2. Jesus Christ came into the world to die for my sins.

Write out Romans 6:23. _____



Read Romans 5:6-11. Pray and ask God to speak to your heart as you read.

How did God demonstrate His love for us (5:8)? _____

From what are we saved through Jesus (5:9)? _____

What do we receive through Jesus (5:11)? _____

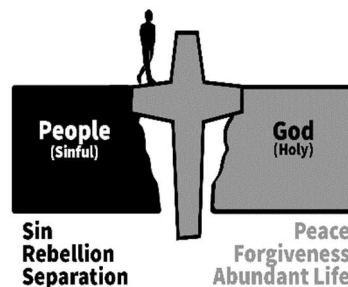
What should be our response because of Jesus (5:11)? _____

An exchange took place on the cross of Jesus Christ. Jesus took our sin and offered us His righteousness. He took our guilt and offered us His innocence. 2 Corinthians 5:21 describes this exchange: *For He [God] made Him [Jesus] who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*

3. I must trust in Jesus Christ alone as my Savior.

Write out Romans 10:9-10. _____

Are you here... or here?



"The Law" (3:19)—The standard of God's righteousness as revealed in the Mosaic law (i.e., a person shall worship God alone, respect His name, rest in His provision, honor parents and authority, not hate or murder, not covet or steal, not lust or commit adultery, and not lie or deceive).

Justified (5:9)—Greek, *dikaioo*, "to be declared righteous." Through Jesus, those guilty of sin can be declared innocent since Jesus received their penalty.

The essence of sin is arrogance; the essence of salvation is submission.
—Alan Redpath

"Jesus is Lord" is the earliest Christian confession of faith. It sums up one's desire to follow Christ alone.

THINK ABOUT:
Why do you think confessing with your mouth is so vital to truly trusting Jesus as Savior?

"Whoever" unrolls the welcome mat to humanity. "Whoever" invites the world to God.
—Max Lucado

DAY THREE

"Seasoned with salt" (4:6)—The implication is that a believer's speech should be "tasty" and create thirst. In conversations we should add a little "spiritual flavor" to our words to pique interest in others and gauge their spiritual interest.

When our hearts are filled with Christ's presence, evangelism is as inevitable as it is contagious.
—Robert E. Coleman

Evangelism is one beggar telling another beggar where to get bread.
—D. T. Niles

What two actions are necessary for salvation according to Romans 10:9-10?

What does Scripture promise to the person who "calls upon the name of the LORD" (10:13)?

What do you think it means to "call upon the name of the LORD"?

God offers the gift of eternal life to *whoever* calls upon His name. Like any gift, salvation is offered for free but it must be personally accepted and received in order to become one's own. *Have you received the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ?*

THE METHOD OF EVANGELISM

Knowing the content of the gospel is one thing...knowing how to share that content with others in an effective way is another. There is no "fool proof" method of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with others. There is no "step-by-step method" given in Scripture that we must follow. Instead as we shine the light of Jesus and show the love of Jesus, God opens up doors for us to share the message of Jesus with others.

Read Colossians 4:2-6. Mark key words or phrases as you read.

Be devoted to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving. ³ At the same time pray for us too, that God may open a door for the message so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. ⁴ Pray that I may make it known as I should. ⁵ Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunities. ⁶ Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you should answer everyone.

Effective evangelism begins with prayer. How should we pray (4:2)?

What should we pray for (4:3-4)?

How should we live before those "outside" the household of God (4:5)?

How should we speak to those "outside" the household of God (4:6)?

Thus the best method to reaching others for Christ is to pray for open doors, live wisely and redemptively, and speak with grace as doors open in our conversations.

Jesus is obviously the “master evangelist.” As you read the gospel accounts, it is apparent that Jesus met people where they were. He met physical needs and emotional needs as well as spiritual needs. When He looked at people, He was “moved with compassion” (Matthew 9:36). It was His intimate, undivided love for God and His genuine, uncompromising love for people that was the “backbone” of His evangelism strategy.

Take some time to read **John 4:1-42**. Ask God to speak to your heart as you read. When you are finished reading this account of Jesus’ interaction with a Samaritan woman, write down five simple principles that you can learn about sharing the good news of salvation with others.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Additional Resources



Read the following excerpt from Rebecca Manley Pippert’s book, *Out of the Saltshaker and into the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), pages 137-151.

All along we have been talking about evangelism as a lifestyle. We have looked at Jesus’ life and examined a few practical conversational skills so that we may become more natural and at ease in sharing our faith. I do not now intend to change my basic approach. Techniques can be helpful to some people in limited ways, but they will not make us natural. So what follows here is not a new, never-before-revealed technique of lifestyle evangelism.

Still, what I am about to say may sound like technique or make you feel stilted. If so, then ignore it. I merely want to offer models that may help you get started. These are not slick steps to successful soul winning, nor will they move every conversation inevitably to things of God. They are simply possible

patterns we might well be conscious of as we talk to people.

We all have different temperaments. Some of us are cognitive, others of us intuitive. Some respond naturally to ideas illustrated through graphs or charts, others are repelled by them. That is what makes communication with any person exciting and at the same time complex. So when examining any technique or model, we need to ask ourselves, Does this correspond to the way I relate to people? Or does it seem artificial and feel awkward? And even if it feels comfortable for me, would it be appropriate for the person to whom I am speaking?

It is important to realize we are at least halfway responsible for how a conversation

goes. We have choices in how we communicate. We should want to make our conversation count in representing Jesus Christ. But that brings us back to Jesus' own example. Jesus directed his conversations, for instance with the woman at the well. He did not manipulate her, yet he did not allow red herrings to get him off the track. He was not molded by her presuppositions; her alternatives did not keep Jesus from his.

So, to have purpose and ultimate desires for a conversation is not wrong. And it is not wrong to learn a few principles of communication to help us get a conversation going as well as to direct it toward spiritual matters....

Model A: Investigate, Stimulate, Relate

Investigate. First we must discover who the person is. This requires a genuine interest and curiosity in that person. Our culture does not encourage us to ask each other questions. We can fly from Los Angeles to New York and never speak to the passenger next to us. But Christians are not to be molded by their culture. We must learn to ask questions, draw people out, so that it becomes part of our lifestyle and not a technique.

In order to do that we need to learn how to be listeners first and proclaimers second. It is like rowing around an island, carefully viewing the shoreline for an appropriate mooring—a shared interest or a shared problem. Look for ways that God has made you alike. The more interests you have, the easier and quicker those mooring points are discovered. For the sake of Jesus Christ we need to be interesting! The more we enjoy God's world and develop our gifts, as well as explore new interests, the easier it will be to establish rapport with others.

If we listen for the nuances, we can draw others out without prying. Many people hesitate giving direct messages because they

are not sure anyone really wants to listen or are afraid that they cannot be trusted. Frequently people give clues about what things are bothering them or where they feel need. For instance, in response to "How are you?" someone says, "After last week things could only go up." Or as in the case of Betty when she said, "I live alone, but I have so many hobbies that I never seem to notice," which was an even more hidden message.

Sometimes people give us direct data but do not elaborate. For example, a person once said to me, "Thanks for the invitation but I can't. I went to a funeral last week and now I'm bogged down with homework." In both cases the ball has fallen into our court. We must find a way to express concern and give them an opportunity to talk *if they want to*. We must approach with care any "message" that we think we hear. If we sense need, it is probably because they intended for us to hear it. Sometimes you may hear a need and feel you are not the person to meet it. Then find a person who can.

Even if you are suddenly tongue-tied and walk away feeling you blew it, it is not too late. Go back later and say, "Listen, I'm so sorry about your grandfather's death. I just couldn't think of what to say to you the other day. But I care, and I'm praying for you" (be sure you do actually pray). That may open just as many doors as an initial statement of condolence.

Stimulate. After we have an idea of whom we are talking to, we must seek to arouse their curiosity about the gospel. This is one of the most neglected aspects of evangelism. We try to saturate people with the light before we have caught their attention. In Acts 26:18 Paul says Jesus first called him to open the eyes of others before helping them turn from darkness to light. He was called to arouse their interest so they would want to hear his message. This is part of being "fishers of

men” rather than “hunters of men.” A look at Jesus and Paul to study their fishing techniques would be helpful.

Jesus was often deliberately vague and intriguing with people at first, not giving the whole answer until he had their complete interest. He knew that the Samaritan woman (Jn. 4:7-42) wouldn’t understand what *living water* meant any more than Nicodemus (Jn. 3:1-21) would comprehend the term *born again*. Here deliberate obscurity was a stimulus and test of their spiritual interest.

Paul aroused the curiosity of the Thessalonian Jews in the synagogue with his fierce logic and rational arguments (Acts 17:1-8). In Athens he captured the interest of the Greeks by citing their poets to affirm his points (Acts 17:28). We too need to develop a style of intriguing evangelism. How can we pique interest in the gospel?

Relate. When we have discovered where people are and have aroused their interest in what we have to say, we are ready to relate the gospel message. Investigating and stimulating are the necessary pre-evangelistic steps that will enable us to communicate Christ more effectively. But it is not enough to take the first two steps without the third. Paul, for example, knew his audience, found where they needed to grapple with commitment and then proclaimed the gospel (Acts 17:16-34).

Notice that Paul’s message to the Athenians contained content and not just experience. It is difficult to imagine Paul on top of Areopagus defending his faith before secular philosophers by saying, “Gee, I dunno, fellas, it’s just this feeling in my heart.” Our conversion experience may illustrate the power of the gospel, but it does not explain it. I cringe sometimes at the lack of content I hear when students are sharing their faith. Jesus begins to sound more like a happy pill to be popped, than a Lord to be obeyed at any cost.

We need to have a basic understanding of the Christian message, so when we do feel led to give it we can. There are lots of tools that give the Christian message. One of them breaks it into four parts:

- 1. The nature of God: His purpose**
- 2. Human nature: our dilemma**
- 3. Jesus Christ: our solution**
- 4. What we do: our response**

...God is the natural place to begin. He is the Creator, the source of all that exists. But he is not just an amorphous power that brought the universe into being and set it in motion. He is a person who is actively involved in all that he has created. He is a person who loves us perfectly (John 3:16). He is also a God of total justice, punishing evil, expelling it from his presence (Romans 1: 18-32).

How do we human beings relate to God? First, because he has created everything, we are his creatures. We were originally made for his own purpose—to be in fellowship with him, to obey him, to relate to him person-to-person (Col. 1:16). But we rejected this offer; we rejected his purpose, his rule (Isaiah 53:6). As a race we have rebelled against God. As individuals we have turned away. The result has been separation, loss of fellowship with God (Isaiah 59:2). Because God is just and holy, because he cannot accept anything that is evil, he hands down the penalty of eternal death (Romans 6:23).

But because God is also love, he simultaneously seeks a way of reconciliation (Col. 1:19-20). That was why Jesus came as a man—to die, to pay the penalty for our sins that we deserved, to actually take on our sins in his body (Rom. 5:8), and then to rise to new life, making eternal fellowship possible for us (1 Cor. 15:3-4; Jn. 10: 10). His gift is eternal life (Rom. 6:23).

God will not, however, force his love on us. He will not require us to have a reconciled relationship with him if that is not our choice. To complete reconciliation with him, we must each admit that we have rebelled (Mt. 4:17), confess that we cannot be reconciled to God apart from what Christ did on the cross (John 1:12) and accept Christ's purpose, rule and power in our lives. Through prayer we can invite him to live in us (Rev. 3:20).

Such an outline of the gospel is one option. There are many others. Find one that you are comfortable with and that is biblical, not sidestepping the problem of sin, the need for repentance or the call to yield to Christ as Lord.

After you find or devise a tool that accurately summarizes the Christian message, then make it your own. Write out in your own words how you would express the fundamentals of the faith to a friend. We need to have an answer to someone who says, "What is a Christian and how do I become one?"

As a younger Christian I felt wobbly in my ability to explain what I believed. So I carried around booklets that expressed far more articulately than I could what I believed. ...Once a girl told me she wanted to become a Christian but did not know how. So I took out a booklet and read her the essence of the gospel and asked her if she believed it. When she said yes, I told her I would pray with her.

I do not need the support of a booklet now but it was valuable then. But we must remember that God does not ask us to give a polished, slick presentation of the gospel after day one. He asks us to be faithful in sharing what we know and what we have seen....

Model B: Relationship, Belief, Epistemology

Mark Petterson provides another model for how to develop conversations with non-

Christians. He says, "In any conversation the content is controlled to a large extent by the questions. If you want to control what is discussed, then you must take the initiative in asking questions." He then defines three areas that conversations (and consequently questions) deal with: relationships, beliefs and epistemology.

Relationships: how a person stands with respect to a common denominator (school, major, number of children, etc.). This is like the "investigate" part in Model A.... Conversation in this area is relatively easy and relaxed. We can usually find something of mutual interest.

Beliefs: everyone has beliefs about politics, love, the meaning of life, God and so on. You might ask, "What do you think about—abortion, women's lib, the *born again* movement?" It is in this area of beliefs that conversation can break down. Meaningful interaction cannot take place at this level if the beliefs are not shared. Conversations can soon degenerate into argument, each person solidly maintaining their previously conceived dogma and not listening or interacting with the other. For example, someone may say, "I think this *born again* thing is for the birds. It's just a new fad."

You instantly say, "No! It's not. It's a legitimate experience." The other person is convinced to the contrary, the battle lines are drawn and fruitful interaction is ended.

How can we avoid the impasse and move into dialog? The key is to move the conversation to the third area.

Epistemology: ask, "*Why* do you think this *born again* experience is not legitimate?" This allows the conversation to continue and very often forces people to admit that what they believe about many important things is mere personal opinion. Asking why makes

people disclose their authority. It may be possible, then, for the Christian to move the discussion on and show how Jesus provides authoritative information. If Christ's claim to be the living God is true, "then his answers to the meaningful questions of life are of the utmost importance," Petterson writes. By asking epistemological questions the Christian can often make any meaningful conversation naturally focus on Jesus Christ, who is the central issue. It is also in this area that Christians must know not only who their authority is, but *why* he is reliable.

The Final Step

The goal of evangelism is to bring people to Christ so that he can bring them to new life. If we are following the leading of the Holy Spirit and living like Jesus, as we talk with people, we will come to the place where they may ask, "Okay. I would like to be a Christian. How do I do it?"

There is probably no experience more terrifying than the first time we lead a person to Christ. But there are few things more thrilling or that make us more aware of how true Christianity is. To see God's Spirit take control and beautifully change a person's life is one of the greatest miracles we will ever witness. So we must be willing to help people enter into a relationship with God if they are ready.

When people tell us they want to become Christians, we need to be sure they understand and believe the essence of the gospel: including the nature of God as just and merciful, the nature of human beings as sinful and separated from God, the nature of salvation through the death of Christ, the necessity of repentance and acceptance of Jesus as Lord as well as Savior.

If all these things are clear, ...we can ask them to pray and ask Jesus to be their living Lord, confessing the sin of running their own lives and asking him to take charge. Then we can pray with them confirming his work in our life and thanking him for entering theirs. John Stott suggests that those who wish to take this final step echo the following prayer in their heart:

Lord Jesus Christ, I acknowledge that I have gone my own way. I have sinned in thought, word and deed. I am sorry for my sins. I turn from them in repentance.

I believe that you died for me, bearing my sins in your own body. I thank you for your great love.

Now I open the door. Come in, Lord Jesus. Come in as my Savior, and cleanse me. Come in as my Lord, and take control of me. And I will serve as you give me strength, all my life.

Amen.

Leading someone to Christ is an experience all of us should have. It confirms the truthfulness of the gospel and the reality of God's presence as few other things do...

There are people around us whom God longs to touch through us—people that only we can reach with our particular style and personality, people whom we have been called to. We must begin to ask God, "Is this the one? Is she the one you are seeking?" It is a fantastic drama, and God wants to use us to accomplish it.

Changed Hearts



Write down two or three things that really stood out to you from this week's lesson.

Now that you have read and studied the topic of evangelism, there is no substitute for doing it. Follow the evangelism strategy of Colossians 4:2-6.

- Pray each morning that God would fill you with His Spirit and open up doors of opportunity to share the message of God's love with others.
- Live a godly life before others, wisely and creatively redeeming the time.
- Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt. Share things that God is doing in your life. Ask good questions of others. Invite someone to a spiritual event. Sprinkling a little of the "salt" of Jesus in your conversations can spark interest, create thirst, and gauge where someone is spiritually.
- Be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks you the reason for the hope that is in you.

Being ready involves knowing a basic gospel outline that you could share with another person. Find a good gospel tract or visit a website like www.4laws.com or www.navigators.org to view some of the different ways to share the gospel with others.

Another good resource is the Pocket Testament League (www.ptl.org) which offers free Gospels of John in different versions and with different theme-based covers to give out as opportunities arise. Simply carrying a Gospel of John each day can remind you to keep your eyes open for spiritual interactions and provide a simple way to give the message of Jesus Christ to someone who may be interested.

If you need practice, then find a friend and role play sharing the gospel using one of these outlines. Have one person act as the "evangelist" while the other person acts as someone interested in trusting in Jesus Christ.

Also spend some time discussing the following questions together:

What is your biggest fear in sharing the gospel with others? _____

What verse or principle in God's Word could help alleviate this fear? _____

11 STEWARDSHIP: Managing God's Resources

Up to this point in the study, we have focused on our relationship to God and to others (family and neighbors). In these last two lessons, the focus shifts to our life within this world.

We are physical beings living in a physical world with physical needs to meet and physical resources to use. True spirituality is not some “other worldly” or mystical pursuit that ignores or abhors the physical realm. True spirituality recognizes the inherent goodness of God’s physical creation and seeks to honor, manage, use, and redeem the resources He has given us.

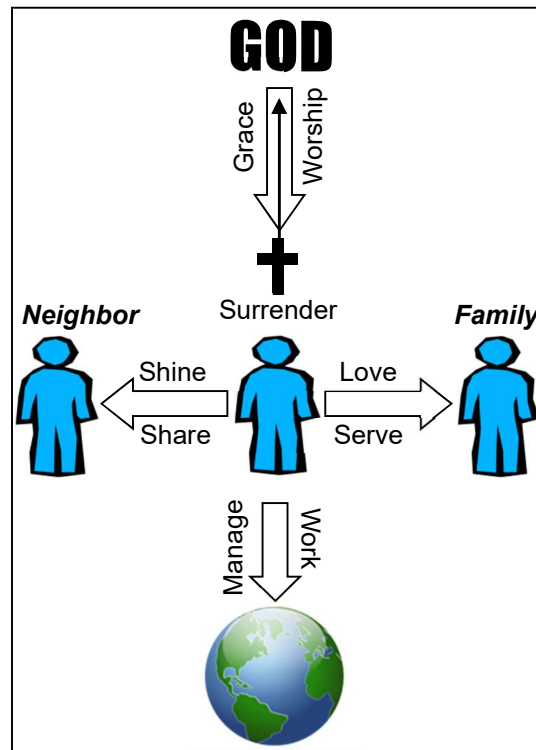
It is important to recognize that the Judeo-Christian worldview stands apart in this regard. Every religion or world-view falls into one of three categories:

1. **Naturalism/Materialism.** The material world is the sum of all reality.
2. **Transcendentalism.** The material world is evil, temporal, and/or illusionary. The spiritual world is the only true reality.
3. **Theism.** A good, personal God created a good, perfect world (that has been corrupted by sin but is to be eventually redeemed by His grace). Thus, both the physical and spiritual worlds are real and good.

Christianity recognizes the value of the physical creation and the physical body. Though the physical world has been impacted by sin, God’s purpose is to redeem it...not destroy it. Jesus stands as the ultimate example of the inherent value of the physical world. Jesus entered the physical realm in a physical body and physically rose again in a new body after his death. Thus our hope in Christ is not the absence of a physical reality but of a new physical reality without the impact of sin.

*For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will **transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body**, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself (Philippians 3:20-21).*

Because the physical realm is created by God and has infinite value in His eyes, then how we treat our physical bodies (and the bodies of others), use our physical resources, and treat our physical environment is a very spiritual matter.



DAY ONE

**Westminster
Larger
Catechism
(1647)**

Question 15:
What is the work
of creation?

Answer: The work of creation is that wherein God did in the beginning, by the word of His power, make of nothing the world, and all things therein, for Himself, within the space of six days, and all very good.

Question 17:
How did God
create man?

Answer: He created man, male and female; formed the body of the man of the dust of the ground, and the woman of the rib of the man; endued them with living, reasonable, and immortal souls; made them after His own image, in knowledge, righteousness and holiness, having the law of God written in their hearts and power to fulfill it, with dominion over the creatures; yet subject to fall.

Scripture Exploration



THE PRINCIPLE OF STEWARDSHIP

If you don't give away anything God wants you to give, you don't own it—it owns you.
—Anonymous

We ask how much a man gives; Christ asks how much he keeps.
—Andrew Murray

“Shrewdly” (16:8)—Greek, *phronimos*, “prudent, practically wise.” The idea is of creatively making the most of one’s opportunities.

This same word is used in Matthew 10:16. *I am sending you out as sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.*

THINK ABOUT: What do you think it means to be as “shrewd as a snake and as innocent as a dove” in this world?

Look up the definition of “steward” in the dictionary. What does it mean?

“Steward” in the NT is a translation of the Greek word, *oikonomos*, which literally means “house manager.” It describes a person (a freed man or slave) who was entrusted by the master of a household with managing the affairs of the house, administering finances, and overseeing the servants and/or children of the house. The steward *owned nothing* but *managed everything* in the *service* of the master and for his *benefit*.

Read Luke 16:1-13. Pray and ask God to give you wisdom and insight as you read this unique parable of Jesus. Remember a parable is a true to life story meant to teach a truth for life. Jesus tells this story to teach one particular truth to His disciples.

How would you best describe the steward in verse 1?

- A. Faithful B. Unfaithful C. Wasteful D. Wise

What is the master’s response to the steward’s job performance (vs. 2)?

The steward stops, considers his situation and comes up with a plan to execute in the short time he has left as a steward (vss. 3-7). How would you describe his plan?

Even though the master is not necessarily happy with the steward’s final actions, he does commend him (vs. 8a). Why? _____

What point does Jesus make from this story (vs. 8b-9)? What do you think He is trying to teach His disciples? _____

Jesus goes on to teach His disciples about how they are to use their money and possessions. What is a truth you can learn from each of the following verses?

16:10-12 _____

16:13 _____

THE PRACTICE OF STEWARDSHIP

The Bible teaches that we are “stewards” of God. God, the Master of creation, has entrusted to us time on this earth, opportunities, talents, abilities, money, possessions, relationships, the message of Christ, and even our physical bodies and world. We do not *own* any of these things. They are gifts given to us for a limited amount of time for us to use in service to God and for His benefit. We will focus on a few of these.



The Stewardship of Time and Opportunities

See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time because the days are evil (Ephesians 5:15-16).

Read Psalm 90:10-17. This psalm was written by Moses and is the oldest psalm in the Bible. What does Moses teach us about life in verse 10?

What does Moses ask God to teach him in light of the brevity of life (vs. 12)?

What do you think this means? _____

What other requests does Moses make of God in verses 13-17?

90:13 _____

90:14 _____

90:15 _____

90:16 _____

90:17 _____



The Stewardship of Talents and Abilities

Write out 1 Peter 4:10. _____

God has given us each talents, abilities, and spiritual gifts to use for His glory.

Ephesians 2:10 reminds us that *we are God's _____*
(His own work of art) created in Christ Jesus (and designed and gifted by God) for
_____ which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

God has designed each one of us to accomplish certain good works for His glory.

DAY TWO

Do not squander time, for it is the stuff of which life is made.

—Benjamin Franklin

We live by demands when we should live by priorities.

—J.A. Motyer

Psalm 90 is considered a wisdom psalm because it teaches how to practically live in this world. In this psalm, Moses teaches us to accept the brevity of life and to live wisely and humbly in light of God's power and eternity.

THINK ABOUT: What request of Moses particularly resonates with your own life?

“Workmanship” (Eph. 2:10)—Greek, *poiema*, from which we get our English word “poem.” We are God's special work of art, designed with a specific purpose and plan in mind.

DAY THREE

The less I spent on myself and the more I gave to others, the fuller of happiness and blessing did my soul become.

—Hudson Taylor

I have held many things in my hands and I have lost them all. But whatever I have placed in God's hands, that I still possess.

—Martin Luther

"Made rich in every way so that you can be generous" (9:11)—We do not give to get more from God. We give so that God can supply and open up even more opportunities for us to give more.

Make all you can, save all you can, give all you can.
—John Wesley

THINK ABOUT: What message does TV and American culture give us about being rich and using our wealth? How much has this message impacted the church? You?



The Stewardship of Money and Possessions

*One person gives freely, yet gains even more;
Another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty.
A generous person will prosper;
Whoever refreshes others will be refreshed. (Proverbs 11:24-25)*

Read 2 Corinthians 9:6-11. Ask God to speak to your heart as you read.

The Law of the Sower. *He who sows _____ will also reap _____
and he who sows _____ will also reap _____* (9:6).

How should we give (9:7)? _____

How should we not give (9:7)? _____

Why should we give? Write down a promise or reason given in the following verses.

9:8-9 _____

9:10 _____

9:11 _____

God blesses us (with time, abilities, financial resources) so that we can bless others. And the more we bless others, the more He blesses us so we can keep blessing others. We are the channel of God's blessings and the wider the channel grows (i.e., the more generous we become), the more His blessing flows through us.

What often keeps us from giving generously to ministries and to others?

Read 1 Timothy 6:17-19. Mark words or phrases that stand out to you.

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

Write down five things that you can learn from 1 Timothy 6:17-19.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____



The Stewardship of Our Physical Bodies and Our World

Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it (Genesis 2:15).

God's plan from the beginning was that we as humans should *cultivate* and *care* for the earth. We are to make use of the world's resources—explore, innovate, develop, improve, and enjoy them—with a sense of stewardship and care. It is a balance that keeps us from exploiting the earth (excessive use without care) or from exalting it (excessive care without use).

The same principle is true with our physical bodies. We are to use our bodies for God's glory—exploring, innovating, developing, improving, and enjoying our physical lives—while at the same time caring for our bodies as the creation of God, the purchase of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19-20). We are not to worship our bodies nor are we to neglect them.

Though given in the context of marriage, Ephesians 5:29 states this principle well: *For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church.* Just as Christ cares for His body, the church, we are to care for our bodies (eating well, exercising, enjoying times of pleasure and rest) so that they can be effective instruments for God's glory.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:19b-20. Personalize this verse and rewrite it in your own words below.

You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

Additional Resources



Read the following excerpt from Randy Alcorn's book, *The Treasure Principle* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2001), pages 21-25, 36-45.

In 1990, I was a pastor of a large church, making a good salary and earning book royalties. I had been a pastor for thirteen years, since the church began. I didn't want to do anything else.

Then something happened that turned my family members' lives upside down. I was on the board of a crisis pregnancy center, and we had opened our home to a pregnant teenager, helping her give up her baby for adoption. We also had the joy of seeing her come to Christ.

I felt an even greater burden for the unborn. After searching Scripture and much prayer, I began participating in peaceful, nonviolent rescues at abortion clinics. For this I was arrested and sent to jail. An abortion clinic won a court judgment against a group of us. I told a judge that I would pay anything I owed, but I couldn't hand over money to people who would use it to kill babies. (This was a matter of conscience. Understand that I have never failed to pay other debts, nor do I recommend that others avoid paying them.)

Then I discovered that my church was about to receive a writ of garnishment demanding that they surrender one-fourth of my wages each month to the abortion clinic. The church would have to either pay the abortion clinic or defy a court order. To prevent this from happening, I resigned.

I'd already divested myself of book royalties. The only way I would avoid garnishment was to make no more than minimum wage. Fortunately, our family had been living on only a portion of my church salary, and we had just made our final house payment, so we were out of debt.

Another court judgment followed, involving another abortion clinic. Though our actions had been nonviolent, the clinic was awarded the largest judgment ever against a group of peaceful protestors: \$8.2 million. This time it seemed likely we would lose our house. By all appearances, and certainly by the world's standards, our lives had taken a devastating turn. Right?

Wrong. It was one of the best things that ever happened to us.

What others intended for evil, God intended for good (Gen. 50:20). We began a new ministry. My wife, Nanci, worked at a secretary's salary, supplementing my minimum wage. Her name alone was on all of our assets, including the house. My inability to legally own assets was nothing I sought after and nothing to be congratulated for, but God used it to help me understand what He means by "Everything under heaven belongs to me" (Job 41:11).

This wasn't the first time God taught me about His ownership. Many years ago, I loaned a new portable stereo to our church's high school group. It came back beat-up and, I admit, it bothered me. But the Lord convicted me, reminding me it wasn't my

stereo—it was His. And it had been used to help reach young people. Who was I to complain about what was God's?

Back then the material possessions I valued most were my books. My money went toward many great books. Thousands of them. Those books meant a lot to me. I loaned them out, but it troubled me when they weren't returned or came back looking shabby.

Then I sensed God's leading to hand over the books—all of them—to begin a church library. I looked at the names of those who checked them out, sometimes dozens of names per book. I realized that by releasing the books, I had invested in others' lives. Suddenly, the more worn the book, the better. My perspective totally changed.

Fast-forwarding to the early 1990s, God used those court judgments to take my understanding of His ownership to a new level. Scripture really hit home:

- The earth is the LORD'S, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it. (Ps. 24:1)
- "The silver is mine and the gold is mine," declares the LORD Almighty, (Haggai 2:8)
- Remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth. (Deuteronomy 8:18)
- You are not your own; you were bought at a price. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

Treasure Principle #1
*God owns everything.
I am His money manager.*

God was teaching me the first of six keys to understanding the Treasure Principle: God was and is the owner of everything, including books and stereos. He even owns me. God never revoked His ownership, never surrendered His claim to all treasures. He didn't die and leave the earth to me or anyone else.

Ironically, I'd written extensively about God's ownership in my book *Money, Possessions and Eternity*. Within a year of its publication, I no longer owned anything. God was teaching me, in the crucible of adversity the life-changing implications of that truth.

I realized that our house belonged to God, not us. Why worry about whether or not we would keep it if it belonged to Him anyway? He has no shortage of resources. He could easily provide us another place to live.

But understanding ownership was only half of my lesson. If God was the owner, I was the manager. I needed to adopt a steward's mentality toward the assets He had entrusted to me.

A steward manages assets for the owner's benefit. The steward carries no sense of entitlement to the assets he manages. It's his job to find out what the owner wants done with his assets, then carry out his will...

EYES ON ETERNITY

The streets of Cairo were hot and dusty. Pat and Rachel Thurman took us down an alley. We drove past Arabic signs to a gate that opened to a plot of overgrown grass. It was a graveyard for American missionaries. As my family and I followed, Pat pointed to a sun-scorched tombstone that read: "William Borden, 1887-1913."

Borden, a Yale graduate and heir to great wealth, rejected a life of ease in order to bring the gospel to Muslims. Refusing even to buy himself a car, Borden gave away hundreds of thousands of dollars to missions. After only four months of zealous ministry in Egypt, he contracted spinal meningitis and died at the age of twenty-five.

I dusted off the epitaph on Borden's grave. After describing his love and sacrifices for

the kingdom of God and for Muslim people, the inscription ended with a phrase I've never forgotten: "Apart from faith in Christ, there is no explanation for such a life."

The Thurmans took us straight from Borden's grave to the Egyptian National Museum. The King Tut exhibit was mind-boggling.

Tutankhamen, the boy king, was only seventeen when he died. He was buried with solid gold chariots and thousands of golden artifacts. His gold coffin was found within gold tombs within gold tombs. The burial site was filled with *tons* of gold.

The Egyptians believed in an afterlife—one where they could take earthly treasures. But all the treasures intended for King Tut's eternal enjoyment stayed right where they were until Howard Carter discovered the burial chamber in 1922. They hadn't been touched for more than three thousand years.

I was struck by the contrast between these two graves. Borden's was obscure, dusty, and hidden off the back alley of a street littered with garbage. Tutankhamen's tomb glittered with unimaginable wealth. Yet where are these two young men now? One, who lived in opulence and called himself king, is in the misery of a Christless eternity. The other, who lived a modest life on earth in service of the one true King, is enjoying his everlasting reward in the presence of his Lord.

Tut's life was tragic because of an awful truth discovered too late—he couldn't take his treasures with him. William Borden's life was triumphant. Why? Because instead of leaving behind his treasures, he sent them on ahead.

ETERNAL REWARDS

If you imagine heaven as a place where you will strum a harp in endless tedium, you

probably dread it. But if you trust Scripture, you will be filled with joy and excitement as you anticipate your heavenly home. As I've written elsewhere, heaven will be a place of rest and relief from the burdens of sin and suffering; but it will also be a place of great learning, activity, artistic expression, exploration, discovery, camaraderie, and service.

Some of us will reign with Christ (Rev 20:6). Faithful servants will be put "in charge of many things" (Matt. 25:21, 23). Christ will grant some followers leadership over cities, in proportion to their service on earth (Luke 19:12-19). Scripture refers to five different crowns, suggesting leadership positions. We'll even command angels (1 Cor. 6:3).

We are given these eternal rewards for doing good works (Ephesians 6:8; Romans 2:6, 10), persevering under persecution (Luke 6:22-23), showing compassion to the needy (Luke 14:13-14), and treating our enemies kindly (Luke 6:35).

God also grants us rewards for generous giving: "Go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven" (Matthew 19:21).

Jesus is keeping track of our smallest acts of kindness: "If anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward" (Matthew 10:42).

God is keeping a record of all we do for Him, including our giving: "A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name" (Malachi 3:16).

Imagine a scribe in heaven recording each of your gifts on that scroll. The bike you gave to the neighbor kid, the books to prisoners, the monthly checks to the church, missionaries, and pregnancy center—all are being chroni-

cled. Scrolls are made to be read. I look forward to hearing your giving stories and meeting those touched by what you gave.

Jesus said, "If you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?" (Luke 16:11-12). If you handle His money faithfully, Christ will give you true riches—eternal ones.

By clinging to what isn't ours, we forgo the opportunity to be granted ownership in heaven. But by generously distributing God's property on earth, we will become property owners in heaven!

Many benefits of our present giving will come to us in heaven. After speaking of the shrewd servant's desire to use earthly resources so that "people will welcome me into their houses" (Luke 16:4), Jesus told His followers to use "worldly wealth" (earthly resources) to "gain friends" (by making a difference in their lives on earth). The reason? "So that when it is gone [when life on earth is over] you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings" (v. 9).

Our "friends" in heaven will be those whose lives we've touched on earth, who will have their own "eternal dwellings." Luke 16:9 seems to say our friends' eternal dwellings are places where we stay and fellowship, perhaps as we move about the heavenly kingdom. The money we give to help others on earth will open doors of fellowship with them in heaven. Now *that's* something to get excited about!

John Bunyan wrote *Pilgrim's Progress* in an English prison. He said:

Whatever good thing you do for Him, if done according to the Word, is laid up for you as

treasure in chests and coffers, to be brought out to be rewarded before both men and angels, to your eternal comfort.

Is this a biblical concept? Absolutely. Paul spoke about the Philippians' financial giving and explained, "Not that I am looking for a gift but I am looking for what may be credited to your account" (Phil. 4:17). God keeps an account open for us in heaven, and every gift given for His glory is a deposit in that account. Not only God, not only others, but we are the eternal beneficiaries of our giving. (Have you been making regular deposits?)

But isn't it wrong to be motivated by reward? No, it isn't. If it were wrong, Christ wouldn't offer it to us as a motivation. Reward is His idea, not ours. Our instinct is to give to those who will give us something in return. But Jesus told us to give to "the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.... Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:13-14). If we give to those who can't reward us, Christ guarantees He will personally reward us in heaven.

Giving is a giant lever positioned on the fulcrum of this world, allowing us to move mountains in the next world. Because we give, eternity will be different—for others and for us.

A HEART IN THE RIGHT PLACE

Ever hear that Ray Boltz song, *Thank You for Giving to the Lord*? It depicts us meeting people in heaven who explain how our giving changed their lives. Whether we were their Sunday school teacher or put money in the offering, these people will one day express their gratitude to us for our giving.

God promises us generous heavenly rewards, in a magnificent New Heaven and New Earth, no longer under the curse and no longer

suffering (Revelation 21:1-6). We'll forever be with the person we were made for, in a place made for us.

Nevertheless, many Christians dread the thought of leaving this world.

Why? Because so many have stored up their treasures on earth, not in heaven. Each day brings us closer to death. If your treasures are on earth, that means each day brings you closer to losing your treasures.

John Wesley toured a vast estate with a proud plantation owner. They rode their horses for hours and saw only a fraction of the man's property. At the end of the day they sat down to dinner. The plantation owner eagerly asked, "Well, Mr. Wesley, what do you think?"

Wesley replied, "I think you're going to have a hard time leaving all this."

I recently spoke with Laverne, a woman with terminal cancer. She was crying—not because she's going to die, but because I asked her to talk about giving. Through tears she said, "Giving melts me. It blows me away to know that God's chosen me to give. It won't be long before I see Him face-to-face. I just want to hear Him say, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant.'"

Suddenly, Laverne laughed. "I mean, what else matters?" she said. "Why should I care about anything else?"

Laverne's heart is focused on heavenly treasures. Because she is storing up treasures in heaven, each day brings her closer to those treasures.

Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). That's the second key to the Treasure Principle.

Treasure Principle #2
*My heart always goes
where I put God's money.*

By telling us that our hearts follow our treasure, Jesus is saying, "Show me your checkbook, your VISA statement, and your receipts, and I'll show you where your heart is."

Suppose you buy shares of General Motors. What happens? You suddenly develop interest in GM. You check the financial pages. You see a magazine article about GM and read every word, even though a month ago you would have passed right over it.

Suppose you're giving to help African children with AIDS. When you see an article on the subject, you're hooked. If you're sending money to plant churches in India and an earthquake hits India, you watch the news and fervently pray.

As surely as the compass needle follows north, your heart will follow your treasure. Money leads; hearts follow.

I've heard people say, "I want more of a heart for missions." I always respond, "Jesus tells you exactly how to get it. Put your money in missions—and in your church and the poor—and your heart will follow."

Do you wish you cared more about eternal things? Then reallocate some of your money, maybe *most* of your money, from temporal things to eternal things. Watch what happens.

God wants your heart. He isn't looking just for "donors" for His kingdom, those who stand outside the cause and dispassionately consider acts of philanthropy. He's looking for disciples immersed in the causes they give to. He wants people so filled with a vision for eternity that they wouldn't dream of not investing their money, time, and prayers where they will matter most.

Of course, giving isn't the only good thing we can do with money. We need to feed, clothe, house, and transport our families. But when the basics are taken care of, why shouldn't the rest go toward treasures in heaven?

Moses left Egypt's treasures "because he was looking ahead to his reward" (Heb. 11:26).

He who lays up treasures on earth spends his life backing away from his treasures. To him, death is loss.

He who lays up treasures in heaven looks forward to eternity; he's moving daily toward his treasures. To him, death is gain.

He who spends his life moving away from his treasures has reason to despair. He who spends his life moving toward his treasures has reason to rejoice.

Are you despairing or rejoicing?

Changed Hearts



Write down two or three things that really stood out to you from this week's lesson.

The principle of stewardship covers every aspect of our lives. There is nothing we have that is truly *ours*. Everything is given to us on loan from God. He is the owner. We are the managers.

Though every aspect of stewardship is vital, the stewardship of money gets particular attention in the Scriptures. How we make, manage, spend, and give our money reveals our heart and our priorities in life. *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also* (Matthew 6:21).

1 Corinthians 16:1-2 provides several key guidelines for financial giving for believers.

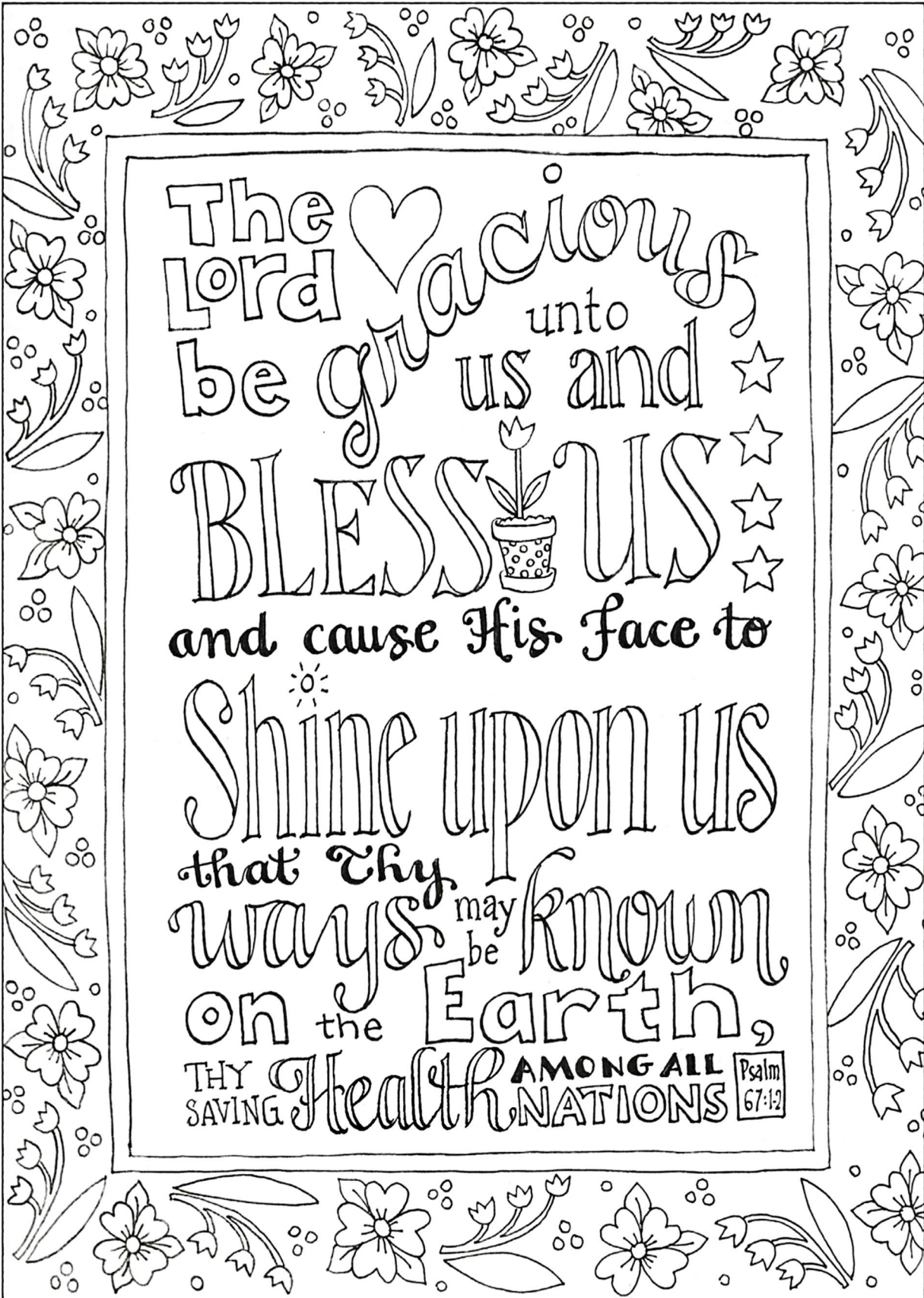
Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also. On the first day of the week, let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come.

1. **We are to give regularly—”on the first day of the week.”** Giving is to be regular and planned. This implies that a person has an idea of their regular income and a general spending plan (i.e., a budget) for managing their finances.
2. **We are to give proportionately—”storing up as he may prosper.”** Biblically, the issue in giving is not the amount but the proportion. In the Old Testament, the “tithe” (literally meaning “one-tenth”) was the general principle of giving. The first ten percent of one’s “prosperity” went to the Lord. *And all the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the tree, is the LORD’s. It is holy to the LORD* (Leviticus 27:30). In addition to the tithe, the people also brought “freewill offerings” to the Lord when they were particularly blessed (see Exodus 36:3). Thus, the term “tithes and offerings” refers to the giving of ten percent of one’s income plus additional amounts as God has prospered. The New Testament does not present the tithe as a requirement for believers. Rather, as partakers of grace, we are to give freely, generously, and joyfully. However, the tithe may still be used as a general guideline and starting point for Christian giving.
3. **We are to give purposefully—”the collection for the saints.”** Biblical giving is not indiscriminate or haphazard. Giving is to be prioritized to meet the needs and functioning of the local church (1 Cor. 16:1-4), to support pastors and missionaries (Gal. 6:6), to assist those in need within one’s physical or spiritual family (Gal. 6:10), and to help the poor and needy (Prov. 28:27). Those who refuse to work or indiscriminately waste funds are not to be supported financially but rather admonished (2 Thessalonians 3:6-12).

Stop and take an honest inventory of how you manage and spend your money.

- Are you giving regularly to your local church? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- Are you giving regularly to other Christian ministries? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- Are you giving generously for the cause of Christ? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- Do you have a budget and a plan for your spending and giving? ☐ Yes ☐ No

What is your goal or vision for becoming a better steward of the blessings God has given you?



12 VOCATION: Knowing One's Calling

People view work in one of several ways:

- **Burden or curse.** “I hate it but I have no other choice.”
- **Duty or responsibility.** “It is what I ought to do.”
- **Source of identity or significance.** “It is who I am.”
- **Source of income only.** “It is the way I make money to do what I want to do.”
- **Joy or blessing.** “It is what I enjoy.”

How do you tend to view the work that you do? _____

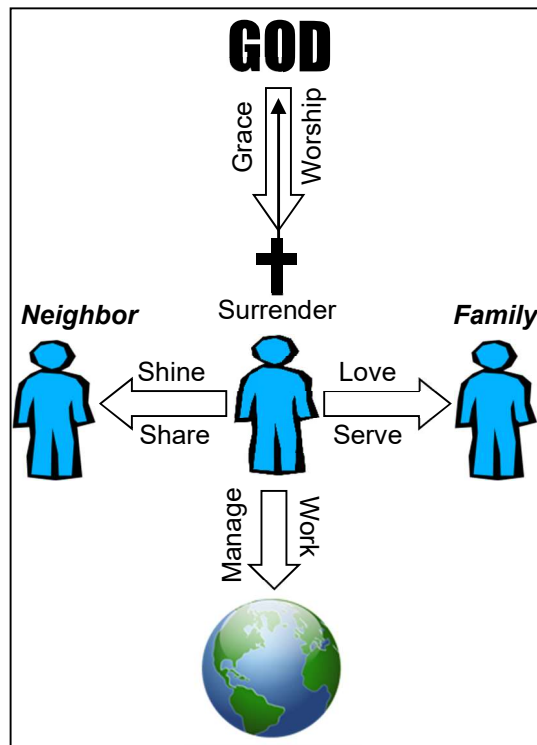
All of us work at something—whether we are paid or unpaid, at home or in the office, volunteers or employees, productive or non-productive. Work is a part of who we are and a part of living in this world.

So how are we supposed to view the work that we do? Biblically, the best term for our work is not a “job” (which implies duty and drudgery) or an “occupation” (which implies something that simply occupies our time) but rather a “vocation”—a specific *calling* in life. Whatever we do in this world, whatever our place of employment, matters to God and is a vital part of devotion to Him.

The Puritans (those who desired to reform the Church of England in the 16th and 17th centuries and formed the backbone of many of the early American colonies) taught four basic biblical principles about work:

1. **Every person has two callings in life.** The first calling is to salvation and godliness. The second is to specific vocations and tasks in life.
2. **God created and called us to work.** We are stewards called to serve Him.
3. **God calls and equips each of us to different types of work.** Thus all work done for God—whether “spiritual” or not—is sacred in His eyes.
4. **Our daily work is central to our spiritual lives.** How we work and why we work is a reflection of our love for God and for others.

This lesson explores the biblical principles that are to govern our work in this world.



DAY ONE

**Westminster
Larger
Catechism
(1647)**

Question 20:
What was the providence of God toward man in the estate in which He was created?

Answer: The providence of God toward man... was the placing him in paradise, appointing him to dress it, giving him liberty to eat of the fruit of the earth; putting the creatures under His dominion, and ordaining marriage for his help; affording him communion with Himself; instituting the Sabbath; entering into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience, of which the tree of life was a pledge; and forbidding to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, upon the pain of death.

Scripture Exploration



THE PRINCIPLE OF WORK

I never did anything worth doing by accident, nor did any of my inventions come by accident; they came by work.
—Thomas Edison

“Let us make man in our image” (1:26)—The image of God is seen in our capacity for rationality, creativity, spirituality, righteousness, dominion, and community.

The idea behind dominion is that God created man to be His representative on earth, exercising leadership, stewardship, and control over nature and animals.

Because of sin, we have lost this control. This dominion will be restored when Jesus Christ, the God-man, reigns over the earth.

God is a worker. *My Father has been working until now, and I have been working* (John 5:17). God is active and creative, not passive and dormant. And by creating us in His image, God has made us to work, to accomplish things, to be creative, to be productive, and to make an impact for Him.

Fill in the following chart from Genesis 1-2. Beside each verse below, write down the task or responsibility given to Adam and/or Eve and the abilities and capacities that you think would be needed for them to fulfill this task.

Vs	Task or Responsibility	Abilities or Capacities Needed
1:28	<i>Subdue the earth (bring it under control)</i>	<i>Leadership, ability to create and design new tools, problem-solving, teamwork.</i>
1:26		
2:15		
2:18		
2:19		

From the very beginning of time, God created us for a purpose and equipped us to accomplish His purpose. This is the message of Ephesians 2:10. Read this verse in the translations below. Mark and/or circle the words or phrases that stand out to you.

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. (NKJV)

For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (NIV)

For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago. (NLT)

What do you learn from this verse? _____

THE PROBLEM OF WORK

Because of the effects of sin, work has taken on a new dimension in this world.

Read Genesis 3:17-19. How is work described in these verses? _____

If this is the way work is “after sin,” what do you think work was like “before sin”? In other words, what do you think work would have been like for Adam and Eve if they would have obeyed God? _____

Because of sin in this world, work is not easy. It can be pointless, meaningless, fruitless, endless, and joyless. And because of the effects of sin in our own lives, regardless of our responsibilities, we can fluctuate between workaholism and laziness, selfishness and service, frustration and satisfaction, greed and generosity. It is in Christ that our work has the potential of being eternally meaningful and increasingly joyful.

THE PRACTICE OF WORK

Read Colossians 3:22-25. This passage is directed specifically toward slaves in the Roman Empire, but it provides timeless principles on how we are to go about our work today. Mark key words or phrases as you read.

Bondservants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eye-service, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God. And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ. But he who does wrong will be repaid for what he has done, and there is no partiality.

Write down five observations on how we are to work for others based on this passage.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Who are we ultimately working for no matter what we do (3:24)? _____

DAY TWO

THINK ABOUT:
In order that people may be happy in their work, these three things are needed. They must be fit for it. They must not do too much of it. And they must have a sense of success in it.
—John Ruskin

Do you agree with Ruskin's quote? How has sin impacted the three things Ruskin mentions?

Slavery was widespread and accepted in ancient Rome. It is estimated that a third of the population of the empire were slaves, including not only field workers but also teachers, doctors, and artists. Slaves were typically foreigners captured by the Roman army as the empire expanded.

In addressing slaves, Paul is addressing a large segment of the church and a large segment of the Roman work force.

DAY THREE

*A dairymaid
can milk cows
to the glory of
God.*

—Martin Luther

**“If a man will
not work, he
shall not eat”
(2 Thess.
3:10)—**Paul is
not speaking to
those who
cannot work but
those who *will*
not work. The
Bible nowhere
condones
laziness nor
suggests that it
should be
supported. This
is not a matter
of cruelty but of
love. To not
work is to lose
a part of our
identity and a
sense of
significance.

*I long to
accomplish
great and noble
tasks, but it is
my chief duty to
accomplish
humble tasks
as though they
were great and
noble. The
world is moved
along, not only
by the mighty
shoves of its
heroes, but
also by the
aggregate of
the tiny pushes
of each honest
worker.*

—Helen Keller

THE PURPOSE OF WORK

Look up the following verses and write down the reason(s) given for working.

Proverbs 12:11 _____

Proverbs 14:23 _____

Proverbs 22:29 _____

Acts 20:34-35 _____

Ephesians 4:28 _____

1 Thess. 4:11-12 _____

2 Thess. 3:10 _____

1 Timothy 5:8 _____

The ultimate reason for all we do in this physical body is given in 1 Corinthians 10:31.

Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

In your own words, what do you think this means? _____

Thus, our reasons for working are multi-faceted. We work for our own benefit, for the benefit of our family and friends, for the benefit of the needy, for the benefit of Christian ministries, as a testimony to the world and as a way of giving glory to God.

It is also important to note that none of these verses specifies one type of work over another. There are not “sacred vocations” and “secular vocations.” All types of vocations (religious or secular) can be performed to the glory of God, just as all types of vocations (religious or secular) can be performed for selfish, godless reasons. The difference is in our focus and in our attitude.

Read Luke 3:7-14. Pray and ask God to speak to your heart as you read.

In this passage, John the Baptist is describing the “fruits of repentance,” the evidence that a person is living a life to the glory of God. Three groups of people asked him how they should live to God’s glory. **Summarize John’s answer to each group.**

The people (3:11) _____

Tax collectors (3:13) _____

Soldiers (3:14) _____

Note well, John the Baptist did not tell them to quit their jobs and join a monastery or religious movement. He told them to live and act righteously in the vocation they had.

Additional Resources



Read the following excerpt from Greg Johnson's book, *The World According to God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), pages 21-25, 36-45.

I remember hearing a woman who was raised Catholic give her testimony. After listening to a Christian friend talk about how central God was in her life, she insisted, "Oh no. You're not going to get me into the convent, sister!" Only when her friend explained that following Christ didn't mean entering a convent was she willing to give the gospel a fair hearing.

Often in Christian spirituality serious believers have been those in the monastery, the convent, the pastorate or mission field. Ordinary Christians...weren't as blessed as the folks doing Christianity full-time. Of the two types of Christians in this dualistic vision, only the former is really used by God to his or her fullest potential...

For Jesus' first thirty years on earth he did carpentry. That's a secular job. And though men called him Rabbi during his last three years, he really wasn't one, strictly speaking. He was even ridiculed in his own hometown when he got up to read in the synagogue. "Isn't this the carpenter?" (Mark 6:3). The implication is clear: This guy works with his hands like the rest of us. What makes him so special? Come on! It's not like he's a priest!

Jesus could have spent more of those first thirty years preaching, but he didn't. Why not? Because God called him to spend thirty years doing carpentry, then God called him to spend three years preaching. Both callings honored God.

Preaching the gospel is important. Salvation doesn't come to people through nature—they'll believe only if we send them a

preacher (Rom. 10:9-15). But preaching wasn't God's original design for us.

Look back to the beginning to God's pattern for us. Before sin ever entered the world, what did Adam do? He worked. "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (Gen. 2:15). Adam had a job. And we can't blame his job on sin. We were made for work.

We often fail to realize that the calling to work—whether a ministerial job or secular job or family chore—is one of the Ten Commandments. The fourth commandment not only reminds us to rest on the sabbath but also commands us to work six days a week. "Six days you shall labor and do all your work" (Ex 20:9). This doesn't mean working outside the home six days a week. It includes all work—housework, homework and office work—whatever is work to us...

We miss part of our humanity when we do nothing. We were made to find fulfillment in our calling, whatever that might be. To use a little theological jargon, work is a creation ordinance, part of God's original pattern of life. We were designed for the pattern of working six days.

The inability to do productive work hurts us. The Soviets understood this. They used to punish political prisoners by making them dig a hole one day and fill it up the next, repeated day after day for months. It would psychologically crush the inmates. It's part of our nature to do productive work. No wonder unemployment can be so devastating. Besides the sense of rejection and insecurity

about the future, there's a real sense that you're missing what you're made to be...

Not Just a Job but a Calling

All work—unless it involves open rebellion against God—can be God-honoring work.

A job as a civil engineer, then, is not a bad thing. It's not even a neutral thing. It is a holy and spiritual calling from God. It's a position of significance in accomplishing God's great purpose for the earth. To build up human culture, to strengthen the social order through holy means—there is no higher occupation within God's plan.

Our jobs aren't just jobs. Scripture refers to them as *callings*. Explaining to servants not to leave their masters without first gaining their freedom, Paul writes, "Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation *God called him to*" (1 Cor. 7:24). This is the same term Paul uses for God's calling us to Christ (1 Cor. 7:17, 20).

A normal, secular work life is a noble part of the Christian experience. "Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody" (1 Thess. 4:11-12). A quiet, respectable secular job with a livable wage is exactly what God wants for most believers.

So your pastor's job isn't more spiritual than the church janitor's. The difference isn't one of value. Positions that bear God-given authority are worthy of higher honor and respect from those under their authority. Thus Scripture instructs us, "Give everyone what you owe him . . . if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor" (Rom. 13:7). I approach my pastor differently than my pastor's son. Still, both are equal, and both have jobs

equally worthy before God. The difference is one of authority.

How to Discern God's Calling

We Christians tend to stress over discerning God's calling for our lives. It was probably a lot easier a few centuries ago. If your parents were farmers, you would be a farmer. Today the sheer number of options makes discernment more difficult. Lots of tests out there that can help people discern their vocation (literally, their *calling*), or at least get you started in the right direction.

Then there's the infamous question, "If you won a million dollars what would you do?" If you'd build a racecar, you should probably investigate engineering. If you'd cook all day, then you should work as a chef. Unfortunately, a lot of us would just watch TV all day, which likely reflects our laziness, not our calling.

People often ask me why I left architecture to attend seminary and teach theology. I loved architecture. I'd wanted to be an architect since first grade. But when I got to college, I found myself rushing through my architecture work just to read theology books. While gluing balsa wood together I was wishing I was preparing a Bible study for my small group. After prayerfully talking things through, it was clear that my calling wasn't architecture but vocational Christian ministry. So I went to seminary...

People sometimes ask me what it felt like to receive a call into the ministry. The truth is, *it didn't feel like anything*. I didn't have any burning in my bosom or quiver in my liver. I just thought through what I was best designed to do. Other people helped me assess my strengths and weaknesses and weigh my options rationally. I prayed, not hoping to hear a voice, but to express to God my dependence on him to guide me.

I was never 100 percent sure of my calling. I just made the best decisions I could at each moment and God kept me on track. If that sounds unspiritual, you probably need to study biblical guidance. I have never found a verse that says God leads us through emotional experiences.

God created our minds to image his rationality. He wants our decision-making to image him, which means we can't turn our minds off and expect the Holy Spirit to take over. God is sovereign over the tiniest details of our lives; so...he'll lead us even if he doesn't tell us where exactly we're going. Our responsibility is to trust in him and walk according to his counsel.

Imaging God on the Job

Whatever your calling, your work life is your primary opportunity to display God's image: knowledge, creativity, righteousness, dominion, community. Knowledge is a big one, becoming increasingly central to many professions as society becomes more specialized.

But even in jobs that aren't information-based, opportunities to image God intellectually abound. I used to work in a kitchen store, and we had to know our products to do our job well. So I learned about the conductivity of metals, the durability and non-stick properties of different coatings, and the difference between an ice-hardened forged blade and a stamped serrated one. Creativity also played a role—setting up displays, marketing items and even doing a little cooking.

And my job was certainly a call to image God's righteousness. Difficult customers provided opportunities for me to learn forgiveness and patience. The day I dropped the jar of barbecue sauce and it exploded on an immaculately dressed lady's white pants also gave me the opportunity to learn to accept

forgiveness when I've done something really, really bad. And there were really nice customers who could have been easily suckered. I could have manipulated people into buying more expensive products than they needed. For the most part I refrained, though there was a constant moral battle...

And I definitely was furthering human dominion over nature. I helped tons of people better exert dominion over cows and chickens—especially the barbecued kind. My little job may have been only one tiny cog in the giant machinery of civilization, but it was an important cog nonetheless, even without any special recognition or a livable wage.

But I think the central aspect of God's image that we should see in the business world is community. In today's cutthroat, profit-driven world, relationships are often expendable. A biblical vision for commerce, though, sees business centering on the development of mutually beneficial relationships between people.

I used to have newsletters printed up at a large copier, for example. No matter how hard I tried, this company would not develop a relationship with me. They were cheaper than most and could produce a better product than anyone else. But they botched almost every job, usually because of a failure to communicate. Eventually I left and found a small company that values a relationship with me. They know my name and know exactly what I want. When something isn't working right, they call and tell me my options. What do they get? A little work, a little money and a highly satisfied client who'll recommend them to anyone. The relationship is at the heart of a godly vision for business.

Adam Had the Perfect Job, but He Lost It

If we're working in our calling and keep our attitude centered on Christ, we should find

some satisfaction in the work we do. Indeed, finding enjoyment from our work “is from the hand of God” (Eccles 2:24). But work isn’t always fun. When Adam ate the forbidden fruit, God laid a curse on our work as punishment:

“Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field.” (Gen 3:17-18)

Work after the Fall takes on a bitter flavor. It remains a calling but becomes a calling filled with pain. Adam’s job was to work the garden (Gen 2:15). He didn’t have an expensive tractor to ride on. Thorns and thistles meant suffering on the job. Adam was given the perfect job, but he lost it. His new job looked a lot like the old one, but it felt a lot more discouraging. And, unfortunately, this aspect of the curse doesn’t go away when you become a Christian.

Pain and frustration aren’t the only effects of the Fall on work. Our attitudes are rarely content with what God has given us. Even if you work just eight hours a day, that’s a third of your daily walk with God. It comes as no surprise then that so much of our struggle with sin can revolve around the workplace.

Our efforts to fight sins like criticism, factions, gossip, anger and complaining are likely to be played out on any job. And jobs in Christian ministry aren’t completely different. We’re all sinners, though you see more people asking each other for forgiveness when your coworkers are Christians. Sins like gossip and complaining crop up in all our relationships...

Freedom from discontentment begins in trusting that God has called you to the very job that so frustrates you. Your final responsibility isn’t to your boss or clients but to God. The Lord is always your true client as

well as your ultimate boss. And since your calling takes center stage in your walk with God, all his grace is available while you’re serving him in the workplace. We work by faith in the promises of God...

Understanding God’s sovereignty over our situation and reminding ourselves that it’s not a job but a calling goes a long way to overcome the attitudes behind laziness. The Bible says that hard work on the job is “doing the will of God” (Eph. 6:6). If what I do has no ultimate significance, Why bother? But if God will be glorified before all the angels in heaven, then I can roll out of bed and get to work. Anything I give is worth it. A calling demands my excellence.

If even a humble job is a calling from God, then our work isn’t just a worldly activity to get money but an act of worship and service to God. Scripture instructs us, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men. ...It is the Lord Christ you are serving” (Col. 3:23-24). This means that you’re not making a latte for the angry lady with all the shopping bags. You’re making a latte for God. So steam the milk... and don’t skimp on the syrup!

What God Thinks About Money

When we think of work, we eventually think of money. But work isn’t essentially about money. It’s about imaging God and fulfilling his cultural mandate. The central biblical instruction about money is that none of it is ours. It all belongs to God. We’re only stewards. “The earth is the LORD’S, and everything in it” (Ps 24:1). All wealth and possessions that end up under our oversight should be used prayerfully for God’s glory. If you have a car, it’s not your car. It’s God’s. He’s just letting you borrow it. God has given several legitimate directions for us to send his money. The first is to send it back to him. Giving should never be done reluctantly or

under compulsion, “for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7).

Generosity, according to God, begins with the tithe. God instituted the tithe sometime before Abraham, who paid it to Melchizedek (Gen 14:18-20). The tithe is the first 10 percent of the money God lets you oversee and the first 10 percent comes before taxes. If you aren’t willing to give that much, you aren’t trusting God for the other 90 percent.

I remember hearing one famous pastor tell about a man who asked the pastor to pray for him. The man had started making a lot more money and said he couldn’t afford to tithe anymore. The pastor prayed, “Father, I pray you’d lower this man’s income back down to the level that he can trust you with.”

God accused the Israelites of robbing him when they skimmed on the tithe (Mal 3:8-12). The tithe went to the Levites (Lev. 18:21). Today this would include Christian ministers and missionaries spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. Jesus affirmed the tithe, though warned against neglecting weightier issues like justice, mercy and faithfulness (Matt. 23:23). The early Christians gave a proportional amount of their income to the church on Sundays (1 Cor. 16:2).

Still, we miss the heart of the biblical vision for money if we focus on the technicalities of tithing. The tithe is a starting point. The thrust of God’s instruction is to have a generous spirit. Trusting God is in control, we’re free to live lives of radical generosity. Those who sow sparingly will reap sparingly, but he who sows generously will reap generously (2 Cor. 9:6). Think of the early believers in Jerusalem who sold their land to provide food for all the converts in Jerusalem after being converted at Pentecost (Acts 4:32-37). This is another biblical direction to send God’s money—toward people in need.

Other than giving to God, charity and basic sustenance, money can also be used for pleasure—to have fun (1 Tim. 6:17). Wealth can be a true blessing and is an opportunity to honor God....

This wonderful gift of God can be a powerful instrument to further his kingdom on earth. The Scriptures give examples of rich believers. Joseph of Arimathea used his influence to secure Jesus’ body from the Roman authorities after the crucifixion, prepared the body himself and gave up his own new tomb—an expensive endeavor (Matt. 27:57-60). Several women supported Jesus during his earthly ministry out of their own means (Luke 8:2-3).

Considering that Americans are only about 4 percent of the world’s population but control about half the world’s wealth, most who buy this book are rich Christians to most of the world. Though a great blessing, this can be a dangerous position. If wealth ever competes with God for your allegiance, God invites you to get rid of it. When I look at how low the giving is in most churches today, I fear that American churches are filled with people trying to serve both God and money. But “no one can serve two masters” (Matt. 6:24). Remember that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 6:10). All God’s good gifts have the potential to become idols, and money is one of the most powerful of idols. Both poverty and wealth have their temptations.... But God has the power to overcome all these dangers and protect our hearts. He can teach us contentment whether we’re in need or plenty (Phil 4:12-13). Surely the writer of Proverbs expressed wisdom when he wrote:

Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, “Who is the LORD?” Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God. (30:8-9)

Changed Hearts



Write down two or three things that really stood out to you from this week's lesson.

What is your current vocation or your main work responsibilities in life? _____

How does your vocation or daily responsibilities enable you to display God's image in...

Knowledge _____

Creativity _____

Righteousness _____

Human Dominion _____

Community _____

Based on what you learned in this lesson, how can you glorify God in your daily work?

Consider this quote by Abraham Kuyper, the prime minister of the Netherlands from 1901-05:

Wherever man may stand, whatever he may do, to wherever he may apply his hand, in agriculture, in commerce, and in industry, or his mind, in the world of art, and science, he is in whatsoever it may be, constantly standing before the face of God, he is employed in the service of God, he has strictly to obey his God and above all, he has to aim at the glory of his God.

Coram Deo is the phrase that governed the minds of early Christians. *Coram Deo* is Latin for “before the face of God.” We work, drink, eat, sleep, relate, and live in the very presence of God.

Brother Lawrence (1605-91) learned this lesson well. Joining a monastery later in his life to “find God,” he found that he was stuck in the kitchen to wash dishes. After spending several weeks inwardly complaining and frustrated by his menial task, he suddenly realized that he could glorify God while washing dishes. The transformation in his attitude and work caught the attention of everyone in the monastery and soon they began to come to Lawrence for counsel. Eventually this monastery dishwasher wrote a little book entitled *Practicing the Presence of God* which has become a classic book on living each moment in God's presence.

True devotion—loving God and loving others—grows as we learn to live each day *Coram Deo*!

PERSONAL SPIRITUAL INVENTORY

1. In one sentence describe how one becomes a Christian.
2. When did you become a Christian?
3. Did becoming a Christian bring any changes to your life? ☐ Yes ☐ No
If so, what was the most significant?
4. If you had to describe your Christian life right now in one word it would be...
5. What do you enjoy the most about being a Christian?
6. What is often your biggest struggle in the Christian life?
7. How often do you gather with other believers?
 - a. Less than weekly
 - b. Weekly
 - c. Twice a week
 - d. More than twice a week
8. How often do you read your Bible?
 - a. Seldom
 - b. Once or twice a week
 - c. Three to five times a week
 - d. Daily or more often
9. How often do you converse with God in prayer?
 - a. Seldom
 - b. Once or twice a week
 - c. Three to five times a week
 - d. Daily
 - e. Frequently throughout the day
10. In what area of your Christian life do you want to grow more? Why?

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

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