

A man in a red t-shirt and dark shorts, and a child in a purple top and patterned leggings, are walking away from the camera on a wooden boardwalk. The boardwalk leads towards a sandy beach and the ocean under a cloudy sky. The text is overlaid on the image.

RAISING KIDS OF CHRISTLIKE CHARACTER

A MANUAL FOR CHRISTIAN CHARACTER FORMATION

ANDY MANNING

Raising Kids of Christlike Character: A Manual for Christian Character Formation

By Andy M. Manning

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INTRODUCTION

2 Peter 3:18 “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity.”

A parent’s calling is to bring up their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph 6:4). This calling can be sub-divided into two tasks. First, to bring up your children in the discipline of the Lord, which is to teach them Christlike character. Second, to bring up your children in the instruction of the Lord, which is to teach them Christian doctrine. First, teach them how to behave. Second, teach them how to believe. The purpose of this book is to equip parents to raise up children of Christlike character.

What is character? **Character is who you are when no one is looking.** It is easy to put on a show of Christian character when you are in a crowd, when you are under the watchful eye of your parents or siblings or church family. But your character is who you are when you are all alone. It is who you really are – the true you. A person may have good character or bad character; Christlike character, or devilish character; virtuous character or vicious character. Your character is the combination of your attitude, actions, meditations (contemplations), intentions, words, feelings, and desires. Your character is your morality – either moral or immoral, which includes more than simply your actions. It includes the whole person. The goal of this book is to help you raise children who are not merely Christlike in your presence, but when you are not watching – when they are all alone.

The title of this book has been carefully chosen – not for its ring, but for its meaning. Let me make it clear up front that the goal of the Christian parent must be to raise kids of *Christlike* character. There is much more to Christlike character than simply good morals. Apart from the Bible, how do we know which morals are good? One man may say that it is good to kill in the name of religion, but that is certainly not the way a Christian should behave. The Christian’s goal is character that conforms to God; character that imitates Jesus Christ. Many people of “good” character have chosen to be good for the wrong reasons. They have discovered the self-evident truth that virtue and happiness are inseparable. That good morals are necessary for a good reputation, and an essential ingredient for success in business. That Christian morals lead to a happier home and a healthier body. This is not Christlike character. Christlike character consists not only in upright behavior, but in upright motives. Christlike character is motivated by love for God, and the glory of God. There are multitudes of “good” people in the exterior only, with no concern for the inner life – the thoughts, feelings, desires, attitudes, etc. They do not care about leading a duplicitous existence, wearing one face here and another there. Christlike character involves the whole person. God desires “integrity in the inner self” (Ps 51:6). Blessed is the man who is “pure in heart” (Mt 5:8). The Christian parent’s goal is not to raise good kids, but Christlike kids.

The focus of this book is to help you teach your children the Christian graces such as love, joy, peacefulness, patience, kindness, goodness, etc. These qualities go by many names: character traits; character qualities; Christian attributes; virtues; and graces. I used to use the term “virtues.” The word “virtue” means moral excellence. The virtues are those qualities that contribute to moral excellence in a person. But after studying the works of the Puritans and classic Christian authors like Thomas Watson, J.C. Ryle, and Charles Spurgeon, I have come to

follow the tradition of referring to the Christian virtues as “graces”. There is a reason the old preachers used this term. The word “grace” means an unmerited gift from God. By referring to the Christian virtues as graces, we are reminded that we can only grow in grace by God’s power. We can only grow in grace because of God’s saving work of regeneration when God graciously gives us a new heart with the desire and power to please Him (2 Cor 5:17). We can only grow because of the sanctifying ministry of the indwelling Holy Spirit, who was graciously given to us in salvation (Phil 2:13). And regardless of how much we grow, we will always be totally dependent upon God’s grace poured out through Jesus Christ on the cross for our salvation (Ephesians 2:8-9). For the remainder of this book, I will often refer to the Christian character qualities as “graces”. This is what Peter meant in 2 Peter 3:18, “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” Peter did not mean that we should strive to grow in saving grace, because saving grace has no degrees. You are either saved or not saved; justified or not justified; regenerated or not regenerated; indwelt by the Holy Spirit or not indwelt by Him. You cannot be slightly saved, or only a little saved. So, what kind of grace must we grow in? We must grow in the Christlike character qualities that are produced and nourished by the grace of God.

Before we begin our study of the graces, I want to lay a foundation by giving you some basic but important truths about spiritual growth. To help your child grow, you will need to understand these truths and teach them to your child.

9 Essential Truths About Spiritual Growth

1. Prioritize salvation before character.

This book is an instruction manual for teaching your children Christlike character. But there is something that must come first in your parenting goals – the salvation of your children. You must prioritize salvation before character development for two reasons.

First, virtue does not save. Titus 3:5 says, “He saved us – not by works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy.” Romans 3:20 says, “For no one will be justified in his sight by the works of the law.” Salvation is not a result of the good things that we do. Salvation is earned not by our efforts, but by the atonement of Christ on the cross, in our place, for our sins. Romans 3:25 says, “God presented him as an atoning sacrifice in his blood, received through faith.” Christ paid for our sins through His death so that we can be saved, and we receive the gift of salvation not by works, but through faith – by trusting in Christ’s atonement rather than in our good works. Regardless of how virtuous your child grows to be, they will go to hell for eternity without a saving relationship with Christ.

This does not mean that God does not care about character. 1 Peter 1:15 says, “But as the one who called you is holy, you also are to be holy in all your conduct.” However, the purpose of being virtuous is not to earn salvation, but because of salvation. We strive to be Christlike because we are Christians, not to become Christians. Christlike virtue is the result of salvation, not the cause of salvation. Salvation results in the graces being formed in our life; the graces do not result in salvation.

Saving faith requires self-denial. Jesus said in Luke 9:23, “If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me.” Salvation requires the denial

of self-indulgence, and the denial of self-righteousness (or self-reliance). On the one hand, saving faith involves the denial of self-indulgence. It is the decision to follow the will of God rather than to do what you feel like doing. This is called repentance – the decision to turn from sin and to turn to God. On other hand, salvation involves the denial of self-righteousness. It is the acknowledgement that you are not good but bad, that you don't deserve heaven but hell, and that you cannot save yourself. It is placing all faith in the work of Christ for you, rather than in any work you might do for Christ.

The Christian virtues cannot save us any more than good behavior in jail can justify the release of a murderer from prison. A model prisoner is still a murderer and must be punished as such. After all the good that we do for Christ, we have only done our duty, and our duty still falls short of God's glory. We can only be saved by faith in Christ's work for us. If we could pull ourselves up, then there was no reason for Christ to come down.

The great preacher John MacArthur said that there are only two religions in the world. The religion of human achievement, and the religion of divine accomplishment. Christianity is the religion of divine accomplishment. Salvation is about faith in what Christ has done for us, not in what we might do for Him.

Wouldn't it be a tragedy to raise up a good kid who ends up in hell for eternity? Good is not good enough. Salvation must be the goal. Your first order of business is not to teach your children to live a good life, but to lead them to eternal life. Virtue without salvation is like a boat with no water; it may look nice, but it won't get you anywhere.

A second reason you must prioritize your child's salvation before their character is that salvation produces Christlike character. When your child gets saved, God gets involved in the character formation of your child. He gives them a new heart through regeneration – a heart with the desire and power to please God. He gives them the indwelling Holy Spirit to convict of sin, and to motivate them to grow, and empower them to grow. He will give them a desire to study God's word, which will lead to growth. Before your child gets saved, their character formation is externally motivated. But when they get saved, they will be internally motivated to grow in grace. They will desire their own growth more than you.

I was saved the summer before the sixth grade, and it was a radical experience for me. My attitude changed. My desires changed. My behavior changed. My language changed. My interests changed. My grades in school changed. Becoming Christlike became my driving ambition, my ultimate desire, my deepest interest. My parents' guidance and discipline was still invaluable, but their job became infinitely easier. From then on, the Lord had taken the lead in the parenting process, and my parents were His assistants. Before salvation, all you can do is try to reform your child's behavior. And there's only so much you can do. But when God saves them, He will transform them from the inside out into the image of their Creator. And His transforming work goes beyond the surface. He transforms every aspect of the personality, every arena of life – the attitude, the thoughts, the words, the desires, the feelings, the emotions, and the actions. That's my deepest desire for my children, and for the children in my church. I want them to experience genuine salvation, because then God will transform their character.

Regularly ask your child, "Why should God let you into heaven?" If their answer has anything to do with their performance, and not solely the grace of God through the person and work of Christ, then they have forgotten the gospel, or never understood it in the first place. It

is essential that your child understands that we pursue growth in Christlike character because we are saved, not to earn salvation. Christlike character is the fruit of salvation, not the root of salvation.

2. Train your children to depend on God for the strength to grow in grace.

We cannot cause spiritual growth. Spiritual growth is a miracle of God. But our responsibility is to create the conditions that are necessary for growth. This is how we depend upon God. Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me (Jn 15:5)." Christ is the vine, and we are the branches that are connected to the vine. The key to spiritual growth is to stay connected to the vine. Stay connected and fruit happens. Keep a constant, close connection with Jesus, and He will cause us to grow. This is how we depend on God for strength to grow.

How do we stay connected? These are sometimes called spiritual disciplines, or the means of grace. It begins with going to church every Sunday for worship, volunteering in church, and having a daily quiet time – a daily time of private prayer and Bible reading. To help your child grow, you must lead them to practice spiritual disciplines. You must lead them to attend and participate in church. You must lead them to have a daily quiet time with God.

3. Teach your children to give the glory to God for any growth that they experience.

As your children grow in Christian character, they will likely be showered with praise by you, and by their church family. Godly people who love them will be delighted to see them taking their faith seriously and making progress. But this praise can have undesirable consequences. It can lead your children to become prideful. To take credit for their spiritual growth. To see themselves as better than others. And to begin to pursue spiritual growth for the applause of men rather than the applause of heaven.

Teach your children that all spiritual growth is by the grace of God. 2 Peter 3:18 says, "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity." We must pursue growth while at the same giving all the glory to God.

Your children must understand that no matter how much they grow in grace, they are still sinners in need of God's grace through the cross of Christ. They can never be good enough to win God's favor. God's favor is given freely through faith in Jesus Christ.

Teach your children not to compare themselves to others, which can lead to pride, but to Jesus Christ, which leads to humility. Teach them to please God alone, rather than people, because sometimes people praise misbehavior and discourage godly behavior.

4. Teach your children the responsibility of spiritual growth.

While spiritual growth is ultimately caused by God, the responsibility for spiritual growth is ours. God wants us to grow, and He has commanded us to grow. He has given us everything

we need to grow in Christ. “His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness (2 Peter 1:3).” God is doing His part. If we do not grow, it is because we have failed to create the conditions for growth. We are as spiritually mature as we want to be. If your child is not growing spiritually, teach them to place the blame on themselves and nobody else. It is not the preacher’s fault, the church’s fault, their sibling’s fault, the devil’s fault, the world’s fault, or their parent’s fault. The blame lies with them alone. Your child can grow as much as they would like, and as fast as they would like. It depends on the effort and discipline they put into it.

5. Keep the gospel front and center so that failure does not lead to despair.

When your children get serious about cultivating Christlike character, their failures will become much more apparent. This can lead to discouragement, and then to despair – giving up. Your children may begin to think that spiritual growth is impossible. That certain habits cannot be broken. That some character qualities can’t be cultivated. That there is something inherently wrong with them that is preventing them from making progress where others have grown. This can cause a child to give up.

Teach your children to expect some failure; that growth will take much time, effort, and struggle. We often feel like we are not growing because we are focusing on cultivating one virtue or defeating one vice. But we may be growing in other areas without even noticing. Sometimes we may feel like we aren’t growing because we are comparing ourselves to Christ, which is what we should do. But remember that Christ is perfect, and we will never reach perfection this side of heaven. When we feel like we aren’t growing, sometimes it is because we have forgotten what we were like when we first got saved. Growth is so slow and gradual that we can’t see that we are completely different from the way we were when first got saved.

Most importantly, teach them to put their hope in Jesus at all times. Remind them that their salvation is secure – once saved always saved. Jesus said, “Everyone the Father gives me will come to me, and the one who comes to me I will never cast out (Jn 6:37).” Teach them that failure will not cause God to love them less (Rm 8:38-39). Remind them that we pursue spiritual growth as a result of salvation, and not to earn salvation. Teach them how to handle failure – to turn to God in repentance, and He will forgive their sins (1 John 1:9).

6. Teach your children to grow in grace for the right reasons.

What are the right reasons to grow in grace? 1) The glory of God (1 Cor 10:31). 2) Love for God (Mt 22:37). 3) Love for others (Mt 22:39).

What are the wrong reasons to develop Christlike character? 1) To earn your way to heaven (Eph 2:8-9). 2) To avoid God’s discipline (Heb 12:7). 3) To avoid parental discipline (Eph 6:4). 4) To avoid the consequences of sin. 5) To win the approval or the applause of men (Mt 6:1).

Pursuing spiritual growth for the wrong reasons will never lead to Christian maturity. It will lead to external holiness only, which is hypocrisy, and to pride.

7. Combine instruction with discipline.

To help your children grow in grace, you must combine instruction with discipline. It is not enough to teach your children Christlike character traits; you must also discipline them to help them grow. God has given a clear plan for training up our children in the way they should go. It involves both discipline and instruction (Eph 6:4).

Discipline involves two actions. 1) Rebuke. “A wise son responds to his father’s discipline, but a mocker doesn’t listen to rebuke (Pr 13:1).” When your child behaves in a way that is contrary to Christlike character, verbally correct them. Call out their misbehavior and explain the correct way to behave. And always do this with gentleness and respect (1 Pt 3:15). 2) The Rod. “The one who will not use the rod hates his son, but the one who loves him disciplines him diligently (Pr 13:24).” When you find it necessary, especially in cases of deliberate disobedience, utilize the rod – spanking. It may be a dirty word these days, but it is Biblical, and God knows better than the latest trend in Parents Magazine. Always use the rod with love and self-control, never in a fit of rage, or in the spirit of revenge.

8. Don’t forget the power of example.

To be the most effective at training up your children in Christian character, you must remember the power of example. Character is more caught than taught. And when you combine both instruction, discipline, and the power of example, the force of your training will be powerful. You cannot pass on what you do not possess. You cannot give away what you don’t have. The more you expect your children to behave in a way that you don’t behave yourself, the more they will come to resent you and ignore your instruction. At the same time, they are more likely to follow your example than to listen to your words.

9. Use the graces to evangelize your children.

Training your children in Christian character is a powerful tool in evangelism. When your children sin, it is an opportunity to share the gospel. First, use their failure to convince them of their sinfulness and inability to be good, no matter how hard they try. Second, point out that God loves them despite their sin, and that He sent His only Son to die on the cross for their sins.

Also, you can use the Christian graces to examine the health of your child’s soul. Simply praying the sinner’s prayer is not a guarantee that your child is saved. To effectively evangelize your children, you will need to be able to determine the state of their souls. You will need to be able to judge for yourself if they are saved, and to determine the health of their relationship with God. The Bible says you can discern the health of a person’s heart by their actions. “You’ll recognize them by their fruit (Mt 7:16).” If your child is displaying Christian character, or you can see them striving to please Christ and become more like Him, these are good signs that your child is saved and has a healthy relationship with God. But if your child is constantly misbehaving, shows no signs of growth, no desire to grow, and no real remorse for sin, then those are signs that your child may not be saved, or that their relationship with God is very immature. You can then adjust your discipleship accordingly.

I am excited about the opportunity to help you raise kids of Christlike character, and I commend you for taking seriously the call to disciple your children. There is no higher calling.

LOVING GOD

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” Mark 12:30

On one occasion an expert in Jewish law asked Jesus a question. “Which command is the most important of all?” He was referring to the commands in the Law of Moses – all 613 of them. The Jews believed that there were 365 positive commands, one for every day of the year, and 248 negative commands, one for every bone and major organ in the human body. This lawyer wanted Jesus to choose the single greatest command out of hundreds. Every command was given by God. They are all important. How could Jesus choose just one? He quoted the most popular Biblical passage to the Jews. It is called the Shema, which is the Hebrew word for “listen,” the first word in the passage. The Shema is so important to the Jews that they begin every worship service with it in their synagogues. They keep copies of the Shema in phylacteries, tiny boxes that are worn on the wrist and forehead during prayer. Small copies of the Shema are also placed inside mezuzahs, small boxes that are placed on every door frame in Jewish homes. The part of the Shema that Jesus quoted is Deuteronomy 6:4-5. “Listen, O Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength (see Mark 12:29-30).” There it is. Jesus clearly stated for us the most important command of all – loving God.

What Does it Mean to Love God?

Loving God is delighting in, desiring, and treasuring God above all else. This definition has three parts.

First, loving God is delighting in Him. It is to be fully pleased with God; to esteem Him higher than anything else; to adore everything about Him – all His ways, all His decisions, all His commands, and all His attributes.

Second, loving God is desiring Him above all else. It is a longing to be close to God, to know Him more, to be more pleasing to Him, to be more like Him. It is desiring God more than food and water, more than wealth, luxury, success, pleasure, entertainment – even more than health.

Third, loving God is treasuring Him above all else. When you love God, He is more important to you than anything else. He is your portion, your treasure, your prize, your priority, your center, your life. You don’t allow anything or anyone to interfere with or to compete with your walk with God. God comes first, and there is no close second.

Four Ways to Express Love to God

Jesus specified four ways to express our love for God. First, love God with all your heart. Your heart is the inner you – your attitude, thoughts, motives, desires, and affections. Love

God by striving to always have an *attitude* that pleases God – an attitude of gratitude, joyfulness, contentment, and humility. Love God by striving to always please Him with your *thoughts* – thoughts that are pure and loving. Love God by striving to always please Him with your *motives*. Love, obey, and serve God for the right reasons. Love God by striving to always please Him with your *desires*. Desire God more than anything else, and only desire things that please God. Love God by striving to always please Him with your *affections*. Esteem and adore God more than anything else.

Second, love God with all your soul. Your soul is your life. Love God with your entire life; your total life; your whole life. Do not let any part of your life be displeasing to God. Love Him with your words, your actions, your relationships, your finances, your physical health, your education, your athletics, your sexuality, and your career.

Third, love God with all your mind. Work hard to study the Bible so that you can have the deepest understanding of God. The better you understand God, the better you will be able to please Him. Be sure that your thoughts of God are correct. Love God for who He is, and not who you would like Him to be.

Fourth, love God with all your strength. Make every effort to love God. Do your best to love God. Just as you do your best in sports and in school, you must put even more effort into loving God. Give your all to loving God. Hold nothing back. Go all out. Loving God is the one thing that you cannot overdo.

Spiritual Maturity = Loving God

There are many false definitions of spiritual maturity. 1) Bible knowledge. You can know everything there is to know about the Bible and not be spiritually mature. 2) Sound doctrine. It is possible to believe all the right things about God, but still not be spiritually mature. Even the demons believe all the right things about God (James 2:19). 3) Good deeds. It does not take spiritual maturity to do good deeds. There are people of all religions, even atheists, who are devoted to good deeds. The true definition of spiritual maturity is loving God.

The Marks of True Love for God

What are the marks of true love for God? First, obedience. Jesus said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commands (Jn 14:15).”

Second, priority. In His teaching on the greatest commandment, Jesus placed loving God before loving others (Mk 12:29-31). We must never put the creation before the Creator. Jesus even said that we must love him before our possessions, our family, and even our own lives (Mt 10:37; Lk 14:26, 33).

Third, time. When you love someone, you want to spend as much time with them as possible. If you love God, you want to spend much time with Him. Jesus set the example. “After dismissing the crowds, he went up on the mountain to pray. Well into the night, he was

there alone (Mt 14:23).” The person who loves God believes that time with God is not only time well spent, but is the best use of time.

Fourth, love for neighbor. 1 John 4:20-21 says, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For the person who does not love his brother he has seen cannot love the God he has not seen. And we have this command from Him: The one who loves God must also love his brother.”

How to Love God More

There are several ways to increase your love for God. First, meditate on God’s love for you. 1 John 4:19 says, “We love because he first loved us.”

Second, focus on God’s forgiveness. Jesus said of the woman who washed His feet with her tears and hair and anointed His feet with perfume, “Therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; that’s why she loved much (Lk 7:47).” Her deep love for Jesus flowed from her appreciation of His forgiveness.

Third, pray for God to grow your love. Paul prayed for the Thessalonians, “May the Lord direct your hearts to God’s love and Christ’s endurance (2 Thess 3:5).” This is a prayer that God is sure to answer.

Fourth, do not love the world. 1 John 2:15 says, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” What does it mean to love the world? J.C. Ryle wrote, “The love of the world’s good things, the fear of the world’s laughter or condemnation, the secret desire to remain in the world, the secret desire to do as others in the world do, and not wanting to be extreme in following God are spiritual foes that assail the Christian continually on his way to heaven, and they must be conquered.”

Fifth, avoid close relationships with people who do not love God. 1 Corinthians 15:33 says, “Do not be deceived: Bad company corrupts good morals.” King Solomon was on the right track until he married women who did not love God. “When Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away to follow other gods. He was not wholeheartedly devoted to the Lord his God, as his father David had been (1 Ki 11:2-4).”

Sixth, remember the benefits of loving God. Let these be as magnets to attract you to the love of God.

1. *Blessings* are promised to those who love God. Deuteronomy 30:16 says, “For I am commanding you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, statutes, and ordinances, so that you may live and multiply, and the Lord your God may bless you in the land you are entering to possess.”
2. *Long life* is promised to those who love God. Deuteronomy 30:20 says, “love the Lord your God, obey him, and remain faithful to him. For he is your life, and he will prolong your days....”
3. *Protection* is promised to those who love the Lord. Psalm 31:23 says, “Love the Lord, all his faithful ones. The Lord protects the loyal, but fully repays the arrogant.”

4. *Effective prayer* is promised to those who love God. David said, “Turn to me and be gracious to me, as is your practice toward those who love your name (Ps 119:132).”
5. *Closer intimacy* with God is promised to them that love Him. Jesus said, “The one who has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. And the one who loves me will be loved by my Father. I also will love him and will reveal myself to him (Jn 14:21).”
6. *God promises to work all things together* for those who love Him. Romans 8:28 says, “We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”
7. *Eternal life* is promised to those who love God. Paul wrote, “What no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no human heart has conceived – God has prepared these things for those who love him (1 Cor 2:9).”

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to love God?
2. What does it mean to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength?
3. Why should we love God?
4. What makes it difficult to love God?
5. How can we grow in loving God?

LOVING OTHERS

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” Matthew 22:39

Human beings are sinful, but God still loves them. Even though they are His enemies, God initiated a plan to save them from eternal punishment in hell. Romans 5:8 says, “But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” God loved us by sending His Son to die on the cross for our sins.

We can learn everything we need to know about loving others by studying God’s love for us. God’s love is *active*. He did not merely feel love for us; He took action on our behalf by sending His Son to die for our sins.

God’s love is *unconditional*. God does not only love the beautiful, the smart, the rich, the famous, or the athletic. He does not only love religious people, or people who are careful to follow His rules. He does not only love white people, or black people, or Americans, or English speakers. God loves everyone in the world, no matter who they are or what they have done (John 3:16).

God’s love is *unending*. It does not stop when we disobey Him or fail Him. If it did, then He would have never loved us in the first place. His love goes on, and on, and on.

God’s love is *generous*. The ultimate demonstration of God’s love is the cross of Jesus Christ, in which God gave His only Son, and Christ gave His life, to pay for our sins.

God’s love is *sacrificial*. God did not give conveniently, He gave sacrificially, painfully, costly. Jesus left the glory of heaven, forfeited the privileges of deity, took on a human body, and suffered and died for us because of His love.

God’s love is *beneficial*. God loves us in a way that truly benefits us. He always does what is best for us.

God wants you to follow His example by loving others. It is the second most important command in the Bible (Mt 22:37-40).

What is Love?

What is love? There are three Greek words for love. *Eros* is sexual or romantic love; this word is not found in the Bible. *Philia* is brotherly affection; in the Bible it primarily refers to the special love that Christians are to have for one another. It means to love each other like family. The most common word for love in the Bible is *agape*. *Agape* is God-like love. This is the word the Bible uses when it speaks of God’s love for us, and of the love we must show others. *Agape* is not the same as liking someone. We are supposed to love people even if we do not like them. *Agape* is not the same as approving of someone’s behavior. You can love someone and hate their sin at the same time. *Agape* is not the same as agreeing with someone. You can disagree with someone and still love them. *Agape* is not the same as being a doormat. The truly loving person knows how and when to say “No.” *Agape* is not the same as feeling good about someone. We must love people even if we don’t feel like it, and even when people make

us feel bad. *Agape* is not love for everything. We are commanded to love everyone, not everything. In fact, we cannot fully love others unless we hate sin. *Agape* does not elevate people above God. Our love for others must never cause us to compromise our love for God. Disobeying God is never the way to love others.

Love is doing what is best for people, not what makes them feel good. It is giving people what they need, not what they want. Think about the love of a parent. To truly love their children, parents must do what is best for their children, not what makes them feel good. Sometimes the best thing for a child is a spanking. Parents must meet the needs of their children, not their wants. Kids often want things that are not good for them, such as eating candy all day long. We must love others in the same way, doing what is best for them, and meeting their needs. This is not always what people want, or what makes them feel good. Sometimes love means speaking a hard truth, or saying “No”, or making your kids do something hard or uncomfortable.

Three Tips for Loving Others

Sometimes it is difficult to know how to show love, so God gave us three helpful tips. The first tip is called *imitation*. God is love (1 John 4:8). By studying and imitating how God loves people in the Bible, we can learn how to love others. Ephesians 5:1 says, “Therefore, be imitators of God, as dearly loved children.”

The second tip is called the “*Great Commandment*”. “Love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:39).” Consider how much you love yourself. You feed and clothe and bathe yourself. You protect yourself. You educate yourself. You go to the doctor when you are sick. You give yourself a ride when you need to go somewhere. You love yourself unconditionally. You forgive yourself. That’s the degree that God wants you to love others.

The third tip is called the “*Golden Rule*”. “Just as you want others to do for you, do the same for them (Luke 6:31).” Treat others the way you want to be treated. In every situation, consider how you want others to treat you, and that will help you know how you should love them.

Love for All

Who does God want us to love? Our love must be like God’s – unconditional and unending. We must not only love our family and friends, but everyone. We must not only love people who look like us and who share our beliefs, but everyone. We must not only love people who can help us, but even people who have nothing to give. We must not only love people who are nice to us, but even our enemies.

Why Must We Love Others?

There are several important reasons why we must love others. First, it is a command. 1 Corinthians 14:1 says, “Let love be your highest goal.” 1 Corinthians 16:14 says, “And do everything with love.”

Second, people deserve our love. Not because of their good works, but because of who they are. They are human beings created in the image of God (Gen 1:27-28). They are so valuable that God sent His only Son to die for their sins (Jn 3:16). They are immortal souls that will spend eternity in heaven or hell.

Third, love for others is proof of our salvation. 1 John 4:8 says, “The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love.”

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to love others?
2. What can we learn about loving others from God’s love for us?
3. Why is it important to love others?
4. When is it hard to love others?
5. Who do you need to get better at loving?

JOYFULNESS

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” Philippians 4:4

The apostle Paul had every reason to be sad. By the time he wrote the letter to the Philippians he had been in a Roman jail for almost four years, chained eighteen inches from a guard. He wasn't in jail for doing anything wrong, but for doing what God called him to do – preaching about Jesus. In jail he was awaiting his fate – release, further imprisonment, or execution. Yet despite these dire circumstances, Paul was filled with joy. He wrote, “But I will rejoice even if I lose my life, pouring it out like a liquid offering to God, just like your faithful service is an offering to God. And I want all of you to share that joy (Phil 2:17, NLT).”

Joy is not the same as happiness. Happiness is based on your worldly circumstances. Joy is based on your spiritual circumstances. Happiness is based on what happens to you. Joy is based on what happens inside of you. Happiness is based on how people treat you. Joy is based on God's kindness to you. Happiness disappears at the first sign of unfavorable conditions. Joy abides through every season of life. Happiness results from getting what you want. Joy results from knowing that God wants you. Happiness can be experienced by anyone. Joy is only for Christians.

What is Joy?

So what is joy? **Joy is the unshakable feeling of cheerfulness that results from the choice to praise the Lord, trust in His word, and walk closely with Him.** Let's take a closer look at this definition.

First, joy is *unshakable*. Because it is based on unchanging spiritual realities, the difficulties and disappointments of life cannot take it away.

Second, joy is *a feeling of cheerfulness and gladness*. It is a sense of well-being. It is the emotion of happiness but without the fragility of happiness.

Third, joy is *a result*. It is a by-product. To experience joy there are certain conditions that must first be met. Meet these conditions, and joy will follow.

Fourth, joy is *the result of your choices*. This makes joy itself a choice. As a Christian, if you are not happy then it is your fault. The choice is yours.

How to Choose Joyfulness

What choices lead to joy? First, you must accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. When God saves you, He gives you the Holy Spirit who enables you to be joyful. Galatians 5:22 says, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy....”

Second, you must choose to praise the Lord. Philippians 4:4 says, “Rejoice in the Lord always.” The more you praise and celebrate the Lord for who He is, what He has done, and what He has promised to do, the more joyful you will be. Your emotions are heavily influenced

by what you choose to think about and focus on. Focusing on God in praise and worship will help you stay joyful.

Third, you must choose to trust in God's word. Proverbs 16:20 says, "... the one who trusts in the Lord will be happy." God's word provides plenty of fuel for joy – if you believe it. God's word promises that our trials are only temporary; heaven awaits us; God is in charge of everything that happens to us; God will use everything for our good; God is always with us, watching, listening, and empowering us; God loves us and sent Jesus to die for our sins; and our salvation is secure.

Fourth, you must choose to walk closely with God. Psalm 16:11 says, "... in your presence is abundant joy; at your right hand are eternal pleasures." The closer you are to God, the more joyful you will be. This means you must be holy and avoid all sin. You must spend much time with God in prayer and in His word. And you must spend time worshiping and serving God with church family. As you make godly choices, you will experience God's joy.

The Importance of Joyfulness

Joyfulness is so important to God that He made it a command. 1 Thessalonians 5:16 says, "Rejoice always." It is a sin for a Christian to live with a perpetual negative, gloomy, complaining, angry, or depressed attitude.

Why is joy so important? First, when people see your joy, they will be attracted to the source of your joy – Jesus Christ. On the other hand, sadness and negativity are likely to push them away. You are a living advertisement for Christ. Does your attitude make Jesus look good or bad?

Second, God wants you to be joyful because He loves you. When you love someone, you want them to feel good and be happy. It must hurt our Heavenly Father when we choose sadness over joy.

Third, God wants you to be joyful because it is an act of love to those around you. No one likes to be around someone who has a sad, negative attitude all the time. A gloomy person sucks the joy and fun out of the room. It's not kind to inflict a bad attitude on people. How can you lift people up with encouragement if you are weighing them down with sadness?

Fourth, God wants us to be joyful because it is energizing. Nehemiah 8:10 says, "... the joy of the Lord is your strength." You can accomplish far more for God when you are joyful than when you are sad.

Discussion Questions

1. What is joyfulness?
2. Why is it important to be joyful?
3. What is the difference between joy and happiness?
4. What do Christians have to rejoice about?
5. Do you need to grow in joyfulness? Explain.

PEACEFULNESS

“If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” Romans 12:18

Saul was the first king of Israel, but he wasn't satisfied. He was jealous of David, his popular and successful army commander. He was afraid that David was going to steal his crown. So, Saul set out to murder David. Obsessed with this one goal, he hunted David all over Israel. Twice he threw a spear at David, intending to kill him. On another occasion, he tried to trap David by sending him into an impossible battle with the Philistines. Saul ordered his son and all his servants to kill David. Despite Saul's determination to destroy David, David never sought revenge. On two occasions David had the opportunity to easily kill Saul, but he spared him. No matter how hard Saul tried to pick a fight with David, he was unsuccessful. David was committed to peacefulness.

What is Peacefulness?

Peacefulness is working hard to get along with others. Consider the relationship between peace and peacefulness. Peace is relational harmony; the absence of conflict. Peacefulness is striving for relational harmony. Peace is not the same as friendship, but it is necessary for friendship. Peace is not the same as unity, but it is necessary for unity. Peacefulness is working hard for the peace that is necessary for unity and friendship.

Peacefulness is not being a doormat, allowing others to use and abuse you to avoid conflict. Sometimes you will need to tell people “No,” and rebuke people, and disagree with people, and make decisions that frustrate and disappoint people. This does not violate peacefulness.

Sometimes you must sacrifice peace with men in order to have peace with God. When people want you to do one thing, and God wants you to do something else, you must do God's will. If it is a decision between pleasing God and pleasing men, you must please God. It is better to lose the friendship of man than the friendship of God. It is better to upset people than to upset God.

You can't always be at peace with others, but you can always be peaceful. You can always work hard for peace. You can do everything within your power for peace. Peace isn't always possible, but you must do everything possible to be at peace with others.

Why is it Important to be Peaceful?

First, it is a command. Psalm 34:14 says, “Turn away from evil and do what is good; seek peace and pursue it.” God wants you to do everything within your power to live at peace with everyone (Rm 12:18).

Second, it glorifies God. God is often called “the God of peace” throughout Scripture (Rm 5:33). When we are peaceful, we reflect God's character.

Third, it is Christ-like. Jesus is called the “Prince of Peace” (Is 9:6). He died on the cross for our sins so that we might have peace with God (Rm 5:1). When we are peaceful, we show others what Jesus is like.

Fourth, it is important to be peaceful because it impacts your relationship with God. You cannot have a right relationship with God unless you strive for peace with men. God will not hear your prayers until you seek peace with the person who is angry with you, and until you forgive the person who has offended you (Mt 5:23-24; Mt 6:14-15).

Fifth, it is important to be peaceful in order to have good relationships with others. Oneness with your spouse, influence with your children, unity at church, and productivity at work – all of these are impossible without peace (Eph 4:3). God created us for relationships, but relationships break down without peace. Peacefulness gives you the best chance for right relationships with others.

How Can We Work for Peace?

First, pursue peace with God through salvation (Rm 5:1). When you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, God gives you the Holy Spirit to empower and inspire you strive for peace.

Second, don't expect peace to be easy. The Bible says we must seek peace and pursue it (Ps 34:14). Peace will require our best effort (Eph 4:3; 2 Pt 3:14). It is something we must work for (Mt 5:9, NLT).

Third, strive for peace with everyone (Rm 12:18). This includes your parents, siblings, neighbors, church family, classmates, teammates, friends, and even your enemies (Rm 12:20).

Fourth, when someone sins against you, you must go to them and point out the offense (Mt 18:15). Do not wait for them to approach you; you take the initiative. The purpose is not to fuss at them, but to restore the relationship.

Fifth, if someone has something against you, then you must go and make peace (Mt 5:23-24). Even if you are not guilty, you must go. Peace has broken down and needs to be restored.

Sixth, when people sin against you, you must forgive them (Eph 4:32). It does not matter what they have done, or how many times they have done it, you must forgive as God has forgiven you.

Don't Disturb the Peace

To be a peaceful person, you must also avoid behaviors that disturb the peace. Avoid *offensive behavior* – actions that anger, aggravate, hurt, frustrate, or insult others (Pr 17:19). Avoid *arguing and bickering* (Pr 26:21). Avoid *mocking* – making fun and teasing others in a hurtful way (Pr 22:10). Avoid *a hot temper* (Pr 15:18). All these behaviors destroy peace and ruin relationships.

The Rewards of Peacefulness

Peacefulness is not easy, but it is worth the effort. When you are peaceful, you prove yourself to be a child of God (Mt 5:9). Peaceful people are happier (Pr 12:20; Mt 5:9). The Bible says that peace is better than riches (Pr 17:1). Finally, peacefulness leads to a more enjoyable life (1 Pt 3:11).

Discussion Questions

1. What is peacefulness?
2. What makes peacefulness hard?
3. Why is peacefulness important?
4. What are some things you can do to work for peace?
5. What are some peace-disturbers that you must avoid?

PATIENCE

“Therefore, as God’s chosen ones,... put on patience.” Colossians 3:12

Moses is one of the greatest heroes in the Bible. He delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and led them through the wilderness to the Promised Land. He wrote the first five books of the Bible. Yet even though he faithfully led God’s people for forty years, God punished Moses, not allowing him to enter the Promised Land. When the Israelites were in the Wilderness of Zin, they ran out of water and blamed Moses. Moses prayed about it, and God told him to speak to the rock, and water would come out. Instead, Moses lost his temper and said, “Listen, you rebels! Must we bring water out of this rock for you?” Then Moses struck the rock twice with his staff, and water came out for the people to drink. God punished Moses for his disobedience, but his disobedience was caused by his temper. Moses’ impatience cost him the honor and privilege of entering the Promised Land.

What is Patience?

Patience is being slow to anger when facing delay, hardship, or wrongdoing. Life is filled with opportunities to lose your temper. When someone hurts you, aggravates you, frustrates you, or wrongs you. When you think you are being treated unfairly. When someone insults you. When you have to wait longer than expected, or when you are faced with a task that is more difficult than expected. In all these situations, God wants you to be patient. Colossians 3:12 says, “Therefore, as God’s chosen ones..., put on patience.” James 1:19 says, “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger.” Patience is controlling your emotions rather than allowing your emotions to control you. It is emotional strength. Patience is controlling your temper so that your temper doesn’t blow up everything around you. Patience is getting angry slowly. It is being even-tempered; slow-tempered. Patience is restraining your anger. It is holding your anger in check. It is turning anger away when it knocks on the door of your emotions. Another word for patience is “longsuffering.” Patience is the ability to suffer long without getting angry. A patient person is not easily angered.

Why Do We Need Patience?

Why should we cultivate the virtue of patience? First, it is an impressive achievement. Proverbs 16:32 says, “Patience is better than power, and controlling one’s emotions, than capturing a city.” Learning to control your temper is one of the most impressive achievements in life. Controlling your temper is harder than controlling people. Capturing your temper is more difficult than a warrior capturing a city. Having power over your temper is more impressive than being physically strong or being a skilled warrior.

Second, the patient person deserves honor and praise. Proverbs 19:11 (AMP) says, “Good sense and discretion make a man slow to anger, and it is his honor and glory to overlook a transgression or an offense [without seeking revenge and harboring resentment].” People are awarded for all sorts of things – good grades in school, winning in sports, etc. But the Bible says that it is the person who defeats his temper that deserves honor and praise.

Third, patience enables you to more effectively serve the Lord. 2 Timothy 2:24 says, “The Lord’s servant must not quarrel, but must be gentle to everyone, able to teach, and patient.” With patience you are more respectable, more influential, and more persuasive. Anger pushes people away; patience draws them in. Anger is repulsive; patience is attractive. You will be a more winsome witness for Jesus if you are patient rather than quick-tempered.

Fourth, patience protects our relationships. Proverbs 15:18 says, “A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict, but one slow to anger calms strife.” Anger causes conflict and division. Anger offends, assaults, wounds, and leaves scars. Patience fosters unity and harmony. It is an expression of love (1 Cor 13:4).

Fifth, it is an act of obedience. 1 Thessalonians 5:14 says, “... be patient with everyone.” If we love God, then we will aim to obey His commands, and He has commanded us to be patient.

Sixth, patience makes us more like God. Numbers 14:18 says, “The Lord is slow to anger and abounding in faithful love, forgiving iniquity and rebellion.”

How to Grow in Patience

How can you cultivate patience and achieve mastery over your temper? It is not easy, but it can be done. It must be done. Proverbs 19:11 (AMP) says, “Good sense and discretion make a man slow to anger, and it is his honor and glory to overlook a transgression or an offense [without seeking revenge and harboring resentment].” This verse gives us four ways to grow in patience.

First, grow in wisdom. Patience is the result of “good sense and discretion.” The more you study and understand the Bible, the more you will grow in patience. Impatience is a sign of foolishness and ignorance. Patience is evidence of wisdom and intelligence.

Second, learn to overlook an offense. Proverbs 19:11 says, “A person’s insight gives him patience, and his virtue is to overlook an offense.” When people offend you, learn to ignore it. Overlook it. Pretend like it didn’t happen. Sometimes it is necessary to bring the offense to their attention and discuss it. But often when someone offends us, it doesn’t have to be a big deal. They may not have meant any harm. They may have just been joking. Or they may be having a bad day, or a weak moment. Instead of getting angry, learn to overlook an offense. In other words, learn to not take offense. An impatient person takes offense at every little thing. But when you take offense, you put a fence between you and them. You damage the relationship. Instead, learn to let insults bounce off you like a basketball bounces off the ground.

Third, do not seek revenge. Proverbs 19:11 says, “without seeking revenge.” The impatient person seeks to make others pay for their faults. He wants to hurt the offender, so he gives full vent to his anger. But the patient person knows that God has called us to forgive, and that means not seeking revenge. You must not respond to an offense or wrongdoing by returning evil for evil. You must control your temper.

Fourth, do not harbor resentment. Proverbs 19:11 says, “without seeking revenge and harboring resentment.” When you feel anger rising up inside of you, must not hold on to it. Quickly let it go. Do not stay angry at someone. In other words, a key to patience is forgiveness. Instead of seeking revenge, show kindness and love.

The Bible gives us more instructions on how to grow in patience. A fifth way is to be slow to speak. James 1:19 says, “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger.” When you get angry, learn to hold your tongue. Sometimes the only way to control your temper is to keep your mouth shut. Silence is often the best response to delays, insults, and wrongdoings. Opening your mouth is like opening the floodgates of anger. Learn to zip it or you will regret it.

Sixth, try to be understanding. Colossians 3:13 (NLV) says, “Try to understand other people. Forgive each other. If you have something against someone, forgive him. That is the way the Lord forgave you.” Often anger is the result of not seeing the situation from the other person’s perspective. We get angry with the waitress for spilling our food, not understanding that this is her very first day on the job. Or maybe she is having to cover for two of her coworkers who are absent. When you are tempted to get angry, try to understand the other person. This is called empathy. Put yourself in their shoes. Try to see the situation from their perspective. Try to feel what they are feeling. Sometimes all it takes is a little understanding to prevent a lot of anger.

Discussion Questions

1. What is patience?
2. When is it tempting to lose your temper?
3. What are some examples of expressing your anger in an inappropriate way?
4. Why should you cultivate patience?
5. How can you grow in patience?

KINDNESS

“And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ.” Ephesians 4:32

Naomi’s world had come crumbling down. She was living in a foreign land when her husband died, and then ten years later both of her sons died. All she had left were her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. When Naomi decided to return to her hometown of Bethlehem, she sent Orpah and Ruth back to their families. Orpah wept and returned to her people, but Ruth clung to her and said, “Don’t plead with me to abandon you or to return and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you live, I will live; your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord punish me, and do so severely, if anything but death separates you and me (Ruth 1:16-17).” Ruth accompanied Naomi to Bethlehem, remarried, and cared for Naomi the rest of her life.

What should we call the type of behavior we see in Ruth? It is not loyalty, because it would not have been disloyal to return to her own family. It is not faithfulness, because she had not previously promised to stay with Naomi. Ruth’s behavior is called kindness, and there is perhaps no better example of it in the entire Bible. Ruth was seeking to be helpful and beneficial to her mother-in-law. And that’s what kindness is. **Kindness is seeking to be helpful and beneficial to others.**

Kindness is not to be reserved for our friends only; we are to extend it even to our enemies (Lk 6:35). God is not only kind to godly people, but also to sinners by allowing them to enjoy His creation, and by giving them time to repent (Rm 2:4). Kindness is not helping someone because you have to, but because you desire to help; you are glad to help; you are looking to help; you are ready to help; you enjoy helping and benefiting others. Kindness is not doing what is required; it is doing more than is required. It is doing more than is expected. It is treating someone better than they deserve. Kindness is not returning a favor, it is showing favor. It does not expect payback. It is paying forward the kindness that you have received from God.

The Importance of Kindness

Why should we be kind? First, out of obedience to God (Eph 4:32). Kindness is an obligation, not an option.

Second, to imitate God (Eph 5:1). Jesus was always doing acts of kindness. He healed the sick. He raised the dead. He fed the hungry. He befriended the outcast and the sinner. He helped the disciples fill their nets with fish. He made breakfast for the disciples. He calmed the storm for the disciples.

Third, to attract the lost to Christ. Unbelievers are much more likely to follow us to Jesus if we have been kind to them.

Fourth, to be happier. Jesus said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35).”

How to Grow in Kindness

How can we grow in kindness? First, ask for God's help. The Holy Spirit lives in you, and He wants to grow you in kindness (Gal 5:22).

Second, always be on the lookout for opportunities to help and benefit others. Whether you are at home, at school, at church, playing in the neighborhood, or playing sports, look for ways to help and benefit others. Kindness can be helping someone with a chore, or with their schoolwork, or with a problem they are facing. It can be offering a listening ear, a word of advice, a word of encouragement, or a sincere compliment.

Think of kindness as sharing happiness. God has been abundantly kind to us, making us happy in Him. Now we have the opportunity and privilege to share happiness by being helpful and beneficial to everyone we encounter.

One person said, "I shall pass through this world but once. Any good thing therefore that I can do, or any kindness that I can show to any human being, let me do it now. Let me not defer it or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again."

Questions for Discussion

1. What can we learn from the story of Ruth and Naomi?
2. What is kindness?
3. Why should we aim to be kind?
4. To whom should we show kindness?
5. What are some ways that you can be kind to those around you?

GOODNESS

“He gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to cleanse for himself a people for his own possession, eager to do good works.” Titus 2:14

Jesus told a story about a Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). A man was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was attacked by thieves. They stripped him naked, beat him up, and ran away. The man was almost dead. When a Jewish priest came along and saw the man, he moved to the other side of the road and passed by. Then a Levite came along and did the same thing. He moved to the other side of the road and just kept walking. Finally, a Samaritan (a man from the region of Samaria) came along. But instead of passing by, he stopped to help. He felt sorry for the injured man. He went over to him, bandaged his wounds, and comforted him. Then he put the injured man on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day, the Samaritan told the innkeeper to take care of the man until he returned, paid him two denarii, and told him that he would pay him back for any more than he might need to spend. The most surprising thing about this story is that of the three men who saw the injured man, the only one who stopped was a Samaritan. In those days Jews and Samaritans disliked and avoided each other. But the Samaritan did not see an injured Jewish man, he saw a fellow human being who needed help.

What is Goodness?

The story of the Good Samaritan is an illustration of the grace of goodness. **Goodness is always doing good works and acts of charity.** Goodness and kindness are closely related. Kindness is seeking to be helpful and beneficial to others, while goodness is seeking to be helpful and beneficial to people in need. Kindness is being helpful to everyone and anyone. Goodness is specifically helping the needy, the suffering, the oppressed, the weak, the marginalized, and the defenseless. Goodness can be pursuing justice for the oppressed (Is 1:17); helping orphans and widows (Is 1:17); helping the sick (Jn 10:32); providing clothes for the needy (Acts 9:39); helping the weak (Acts 20:35); carrying other's burdens (Gal 6:2); comforting and helping the afflicted (2 Cor 1:4; 1 Tim 5:10); and giving shelter to the homeless (Rm 12:13).

Why be Good?

Why should we cultivate the grace of goodness? First, it is a command. It is a sin for a Christian to not be good. We are commanded to pursue goodness, to love goodness, to excel in every good work, to be rich in good works, to be eager to do good works, to be ready for every good work, to be devoted to good works, and to make every effort to grow in goodness (Am 5:14-15; 2 Cor 9:8; 1 Tim 6:18; Titus 2:14; Titus 3:1; Titus 3:8; 2 Pt 1:5-7).

Second, goodness is a sign of salvation. It is evidence that God has saved you. 1 John 3:17 says, “If anyone has this world's goods and sees a fellow believer in need but withholds compassion from him – how does God's love reside in him?”

Third, goodness is the purpose of our salvation. God did not merely save us to go to heaven, but to do good works on earth until we go to heaven. Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do."

Fourth, goodness glorifies God. God wants us to show the world what He is like, and He is good. Psalm 119:68 says, "You are good, and you do what is good; teach me your statutes."

Fifth, goodness will help you to be a productive Christian. Goodness will help you to accomplish a lot and make the most of your time on earth. Titus 3:14 says, "Let our people learn to devote themselves to good works for pressing needs, so that they will not be unfruitful."

Sixth, goodness will help you to attract lost people to Christ. Matthew 5:16 says, "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

Seventh, God will bless you for your good works. Your good works will cause God to look upon you with special favor. Amos 5:15 says, "Hate evil and love good; establish justice in the city gate. Perhaps the Lord, the God of Armies, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph."

Eighth, good deeds on earth are transformed into treasures in heaven. Every good deed will increase the size of your heavenly reward. 1 Timothy 6:18-19 says, "Instruct them to be good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and willing to share, storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of what is truly life."

How to Grow in Goodness

How can you grow in goodness? Follow the example of the Good Samaritan. First, look upon the needy with compassion (Lk 10:33). Don't criticize them or laugh at them. Feel sorry for them.

Second, give of your time. The priest and the Levite just passed by when they saw the injured man, but the Good Samaritan stopped and helped. He was willing to interrupt his schedule and adjust his plans for the benefit of the one in need.

Third, be ready for unexpected opportunities to help. The Good Samaritan did not plan a mission trip. This was not on his agenda for the day. But when he saw that someone needed help, he got busy.

Fourth, be willing to get your hands dirty. The Good Samaritan "bandaged his wounds, pouring on olive oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him (Lk 10:34)." Goodness is dirty work. You will probably need a bath after. Consider what Christ was willing to do for you. He took on human flesh and suffered the death of a criminal. He got dirty for you. Helping the needy is more important than keeping your clothes clean.

Fifth, help people feel better. The Good Samaritan helped the injured man to feel better physically and emotionally.

Sixth, be generous. The Good Samaritan used his own resources and money to help the man in need. Use your money, which is God's money, to help the needy. The more you give, the greater your reward will be in heaven.

Seventh, save lives. If the Good Samaritan hadn't helped, the injured man might have died. Look for opportunities to rescue those who are being unjustly sentenced to death, such as the unborn.

Eighth, be willing to help anyone, regardless of their race, religion, appearance, age, or political beliefs. The Good Samaritan wasn't deterred by the injured man's race or religion; he saw a human being in need and did what he could to help.

Discussion Questions

1. What is goodness?
2. What is the difference between good and kindness?
3. Why should we strive to be good?
4. What makes it difficult to be good?
5. How can you grow in goodness?

GENTLENESS

“Therefore, as God’s chosen ones, holy and dearly loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience,” Colossians 3:12

How do you act when you get angry? Think about how God acts. Even though He is angry with us for our sins, He never loses His temper. He never does anything mean. No matter what we do, God remains calm and kind.

Gentleness is staying calm and kind, even when you are angry. Even if you have cultivated the grace of patience – slow to anger – you will still get angry at times. Anger is a natural human emotion. Not all anger is evil. God gets angry, and he never sins. The Bible tells us to be angry and not sin (Eph 4:26). What does it mean to be angry and not sin? Gentleness. Stay calm and kind.

Why be Gentle?

Why should we cultivate gentleness? First, because God commands it. Ephesians 4:1-2 says, “Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, urge you to live worthy of the calling you have received, with all humility and gentleness...”

Second, because it is Christlike. The Christian’s aim is to imitate Christ, and Christ is gentleness perfected. Matthew 11:29 says, “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.”

Third, it is the Spirit’s goal for your character. The Spirit is working in you to make you more gentle. Galatians 5:22-23 says, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

Fourth, we should cultivate gentleness so that God will bless us. Matthew 5:5 (HCSB) says, “The gentle are blessed, for they will inherit the earth.” God doles out special blessings to those who are gentle. Blessedness is happiness. If you want to be happy, then be gentle.

Fifth, we should cultivate gentleness to lead others more effectively. Leaders are commanded to be gentle, because the gentle leader will get more done. 2 Timothy 2:24, “The Lord’s servant must not quarrel, but must be gentle to everyone, able to teach, and patient.”

Sixth, we should cultivate gentleness because it is attractive. A gentle personality is magnetic. It is winsome. Gentle people are liked. People like to be around a gentle man or woman. The Bible instructs Christian wives to make themselves attractive to their husbands with the virtue of gentleness. 1 Peter 3:3 says, “Don’t let your beauty consist of outward things like elaborate hairstyles and wearing gold and jewelry or fine clothes, but rather what is inside the heart – the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit...”

Seventh, we should cultivate gentleness because it is imperishable. Physical strength decreases over time. Beauty fades with age, but gentleness is imperishable. You can be gentle until the day you die. 1 Peter 3:4 says, “—the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit...”

Eighth, we should cultivate gentleness because it pleases the Lord. 1 Peter 3:4 says, “...a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight.” To the one who loves the Lord with all his heart, there is no greater motivation than this. Pleasing God is his deepest desire.

Ninth, we should cultivate gentleness because it prevents conflict. Proverbs 15:1 says, “A gentle answer turns away anger, but a harsh word stirs up wrath.” Gentleness pacifies an angry person. It snuffs out the first sparks of a burning temper. It fosters peace. It is difficult to stay angry at a gentle person.

Tenth, we should cultivate gentleness because it is persuasive. Proverbs 25:15 “A ruler can be persuaded through patience and a gentle tongue can break a bone.” Whether you are teaching, or debating, or selling, or restoring one who has fallen away, the gentle approach is the most persuasive.

How to Grow in Gentleness

How can we cultivate gentleness? First, avoid harsh speech. Harsh speech is loud and offensive. When you get angry, keep your voice down, and don’t say anything hurtful. Proverbs 15:1 says, “A gentle answer turns away anger, but a harsh word stirs up wrath.”

Second, do not harm or destroy. The word “gentleness” is often used to describe a soft wind, or the way that you should hold a newborn baby (Acts 27:13; 1 Thess 2:7). When you get angry, do not harm anyone or destroy anything.

Third, go easy on those who fail. There are two possible ways to respond to someone who fails: Harshness or gentleness. You can either come down hard on that person, or you can go easy on them. Galatians 6:1 says, “Brothers and sisters, if someone is overtaken in any wrongdoing, you who are spiritual, restore such a person with a gentle spirit, watching out for yourselves so that you also won’t be tempted.” Gentleness does not turn a blind eye to failure, but when it corrects it remains calm and kind.

Fourth, do not demand too much of those under your authority. Gentleness applies to leadership. As a parent, or a pastor, or a manager, or employer, do not be overbearing. Do not demand too much. Do not be impossible to please. Do not make life miserable for those under your care. Follow the example of Jesus, who said, “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 (Mt 11:28-30, NIV).”

Fifth, do not offend the people you are trying to reach. 1 Peter 3:15-16 says, “But in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you. Yet do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that when you are accused, those who disparage your good conduct in Christ will be put to shame.” When you are trying to win someone over to your way of thinking, avoid offending or insulting them. It is useless to win the debate but lose the person. Gentleness and respectfulness go hand in hand.

Sixth, do not try to force people to do what you want. The Bible says that a pastor must not be a bully, but gentle (1 Tim 3:3). A bully is the opposite of gentle. A bully is someone who gets angry and forces his will on others. We try to force people to do what we want by raising our voice, getting violent and destructive, and making threats. All these behaviors are sinful. Be gentle. Do not force your way on people. Learn to gently lead people rather than push them.

Discussion Questions

1. What is gentleness?
2. When is it hard to be gentle?
3. How does gentleness apply to parenting?
4. How does gentleness apply to evangelism?
5. How do you need to grow in gentleness?

FAITHFULNESS

“But let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes,’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no.’ Anything more than this is from the evil one.”
Matthew 5:37

Jesus made several important promises to His disciples. He told them He would be killed and raised the third day (Mt 16:21). He told them He would send the Holy Spirit to them (Acts 1:4-5). He told them He was going to ascend to heaven (Jn 20:17). And in each case, Jesus was faithful. He kept His word and did what He said He would do.

What is Faithfulness?

Faithfulness is keeping your word. It is doing what you said you would do. Being where you said you would be. Showing up when you said you would show up. Going where you said you would go. Avoiding what you said you would avoid. To be faithful is to be trustworthy, reliable, and dependable.

Faithfulness is not simply keeping your promises; it is keeping your word. Your word is your bond. By itself, your word is a promise. So, if you agree to do something, even if you did not promise, it is a lie when you fail to keep your word. Your word is your commitment to a course of action that must be backed up with faithfulness.

The Importance of Faithfulness

Why is it important to be faithful? First, to glorify God. Psalm 36:5 says, “Lord, your faithful love reaches to heaven, your faithfulness to the clouds.” Isaiah 31:2 says, “He does not go back on what he says.” 1 Corinthians 1:9 says, “God will do this, for he is faithful to do what he says....” God wants you to glorify Him by reflecting His moral nature. We must be faithful to be glorifying to God.

Second, to obey God. God’s will is for us to be faithful. Proverbs 3:3-4 says, “Never let loyalty and faithfulness leave you. Tie them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart.”

Third, to imitate Christ. To be a Christian is to be Christlike, and Christ is faithful. 2 Corinthians 1:19 (NLT) says, “For Jesus Christ, the Son of God, does not waver between ‘Yes’ and ‘No.’ He is the one whom Silas, Timothy, and I preached to you, and as God’s ultimate ‘Yes,’ he always does what he says.”

Fourth, to find favor with God. God’s favor is His pleasure. It is to have God smile on you. It is to be God’s favorite. To find favor with God opens the windows of heaven to you so that the showers of God’s blessings can pour into your life. Proverbs 3:3-4 says, “Never let loyalty and faithfulness leave you.... Then you will find favor and high regard with God and people.”

Fifth, to receive greater responsibility from God. Matthew 19:17 says, “His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’” If you want God to give you more, you must be faithful with the little He has already given you. The little is the test you must pass

for more. If you want God to use you in a greater way, to place more responsibility on your shoulders, then you must be faithful with what He has already given to You.

Sixth, to grow in favor with men. Proverbs 3:3-4 says, “Never let loyalty and faithfulness leave you.... Then you will find favor and high regard with God and people.” Relationships depend on trust, and trust and faithfulness are twins. Unfaithfulness hurts. When you say you will do something, people immediately make plans and decisions that depend on your being faithful. When you fail to keep your word, it causes problems for people. If people cannot trust you, then they will distance themselves from you. But as you grow in faithfulness, you will grow in intimacy.

Seventh, to grow in leadership. People are always looking for someone they can depend upon. Organizations are always on the hunt for reliable people. As you prove yourself dependable, people will depend on you for more. As you prove yourself reliable, they will rely on you for more.

Eighth, to attract the lost to Christ. Faithfulness is a fast way to find favor and high regard with people, even lost people. The more that people favor you, the more they will respect your faith in Christ, and the more open they will be to the gospel.

Ninth, to be fruitful. It is God’s will that we be fruitful. Faithfulness is the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). As we grow in faithfulness, we bear more fruit for God (Jn 15:8).

Tenth, to avoid grieving the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 4:30 says, “And don’t grieve God’s Holy Spirit.” The indwelling Holy Spirit is working to grow us in faithfulness. When we are faithful, we please Him; when we are unfaithful, we grieve Him. How horrible it is to grieve the very One who seeks our joy.

How to Grow in Faithfulness

How does one grow in faithfulness? First, stop making promises. Matthew 5:34-37 says, “But I tell you, don’t take an oath at all.... Do not swear.... But let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes,’ and your ‘no’ mean ‘no.’ Anything more than this is from the evil one.” James 5:12 says, “Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. But let your ‘yes’ mean ‘yes,’ and your ‘no’ mean ‘no,’ so that you won’t fall under judgment.” The only reason to say “I promise” is because your word alone is untrustworthy. From now on realize that your word by itself is a promise.

Second, be careful about giving your word. Before you give your word, be sure that you are willing and able to follow through. Do not say “yes” when you have no intention of following through. Do not say “yes” just to avoid offending or disappointing someone. It is much more offensive to break your word. Do not say “yes” if you are unsure of your schedule, or if you first need to get your parent’s consent.

Third, get organized. Often the cause of unfaithfulness is disorganization – forgetting the commitments you have made or over-committing yourself. Simple tools like an alarm clock, a wrist watch, a to-do list, and a personal calendar can help you avoid forgetfulness and over-commitment.

Fourth, plan ahead. If you agreed to meet someone early in the morning, get plenty of rest the night before. Give yourself plenty of drive-time so that you can be prompt. If you said that you would bring something to a friend, set it out where you won’t forget it.

Fifth, apologize if you break your word. If ever you are unfaithful, be sure to give a sincere apology. Do not make excuses. Simply admit your fault, apologize, and renew your commitment to faithfulness in the future.

Sixth, pray for faithfulness. We cannot be like Christ without Christ's power. The prayer for faithfulness is a prayer for the will of God, and God always answers the prayer that is in line with His will (1 Jn 5:14).

Always Faithful?

Is it ever permissible for a believer to break his word? There are two such cases. First, when you are prevented by a greater or prior obligation. You are obligated by your word. However, when a greater or prior obligation demands your attention, then you must break your word. If you told your friend that you would meet him for lunch, but complications at your employment require you to work through lunch to meet a guaranteed deadline for a customer, then you must break your word with your friend. You have a prior obligation to your company.

Second, when you are incapable of keeping your word. There will be situations when you are unable to keep your word. Medical emergencies and serious illnesses, car breakdowns, and severe weather are just a few examples. In both cases, you are not breaking your word, but are prevented from keeping your word by forces outside of your control. Even so, these situations still warrant an apology for the inconvenience and disappointment that they caused.

Discussion Questions

1. What is faithfulness?
2. Why is faithfulness important?
3. When is it hard to be faithful?
4. Have you ever been unfaithful? Explain.
5. How can you grow in faithfulness?

SELF-CONTROL

Proverbs 25:28 (TLB) “A man without self-control is as defenseless as a city with broken-down walls.”

Amnon had everything a person could desire in this world. He was the son of the great king David. As a prince he lived in extravagant wealth and luxury. He was famous. As for marriage, just about any girl in all of Israel would be thrilled to marry royalty. But there was one thing he lacked. He was in love with his half-sister, the beautiful Tamar. Unfortunately, he could not control his feelings. With the help of his wicked friend Jonadab, he pretended to be sick and asked his father to send Tamar to care for him. When she went to his house to care for him, he raped her. When Tamar’s full brother, Absalom, learned about the incident, he murdered Amnon. It was Amnon’s lack of self-control that ultimately led to his demise. He was unable to keep his passion in check.

What is Self-Control?

What is self-control? **Self-control is doing what is right, even when you don’t feel like it.** It goes by many different names: self-discipline, self-mastery, the moral muscle, mind over body, and impulse-control.

Self-control is about letting God’s Spirit and God’s word control you, rather than being controlled by your feelings, passions, impulses, and desires. You will often have desires, urges, and impulses that do not conform to the will of God, and that are not good for you. To be the person that God wants you to be, and to live the life that God wants you to live – the best kind of life – you must be able to resist those feelings and desires and do what is right. That’s what self-control is all about.

Galatians 5:22-23 says, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” Notice that self-control is the last fruit mentioned. That’s not by accident. It is last because it is the most important, and the hardest to get. Anyone can be kind to a nice person; self-control is being kind to a mean person. Anyone can be patient, until they forced to wait. Anyone can say no to ice cream, if they have a full belly and a bunch of people are watching. But it takes self-control to say no to ice cream when you are hungry and home alone.

There are two kinds of self-control. Self-control is the ability to resist the desire to do what is not good for you, and the ability to resist the desire to not do what is good for you. To be successful and happy in life, you need both.

Self-control is about freedom. Freedom is not the liberty to do whatever you want, but the strength to make yourself do what you should do, even when you don’t feel like it. You are a slave to whatever controls you. If you don’t develop self-control, then you will always be a slave to your mood, to your emotions, to your feelings, to your desires.

The ancient philosopher Plato said, “The first and best victory is to conquer self.” Self-control is all about self-mastery. It is about conquering yourself. One of the most counter-productive things you can do with your life is to complain about other people and all the trouble they are causing you. Do you know who your worst enemy is? It’s not the devil. It’s

not other people. It's not your parents or your siblings. Your worst enemy is you. If you can conquer yourself, gaining mastery over your emotions, desires, urges, and impulses, then you can achieve anything God wants you to achieve. Self-control is all about controlling yourself so that you do not interfere with what God wants to do in and through you.

Why do We Need Self-Control?

Why do we need self-control? First, you need self-control to master your mood; to be controlled by your commitments and values rather than your emotions. Proverbs 25:28 (TLB) says, "A man without self-control is as defenseless as a city with broken-down walls."

Second, you need self-control to watch your words. Proverbs 13:3 (NIV) says, "Those who guard their lips preserve their lives, but those who speak rashly will come to ruin."

Third, you need self-control to restrain your reactions. Proverbs 19:11 (GNT) says, "If you are sensible, you will control your temper. When someone wrongs you, it is a great virtue to ignore it." Pastor Rick Warren said, "A lot of potential influence can be cut short by a short temper."

Fourth, you need self-control to tame your thoughts. Romans 13:14 (NIV) says, "Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh." All sin begins in the mind. If you can't control your thought-life, then you will not be able to control your actions.

Fifth, you need self-control to stick to your schedule. Ephesians 5:15 (Phillips) says, "Make the best use of your time, despite all the difficulties of these days."

Sixth, you need self-control to defeat your sinful desires. 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5 (CSB) says, "For this is God's will, your sanctification: that you keep away from sexual immorality, that each of you knows how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passions, like the Gentiles, who don't know God."

Seventh, you need self-control to guard your eyes. Matthew 5:29 says, "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of the parts of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell." In order to overcome pornography and lust, you need to exercise self-control with your eyes.

Eighth, you need self-control to stabilize your spending. Proverbs 21:20 (TLB) says, "The wise man saves for the future, but the foolish man spends whatever he gets."

Ninth, you need self-control to maintain your health. 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 (TLB) says, "Haven't you yet learned that your body is the home of the Holy Spirit God gave you, and that he lives within you? Your own body does not belong to you. For God has bought you with a great price. So, use every part of your body to give glory back to God because he owns it." Good health requires self-control.

How to Become More Self-Controlled

How do we cultivate self-control? First, believe that you can cultivate it. If you don't believe that you can learn self-control, then you will give up before you even start. If you are a Christian, then you have all you need to develop self-control (2 Peter 1:3). Self-control is not just for a select few; it is for everyone.

Second, have faith in the supremacy of Christ. Jesus said that He came to give us abundant life (John 10:10). The best life is found in the will of God. To develop self-control, you have to believe that with all your heart. You must believe that saying “Yes” to Christ is going to be much more rewarding than saying “Yes” to your sinful desires.

Third, abide in Christ (John 15:5). Stay close to Him through the practices of daily Bible reading, private prayer, and Sunday worship. As you do, He promises to produce the fruit of self-control through your life.

Fourth, be filled with the Spirit. As self-control is a fruit of the Spirit, then you must be filled with the Spirit so that He can produce it in you. To be filled with the Spirit is to be fully-yielded to His control. Dedicate yourself, every part of yourself, to God’s will. Then the Holy Spirit will be free to empower you to grow in self-control.

Fifth, do everything within your power. Make every effort to be self-controlled (2 Peter 1:5-8). Jesus said that if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out, and if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off (Mt 5:29-30). In other words, do everything within your power to be self-controlled. Put all your effort into it. Self-control doesn’t come easily. It is only achieved by those who are willing to do whatever it takes.

Jesus did not die for your sins so that you could live a defeated life. Yet so many Christians live defeated lives because they lack self-control. They are ruled by their foolish and sinful feelings and desires. For many Christians, the main obstacle keeping them from abundant life in Christ is simply self-control. So, make the decision today to take control of your life for the glory of God.

Discussion Questions

1. What is self-control?
2. How did Amnon’s lack of self-control hurt him?
3. Why is self-control so important?
4. How can we develop self-control?
5. What is one area of your life that you would like to have more self-control?

ENDURANCE

Hebrews 12:1 “Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every hindrance and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us.”

The apostle Paul is one of the most important figures in Christian history. He started out as a persecutor of Christianity, was radically converted, and then became an apostle of Jesus Christ. He traveled all around the Roman Empire preaching the gospel and starting new churches. But Paul’s life was not easy. As he served the Lord he met with many difficulties. Paul described some of the hardships he faced in 2 Corinthians 12:24-27. “Five times I received the forty lashes minus one from the Jews. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked. I have spent a night and a day in the open sea. On frequent journeys, I faced dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my own people, dangers from Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers at sea, and dangers among false brothers; toil and hardship, many sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, often without food, cold, and without clothing.” Despite all the difficulties, however, Paul did not give up; he did not quit; he did not slow down; he did not get angry with God; he did not turn to sin; he did not wallow in depression; and he did not lose the faith. He endured.

What is Endurance?

Endurance is doing what is right despite adversity. It is also called perseverance, persistence, and resilience. It is fortitude, staying-power, stick-to-it-iveness. It is steadfastness, unswerving constancy, and standing firm.

Adversity is a fact of life. It doesn’t matter if you are good or bad, Christian or non-Christian, you will face many difficulties in life. These might include failure, disappointment, sickness, injury, physical pain, poverty, persecution, loneliness, or loss, just to name a few. The Bible does not promise a problem-free life for Christians. On the contrary, it promises that you will face adversity (John 16:33). The only question is how you will respond to adversity when it comes. God’s will is that you learn to endure; to do what is right despite adversity.

The Greek word for endurance literally means “to stay under.” The idea is to stay Christlike, to stay on mission, and to stay close to God when you are under the weight of adversity. Think of an endurance runner, an athlete who specializes in long-distance races like the mile, the 5K, or the marathon. An endurance runner is able push through muscle fatigue, thirst, windedness, cramps, and joint pains, and to keep running until he crosses the finish line. Consider a boxer. A boxer with endurance is the one who keeps fighting until the final bell, regardless of the pain in his lungs, the weakness in his legs, the sweat in his eyes, the jeers of the crowd, and the blood streaming down his face. The Christian with endurance is able to do what is right regardless of the circumstances; no matter how hard life gets.

Perhaps the best way to understand endurance is to think about its opposite. The opposite of endurance is to give up, to lose heart, to draw back, or to get discouraged. It is to grow weary, to get tired, to quit, to surrender, to compromise, to fall away, or to backslide. When adversity hits, the man without endurance may drop out of church, or get angry with

God. He may deny the faith and stop believing in God and the Bible. Without endurance a woman may look to sin to soften the blow or shorten the duration of adversity. The person lacking endurance may respond to problems by dropping out of ministry, giving up on their goals, or mistreating others. The absence of endurance is the reason some people respond to trials by complaining, getting depressed, and even committing suicide. Without endurance, problems may drive you to blame your parents and rebel; they may cause you to stop reading your Bible and praying; they may lead to chronic worry, or the abandonment of your responsibilities.

On the other hand, the man with endurance does the right thing when hard times hit. He stands firm in the faith. He resists temptation. He stays joyful and keeps serving the Lord. He continues pursuing spiritual growth. He stays loving toward others in his attitude, words, and actions. He stays holy and pleasing to God.

Six Truths About Adversity

How can we grow in endurance? The most important thing to do is to learn what the Bible says about adversity. Start with these six truths. First, trials are to be expected. Jesus said, "You will have suffering in this world" (John 16:33). Don't expect God to keep you out of trouble.

Second, we won't always be rewarded or rescued in this life. John the Baptist was beheaded. All the apostles except for John were killed for their faith. God will rescue you, and He will reward you, but it may not be until you die and go to heaven.

Third, God is in control. Nothing can happen to you unless God allows it (Psalm 135:6). This means that when something bad happens to you, it is God's will. The presence of trials doesn't mean that God is not in control, it means they are a part of His plan.

Fourth, God loves you. He always does what is best for you (1 John 4:8). When you have difficulties, it doesn't mean that God doesn't love you, it means that difficulties are the best thing for you. It means that difficulties are what you need; they will make you better.

Fifth, God will use your problems for your good (Romans 8:28). God will make sure that any problem you face will benefit you in the end. It might help you grow in Christ. It might make you more useful. It might prevent you from falling into sin. It might help you store up more treasures in heaven.

Sixth, God will use your problems to grow you. Adversity is the most effective classroom. Trouble is the best textbook. Suffering is the clearest sermon. Anytime you go through hard times, it is because God wants to grow you and take you to the next level in your spiritual maturity. Hebrews 12:11 says, "No discipline seems enjoyable at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."

Adversity is a given, but it can either make you better or bitter. And that's up to you. If you cultivate endurance, problems will always benefit you. Psalm 37:4 says, "Let us not get tired of doing good, for we will reap at the proper time if we don't give up."

Discussion Questions

1. What is endurance?
2. How is Paul an example of endurance?
3. Why do we need endurance?
4. How can we cultivate endurance?
5. What truths do we need to believe to be able to endure hardships?

HUMILITY

Philippians 2:3 “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves.”

God is serious about humility. How serious? God allowed one of His most loyal servants, the apostle Paul, to suffer in order to protect him from the sin of pride. Paul wrote about it. “Therefore, so that I would not exalt myself, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to torment me so that I would not exalt myself (2 Cor 12:7).” What exactly was this thorn in the flesh? Nobody knows for sure. But we do know that it was painful. Paul prayed three times for God to take it away, but God refused. He said to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). God knew that Paul would be at his best if he realized his weakness and utter dependence upon God.

What is Humility?

Humility is seeing yourself the way that God sees you. It does not mean that you hate yourself, or that you don’t like yourself. It does not mean that you lack confidence. It means that you see yourself correctly – through the lens of Scripture. How does God see you? You are priceless, but without God you are hopeless. You are important, but no more important than anyone else. You are very talented, but your talents are a gift from God and must be used in His service. You have many strengths, but you are very weak without Christ’s power working within you, and without the support of a church family. You have an amazing mind, but you are foolish without the wisdom of God’s word. You may be the boss at home or at work, but God wants you to submit to His authority. You may be a leader, but God put you in charge to serve those you lead. You can accomplish much, but apart from Christ you can do nothing. You may be very beautiful, or very strong, but true beauty and strength are measured by one’s character. You may be very rich, but God wants you to be rich in good deeds. You may be rich in good deeds, but apart from God’s grace through the cross of Christ you are a sinner deserving of hell.

The opposite of humility is pride. If humility is seeing yourself the way that God sees you, then pride is thinking too highly of yourself. Pride is thinking that you are better, smarter, stronger, more talented, and more deserving than everyone else. Pride can ruin your life. Pride prevents people from growing spiritually, because they think they are already mature. Pride prevents someone from consistently attending church, because they think they don’t need a church family. Pride causes people to butt heads with authority figures, because they think they should be in charge. Pride prevents people from admitting their faults, making apologies, asking for forgiveness, and asking for help. Pride prevents people from seeing their own flaws, sins, and imperfections. Pride prevents people from taking personal responsibility for their lives, since all their problems are caused by other people. Proverbs 16:18 says, “Pride comes before destruction, and an arrogant spirit before a fall.”

On the other hand, humility has great rewards. Proverbs 18:12 says, “Before his downfall a person’s heart is proud, but humility comes before honor.” Proverbs 3:34 says that God “mocks those who mock, but gives grace to the humble.” In other words, God blesses and

helps the humble person. Humility is also the pathway to wisdom. Proverbs 11:2 says, “When arrogance comes, disgrace follows, but with humility comes wisdom.”

Humility in Practice

What does humility look like in everyday life? Humble people are teachable; they realize they don't know it all. Humble people give the glory to God for any success, and anything good that comes from their lives. Humble people are quick to praise and thank others for their efforts, achievements, and contributions. Humble people don't seek the spotlight but are willing to serve in the shadows. Humble people don't seek the praises and thanks of men but are content with pleasing God. Humble people don't strive to be the center of attention but are happy to let others shine. Humble people are willing to admit their mistakes and apologize. Humble people are always striving to grow and improve, because they realize they don't know it all. Humble people treat others as more important than themselves. Humble people realize that they are sinners deserving of hell, and that every good thing in their lives is an undeserved gift from God. Humble people realize that even with all their problems, they still have it much better than they deserve, and so they don't complain. Humble people realize that the biggest cause of their problems is themselves. Humble people are not critical of others, because they see themselves as the worst of sinners. Humble people are quick to ask for and listen to counsel from people who are smarter and wiser than them, because they know they are not the smartest people in the world. Humble people spend much time in prayer, because they recognize their total dependence on God. Humble people are good listeners, because they don't think their words are more important than everyone else's. Humble people keep themselves from tempting situations and ungodly companions because they know how weak they are. Humble people are always looking for ways to help others, because they don't think that they are so important that everyone should be serving them. Humble people are willing to serve others in any capacity necessary, because they don't see any job as beneath them.

As you can see, humility is an essential Christian grace because it touches every area of life. The only way to become like Jesus is to put on humility. Philippians 2:5-9 says, “Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus, who, existing in the very form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited. Instead he emptied himself by assuming the form of a servant, taking on the likeness of humanity. And when he had come as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death – even to death on a cross. For this reason God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name.”

Humbling yourself may feel like you are losing, but you are really gaining. God resists the proud, but He rewards the humble (James 4:6). The way up is down. The way to exaltation is humiliation. Remember the words of 1 Peter 5:6. “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you at the proper time.”

Discussion Questions

1. Why did God give Paul a thorn in the flesh?
2. What is humility?
3. Why is humility so important?

4. What does humility look like in daily life?
5. How can we become more humble?

KNOWLEDGE

2 Peter 3:18 “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

Sometimes people say, “What you don’t know can’t hurt you,” and, “ignorance is bliss”. But these sayings could not be more wrong. If you take a test without knowing the material, then you will fail. If a doctor tried to perform a surgery without understanding the problem, then he would hurt rather than heal. If you were given a large sum of money but lacked the knowledge to handle it wisely, then you would waste it and end up worse off than before. The truth is that ignorance is bitter, not bliss. What you don’t know can destroy you.

The Bible repeatedly stresses the importance of growing in knowledge. What kind of knowledge? Spiritual knowledge. **Spiritual knowledge is knowing God and His word.** All knowledge is not created equal. The kind of knowledge that we need most is an understanding of the Bible. A mastery of Biblical truth. But there is more to it than that. The kind of knowledge we are commanded to seek is not just a knowledge about God, but a knowledge of God; a personal, experiential, relational knowledge of God. This is what the Bible means in 2 Peter 3:18, “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” God wants us to grow in knowledge – to understand the Bible and the God who authored it.

The Importance of Knowledge

Why is it important for us to grow in knowledge? First, it is important because it is commanded. 2 Peter 3:18 says, “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” This is not a suggestion it is a command. 2 Peter 1:5 says, “For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with goodness, goodness with knowledge.”

Second, it is important to grow in knowledge to love and please God (Col 1:9-10). The more you know someone, the better you can love them. God wants you love Him (Mt 22:37), but your love will always be limited by your knowledge.

Third, it is important to grow in knowledge in order to know how to treat others. God wants you to love your neighbor (Mt 22:39). But what is love? What actions are loving, and what actions are unloving? What type of speech is kind, and what type is cruel? Knowledge of the Bible will help us know how to treat others right, and how to have healthy relationships.

Fourth, we must grow in knowledge in order to have eternal life. The Bible tells us exactly what we need to do to be forgiven of our sins and reconciled to God so that we can have eternal life. Jesus said, “This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and the one you have sent – Jesus Christ (Jn 17:3).” Without this knowledge we would spend eternity in hell.

Fifth, we must grow in knowledge so that we can make good decisions. Life is all about decisions. If you make good decisions, then you will live a good life. If you make bad decisions, then you will live a life of sorrow and regret. How can we learn to make good decisions? By growing in Biblical knowledge. The more your mind is renewed through the knowledge of the Bible (Rm 12:2), the easier it will be to make good decisions about money, relationships, work, marriage, parenting, morality, etc.

Sixth, it is important to grow in knowledge in order to avoid offending almighty God. We must serve God with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire (Heb 12:29). We should fear offending God more than anything else, because God is able to destroy both soul and body in hell (Mt 10:28). How can we avoid offending God? By growing in Biblical knowledge. Psalm 119:9 says, "How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping your word."

Seventh, it is important to grow in knowledge to be happy. Proverbs 2:10 says, "For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will delight you." Knowledge will give you great pleasure. It will deeply please you. The more you grow in knowledge, the more you will be able to enjoy life.

Three Ways to Grow in Knowledge

How can we grow in spiritual knowledge? First, read your Bible. Use a Bible reading plan and read a few pages of your Bible every day.

Second, study the Bible at church. When the pastor preaches, pay close attention as he explains God's word. When you gather in small group to study the Bible, listen closely.

Third, pray for more knowledge. Listen to how the apostle Paul prayed for the church in Colossae. "... we haven't stopped praying for you. We are asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding (Col 1:0)." Ask God to help you grow more in knowledge every day.

Be Careful

Before you get excited about growing in spiritual knowledge, there are a few dangers to keep in mind. First, the more you know, the more you are responsible for. God will judge the person with much knowledge more strictly than the person with very little knowledge (Lk 12:47-48). Jesus said, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, even more will be expected (Lk 12:48).

Second, knowledge tends to make a person prideful. 1 Corinthians 8:1 says, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." It is very tempting to look down on people who have less knowledge than you. Resist this temptation. Knowledge does not make you better than other people. What matters is faith working through love (Gal 5:6). Knowledge by itself is not an indicator of spiritual maturity. The devil knows more about the Bible than all the greatest theologians put together. The ultimate goal is not to merely master the truth, but to be mastered by the truth. To not merely know the truth, but to live it out.

Third, do not settle for knowledge about God; instead, push on to know Him personally. You may know all about President George Washington, but you do not know him personally. You can't know him, because he has been dead for many, many years. But God is not dead. He is alive. And He doesn't want you to merely know about Him; He wants you to know Him personally. The goal of knowledge is not just to know about God, but to grow closer to Him.

A survey by Pew Research found that fewer than half of adults could name all four Gospels. Only 40% knew that Job was a Biblical figure known for following God in the face of

great suffering. And 40% of adults seldom or rarely read the Bible.¹ How sad! The Bible is the greatest book ever written, and the only book written by God, yet so many people do not take the time to read and understand it. Be careful that you do not follow this trend. Follow the example of the old pastor George Muller, who loved the Bible so much that he read it over 200 times cover to cover in his life. He respected it so much that more than half of those were on his knees. The famous English preacher Charles Spurgeon wrote, “God’s Word is His witness or testimony to great and important truths concerning Himself and our relation to Him. We should desire to know this, and when we know it, we should believe it. Once we believe it, we should love it, and loving it, we should hold it tightly against all who try to take it away from us.”

Discussion Questions

1. Do agree with the statement, “Ignorance is bliss”? Explain.
2. What kind of knowledge does the Bible command us to develop?
3. Why is knowledge so important?
4. How can we grow in knowledge?
5. What are some of the potential dangers of growing in knowledge?

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GODLINESS

1 Timothy 4:7 “Train yourself in godliness.”

Only two people in all of history never died – Enoch and Elijah. Both were taken to heaven to be with God without ever having to experience death. The story of Enoch is found near the beginning of the Bible, in the book of Genesis. While we don’t know much about him, the Bible gives us two very important details about his character. Genesis 5:24 says, “Enoch walked with God; then he was not there because God took him.” Hebrews 11:5 says, “By faith Enoch was taken away, and so he did not experience death. He was not to be found because God took him away. For before he was taken away, he was approved as one who pleased God.” First, the Bible says that Enoch walked with God; he had a close friendship with God. Second, the Bible says that Enoch pleased God; he lived in conformity with God’s will. These are the two parts of godliness. Walking with God, and pleasing God. **Godliness is devotion to God resulting in a life that is pleasing to Him.** Like Enoch, it begins with devotion to God – a close, loving friendship with God. And then it translates into a lifestyle that is pleasing to God.²

Five Facts About Godliness

There are five important facts you need to know about godliness. First, godliness is God’s will for every Christian (2 Pt 3:11). We are commanded to train ourselves in godliness (1 Tim 4:7); to pursue godliness (1 Tim 6:11); and to make every effort to cultivate godliness (2 Pt 1:3-7).

Second, godliness is possible for every Christian. This is good news. You can become the person that God wants you to be. 2 Peter 1:3 says, “His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.”

Third, godliness should be the Christian’s priority. Growing in godliness should be the most important thing in your life. 1 Timothy 4:7 commands us to train for godliness. The word “train” means strenuous exertion, like a person training at the gym. The same effort and discipline that an athlete puts into training his body, Christians are to put into their growth in godliness. 1 Timothy 6:11 commands us to pursue godliness. The word “pursue” means unrelenting, persevering effort. 2 Peter 1:5-7 commands us to make every effort to grow in godliness. In other words, do your best; do whatever it takes. Godliness is to be the Christian’s priority. It is not something you work on after you do everything else; it should come first. It is more important than your finances, your career, your hobbies, your schoolwork, and even your physical health.

Fourth, godliness is not cultivated easily. We know this because we are told that it takes training – strenuous exertion. It takes pursuit – unrelenting, persevering effort. We are told to

² See “What is Godliness?” by Jerry Bridges. <https://bible.org/article/what-godliness>.

make every effort. Godliness does not come easily. It is the most important thing, but it is the hardest thing. If you give 50% effort, then you will be 100% ungodly. Growth in godliness takes 110% effort. Your flesh craves sin. The world offers you all the sin you could want. And the devil is constantly on the prowl, shooting his flaming darts of temptation at Christians. If you don't give it your all, you will not become a godly Christian.

Fifth, godliness has unlimited benefits. 1 Timothy 4:8 says, "For the training of the body has limited benefit, but godliness is beneficial in every way, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come." Godliness requires all your effort, but it is worth it. Unlike physical exercise, which has but limited benefits, godliness has unlimited benefits. It is beneficial in every way. It benefits us in this life, and in the life to come. Godliness benefits you when you are sick or healthy; when you are rich or poor; when you are married or single; when you are young or old. Godliness benefits your mind, your body, your soul, and your emotions. Godliness benefits you at home, at work, when you are alone, and when you are surrounded by people. Godliness benefits you in wartime and in peace time. It benefits you in every season of life. It benefits you in the prime of your life, or on your deathbed. Godliness benefits both you and everyone who interacts with you. Your children, spouse, family, friends, coworkers, community, and nation will benefit from your godliness. The Bible mentions many benefits of godliness. It leads to contentment (1 Tim 6:6). It is great gain (1 Tim 6:6). God will be your shield (Ps 5:12). God will make you stand like a strong mountain (Ps 30:7). God will give you victory/success (Ps 44:3; Ps 90:17). You will grow in intimacy with God (Ps 101:6). You will have an effective prayer life (1 Jn 3:22).

How to Grow More Godly

There are four steps you must take to grow in godliness. First, focus on God's goodness and greatness. The more clearly you see God's beauty, the more you will desire to know and please Him in all that you do.

Second, spend time working on your friendship with God. Friendships take time to develop – both quality time, and quantity time. Try to spend time alone with God as often as possible, talking to Him through prayer and singing, and listening to Him through His word.

Third, use God's word to identify and destroy any and all sin in your life. Remember, godliness is not just devotion, but a life that is pleasing to God. 2 Corinthians 5:9 says, "Therefore, whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to be pleasing to him."

Fourth, use God's word to identify and obey all of God's commands.

Discussion Questions

1. What is unique about Enoch and Elijah?
2. What are the two character traits of Enoch described in the Bible?
3. What is godliness?
4. Why is godliness important?

5. How can we grow in godliness?

HOLINESS

1 Peter 1:15-16 “But as the one who called you is holy, you also are to be holy in all your conduct; for it is written, Be holy, because I am holy.”

The word “holy” means “set apart.” In the Old Testament, “holy” is used to describe people, things, and places that were set apart for God for a special purpose. The temple was holy because it was set apart from other buildings for a special purpose. The high priest of Israel was holy because he was set apart from other men for a special purpose. He wore a hat with the words “holy to the Lord” inscribed on it. The Sabbath was holy because it was set apart from the other days of the week for a very special purpose. In the same way, Christians are holy because they have been set apart for a very special purpose for God. The moment that you trust in Christ Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you become holy. God sets you apart for Himself. In fact, Christians are called “saints” (holy ones) in the New Testament more than any other name.

Consider some of the ways that Christians are set apart for God. In Christ you are set apart as God’s child (Jn 1:12), God’s witness (Acts 1:8), God’s temple (1 Cor 6:19-20), God’s property (1 Cor 6:19-20), God’s servant (1 Cor 15:58), God’s representative (Col 3:23), and as a member of God’s church (1 Cor 12:27). Because you have been set apart in Christ, you are a saint. All Christians are saints – God’s holy ones.

Because God has set us apart for Himself, He has called us to be set apart from sin. In this sense, the word **holiness means moral blamelessness**. Through Christ God has forgiven our sins (Col 1:14), given us a new heart with the desire and power to overcome sin (Phil 2:13), and given us the indwelling Holy Spirit to help us grow in holiness (1 Cor 6:19-20). We have been blessed with all the resources we need to grow in holiness (Eph 1:3; 2 Pt 1:3). Now we have the responsibility to make every effort to grow in holiness (2 Pt 3:14). 1 Peter 1:15-16 says, “But as the one who called you is holy, you also are to be holy in all your conduct; for it is written, Be holy, because I am holy.”

So, Christians are holy in two ways. God has made us holy; now we must make ourselves holy. We are holy in our position; now we must pursue holiness in our practice. We have been set apart for God; now we must set ourselves apart from sin.

The Extent of Holiness

Two verses explain the extent of holiness. 1 Peter 1:15 says, “But as the one who called you his holy, you also are to be holy in all your conduct.” Holiness is to characterize *all your conduct*. Do not compartmentalize your pursuit of holiness. If you picture life as a pie, with each slice representing a different arena of your life, holiness must not only characterize one or two slices; instead, it must be the filling and flavor of every arena of your life. We must be holy in our words, our attitude, our finances, our health and fitness, our sobriety, our relationships, our sexuality, our thoughts, in what we listen to, in what we look at, and in the way we spend our time.

2 Corinthians 7:1 says, “So then, dear friends, since we have these promises, let us cleanse ourselves from every impurity of the flesh and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in

the fear of God.” Holiness is the elimination of *every impurity* from our lives. We cannot treat some sins as little, and some as big; some as insignificant, and some as significant. All sin is offensive to God, so we must cleanse ourselves from every impurity.

Reasons to Pursue Holiness

There are many reasons to pursue holiness. First, holiness is required for fellowship with God (Ps 15:1-2). Just as sin disrupts human relationships, it also disrupts your relationship with God. Holiness is required for an intimate friendship with the Lord.

Second, holiness is required for answered prayer (Ps 66:18). If we do not listen to God’s command to be holy, then God will not listen to our call for help.

Third, holiness is required for happiness (Ps 19:8). Sin doesn’t just divide, it disturbs. It is painful emotionally and physically. Happiness is the by-product of holiness.

Fourth, we should pursue holiness in view of the mercies of God (Rm 12:1). Because of all the good things God has done for us, and is doing for us, and promises to do for us in the future, we should show our gratitude by living holy lives.

Fifth, we should pursue holiness because it is the reason God saved us (Eph 1:4). God did not save us merely to keep us out of hell, but to live holy lives on earth.

Sixth, we should pursue holiness because it is the reason Christ died for us (Col 1:22). Christ died to save you not just from the penalty of sin, but also from the power and presence of sin. Considering all that Christ endured for us on the cross, we should thank Him by pursuing holiness.

Seventh, we should pursue holiness to be useful to the Master (2 Tim 2:21). God has set you apart for a special purpose; to be used by Him for His glory. But to be useful to God, you must be a clean vessel, and not a dirty vessel. God has to clean you up before He can use you. He must do a work in you before He can do a work through you. God uses imperfect people, but only imperfect people who are striving to grow in holiness.

Eighth, we should pursue holiness because without it no one will see the Lord (Heb 12:14). You cannot go to heaven without holiness. Holiness cannot save you, but it is the evidence that you have been saved. We are saved by grace through faith in the death of Christ in our place for our sins. But the proof that you have been saved from the punishment for sin is that you are being saved from the practice of sin.

How to Pursue Holiness

The pursuit of holiness is a simple enough process to understand. First, you must discover God’s standard of holiness through the study of His word (2 Timothy 3:16-17). God’s word shows us the path of holiness; it shows us when we have gotten off the path; it shows us how to get back on the path; and it shows us how to stay on the path.

Second, confess your sins to God (1 Jn 1:9). As you realize that your life does not measure up to God’s standard of holiness, you must confess your sins. There are four parts to Biblical confession. *Admit* your sin to God (agree with God that your behavior is sinful). *Apologize* to God for offending Him. *Affirm* your commitment to obedience. *Ask* for

forgiveness in Christ's name. When we confess our sins, God forgives us and cleanses us (changes us).

Third, after you have confessed your sins to God and received His forgiveness, pray for God's help to grow in holiness (1 Thess 3:13). Holiness is impossible to achieve without God's strength.

Fourth, imitate the moral character of God (1 Pt 1:15-16). God is holy. He is the standard of holiness; the definition of holiness. We must not compare ourselves to other people, because people are sinful.

Fifth, make every effort to be found without spot or blemish in the sight of God (2 Peter 3:14). Do whatever it takes, working with all your heart, to be holy. Holiness is not possible unless you strive for it with all of your might.

Discussion Questions

1. What is holiness?
2. Why is holiness important?
3. How can we grow in holiness?
4. What are the biggest challenges to growing in holiness?
5. What parts of your life should be holy?

SAVING FAITH

Galatians 3:11 “Now it is clear that no one is justified before God by the law, because the righteous will live by faith.”

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. He was a ruler of the Jews. Most of his colleagues were against Jesus, but Nicodemus saw something special in Jesus. He knew that only a man sent from God could perform such miracles. He went to talk Jesus at night, probably so that his peers would not know about it. Jesus told him exactly what he needed to hear. The way to salvation. The most popular verse in the Bible comes from this conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus. Jesus said, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life (John 3:16, KJV).” Jesus said in the clearest terms that the way to eternal life is by faith.

There are two kinds of faith. First, there is *living faith*, or faith for victorious Christian living. This is confidence in God, that He is who He says He is, and that He will do what He says He will do. Second, there is *saving faith* – the focus of this chapter. Saving faith is required for salvation. It is the starting point of the Christian life. It is the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian; heaven and hell. Being a very moral person, with all the virtues – generosity, honesty, purity, courage, and love – is pointless without saving faith. You will simply be a very moral resident of hell.

2 Corinthians 13:5 says, “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith. Examine yourselves. Or do you yourselves not recognize that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless you fail the test.” We must learn the true nature of saving faith so that we can test ourselves to see if our faith is genuine. If it is not, then we will know it, and we can change.

We are Saved by Faith

The first thing that needs to be said about saving faith is that salvation is by faith. Faith is the key that unlocks the door of salvation. Ephesians 2:8 “For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift.” Faith is the ticket to heaven. It is the condition that must be met in order to receive the blessings of salvation.

What is Saving Faith?

So what is saving faith? Saving faith is **relying on Jesus Christ alone for salvation**. But let’s get more specific. There is a kind of faith that saves, and there is a kind of faith – false faith – that condemns. Let’s begin by describing what saving faith is NOT.

Saving Faith is NOT...

First, saving faith is not mere mental assent, or agreeing with a set of propositions about Jesus Christ. If you believe in Jesus – that he exists, that He is the Son of God, that He died on the cross for the sins of the world, that He is God’s only provision for sin, that He rose from the grave, that He is the Messiah – are you saved? Not necessarily. Satan and his demons believe all those things, and they are not saved (James 2:19).

Second, saving faith is not mere strong belief. Saving faith has to have the right object. It is not enough to believe – you must also believe in the right thing. You can believe in something with all your heart, but that doesn’t necessarily benefit you. You can believe with all your heart that two packs of cigarettes a day will keep the doctor away, but the cigarettes are still going to kill you. You can believe something with all your heart, but that doesn’t make it true. You can believe with all your heart that the earth is flat, but it is still going to be round.

Third, saving faith is not without repentance. Mark 1:15 says, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” The true believer doesn’t remain in sin. True faith is not just mental, it is physical. It is not just a way of thinking, it is a way of living. Faith without repentance is not saving faith. The person who believes in Jesus but doesn’t turn from sin simply believes in Jesus so that he can keep sinning and get away with it; so he can continue in rebellion against God without facing the consequences. Faith is a two-sided coin; one side is faith, and the other side is repentance. You cannot cling to Jesus if you are holding on to sin.

Fourth, saving faith is not relying upon good works. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, “For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift— not from works, so that no one can boast.” Salvation is not by faith *and* works. It is by faith, *not* works. The true believer does not try to earn his way to heaven with good works. He does not believe it is even possible to earn his way to heaven with good works. He understands that if God treated him according to his works, his wages would be death and destruction (Romans 6:23).

Fifth, saving faith is not boastful. The person with true faith doesn’t see anything in himself that is deserving of salvation. He doesn’t see himself as a good person, or a good Christian, or good enough to go to heaven. The true believer is not proud of himself but boasts in nothing but the cross (Galatians 6:14). The true believer does not believe in himself but boasts only in the Lord (1 Corinthians 1:31). The true believer is poor in spirit, recognizing his sinfulness and need for a savior (Matthew 5:3). True believers are humble – they see how sinful they are and put no faith in themselves (James 4:10).

Sixth, saving faith is not relying upon religious rituals. Galatians 5:6 says, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision accomplishes anything; what matters is faith working through love.” Circumcision was the most important of all Jewish rituals. Yet in Christ – now that Christ has come – circumcision accomplishes nothing. And neither does baptism, or communion, or penance, or confession, or any religious ritual. There are some rituals that must be practiced out of obedience, but not to merit salvation. The ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper are to be practiced by people after they get saved, not in order to get saved.

Saving Faith IS...

So what is saving faith? First, saving faith is *relying* upon Jesus Christ. Remember. Saving faith is not mere mental assent. It is not merely agreeing with certain propositions about Jesus. It is relying upon Jesus Christ. Faith is not merely believing that Jesus is who He says He is; it is trusting in Him, depending on Him, and relying upon Him for salvation. It is believing that you are a sinner (Romans 3:23). It is believing that you deserve to go to hell (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). It is believing that the cross of Jesus Christ is the only way you can be saved (Acts 4:12). And it is calling on Jesus to save you.

Second, saving faith is relying upon *Jesus Christ*. Saving faith is not mere strong belief. It is essential that your faith is centered on the right object. What must we believe about Jesus Christ to be saved? Certainly, we must believe all that the Bible teaches about Jesus Christ – He is the eternal Son of God, co-equal with the Father; He is the Messiah promised by the Old Testament; He died for the sins of the world and rose again. But specifically, we must have faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ – that Christ died in our place, for our sins, to reconcile us to God. Romans 3:25 (HCSB) says, “God presented Him as a propitiation through faith in His blood...”

Third, saving faith is relying upon Christ *alone*. It relies on Christ, and it does not rely upon anything else – not good works, not religious rituals, not personal righteousness. When you ask a true believer why God would let him into heaven, He doesn’t talk about his performance, his effort, his virtue, or his devotion. He speaks of only one thing – His faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Fourth, saving faith is obedient. Saving faith is not without repentance. Real faith doesn’t make you sinless, but you sin less and feel worse. It is not perfection, but direction. The direction of your life is to follow God’s will. Your sincere desire is to be fully pleasing to God, even though you still wrestle with sin. John 8:31 says, “Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you continue in my word, you really are my disciples.””

Fifth, saving faith is a relationship with Christ. Saving faith is more than just believing things about Jesus. It is establishing a relationship with Jesus. It is not just the desire for heaven; it is the desire for Jesus. It is not merely the desire to escape hell, but to be reconciled to Jesus Christ. John 1:12 says, “But to all who did receive him, he gave them the right to be children of God, to those who believe in his name.” Saving faith doesn’t just believe, it receives. It opens the heart and invites Jesus to come in and live and take over. Jesus said in Revelation 3:20, “Listen! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and have dinner with him, and he with Me.” Jesus doesn’t just want to save you from hell; and He doesn’t just want to clean up your behavior. He wants to come into your life and have fellowship and friendship with you. And saving faith is receiving that relationship with Jesus.

Saving faith can be simplified by breaking it down into two decisions. First, it is the decision to *deny self-righteousness and depend Christ*. Rather than trusting in your good works, it is trusting in Christ’s work on the cross for you. It is the admission of guilt, and of the total inability to save yourself. Second, saving faith is the decision to *deny self-rule and devote*

yourself to Christ. It is the decision to repent of your sins; to hand the steering wheel of your life to Jesus Christ and follow Him as King.

Discussion Questions

1. What is saving faith?
2. What does it mean that salvation is by faith?
3. What are some of the characteristics of false faith?
4. How do you know if your faith in Jesus is real?
5. Why is it important to have saving faith?

LIVING FAITH

Jeremiah 17:7 “The person who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence indeed is the Lord, is blessed.”

Did you know that Jesus was only amazed two times? And both times it had to do with faith. In Mark 6, Jesus was amazed at the unbelief in His hometown of Nazareth. It says that there was so much unbelief there that He was unable to do a miracle, and He was amazed at their unbelief (Mk 6:5-6). The second time that Jesus was amazed is found in Luke 7. A Roman Centurion, a Gentile, asked Jesus to heal his servant who was sick. The Centurion said several things that revealed his great faith. He told Jesus that he was unworthy to have Jesus visit his home. This showed that He believed that Jesus was no mere man. As well, He was confident that all Jesus had to do was to say the word for his servant to be healed. He did not need to visit the servant, or meet the servant, or see the servant, or touch the servant, or pray for the servant. Just by saying the word, he would be healed. Luke 7:9 says, “Jesus heard this and was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, ‘I tell you, I have not found so great a faith even in Israel.’” Jesus was amazed at belief and unbelief because faith is so important.

What is Living Faith?

There are two kinds of faith. The first is saving faith – relying on Jesus Christ alone for salvation. Saving faith is the way we begin the Christian life. It is the way we inherit eternal life (see John 1:12).

The second kind of faith, living faith, is the focus of this chapter. Living faith is the faith we need to live the Christian life on a daily basis. **Living faith is confidence in God, that He is who He says He is, and that He will do what He says He will do.** Jeremiah 17:7 says, “The person who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence indeed is the Lord, is blessed.” Hebrews 11:1 (ESV) says, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

Six Reasons You Need Faith

Why do you need saving faith? First, faith empowers you for costly obedience. Faith is what enabled Daniel to disobey the king’s order not to pray for thirty days, even at the threat of being thrown in the lion’s den (Dan 6:23).

Second, faith enables you to receive God’s blessings. Jesus was unable to perform miracles in his hometown because of their lack of faith (Mk 6:5-6).

Third, faith is the only way to pray with power and consistency. Mathew 21:22 says, “And if you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.” Without faith you will not have the desire to pray, or the strength to keep praying when God doesn’t answer your prayers right away, or the way you want.

Fourth, faith helps you to be obedient, even when the devil is tempting you. The Bible calls faith a shield that can extinguish all the flaming arrows of Satan (Eph 6:16).

Fifth, faith empowers you to please God, because you believe God exists and will reward you for seeking Him (Heb 11:6).

Sixth, faith energizes you to serve God, because you believe that He is watching everything you do and will one day reward you for it (1 Thess 1:3).

Four Things Faith is Not

There are four things faith is not. First, faith is not sowing a seed. Some preachers teach the concept of seed money, claiming that if you sow your money into their ministry, then you will reap financial and other blessings in return. The more money you sow, the more faith is required, and the bigger harvest you will reap. This is not faith. This is a way for greedy preachers to grow rich. It is also an act of greed on the part of the giver, because your desire is not the glory of God, but your own wealth. Also, there is no guarantee that God will bless you in a specific way. When you give to His work for the right reasons, God will bless you, but how and when is totally up to Him. It may or may not be a financial blessing, and it may or may not be in this life.

Second, faith is not positive affirmation, or positive confession. This is sometimes called “name it, claim it” theology. According to this view, the way to receive God’s blessings is to name what you want God to do for you, and then verbally claim that you will receive it. You must claim it with all confidence. For example, if you want God to heal your mother’s cancer, then you simply need to name it – “Lord, please heal my mother,” – and claim it – “My mom is healed. God is going to heal her. This will not end in death.” Along with this idea of faith is that of positive speaking. If you say anything contrary to what you want to happen, then it will not happen. You must not speak of the possibility that things may not work out exactly as you wish, or they will. The problem is that this makes man to be God. Instead of praying for God’s will, man is declaring that his own will be done. But we don’t know God’s plan. We cannot “name it and claim it” if God has not willed it. Sometimes it is not God’s will for you to be healed, or to get the promotion. Instead, we must realize that we do not always know God’s will, and that He does not have to answer our prayers according to our desires. He knows what is best; we must submit to His will when it differs from ours. Before His crucifixion Jesus prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will (Mt 26:39).” Pastor Larry Osborne wrote, “The Bible doesn’t guarantee that if you have enough faith, if you think positively, if you confess positively, if you plant your seed, that your faith will make everything better. You can’t have faith that God will fix everything because God doesn’t promise to fix everything this side of heaven. God promises to fix everything on the other side of heaven.”

Third, faith is not acting as if. There are people who are convinced that faith is acting as if something has already happened. For example, some parents don’t take their kids to the doctor when they fall sick. They just pray and wait. To take the child to the doctor would be a

lack of faith. Many of these children died and the parents have gone to jail. Once again, the problem is that we don't always know God's will and God's plan. God doesn't always heal every sickness or mend every marriage. Christians don't always win in this life.

Fourth, faith is not merely strong belief. What makes faith valuable is the object of your faith. You can believe with all your heart that the sun revolves around the earth, but that doesn't make it true. The most important thing about your faith is not your level of sincerity, or how strong your faith is, but the object of your faith. The important thing is that you believe in the God of the Bible, and that you believe the correct things about the God of the bible, and in the promises that God has made.

Three Marks of Genuine Faith

There are three marks of genuine faith. First, faith trusts God enough to do what He says. The Bible is filled with examples of obedient faith. The most shocking example is Abraham, when he sacrificed his beloved son in obedience to God. Hebrews 11:17 says, "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac." God commanded Abraham to do the unthinkable; the hardest, most costly thing possible. But Abraham trusted that God's will is best. That's faith.

Second, faith has inner peace in times of difficulty. Think of faith as the opposite of fear and worry. It is the antidote to fear and worry. Worry and fear can only exist in the absence of faith. People without faith or with weak faith worry, and panic, and freak out during difficult times. We see this in a story of Jesus and His disciples in Matthew 8. They got into a boat, and a violent storm arose, but Jesus just slept right through it. Even though they had God incarnate on the boat with them, the disciples were terrified. So Jesus said in Matthew 8:26, "'Why are you afraid, you of little faith?' Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm." Faith trusts God when things go south; that God is good; that God is in control; that God is going to work it all out for good; that God is going to do what's best. This is what confidence in God looks like. Isaiah 26:3 says, "You will keep the mind that is dependent on you in perfect peace, for it is trusting in you."

Third, faith praises God in times of difficulty. When someone has a lack of faith and they go through hard times, they question God's goodness. They question God's existence. They question God's sovereignty. And they sometimes get angry with God. They shake their fist at God. They may stop going to church, or stop praying, or stop serving God. But faith does something different. Faith has so much confidence in God that it is able to praise God even during the hard times. In other words, "Even though God is allowing this to happen, God is good, and God is great." A great example of this is Job. The Bible says that Job was a righteous man, but in one day his ten children were killed, all of his livestock was either stolen or destroyed, and all of his servants were killed except for four. After all of this Job said in Job 1:21, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will leave this life. The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

Discussion Questions

1. What is the difference between living faith and saving faith?
2. Why do you need living faith?
3. How can you grow your faith?
4. What are some wrong ideas about faith?
5. What are the marks of genuine faith?

THANKFULNESS

1 Thessalonians 5:18 “give thanks in everything; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

The gospel of Luke tells a story about the importance of thankfulness (Luke 17:11-19). As Jesus was entering a village, ten men with leprosy begged Him for healing. And He did. But only one of the ten returned to thank Jesus. Jesus was clearly disappointed. He said, “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Didn’t any return to give glory to God except this foreigner?” The story reveals two lessons about thankfulness. First, Jesus expects us to take the time to give thanks to Him. In fact, He said that giving thanks glorifies God. “Didn’t any return to give glory to God except this foreigner?” Second, the majority of people do not practice thankfulness. Only one of the ten lepers returned to give thanks. On the one hand, we must learn to be thankful. On the other hand, it is not going to be easy. Our tendency is to focus on the bad and forget the blessings.

What is Thankfulness?

What is thankfulness? **Thankfulness is gratitude for blessings.**³ It is heartfelt gratitude to God, expressed in response to His love and mercy.⁴ Author Jerry Bridges wrote, “Thankfulness to God is a recognition that God in His goodness and faithfulness has provided for us and cared for us, both physically and spiritually. It is a recognition that we are totally dependent upon Him; that all that we are and have comes from God.”

Three Essential Aspects of Thankfulness

There are three essential aspects of thankfulness. First, thankfulness requires appreciation. To appreciate is to understand the true nature of a situation and realize why it is important or serious.⁵ Thankfulness appreciates, or truly understands the source of the gift and the significance of the gift. 1) Thankfulness appreciates the source of the gift. To be thankful you must understand that every good thing is a blessing from God (James 1:17). Nothing good comes to us but from the loving hand of God. 2) Thankfulness also appreciates the significance of the gift; that every gift from God is extremely valuable because it comes from almighty God, and it is received by an unworthy sinner. To appreciate God’s gifts is to realize that every good gift is from God, and God’s gifts are undeserved.

A second aspect of thankfulness is that it reacts with words. Thankfulness is not merely a feeling; it must be expressed with our words. Psalm 109:30 says, “I will fervently thank the LORD with my mouth.” There are three ways to give thanks with our words. 1) We should give thanks when we pray. Prayer should not be only asking for help, but also giving thanks (Col 4:2). 2) We should give thanks through singing (Ps 28:7). The Lord is honored when we sing praises to Him with heartfelt gratitude. 3) We should give thanks by telling others how the Lord

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⁴ Dictionary of Bible Themes Scripture index copyright Martin H. Manser, 2009.

⁵ <https://www.macmillandictionary.com/us/dictionary/american/appreciate>

has been good to us. Psalm 9:1 says, "I will thank the Lord with all my heart; I will declare all your wondrous works." Not only should we thank the Lord, but we should declare His works to others.

A third aspect of thankfulness is that it responds with action. Thankfulness is not just a feeling, nor is it expressed with words only; gratitude must be shown by our actions. Thanksgiving must result in thanks-living. A thankful life is the result of a thankful heart.

Thankful Acts

There are four ways to show our gratitude to God through our actions. First, we give thanks by being obedient to God's commands. Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commands" (Jn 14:15). The person who is thankful for God's gifts is obedient to God's commands.

Second, we give thanks with our actions by not complaining. Philippians 2:14 (ERV) says, "Do everything without complaining or arguing." Complaining and thanksgiving are opposites. Complaining is praising your problems; thanksgiving is praising God. To complain is not just to neglect praise, but to say that God is bad. It is offensive when someone fails to give thanks. But when that person also complains, it adds insult to injury.

Third, we give thanks with our actions by being cheerful. Philippians 4:4 says, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" The thankful person is joyful; cheerful. He lives with a song in his heart, and a smile on his face. To be depressed, or perpetually sad, is to express sorrow rather than thanksgiving. There is a time for sorrow, but thanksgiving is commanded all the time. Ephesians 5:20 "giving thanks always for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." A cheerful attitude says, "God is good! It is good to be a Christian!" A sour attitude says, "God is not good! There are no advantages to being a Christian."

Fourth, we give thanks with our actions by serving God. In the first chapter of the gospel of Mark, Jesus met Peter's mother-in-law when she was sick, and He healed her. Immediately she got up and started serving Jesus and His disciples. That's how gratitude should be expressed. Serve the Lord who has first served you. If you truly appreciate all that God has done for you, then you can't help but devote your life to His service. No one needs to recruit you; no one needs to twist your arm; nobody needs to guilt-trip you into serving. It is your joy to serve God because He has been so good to you.

Three Ways to Get Better at Thankfulness

Here are three suggestions to help you get better at the grace of thankfulness. First, add thanksgiving to your daily prayer time. When you pray, it is good to ask God meet your needs; but remember to thank God for all He has done.

Second, give thanks before meals. Before you eat, take a moment to bow your head, close your eyes, and give thanks for your food, and for any of God's other gifts.

Third, sing with your whole heart in church. Sometimes people don't sing at all; sometimes they sing without any passion or energy; and sometimes they sing without really thinking about the meaning of the words. Corporate worship is a great opportunity to give

thanks. It is to be a time of cheering for God and thanking Him for His mercy and grace. Psalm 138:1 says, "I will give you thanks with all my heart; I will sing your praise before the heavenly beings."

Discussion Questions

1. What is thankfulness?
2. Why is thankfulness so important?
3. When is it challenging to be thankful?
4. Are you good at the grace of thankfulness?
5. What are some ways that you can grow in thankfulness?

COURAGE

Psalm 31:24 “Be strong, and let your heart be courageous, all you who put your hope in the Lord.”

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon made a gold statue – a huge gold statue. It was ninety feet tall and nine feet wide. Then he invited all the government officials to join him for the statue’s dedication ceremony. He commanded the officials, “When you hear the music, you must worship the gold statue. If you refuse, you will immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire to be burned alive.” This was a problem for three Jewish officials named Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They were devoted to the one true God – the God of the Bible. God had forbidden them from worshiping other gods. They were faced with a very tough decision. On the one hand, they could worship the gold statue. This would be a great sin against God, but at least they would live to see another day. On the other hand, they could disobey the king’s command and refuse to bow down. This option would please the Lord, but it would probably lead to a very painful and terrifying death. To make the right decision, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego needed courage. They needed the strength to do the right thing no matter the cost. And that is exactly what they did. They refused to bow down. Sure enough, they were arrested and brought before the king, who threw them into the fiery furnace. But God did not abandon them. Their story is one of the most amazing miracles in the Bible. When they were thrown into the fiery furnace, God sent an angel to protect them. King Nebuchadnezzar said, “Look! There are four men walking around in the fire, and one of them looks like a son of the gods!” Not only that, but the fire had no effect on their bodies. Not a hair on their heads was singed, their clothes were untouched, and they did not even smell like fire. The fire only burned the ropes off their wrists! The three men were removed from the fire, rewarded, and promoted. The king made a law prohibiting anyone from saying anything offensive against their God.

What is Courage?

The story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is about courage. What is courage? **Courage is doing what is right no matter the cost.** No matter the consequences. No matter the sacrifice. Courage is not the absence of fear, it is refusing to let fear stop you from doing the right thing. Courage is letting the Holy Spirit guide you rather than being ruled by fear. Everyone gets scared. Everyone is afraid of something. Fear is a natural, normal, healthy human emotion. But without courage, fear can prevent you from doing God’s will.

Courage is essential for following Jesus. Doing God’s will is not easy. It is much easier to sin. Doing God’s will could mean the loss of income, the loss of your job, getting kicked out of college, getting sued, getting laughed at, getting rejected, or even getting physically attacked. All through the ages God’s people have been persecuted for His sake. It takes courage to say no to sin, when everyone else is saying yes. It takes courage to speak up for God, when

everyone else is keeping quiet. It takes courage to imitate Christ, when it will make you look very different from everyone else. Following Jesus often leads not to green pastures and quiet waters, but to the fiery furnace, the lion's den, the jail cell, and the cross. It takes great courage to be a Christian.

The Importance of Courage

Why must we develop courage? First, the Bible commands it. Joshua 1:9 says, "Haven't I commanded you: Be strong and courageous? Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." Allowing fear to rule your behavior is a sin.

Second, the fear of man is a trap. Proverbs 29:25 says, "The fear of man is a snare, but the one who trusts in the Lord is protected." The fear of man is a trap in two ways. First, we assume that the wrath of man is worse than the wrath of God. When you sin to avoid the wrath of man, you are choosing instead to face the wrath of God. Jesus made it clear that this is a foolish decision. Luke 11:4-6 says, "I say to you, my friends, don't fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. But I will show you the one to fear: Fear him who has authority to throw people into hell after death. Yes, I say to you, this is the one to fear!" In other words, all people can do to you is hurt you temporarily. The worst they can do is kill you. But God has the power to throw you in hell for all eternity. Second, the fear of man is a trap because we assume that the rewards of man are greater than the rewards of God. How foolish this is! Man offers us a cardboard box, but God offers us a kingdom! Mark 10:29-30 says, "Truly I tell you," Jesus said, "there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, who will not receive a hundred times more, now at this time —houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions —and eternal life in the age to come."

Third, we must develop courage because God expects us to suffer for His sake. We are not commanded to do God's will as long as it is easy, safe, and cheap. He wants us to follow Him into the furnace, if necessary. 2 Timothy 3:12 says, "In fact, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." We need courage because hardship and persecution are no excuse for disobedience. We must do God's will even when it hurts. This is what Jesus meant when He said in Luke 9:23, "If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me." To deny yourself is to do God's will rather than your own. To take up your cross is to do God's will no matter the cost – even to the death.

Fourth, we must develop courage because Christ was courageous for us. When Christ came to earth, He faced rejection, mockery, false accusations, slander, torture, and death for us. Make no mistake, this took great courage. Should we avoid pain for Christ, when Christ embraced it for us? Should we run from the cross when Christ embraced for us? If Christ was willing to save us no matter the cost, we should have the courage to do His will no matter the cost.

Fourteen Reasons You Don't Need to Fear

1. There is no need to fear *death*, because it is a promotion. Philippians 1:21 says, “For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” Why? The moment you die you will wake up in paradise with Jesus.
2. There is no need to fear *pain*, because it is only temporary. The Bible calls pain “our momentary light affliction (2 Cor 4:17).”
3. There is no need to fear *being different*, because when we are different, we are like Jesus. Jesus said, “If the world hates you, understand that it hated me before it hated you (Jn 15:18).”
4. There is no need to fear *being alone*, because God will always be with us. The Lord has promised, “I will never leave you or abandon you (Heb 13:6).”
5. There is no need to fear *persecution*, because earthly rejection means heavenly rewards. Jesus said when you are persecuted, “Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven (Mt 5:11-12).”
6. There is no need to fear *suffering*, because God uses it for our growth. Hebrews 13:7 says, “Endure suffering as discipline: God is dealing with you as sons. For what son is there that a father does not discipline?”
7. There is no need to fear *adversity*, because God works all things together for our good (Rm 8:28).
8. There is no need to fear sudden *danger*, for the Lord will keep your foot from a snare (Pr 3:25-26).
9. There is no need to fear *poverty*, because God will provide for you. Philippians 4:19 says, “And my God will supply all your needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”
10. There is no need to fear *loss*, because God will comfort you. 2 Corinthians 1:4 says, “He comforts in all our affliction.”
11. There is no need to fear *sickness*, because God will heal you. James 5:15 says, “The prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up.”
12. There is no need to fear the *devil*, because the evil one cannot touch you (1 Jn 5:18).
13. There is no reason to fear *hell*, because nothing can separate you from the love of God (Rm 8:35-39).
14. There is no need to fear *the odds*, because the Lord is your helper (Heb 13:6).

How to Become More Courageous

How can we grow in courage? First, die to the world. We lack courage because we fear losing the things of this world – money, luxury, reputation, admiration, etc. Galatians 6:14 says, “The world has been crucified to me through the cross, and I to the world.” Why fear losing the world when it is not your home anyway? You are just passing through. Your home is in heaven, an indescribable, eternal paradise. Your purpose is not to enjoy this world, but to reach the world for Christ. But to reach the world, you must first die to the world.

Second, have faith in God. Fear and faith are opposites. When the disciples feared the storm, Jesus said to them, “Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith (Mk 4:40)?” Fear is the absence of faith. Fear runs from faith. Have faith in God and His word. Trust that He is who He says He is, and that He will do what He says He will do. Have faith that God is in control, and nothing can happen to you unless He allows it. And if He allows it, it will work out for you good (Rm 8:28).

Three Lessons About Courage

When Moses died, Joshua took over the reins as the leader of Israel. His first reaction was fear. How could he possibly lead an entire nation to not only flourish, but to be loyal to God? In Joshua 1:7-9, the Lord encouraged Joshua with these words. “Above all, be strong and very courageous to observe carefully the whole instruction my servant Moses commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right or the left, so that you will have success wherever you go. This book of instruction must not depart from your mouth; you are to meditate on it day and night so that you may carefully observe everything written in it. For then you will prosper and succeed in whatever you do. Haven’t I commanded you: be strong and courageous? Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” Joshua’s story teaches us three lessons about courage.

First, the Lord told Joshua why He would need courage – to be fully obedient. Remember, obedience is not always easy; in fact, it is most often difficult and costly. We need courage to be obedient no matter the price.

Second, the Lord told Joshua the reward for courage – success wherever you go. Courage gives you the strength to be obedient, and obedience to God’s word is true success in life.

Third, the Lord told Joshua how to find courage. 1) Meditate on God’s word constantly. The Bible is God’s encouragement to us. It reminds us of who we are, who God is, what God has promised, what God has done, what God will do, and why we don’t need to be afraid. To be courageous, read God’s word deeply and daily. 2) Remember that God is with you wherever you go. If God is for us, who can be against us? If God is on our side, what can man do to us? Romans 8:31 says, “What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?”

From now on, be strong and courageous. Do God’s will no matter the cost. Do what is right and leave the consequences to God.

Discussion Questions

1. What is courage?
2. Is courage the same as fearlessness?
3. Why do we need courage?
4. Have you ever struggled with fear? Explain.

5. How can we grow in courage?

HONESTY

Colossians 3:9 “Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old self with its practices.”

Ananias and his wife Sapphira were members of the first church in Jerusalem. It was an exciting time to be a Christian, as everyone in the church was giving freely and generously of their finances to help those in need. A man named Barnabas sold a field he owned and gave the money to the church. So, Ananias and Sapphira decided to take part in this culture of generosity. They sold a piece of property, gave some of the money, and kept some of the money for themselves. No problem with that. However, they lied, claiming to give all the money to the church. Then God did something frightening. He displayed His hatred of lying by causing Ananias and Sapphira to instantly drop dead (See Acts 5:1-11). Their story illustrates the importance of honesty.

What is Honesty?

Honesty is speaking the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. To put it negatively, we must avoid every kind of dishonesty.

Six Reasons to be Honest

There are six reasons we must be honest. First, God commands us to be honest. Ephesians 4:25 says, “Therefore, putting away lying, speak the truth, each one to his neighbor, because we are members of one another.” The ninth commandment says, “Do not give dishonest testimony against your neighbor (Dt 5:20).” When you lie to your neighbor, you rebel against God.

Second, we must be honest because God hates lying. Proverbs 12:22 says, “Lying lips are detestable to the Lord, but faithful people are his delight.” Proverbs 6:6-19 lists six things that God hates, and two of the seven are a lying tongue, and a lying witness who gives false testimony. If you love God, then you hate the things that He hates.

Third, we must be honest because God is honest. Exodus 34:6 says, “The Lord – the Lord is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and truth.” Jesus described Himself as “the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6). The Holy Spirit is called “the Spirit of truth” (Jn 15:26). To be Christlike, we must be honest. When we lie, we imitate the devil rather than God. The devil “does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he tells a lie, he speaks from his own nature, because he is a liar and the father of lies (Jn 8:44).”

Fourth, we must be honest to avoid being punished by God. Proverbs 19:9 says, “A false witness will not go unpunished, and one who utters lies perishes.” Revelation 21:8 says, “But the cowards, faithless, detestable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars—their share will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.” Telling the truth may be hard sometimes, but nothing is worse than the wrath of God.

Fifth, we must be honest to love our neighbors. The greatest commandment is to love God, and then to love your neighbor as yourself. But lying is not loving. 1 Corinthians 13:6

says, “Love finds no joy in unrighteousness but rejoices in the truth.” Proverbs 25:18 says, “A person giving false testimony against his neighbor is like a club, a sword, or a sharp arrow.”

Sixth, we must be honest because lying is self-destructive. When you lie and sin against God, you expose yourself to God’s discipline. You damage your reputation, ruin your credibility, and destroy your witness. Nobody will want to hear what you have to say about Jesus if you are a known liar.

Eight Types of Dishonesty

There are many ways that people fail to be completely honest. One: Lying. Thomas Watson wrote, “To lie is to speak that which one knows to be an untruth.” There are many ways to lie. Lying to get out of trouble. Lying on your taxes. Plagiarism – copying someone else’s words and claiming them as your own. Falsifying reports and fudging the numbers at work. Lying about your record and accomplishments on a job application. Cheating on a test.

Two: Perjury – lying under oath in a court of law after swearing on the Bible to tell “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God.” Zechariah 8:17 says, “Do not love perjury, for I hate all this – this is the Lord’s declaration.”

Three: Flattery – insincere or excessive praise intended to manipulate (Source Unknown). Flattery is dishonestly complimenting someone, or agreeing with someone, or laughing at someone’s jokes in order to influence them to reward you in some way. Proverbs 26:28 says, “A flattering mouth causes ruin.”

Four: Not telling the whole truth. Rather than making a false claim, we intentionally leave out an important detail which might get us in trouble. A woman called her pastor and said that her husband had become physical with her, grabbing and restraining her. When the pastor sat down with the couple together, the whole truth came out. While eating dinner she had become angry, grabbed her husband’s plate, and slammed it over his head, causing a big cut. Then she grabbed a steak knife to stab him, so he grabbed her wrist and restrained her. She left out these important details when she first called the pastor.⁶

Five: Hypocrisy. A hypocrite is someone who pretends to be what they are not. A girl who acts pious at church, but then sinful at school. A boy who pretends to be devoted to Christ in front of his parents but acts sinfully when his parents aren’t watching. A man who claims to tithe but doesn’t.

Six: Exaggeration – making the truth sound better than it is. Claiming to have caught ten fish when you only caught five. We tend to exaggerate when we use the words “always” and “never.” “I always do this.” “I never do that.” Always and never are “God-words,” because they can only be used accurately when describing the character of God. God is always holy; He never sins.

Seven: Lying to get a compliment. People will say bad things about themselves, even though they don’t mean it, just to get others to compliment them.

Eight: Slander – lying about others to hurt them, or to get an advantage over them. Jesus was the victim of slander. He was accused of being a friend of sinners, a glutton, a drunkard, and a Satan worshiper.

⁶ I heard this story in a sermon by Mark Driscoll.

The Cure for Lying

Why do people lie? They lie because they do not trust God to take care of them. They fear the truth will ruin them. They fear that if they tell the truth, they will lose everything near and dear to them. Therefore, the cure for lying is faith. Trust God to care for you; to provide for you. Tell the truth, and let God handle the fallout. The truth may bring you some short-term discomfort, but it will spare you long-term problems, along with God's eternal wrath. You may lie and avoid temporary hardship, but you will strike your conscience and rob yourself of God's blessings. Don't lie. It is better to lose favor with man than fellowship with God.

Make a commitment to honesty. It is the best policy. Tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Discussion Questions

1. What is honesty?
2. Why is honesty important?
3. What are the different kinds of dishonesty?
4. Have you ever told a lie?
5. How can you grow in honesty?

CONTENTMENT

Hebrews 13:5 “Keep your life free from the love of money. Be satisfied with what you have, for he himself has said, I will never leave you or abandon you.”

Ahab was the king of Israel. He was wealthy, famous, and powerful. But he was not satisfied. There was always something out there that he needed in order to be happy. At one point, it was his neighbor's property. His neighbor, Naboth, owned a vineyard, and Ahab wanted it for himself because it was right next to his palace. Ahab offered to buy it from Naboth, or to give him a better field in its place, but Naboth declined. His vineyard was not for sale. Ahab got depressed and angry. He laid down on his bed, turned his face to the wall, and refused to eat. When Ahab's wife, Jezebel, discovered the reason for his bad mood, she assured him that she would fix the problem. Jezebel sent letters from the king to the leaders in the city and instructed them to proclaim a fast and hold an assembly. She told them to seat two wicked men next to Naboth and to falsely accuse him of cursing God and the king. Then they were to take him out and stone him to death. These things took place just as Jezebel had planned, and Ahab was able to acquire the vineyard. But that's not the end of the story. The Lord saw everything that Jezebel had done. He sent the prophet Elijah to tell Ahab that God was going to kill him, his wife, and wipe out all the males from his family so that the throne would be stripped from his family (see 1 Kings 21). King Ahab's sin was discontentment. He was dissatisfied with what God had given him. He thought he needed more of the things of this world to be happy. And his discontentment was destructive. It led to covetousness, jealousy, anger, depression, loss of appetite, theft, murder, and ultimately his death and the destruction of his entire family.

What is Contentment?

Ahab's story illustrates the importance of the grace of contentment. **Contentment is being satisfied with what God has given you.** It is being satisfied with your current circumstances in life – your income, your possessions, your relationships, your status, your job, etc. The content person may prefer more, but he is happy to go without. He may prefer a different situation, but he is happy to stay where he is. The content person is happy to go wherever Jesus leads – riches or poverty; health or sickness; fame or obscurity; success or failure; appreciated or rejected; loved or hated; in freedom or in bondage. The opposite of contentment is discontentment. It is dissatisfaction with your current status. It is a state of unhappiness; uneasiness; inner turmoil; and sadness.

Contentment is not the same as complacency. Contentment is being satisfied with where God has you. Complacency is being satisfied with less than God has for you. There are some cases in which we should not be satisfied. We should not be satisfied with unconfessed sin in our lives. We should not be satisfied with an unhealthy marriage. We should not be satisfied with our current level of spiritual maturity. We should not be satisfied with the injustice and sin in the world. We should not be satisfied with so many lost people all around us. To be satisfied with less than God wants for you is not contentment, but sinful complacency. Contentment, however, is being satisfied with God's will for your life.

The content person is not covetous. He does not desire the wrong things, or sinful things, or even good things for the wrong reason. His deepest desires are for God, and for the things that God wants for him. The content person is not jealous of others. He is happy for others when they prosper and succeed. The content person does not complain. He is not angry with God for what God has not given him. The content man is joyful in all circumstances. He gives thanks in everything.

Five Reasons to be Content

There are five reasons we should strive to be content. First, it is commanded. Hebrews 13:5 says, "Keep your life free from the love of money. Be satisfied with what you have, for he himself has said, I will never leave you or abandon you."

Second, it is the happiest way to live. 1 Timothy 6:6 says, "But godliness with contentment is great gain." Discontentment is misery.

Third, it prevents much sin. 1 Timothy 6:9-10 says, "But those who want to be rich fall into temptation, a trap, and many foolish and harmful desires, which plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and by craving it, some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." As was illustrated with the story of Ahab, discontentment leads to all kinds of sins.

Fourth, discontentment leads to a wasted life. Discontentment drives you to spend money you don't have, to buy things you don't need, to impress people you don't even like. It pushes you to devote your life to acquiring things that don't matter and neglecting the things that do, such as God and family.

Fifth, contentment is a good witness. A Christian is a walking advertisement for God. When others see that you are content, they will be attracted to the Savior.

Eighteen Ways to Grow More Content

How can we cultivate contentment in our lives? First, do not seek happiness in the things of this world. Wealth, luxury, pleasure, fame, and the other things of this world do not satisfy. Only Christ can fulfill the human heart. Psalm 112:1 (NLT) says, "Praise the Lord! How joyful are those who fear the Lord and delight in obeying his commands."

Second, develop a humble attitude. Discontentment is caused by pride. It is the belief that you deserve more; that you deserve better. The humble person believes that whatever he does for God is too little, and not good enough, and whatever God does for Him is too much, and too good. This was the attitude of King David. "Who am I, Lord God, and what is my house that you have brought me this far (2 Sam 7:18)?"

Third, believe that God put you where you are. God is in control. You are exactly where He wants you. If you want your circumstances to change, then pray. But if your circumstances remain the same, then you are right where God wants you. John 3:27 says, "No one can receive anything unless it has been given to him from heaven."

Fourth, have faith that God loves you, and is doing what is best for you. God has you where you are because that is the best place for you. Romans 8:28 promises that "all things work together for the good of those who love God." If you were in a different situation, you

would not be as close to God. The content person prays for what he wants, but his deepest desire is for God's will, knowing that it will be best.

Fifth, compare yourself to people who are worse off than you. Discontentment is caused by comparing yourself to people who have it better than you; to people who have more than you. But there are plenty of people who would love to trade places with you. Compare yourself to the person who cannot see, or hear, or walk. Compare yourself to the orphan, the widow, the homeless, the unemployed. Compare yourself to the people who don't know Christ; to those who have never even heard the name of Jesus. Realize that many of those who are less fortunate than you are more deserving than you. The Israelites in the wilderness compared themselves to their former lives in Egypt. "We sat by pots of meat and ate all the bread we wanted (Ex 16:3)." They should have compared themselves to the people of Canaan, whom God would destroy on their behalf.

Sixth, know that it could be much worse. Before you start feeling sorry for yourself, think about how much worse it could be. You may not have everything you want, but you have enough. You may not have rich parents, but are your parents godly and loving?

Seventh, understand that you deserve much worse. Are you discontent with your current situation? Don't you know that if God gave you what you deserve, you would be suffering in the flames of hell? Before Christ "we were by nature children under wrath (Eph 2:3)."

Eighth, consider the brevity of life. Whatever your circumstances are, you won't have to live with them for long. You will only walk through this life for a short while, and then you will die and enter eternity. Job 9:25-26 says, "My days fly by faster than a runner; they flee without seeing any good. They sweep by like boats made of papyrus, like an eagle swooping down on its prey."

Ninth, look forward to the rewards of heaven. You may suffer, and struggle, and go without in this life, but when you die and go to heaven there will be no more sin, no more sadness, no more suffering, no more sickness, no more loneliness, no more poverty. 1 Corinthians 2:9 says, "What no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no human heart has conceived – God has prepared all these things for those who love him."

Tenth, throw yourself into serving God. Discontentment is the result of focusing on yourself. The purpose of life is not to enjoy this world, but to reach this world for Christ. Stop seeking comfort, luxury, and pleasure, and follow Christ by seeking and saving the lost. Your eyes cannot focus on two things at the same time. To focus on one is to lose sight of the other. As you focus on serving God, you will lose sight of your complaints and find contentment in Christ.

Eleventh, understand that more will not make you happier. Do not believe the Myth of More – more stuff equals more happiness. Do not succumb to "When/Then" syndrome: When you get what you want, then you will be happy. Happiness doesn't come from the riches of this world, but from a rich relationship with God. 1 Timothy 6:10 says, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and by craving it, some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs."

Twelfth, realize the dangers of prosperity. Prosperity is a tough burden to carry. It is easier to serve God in poverty than in riches; in sickness than in health; in failure than in success. Success has a way of making a person forget about God. Be thankful that God has not

given you more than you can handle. Matthew 19:24 says, “Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”

Thirteenth, stop trying to keep up with the Joneses. Just because others have it does not mean you need or deserve it. If God hasn’t given it to you, then it is not good for you. The Israelites were discontent because they didn’t have a king like the nations around them (1 Sam 8:5). They failed to realize that this made them better off, not worse. Not only did Israel have a king, but they had the King of kings.

Fourteenth, live for an audience of One. Stop trying to be cool in the eyes of the world. Stop trying to be in style. Stop trying to impress. Stop trying to please others. The content person doesn’t care about impressing others and doesn’t care when others disapprove. The only opinion that matters to them is God’s. Paul is the example of contentment in the Bible. “In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being content (Phil 4:12).” What was his secret? He lived to please God alone. “If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ (Gal 1:10).”

Fifteenth, see what really matters in life. Do not be impressed by wealth, or beauty, or talent, or intelligence. And do not be embarrassed that you do not possess them in the same measure as others. These things do not matter. Self-worth is not determined by net worth. The value of the person is not determined by the value of the portfolio. All that matters are your relationship with God and your character. Jesus said, “Watch out and be on guard against all greed, because one’s life is not in the abundance of his possessions (Lk 12:15).”

Sixteenth, remember that you are spiritually wealthy. You may lack the things of this world, but you are wealthy, nonetheless. You have salvation. You have eternal life. You are a child of the king. You have the Holy Spirit. You have forgiveness of sins. You have the Word of God. Paul prayed that the Ephesians would understand their riches in Christ. “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened so that you may know what is the hope of his calling, what is the wealth of his glorious inheritance in the saints (Eph 1:18).”

Seventeenth, spend much time in praise and thanksgiving. Praise is focusing on God’s attributes. Thanksgiving is focusing on God’s acts of kindness. When you focus on God and all that He has done for you, it will take your mind off the negative. Jacob did not notice the length of his sentence because his focus was on Rachel’s beauty (Gen 29:20). You will lose sight of your complaints when you take your eyes off yourself and focus on the beauty of God.

Eighteenth, seek God with all your heart. The closer you are to God, the more satisfied you will be, and the less you will desire the things of this world. When the hole in your heart is filled with God, you will have no need to fill it with the world. Psalm 63:5 says, “You satisfy me as with rich food; my mouth will praise you with joyful lips.”

Discussion Questions

1. What is contentment?
2. How was King Ahab discontent?
3. How did Ahab’s discontentment lead to sin?
4. How did Ahab’s discontentment lead to destruction?
5. How can you grow in contentment?

RESPECT FOR PEOPLE'S PROPERTY

Ephesians 4:28 "Let the thief no longer steal. Instead, he is to do honest work with his own hands, so that he has something to share with anyone in need."

Judas Iscariot is best known for being the apostle who betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. But the Bible also tells us that he was the treasurer for Jesus and the apostles, carrying all their money, and that he would often steal from it. This money would have been used to buy their food and supplies, and even to share with the poor. Judas was a thief (Jn 12:6).

The Many Ways to Steal

To steal is to take something that does not belong to you without permission. It is to take something that belongs to someone else. There are many different types of stealing. Stealing a friend's basketball. Stealing money from your mother's purse. Destroying another person's property, whether on purpose or by accident. Cheating on a test is stealing, because you are taking answers that do not belong to you. Borrowing something and not giving it back, such as money, or a library book, or a movie rental. Borrowing something without permission, even if you intend to give it back. Failing to point it out when the cashier under-charges you, or gives you back more change than you are owed. Cheating on your taxes. Wasting time at your job when you are supposed to be working. Taking home supplies from work without permission.

Stealing is also connected with other sins. For example, adultery is stealing another man's wife. Slander is stealing someone's reputation. Sexual immorality is stealing a person's virginity. Neglecting to tithe is stealing from God. And murder is robbing someone of their life. Sadly, stealing is rampant in our society. That's why we have locks on our homes and vehicles, security cameras, and passwords on our phones and computers. Today stealing is not the practice of a few bad people; it has gone mainstream. Those who do not steal are in the small minority.

The Problem with Stealing

Consider the following reasons that we must not steal. First, it is against God's will. The Bible commands us not to steal. It is the eighth commandment. Exodus 20:15 says, "Do not steal."

Second, people have the right to private property. The command to not steal means that property is not shared; it is privately owned. If something does not belong to you, then you do not have the right to take it.

Third, God owns it all (Ps 24:1). There is nothing in the universe that God does not own. Anything we have is only borrowed property. So, when we steal, we are not only taking from others, but also from God.

Fourth, we must not steal because it is selfish. Selfishness is the decision to do what is best for you even though it is harmful to others. When you steal, you seek to gain at the

expense of another's loss. This is contrary to the Bible's command to love your neighbor as yourself (Mk 12:31).

Fifth, we must not steal because God loves people. 1 John 4:8 says, "God is love." God prohibits stealing because He loves you, and He wants to protect your property. He also loves others and wants to protect their property. When we steal, we hurt the people whom God dearly loves.

Sixth, God will punish the thief. In fact, the Bible says that God will punish thieves with hell. 1 Corinthians 6:10 says, "No thieves, greedy people, drunkards, verbally abusive people, or swindlers will inherit God's kingdom."

Seventh, stealing is the opposite of how God wants us to behave. God does not just want us to avoid stealing; He wants us to share our extra resources with those in need. Ephesians 4:28 says, "Let the thief no longer steal. Instead, he is to do honest work with his own hands, so that he has something to share with anyone in need."

Sometimes people justify stealing. They say, "I was only borrowing it; I was going to return it. They don't need it. They have more than they need. They weren't using it. They won't even know it is missing. I was going to use it for a good cause." But none of these excuses are legitimate. There is never a good reason to steal. It is always wrong.

Respect for People's Property

Instead of stealing, God wants us to have respect for people's property. **Respecting people's property means avoiding all forms of stealing.** How can we overcome the temptation to steal? First, make restitution for the things you have stolen. To make restitution is to pay back what you have stolen. According to the Old Testament law, a just restitution meant paying back much more than was stolen – sometimes as much as five times more (Ex 22:1-4). When the tax collector Zacchaeus became a Christ-follower, he made a commitment to pay back the people he had stolen from – four times as much (Lk 19:8). If you have stolen something, or broken someone's property, make restitution.

Second, work hard to earn a living. Ephesians 4:28 says, "Let the thief no longer steal. Instead, he is to do honest work with his own hands..." We need money to live, but stealing is not the way God wants us to acquire it. We must work. If you work hard and earn a good living, you will be less tempted to steal from others.

Third, be generous. Ephesians 4:28 says, "Let the thief no longer steal. Instead, he is to do honest work with his own hands, so that he has something to share with anyone in need." The thief's focus is on getting more for himself. The generous person's focus is on giving more away. If your focus is on sharing with the poor and needy, then you will be less tempted to steal for yourself.

Fourth, be content. Be satisfied with what God has given you. Don't look to money and possessions for happiness, or to impress others. Don't long to be rich or make it your goal to get rich. Learn to find happiness and significance in your relationship with God. Hebrews 13:5 says, "Keep your life free from the love of money. Be satisfied with what you have, for he himself has said, I will never leave you or abandon you."

Fifth, trust God to take care of you. Sometimes people steal because they think they need to. You never need to steal. God has promised to meet your needs. Seek Him first and

trust Him to care for you. Matthew 6:33 says, “Be seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you.” It is better to be poor and pure, than rich and rotten.

Discussion Questions

1. What is stealing?
2. What are the different kinds of stealing?
3. What does it mean to have respect for other people’s property?
4. Why is it important to avoid stealing?
5. How can we overcome the temptation to steal?

DILIGENCE

Colossians 3:23 (ERV) “In all the work you are given, do the best you can. Work as though you are working for the Lord, not any earthly master.”

The apostle Paul had every right to receive a salary from the churches he served, and sometimes he did. But sometimes he chose to give up this right, either because he did not want to give people a reason to criticize, or because he did not want to be a burden, or because he wanted to set a good example. To set a good example, not only did he work tirelessly to spread the gospel, but he also worked hard to earn a living as a tent maker (Acts 18:1-3). 2 Thessalonians 3:7-8 says, “For you yourselves know how you should imitate us: We were not idle among you; we did not eat anyone’s food free of charge; instead, we labored and toiled, working night and day, so that we would not be a burden to any of you.” Paul’s devotion to hard work is called diligence, and it is a grace that every Christian must develop.

What is Diligence?

Diligence means always doing your best at whatever you do. It means being a hard worker. Whether it is schoolwork, or chores around the house, or yard work, or volunteer work at church, or work at your job, God has called you to do your very best. If you are a guitar player, then be the best guitar player you can be. If you are a basketball player, then be the best basketball player you can be. If you are a doctor, then be the best doctor you can be. If you are a homemaker, then be the best homemaker you can be. The opposite of diligence is being lazy, slothful, idle, a slacker.

Six Reasons to be Diligent

Why is it important to become a diligent person? First, to glorify God. 1 Corinthians 10:31 says, “So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.” The purpose of your work is to show others the God who is at work in your life. Your work should be a testimony of the greatness of God.

Second, to be wise. Proverbs 24:30 says, “I went by the field of a slacker and by the vineyard of one lacking sense.” Laziness is foolish because you hurt yourself more than anyone else. Laziness will prevent you from making a good living, from getting promoted at work, and will cause others to dislike you.

Third, to be kind to others. God wants you to be kind, being helpful and beneficial to others. One way to be kind is by being diligent – working hard and doing your best at whatever you do. Proverbs 10:26 says, “Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so the slacker is to the one who sends him on an errand.” Laziness is as bad as stealing. Proverbs 18:9 says, “The one who is lazy in his work is brother to a vandal.”

Fourth, to be happier. Diligence is just a happier way of life. Proverbs 13:4 says, “The slacker craves, yet has nothing, but the diligent is fully satisfied.” When you do your best, you can be proud of your work. Others will likely reward you for your work. And you can lay down at night with your mind at peace knowing that you did your very best; you have fulfilled your

potential. Life is just easier when you are a hard worker, but laziness leads to all sorts of unnecessary problems. Proverbs 15:19 says, “A slacker’s way is like a thorny hedge, but the path of the upright is a highway.”

Fifth, to become a leader. Proverbs 12:24 says, “The diligent hand will rule, but laziness will lead to forced labor.” Do you want to be your own boss and run your own company? You must be a hard worker. Do you want to rise the ladder at work and become a leader? It requires diligence.

Sixth, to prosper financially. Often the cause of poverty is not lack, but slack. Not the lack of opportunity, but the lack of effort. Not all hard workers are rich, but diligence will give you the best possible chance to prosper financially. Proverbs 10:4 says, “Idle hands make one poor, but diligent hands bring riches.”

Eleven Habits of Diligent People

To become diligent, you must develop eleven habits. First, do your best. Never do poor quality work. Never do a so-so job. Never give minimal effort. Always give your all to every endeavor you undertake. Colossians 3:23 (MSG) says, “Don’t just do the minimum that will get you by. Do your best. Work from the heart.” “Put your whole heart and soul into it (Col 3:23, Phillips).”

Second, stay busy (Pr 10:4). Diligence is often contrasted in the Bible with idleness – with wasting time. Make every minute count. There is plenty to do; more tasks than time; more projects than energy. See your leisure time as an opportunity to get something important accomplished.

Third, be a self-starter. Lazy people need to be forced out of bed, forced to work, and forced to do a good job. They have less intelligence than the ant. Proverbs 6:6 says, “Go to the ant, you slacker! Observe its ways and become wise. Without leader, administrator, or ruler, it prepares its provisions in summer; it gathers its food during harvest.”

Fourth, learn to plan ahead. Proverbs 21:5 (NLT) says, “Good planning and hard work lead to prosperity, but hasty shortcuts lead to poverty.” Good planning and hard work go hand in hand. Ben Franklin said, “If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail.” Planning is essential for success. It is not fun, so lazy people avoid it.

Fifth, do not over-sleep. We need rest. But lazy people get more than their fair share. They rest when they should be working. Proverbs 6:9-11 says, “How long will you stay in bed, you slacker? When will you get up from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the arms to rest, and your poverty will come like a robber, your need, like a bandit.”

Sixth, be a finisher. Proverbs 12:27 says, “A lazy hunter doesn’t roast his game, but to a diligent person, his wealth is precious.” This Proverb is about a hunter who does not finish the job. He only does the job half-way. He shoots the deer, but he does not clean it, and butcher it, and eat it, and turn the hide into a warm blanket. The diligent person does not just start projects but finishes them. To be diligent is to go all the way. It is to complete the job. It is to clean the entire room, not just the floor; the entire car, not just the wheels.

Seventh, work fast. The Bible contrasts diligence with the sloth, an animal that lives in slow motion. Proverbs 19:15 (KJV) says, “Slothfulness casteth into a deep sleep; and an idle soul shall suffer hunger.” Learn to move quickly; to do your work with speed. Diligence is not

just about quality, but also quantity. The diligent person is not just effective, but efficient. Don't just clean your room but clean it quickly.

Eighth, avoid excuses. Proverbs 22:13 says, "The slacker says, 'There's a lion outside! I'll be killed in the public square!'" The lazy person always has an excuse for why they can't work harder. The diligent person busts through obstacles and gets the job done.

Ninth, work with a good attitude. Colossians 3:23 says, "Whatever you do, do it from the heart." "Work hard and cheerfully (TLB)." "Do it enthusiastically (HCSB)." Proverbs 31:13 says of the wife of noble character, "She selects wool and flax and works with willing hands."

Tenth, be an early riser. Proverbs 31:15 says, "She rises while it is still night and provides food for her household and portions for her female servants." "Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise (Benjamin Franklin)." If you are an early riser, you are more likely to get the most productive hours out of your day.

Eleventh, work long hours. The wife of noble character "rises while it is still night" "and her lamp never goes out at night." She works all day long, starting very early, and going late. Your day should not be all play and no work, or much play and little work; neither should it be all work and no play. Instead your habit should be much work, and a little play. Remember that work is not a curse. God gave work to Adam and Eve before they sinned. We were created to work, to produce, to cultivate, to subdue, to mend, to fix, to solve, to build, to create, to contribute. We will not be happy unless we have work to do, and unless we are doing our best work.

Three Tips to Grow in Diligence

There are three things that can help you to grow in diligence. First, do your work for God. Colossians 3:23 says, "Whatever you do, do it from the heart, as something done for the Lord and not for people." When you work, God is watching; and He wants you to do your work for Him. Work to please Him; work to make Him proud; work to represent Him; work to make Him look good in the eyes of others.

Two, trust that God will reward you for your diligence. Colossians 3:24 says, "knowing that you will receive the reward of an inheritance from the Lord. You serve the Lord Christ." When you do your best for God, He will see it, and He will record it in His book to reward you one day. Diligence is never wasted. Even if nobody else notices your effort or appreciates the quality of your work, the Lord does, and He will reward you.

Third, stay away from lazy people. 2 Thessalonians 3:6 says, "Now we command you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from every brother or sister who is idle..." You are more likely to adopt the ways of the slacker than he is to pick up your diligence. It is not health that is contagious, but sickness. If you live among sloths, you will start acting like a sloth.

Discussion Questions

1. What is diligence?
2. What must we do to be diligent?
3. Why is diligence important?

4. What is the opposite of diligence?
5. How can we grow in diligence?

EDIFICATION

Ephesians 4:29 “No foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear.”

Elisha had just begun his new job as the prophet of Israel, taking over for his mentor, the great Elijah. On his way to the town of Bethel, a group of small boys came out and teased him, making fun of his baldness. Then Elisha turned around, looked at them, and cursed them in the name of the Lord. God sent two bears out of the woods to attack and maul forty-two of the children. This story teaches some powerful lessons about the tongue. First, it shows that our words can hurt others. Elisha, even though he was a prophet, was deeply bothered by their teasing, even though they were just little boys. Words can cut. Second, this story shows the extreme danger of the tongue. Just as words got the boys in big trouble, and probably cost many of them their lives, if we are not careful our words can be our downfall.

How to Use Your Words

The Bible tells us how to use our words. In a nutshell, it is called edification. **Edification means using your words to build up and not to tear down.** Ephesians 4:29 says, “No foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear.” The young boys used their words to tear down, and it hurt Elisha and got them into big trouble. Instead, God wants us to only use our words to build people up; to encourage them; to help them.

The Importance of Your Words

Consider the importance of your words. First, your words can ruin your life. Proverbs 18:6-7 says, “A fool’s lips lead to strife, and his mouth provokes a beating. A fool’s mouth is his devastation, and his lips are a trap for his life”

Second, your words can help or hurt others. Proverbs 12:18 says, “There is one who speaks rashly, like a piercing sword; but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”

Third, God will judge you for your words. Matthew 12:36 says, “I tell you that on the day of judgment people will have to account for every careless word they speak.”

Fourth, guarding your tongue will keep you out of trouble. Proverbs 21:23 says, “The one who guards his mouth and tongue keeps himself out of trouble.”

Fifth, God wants you to represent Him in everything you say. Colossians 3:17 (NLT) says, “And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father.”

Sixth, if you have an uncontrolled tongue, then your religion is worthless. James 1:26 says, “If anyone thinks he is religious without controlling his tongue, his religion is useless and he deceives himself.”

Seventh, a controlled tongue is evidence of spiritual maturity. James 3:2 says, “For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is mature, able also to control the whole body.”

Eighth, you must keep your tongue from evil if you want to enjoy your life. 1 Peter 3:10 says, "For the one who wants to love life and to see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit."

Five Types of Speech Christians Must Avoid

There are five types of speech the Christian must avoid. One: Curse words. How do you know if a word is a curse word? Curse words are words that adults don't want their children to hear; words that parents do not want their children to say; words that would not be used in Disney or Hallmark movies; words that the preacher would never use in a sermon. Colossians 3:9 says, "Put filthy language from your mouth."

Two: Corrupt language. Corrupt or dirty language usually involves talking about sexual things in an inappropriate way. Ephesians 5:3 says, "Obscene and foolish talking or crude joking are not suitable, but rather giving thanks."

Three: Cut-downs. A cut-down or insult is a degrading comment or a hurtful name. Matthew 5:22 says, "Whoever insults his brother or sister, will be subject to the court. Whoever says, 'You fool!' will be subject to hellfire."

Four: Criticism. Criticism is pointing out a person's faults or flaws in an unloving way, either to their face or behind their back. James 4:11 says, "Don't criticize one another, brothers and sisters."

Five: Complaining. To complain is to express dissatisfaction about a person or a circumstance. Philippians 2:14 says, "Do everything without complaining or arguing."

Five Types of Speech Christians Must Employ

There are five types of speech that Christians must practice. One: Edification. Use your words to build up, not to tear down. Don't say things that will hurt or offend people. Ephesians 4:29 says, "No foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear."

Two: Encouragement. There are two main types of encouragement. Comforting someone who is sad or discouraged or motivating and inspiring people. 1 Thessalonians 5:11 says, "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up as you are already doing."

Three: Exaltation. To exalt is to praise the Lord very much. Use your words to praise God for who He is, and to thank Him for all He has done. Psalm 34:1 says, "I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise will always be on my lips."

Four: Evangelism. We must use our words to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to people who are far from God. Acts 8:4 says, "So those who were scattered went on their way preaching the word."

Five: Equipping. We must use our words to teach others the Bible. Colossians 1:28 says, "We proclaim him, warning and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ."

Our words are very powerful. Let us heed the words of 1 Peter 4:11, "If anyone speaks, let it be as one who speaks God's words."

Discussion Questions

1. What is edification?
2. Why is it important to guard your tongue?
3. What kind of language Christians should avoid?
4. What kind of language should Christians use?
5. How do you need to grow in edification?

GENEROSITY

Proverbs 22:9 “A generous person will be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor.”

Before Jesus ascended into heaven, He instructed the disciples to wait in Jerusalem until He sent the gift of the Holy Spirit. That time came on the Day of Pentecost. All the believers were filled with the Holy Spirit. Peter preached a sermon and 3,000 people were baptized in one day. The church in Jerusalem took off like a rocket. It had people from all walks of life – men, women, children, the elderly, widows, rich people, and poor people. This first church is perhaps best known for its generosity. Acts 2:44-45 says, “Now all the believers were together and held all things in common. They sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as any had need.” Acts 4:34-35 says, “For there was not a needy person among them because all those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the proceeds of what was sold, and laid them at the apostles’ feet. This was then distributed to each person as any had need.” The early church was generous because they shared their money and possessions with those in need.

Generosity Defined

To be generous is to share your extra resources with those in need. The opposite of generosity is stinginess, hoarding, and greed.

Ten Reasons to be Generous

Why is it important to be generous? First, because God is generous, and we must imitate Him. Matthew 5:45 says, “so that you may be children of your Father in heaven. For he causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” If God was not generous, we would have none of the good things we enjoy. James 1:17 says, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” 1 Timothy 3:17 says, “... God, who richly provides us with all things to enjoy.”

Second, generosity is commanded. 1 Timothy 6:18 says, “Instruct them to do what is good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and willing to share.”

Third, God will reward you. Luke 6:38 says, “Give, and it will be given to you; a good measure—pressed down, shaken together, and running over—will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you.”

Fourth, to store up heavenly treasure. 1 Timothy 6:18-19 says, “be generous and willing to share, storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of what is truly life.” Generosity on earth is rewarded with treasure in heaven.

Fifth, generosity leads to happiness. Acts 20:35 says, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Sixth, generosity honors and pleases the Lord. 2 Corinthians 9:7 says, "God loves a cheerful giver." Proverbs 14:31 says, "The one who oppresses the poor person insults his Maker, but one who is kind to the needy honors him."

Seventh, God promises to provide for your needs if you are generous. Proverbs 28:27 says, "The one who gives to the poor will not be in need."

Eighth, God promises to punish those who refuse to share with the needy. Proverbs 28:27 says, "but the one who turns his eyes away will receive many curses."

Ninth, God will not answer your prayers unless you are generous. Proverbs 21:13 says, "The one who shuts his ears to the cry of the poor will himself also call out and not be answered."

Tenth, it is unchristian to neglect generosity. James 2:15-17 says, "If a brother or sister is without clothes and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, stay warm, and be well fed,' but you don't give them what the body needs, what good is it? In the same way faith, if it doesn't have works, is dead by itself."

Seven Ways to Grow More Generous

The Bible tells us how to grow in generosity. First, do not practice your generosity in front of others to be seen by them. Matthew 6:1-4 says, "Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. Otherwise, you have no reward with your Father in heaven. So whenever you give to the poor, don't sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be applauded by people. Truly I tell you, they have their reward. But when you give to the poor, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

Second, to grow in generosity you must give cheerfully. 2 Corinthians 9:7 says, "Each person should do as he has decided in his heart – not reluctantly or out of compulsion, since God loves a cheerful give." Do not give with a bad attitude. Do not complain about giving. Do not give because you think you "have to." Give as much as you want to, because you want to.

Third, to grow in generosity, do not take pride in your money. 1 Timothy 6:17 says, "Instruct those who are rich in the present age not to be arrogant." Use your money to bless people, not impress people.

Fourth, to grow in generosity, do not set your hope on the uncertainty of wealth. 1 Timothy 6:17 says, "Instruct those who are rich in the present age not to be arrogant or to set their hope on the uncertainty of wealth, but on God, who richly provides us with all things to enjoy." Do not assume that holding on to your money will give you security. Security comes from God alone. Money has the tendency to grow wings and fly away, but God will never fail to take care of His generous ones.

Fifth, to grow in generosity you must be content. 1 Timothy 6:8 says, "If we have food and clothing, we will be content with these." Do not try to use money to buy happiness. Happiness comes not from riches, but from a rich relationship with God.

Sixth, to grow in generosity you must get a good job and work hard so you will be able to share with others. Ephesians 4:28 says, "Let the thief no longer steal. Instead, he is to do honest work with his own hands, so that he has something to share with anyone in need." It's hard to share if you don't have anything. Be a hard worker, and be smart with your money, and then you will be in a position to help others.

Seventh, to grow in generosity, realize that God gives us more than we need to share with those in need. Why do you have more than you need? It is not just for your own enjoyment. It is to help others. Luke 3:11 says, "The one who has two shirts must share with someone who has none, and the one who has food must do the same." See your possessions as God's provisions to you and through you.

Discussion Questions

1. What is generosity?
2. How did the early church in Acts exemplify generosity?
3. How can we grow in generosity?
4. Why is generosity important?
5. Do you need to be more generous? Explain.

CHASTITY

1 Thessalonians 4:3 “For this is God’s will, your sanctification: that you keep away from sexual immorality.”

Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh and the captain of the guards. God made Joseph successful, and he found favor with his new master. Potiphar’s wife lusted after Joseph sexually. She looked longingly at him and asked him to have sex with her. But Joseph refused to sin against God. He was committed to saving his sexuality for marriage. He told Potiphar’s wife, “Look, with me here my master does not concern himself with anything in his house, and he has put all that he owns under my authority. No one in this house is greater than I am. He has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. So how could I do this immense evil, and how could I sin against God (Gen 39:8-9)?” But Potiphar’s wife persisted, pressuring Joseph day after day to commit adultery with her. One day when Joseph was working in the house, and all the other servants were outside, Potiphar’s wife grabbed his garment and said, “Sleep with me!” Joseph left his garment in her hand and ran outside.

What is Chastity?

Joseph is a great example of the grace of chastity. **Chastity means saving your sexuality for marriage.** Out of respect for his neighbor, and out of love for God, Joseph refused to give in to sexual temptation. Your sexuality involves more than the act of sexual intercourse. It involves sexual thoughts, words, looks, touches, etc. All sexual activity is to be reserved for the marriage bed between one man and one woman.

There are two main types of chastity. First, chastity is avoiding premarital sex, or sex before you get married. The Biblical term for premarital sexual activity is sexual immorality. Second, chastity is a married person avoiding sex outside of marriage. The Biblical term for sex outside of marriage is adultery. Hebrews 13:4 says, “Marriage is to be honored by all and the marriage bed kept undefiled, because God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterers.” Chastity is the commitment to sexual purity; to sexual integrity; to God’s standard for sexuality – never before marriage, never outside of marriage, and never with the same sex. God made sex for a reason. Sex is for marriage, for the purpose of procreation, intimacy, and enjoyment. As long as we use sex as God intended, then sex is a good thing. But a good thing can turn into a bad thing when you misuse it.

Why be Chaste?

Why is it important to commit to chastity? First, God commands chastity. 1 Thessalonians 4:3 says, “For this is God’s will, your sanctification: that you keep away from sexual immorality.”

Second, God will punish those who commit sexual sin. Colossians 3:6 says, “Because of these, God’s wrath is coming upon the disobedient.”

Third, sexual sin is a sign that you are on your way to hell. Ephesians 5:5 says, “For know and recognize this: Every sexually immoral or impure or greedy person, who is an idolater, does not have an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.”

Fourth, sexual sin will hurt you. Committing sexual sin is like drinking poison mixed with sugar. It may taste sweet at first, but in the end it kills. Sexual sin can cause painful diseases, some of which are incurable and terminal. Sexual sin can lead to unplanned pregnancies and children born out of marriage. Sexual sin can destroy your marriage. It is the one exception for divorce in the Bible (Mt 19:9). Sexual sin can also hurt you by giving you a guilty conscience. 1 Corinthians 6:18 says, “Flee sexual immorality! Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the person who is sexually immoral sins against his own body.”

Fifth, sexual sin will hurt your spouse. Husbands and wives form a very special bond when they have sex together. It is a bond of intimacy that only they share. The Bible says that the two become one flesh. Sexual sin breaks this bond and it breaks your spouse’s heart. It is so serious that it is grounds for divorce (Mt 5:32). The wound caused by adultery is so deep that many marriages never recover, and the wounded party often feels the pain for many years afterwards.

Sixth, sexual sin breaks the marriage vow. When you get married, you make a promise to your spouse and to God to be chaste, saving all sexual activity for your spouse alone. Sexual sin is the ultimate betrayal; it is unfaithfulness to your spouse and to your God.

Seventh, chastity will protect your children. The best environment for children to grow up in is to live with their married father and mother. Sexual sin often leads to children born and raised out of wedlock. This causes all kinds of challenges and problems for them not only in their childhood, but well into adulthood. To give your children the best kind of life, sexual sin must be avoided at any cost.

How to Pursue Sexual Purity

How can you keep yourself chaste? First, put sexual sin to death. Colossians 3:5 says, “Therefore, put to death what belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desire, and greed, which is idolatry.” Do not play with sexual sin. Do not compromise even the slightest. Do not allow even a hint of sexual sin to live in your mind and body. Destroy it, or it will destroy you.

Second, avoid tempting situations. Sin is often the result of consciously exposing ourselves to temptation. Do not overestimate your ability to resist temptation. 1 Corinthians 10:12 (ERV) says, “So anyone who thinks they are standing strong should be careful that they don’t fall.” The great evangelist Billy Graham lived by a code that came to be known as the Billy Graham Rule: Never be alone with a woman other than your wife. This is a great rule to follow whether you are single or married. If you allow yourself to be alone with a woman other than your wife, you might find yourself to be alone without God’s help.

Third, do not lust with your eyes. Matthew 5:27-28 says, “You have heard that it was said, Do not commit adultery. But I tell you, everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Sin often comes through the eyes. First Potiphar’s wife looked longingly at Joseph, and then she attempted to sleep with him (Gen 39:7). First David lusted with his eyes for Bathsheba, and then he committed adultery with her. A good skill to develop is to “bounce your eyes” away immediately when you are tempted to look and stare. Follow the example of Job, who said, “I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a young woman (Job 31:1, NIV).”

Fourth, keep your thoughts pure. Romans 13:14 (NIV) says, “Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.” The mind is the devil’s playground. It is tempting to entertain impure thoughts, because nobody can see them. But God can. And whatever you meditate on will eventually be expressed in your behavior. As soon as an impure thought enters your mind, pray and quote scripture until the temptation subsides. Remember, chastity involves not only keeping your body sexual pure, but saving all sexual activity for marriage – your eyes, your thoughts, your words, and your body.

Fifth, save dating for marriage. The purpose of dating is to find a mate, yet many people today date years before they are ready for marriage. Dating leads to romance, and romance leads to sexual temptation. Dating at a young age exposes you to temptations that are almost impossible to resist. Instead, save dating until God tells you it is time to find a spouse and get married. For most people this will not be until college, or after college. Song of Songs 8:4 says, “Young women of Jerusalem, I charge you, do not stir up or awaken love until the appropriate time.”

Sixth, avoid cohabitation. Cohabitation refers to a couple living together before marriage. Even though cohabitation is all too common today, it makes chastity impossible, and it usually leads to problems down the road after the couple gets married. It is best to not move in together until after you get married. Matthew 19:4 says, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” Man is to leave his father and mother and live with his wife, not his girlfriend.

What to do When You Fail

Although sexual sin is very serious, there is hope for those who fail. 1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” God will never leave you, even if you sin (Heb 13:5). And God will never love you less (Rm 8:38-39). If you sin, simply repent and turn back to God, and He will always be ready to forgive you and give you a fresh start.

Discussion Questions

1. What is chastity?
2. What are the two kinds of chastity?

3. Why is it important to be chaste?
4. What can we learn about pursuing chastity from the story of Joseph?
5. What do you need to do to protect your chastity?

RESPONSIBILITY

Galatians 6:7 "Don't be deceived: God is not mocked. For whatever a person sows he will also reap."

If anyone had an excuse to not achieve anything with his life, it was Joseph. He was betrayed by his brothers when they sold him into slavery. While serving as a slave in a foreign country, he was falsely accused of sexual assault and sent to prison. While in prison he helped two of Pharaoh's employees, both of whom forgot about him when they were reinstated. According to today's standards, Joseph was the ultimate victim. He had every reason to complain, to turn to crime, to sink into depression, to commit suicide, to be bitter. But Joseph didn't do any of those things. Despite his trials, Joseph maintained his integrity, his loyalty to God, his work ethic, and the Lord blessed him. You probably know the rest of the story. Eventually God freed him from prison and exalted him to the position of Prime Minister of Egypt. He got married and had children, reconciled with his brothers, was reunited with his father, and was used of God to save millions of people during a time of famine.

Defining Responsibility

Joseph is an example of the grace of responsibility. **Responsibility is accepting that you are where you are because of your own choices.** The grace of responsibility is part of the Law of the Harvest -- you reap what you sow (Gal 6:7). Not only does this mean that your input determines your future outcome, but your current outcome is the result of your past input.

Responsibility is the key to success in life. Most people do not succeed and reach their potential because they refuse to take responsibility for their lives. They play the blame game, point the finger, demand reparations, make excuses, complain about others, play the victim, and feel sorry for themselves.

The fact is, everyone has experienced hardship. Everyone is at a disadvantage in some respect. Everyone is privileged one way or another. Everyone has been oppressed and victimized and faced unjust discrimination. Nobody has the perfect life. Yet some people are wildly successful while others live their entire lives in the mud. The difference is responsibility. In life you cannot determine what happens to you, but you can determine your response, and your response is what ultimately determines your destiny.

The idea of responsibility offends and threatens some people. They are terrified of accepting responsibility for their lives. If they can't blame their failure on others, then they must point the finger at themselves and admit that they are the problem. But responsibility should encourage and empower you, if you understand it right. If my present reality is the result of my past choices, then that means that I am in control my life. I can make choices today that will change my future. I am not stuck. I don't have to be a failure. I don't have to be poor. I don't have to be like everyone else in my family. I am response-able.

Responsibility Requires Five Hard Choices

To grow in responsibility, you must make five hard choices. First, stop blaming others. Irresponsible people spend all their time blaming others. They blame others for their failures, for their unhappiness, for their poverty, for their addictions, for their poor health, for their bad relationships, for their bad attitude, etc. When you blame others for your problems, you forfeit control of your life. Worse, you give others control of your life. You are surrendering to the notion that the only way your life can improve is if other people treat you better. Responsible people don't waste time blaming others. You must realize that your biggest enemy is self, not others. Others may have wronged you, but the only person preventing you from the life you want is you. You can't change or control others, but you can change and control yourself. Stop focusing on what others have done to you and focus on the things that you can do to move forward.

Second, stop complaining. Complaining is similar to blaming, but the focus is on circumstances rather than people. "I can't succeed because I'm not the right race or gender; I'm too old; I'm too young; the economy isn't good; I'm too busy; I don't have enough time; I'm not talented enough; I don't have the right equipment; I don't have transportation; I come from a poor neighborhood; no one in my family has ever graduated high school, etc." Complaining is surrendering control of your life to circumstances. It is a state of weakness. A waste of time and energy. Rather than complaining, be thankful. Be positive. Focus on your opportunities, your privileges, your advantages, your blessings, and on the things you can do to improve your life. Don't focus on what you can't change, but on the things you can change. Forget about what you lack and focus on what you have.

Third, stop waiting. Irresponsible people are always waiting, never doing. They are waiting for people to change, for circumstances to change, for a miracle from heaven. They are waiting for someone to send them a check in the mail, or to come to their rescue. Let me save you some time. Your life is not going to change until you change. Things won't get better until you get better. The world will not change unless you change it. No one is coming to help you; stop waiting around and pick yourself up. You can change your perspective, your attitude, your behavior, your habits, your thoughts, your words, your approach, your focus, and your goals. There's plenty for you to do. Stop waiting and get busy.

Fourth, stop excusing. Irresponsible people are full of excuses. They always have an excuse for why they are failing, why they are stagnant, why they haven't changed, why they are unhealthy. They have countless excuses, but the bottom line is that failure is not their fault. It's out of their hands. Life is out of their control. There is nothing they can do about it. My high school coach used to say, "Excuses are like arm pits; everybody has them and they all stink." We can all come up with excuses if we wanted to, but in the end, excuses don't help you. They only make you feel a little better about not taking responsibility for your life. Stop making excuses and start executing the changes you need to make. Look for solutions. Look for answers. Look for opportunities. Look for workarounds.

Fifth, stop demanding. Irresponsible people always focus on what they deserve, on what people owe them. They believe they are entitled to the very best simply for breathing. Responsible people focus on working and earning. Your income is determined by the value you bring to the marketplace.⁷ The way people treat you is largely determined by the way you treat them and the value you bring to their lives. Stop demanding more and start adding more value. Stop demanding that people treat you better and focus on being a better person and adding more value to others.

The bottom line: Your outcome is determined by your input. Stop playing the victim. Stop feeling sorry for yourself. Stop the excuses, the complaining, the blaming, the waiting, and the demanding. If you don't like the outcome you have been getting, then change the input you have been giving.

The Story of Helen Keller

To become a responsible person, it is essential that you put things into perspective. For every trial that you have faced, for every disadvantage you have, for every obstacle in your path, for every injustice that you have experienced, someone out there has experienced far worse and succeeded. Joseph is a Biblical example. Helen Keller is a more contemporary example. She got sick when she was just a baby, leaving her both deaf and blind. But with the help of a young woman named Anne Sullivan, she learned to read braille, to write, and to speak. She learned to communicate with people by reading their lips with her hands. She learned to understand sign language by feeling people's hands. She became the first deaf and blind person to receive a Bachelor of Arts degree in college, graduating from Radcliffe College of Harvard. She traveled the world (to over forty countries) as a motivational speaker and lecturer. She wrote twelve published books and several articles. She became friends with many famous people, including Alexander Graham Bell, Charlie Chaplin, and Mark Twain. She was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame, the Alabama Writers Hall of Fame, and lived to the age of 87. Helen Keller had every reason to do nothing with her life; to be depressed; even to commit suicide. But she refused to be controlled by her circumstances. She took responsibility for her life and accomplished far more than most people dream of. If a woman who was deaf and blind from infancy can accomplish so much, so can you! Now go and be responsible.

Discussion Questions

1. What is responsibility?
2. How did Joseph display responsibility?
3. Why is responsibility important?
4. Why are some people threatened and offended by responsibility?

⁷ I learned this important lesson from Jim Rohn.

5. How can we become more responsible?

THRIFTINESS

Proverbs 13:7 “One person pretends to be rich but has nothing; another pretends to be poor but has abundant wealth.”

When Joseph was the Prime Minister of Egypt, a severe famine struck the land for seven long years. It was devastating. But Egypt was prepared. How? For seven years before the famine, the land was blessed with abundance. The rain fell often, the crops grew tall, the animals multiplied, and there was plenty of food. During the years of abundance, Joseph sent out instructions to save up twenty percent of the harvest so that the nation would be ready for the famine. When the famine began, they had plenty of food saved up. Everyone throughout Egypt and beyond came to Joseph to buy grain, and Pharaoh became extremely wealthy (Gen 41).

What is Thriftiness?

Joseph’s behavior in this story is called thriftiness. **Thriftiness is using your money and resources carefully and not wastefully.** Thriftiness is being smart with money. It is wise money management.

Two Reasons You Need to be Thrifty

Why do you need to cultivate the virtue of thriftiness? First, your money belongs to God. Psalm 24:1 says, “The earth and everything in it, the world and its inhabitants, belong to the Lord.” You are just a steward; God’s money-manager. Since your money belongs to God, you must use it in a way that serves and pleases Him. It is not right to be careless and wasteful with someone else’s money.

Second, you need money to live. Money is how we pay for necessities like food, shelter, and clothing. If you are foolish with money, then you will not be able to take care of yourself and the people who depend on you. 1 Timothy 5:8 says, “But if anyone does not provide for his own family, especially for his own household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”

Thriftiness has nothing to do with being rich. Becoming rich is not wrong, but it is not a godly goal. The desire to get rich is called greed, and it leads to all sorts of problems. 1 Timothy 6:9 says, “But those who want to be rich fall into temptation, a trap, and many foolish and harmful desires, which plunge people into ruin and destruction.” God’s plan may not be for you to be rich, but His will is for you to be thrifty. Thriftiness is not about how much money you make, but how you manage your money. One person may have a large income and be very foolish with money, while another person may make a much smaller income yet be very thrifty, and better off for it. While you should not pursue wealth, you should work hard to cultivate the grace of thriftiness.

Ten Steps to Becoming Thrifty

There are ten steps to becoming thrifty and winning with money. First, work hard to earn a good living. Proverbs 10:4 says, “Idle hands make one poor, but diligent hands bring riches.” It is impossible to win with money unless you get a job. But just having a job is not enough. To win with money you need to do two things at work. First, do your very best at whatever you do. Colossians 3:23 (ERV) says, “In all the work you are given, do the best you can. Work as though you are working for the Lord, not any earthly master.” Do not be lazy. Do not do poor quality work. Do not bring a bad attitude to work. Do your best. Second, master your craft. Proverbs 22:29 says, “Do you see a person skilled in his work? He will stand in the presence of kings. He will not stand in the presence of the unknown.” Whatever kind of work you do, master it. Become the best you can be. Become an expert. Your income is determined by your value to the marketplace. The harder you work, and the more skilled you become, the more people will reward you for your labor.

Second, set aside some money for emergencies. Joseph knew that seven years of famine were coming because God revealed it to Pharaoh in a dream. God hasn’t told me this in a dream, but I can assure you that you will experience hard times financially.⁸ You may lose your job. Someone in your family may fall sick and the medical bills will pile up. Your car may break down and require expensive repairs. It is a guarantee that you will have financial emergencies, therefore it would be foolish to not prepare for them. Proverbs 27:12 says, “A sensible person sees danger and takes cover; the inexperienced keep going and are punished.” It is wise to set aside three to six months of living expenses, and only use it for emergencies.

Third, live on a budget. Proverbs 21:5 (NLT) says, “Good planning and hard work lead to prosperity, but hasty shortcuts lead to poverty.” Good planning is essential for financial prosperity, and a budget is just that – your monthly money plan. All successful companies operate on a strict, organized budget, but budgets are not just for businesses. If you want to win with your money you need to make a careful plan, and then do your best to stick to the plan. A monthly budget is a plan for how you are going to spend every cent of your income before the month begins. Your budget will ensure that you live within your means and do not overspend.

Fourth, avoid debt. Proverbs 22:7 says, “The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is a slave to the lender.” When you buy something, you have two options. You can pay cash for it, or you can use debt. Debt is paying someone to borrow their money. Debt includes things like credit cards, or loans for cars, appliances, or other things. Financial experts agree that the only kind of debt that makes sense is a mortgage – going into debt to buy a home, and that is because it is such a big expense. For everything else, you should save up and pay cash all at once. When you use debt, you end up paying much more than you do with cash. Also, debt is

⁸ As I was writing this chapter the world was in the middle of the economic crisis caused by the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic.

dangerous. When you buy things with debt, you don't actually own them. The bank owns them until you finish paying for them. That means if you face an emergency and can't pay your bills, the bank will take away your things.

Fifth, save up for retirement. Proverbs 6:6-8 says, "Go to the ant, you slacker! Observe its ways and become wise. Without leader, administrator, or ruler, it prepares its provisions in summer; it gathers its food during harvest." The ant stores up food in the summer for an important reason. During the winter it must remain underground, because it cannot survive the cold, and it knows that winter is coming. Winter is coming for you, too. There will come a day in your old age when you no longer desire to work, or when you are unable to work. If you fail to prepare for retirement, you will spend your final years in poverty, and be a burden on your children. Saving up for retirement is your responsibility, and it is easy. As soon as you begin working, make a commitment to invest fifteen percent of your income. If you keep this up, by the time you retire you will have plenty.

Sixth, tithe. Malachi 3:10 says, "Bring the full tenth into the storehouse so that there may be food in my house. Test me in this way, says the Lord of Armies. See if I will not open the floodgates of heaven and pour out a blessing for you without measure." All Christians are commanded to tithe – to bring the first ten percent of their income to the church to fund God's work. God promises to bless abundantly those who tithe faithfully.

Seventh, take care of your needs first. Proverbs 21:17 says, "The one who loves pleasure will become poor; whoever loves wine and oil will not get rich." There are three kinds of things you can buy: Needs, wants, and desires. Needs are things you cannot live without, such as food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. Wants are things that will improve your life, but you don't need them, such as a more reliable car, a faster computer, or a mobile phone. Luxuries are things that increase your fun and comfort in life, such as vacations, cable TV, going to the movies, or eating out. Proverbs 21:17 is about the man who wastes all his money on luxuries, and then doesn't have enough money left over to pay for his needs. This leads to poverty. Proverbs 13:7 says, "One person pretends to be rich but has nothing; another pretends to be poor but has abundant wealth." The person who pretends to be rich spends all his money on luxuries; on the surface he looks rich but is drowning financially because he cannot afford the necessities. The thrifty man is careful to pay for his needs first; on the surface he looks much poorer than the pretender but is financially secure. To win with money you must be sure to pay for needs first, then wants, and then only purchase luxuries if there is anything left over.

Eighth, make financial decisions as a team with your spouse. Matthew 19:6 says, "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate." In marriage every penny is jointly owned, and therefore every financial decision must be jointly made. The Bible instructs wives to submit to their husbands as to the Lord, and husbands to love their wives as Christ loves the church. Therefore, never make a money

decision without an enthusiastic agreement between you and your spouse.⁹ This will protect you from money fights, which are the biggest causes of divorce.

Ninth, be generous. Proverbs 19:17 says, “Kindness to the poor is a loan to the Lord, and he will give a reward to the lender.” God promises special blessings and rewards to the person who is generous, and curses to the one who turns his eyes away (Pr 28:27). Everything you own really belongs to God (Ps 24:1). When God gives you more than you need, it is not to satisfy your greed, but to share with those in need.

Tenth, enjoy God’s gifts. 1 Timothy 6:17 says, “... God, who richly provides us with all things to enjoy.” Thriftiness doesn’t mean miserable and grumpy. You must be thrifty, but not to the exclusion of enjoying your money. Money is the reward for your hard work; it is God’s blessing. Be sure to use some of your money to have fun with your family and friends. Our Heavenly Father enjoys watching His children have a good time.

Discussion Questions

1. What is thriftiness?
2. How did Joseph exemplify thriftiness?
3. Why is thriftiness important?
4. How can you learn to be thrifty?
5. Is it okay for a Christian to be rich? Explain.

⁹ Christian marriage counselor Willard Harley teaches the Policy of Joint Agreement: Never do anything without an enthusiastic agreement between you and your spouse. Learn more at www.marriagebuilders.com.

SINCERITY

1 Timothy 1:5 “Now the goal of our instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith.”

Peter was visiting the apostle Paul and the church in Antioch, a church that had many Gentiles (non-Jews). At first Peter regularly ate with the Gentiles, because God had told him to treat Jews and Gentiles equally. But when some Jewish Christians visited from out of town, Peter separated himself from the Gentiles (Gal 2:11-14). Peter’s behavior is called hypocrisy. He acted one way when the Jews were absent, and another way when they were present. When the Jews showed up, he pretended to be something that he was not.

What is Sincerity?

In contrast to hypocrisy, the Bible commands us to be sincere. **Sincerity is acting without hypocrisy.** Walk your talk. Practice what you preach. Really mean what you say and do. Don’t be fake. Don’t be two-faced. Don’t be a pretender. Be real. Be genuine. Be authentic. Be earnest. Sincerity is aligning your words and your actions.

How to be Sincere

How can you be sincere? First, do not do good deeds and religious duties to be seen and applauded by others (Mt 6:1-8). When you give to charity, or help someone in need, don’t show off. Don’t shout it from the rooftop. Don’t draw attention to yourself. Don’t try to impress people with your when you pray aloud. Don’t attend church to be seen by others. Don’t raise your hands in worship just to look spiritual.

Second, be real. Ananias and Sapphira pretended to be more generous than they were. Don’t pretend to pay attention to the sermon; really listen. Don’t pretend to sing to God in worship; truly worship Him. Don’t pretend to pray during times of corporate prayer; really participate. Don’t pretend to love others; really love them.

Third, don’t be two-faced. Don’t be like Peter, who changed his behavior depending on who He was with. Be the same wherever you are. Be the same person when you are alone, when you are at school, when you are at your grandparents’ house, when you are home, and when you are at church.

Fourth, don’t condemn the sins of others when you do the same thing, or even worse. Matthew 7:3-5 says, “Why do you look at the splinter in your brother’s eye but don’t notice the beam of wood in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the splinter out of your eye,’ and look, there’s a beam of wood in your own eye? Hypocrite! First take the beam of wood out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to take the splinter out of your brother’s eye.”

Fifth, don't say something unless you really mean it. The Pharisees pretended to have great respect for Jesus, but Jesus knew they despised Him and called them hypocrites (Mt 22:15-21).

Sixth, practice what you preach. The Pharisees pushed strict rules on people that they themselves did not even follow. Matthew 23:3-4 says, "Therefore do whatever they tell you, and observe it. But don't do what they do, because they don't practice what they teach. They tie up heavy loads that are hard to carry and put them on people's shoulders, but they themselves aren't willing to lift a finger to move them." Imagine a preacher telling his congregation to tithe when he neglects to do so.

Seventh, focus on heart purity, not just outward purity. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for focusing on their outward behavior but neglecting their hearts. Matthew 23:25-26 says, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside of it may also become clean." In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs us to cultivate heart purity, which is an important aspect of sincerity (Mt 5:8). To be pure in heart means to pursue purity in your thoughts (only thinking pure thoughts), your motives (doing things for the right reasons), your desires (only desiring the right things), your attitude (loving, joyful, forgiving, grateful, humble), and in your private life when no one is watching.

Why Choose Sincerity?

There are several reasons to pursue sincerity. First, to get a reward from God. Jesus made it very clear that if you are a hypocrite, you will lose your heavenly reward. Matthew 6:1-2 says, "Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. Otherwise, you have no reward with your Father in heaven."

Second, eventually your true nature will be exposed. You can only fool people for so long, and you never fool the Lord. Eventually people will discover the real you. Luke 12:1-3 says, "Meanwhile, a crowd of many thousands came together, so that they were trampling on one another. He began to say to his disciples first, "Be on your guard against the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. There is nothing covered that won't be uncovered, nothing hidden that won't be made known. Therefore, whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in an ear in private rooms will be proclaimed on the housetops."

Third, hypocrisy is forbidden by God. 1 Peter 2:1 says, "Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all slander."

Fourth, sincerity is commanded by God. Joshua 24:14 "Therefore, fear the Lord and worship him in sincerity and truth."

Growing More Sincere

How can you grow in sincerity? First, live for an audience of one. Live to please God alone. Live for heavenly rewards and not temporary rewards. Don't try to please or impress people. Proverbs 29:15 says, "The fear of mankind is a snare, but the one who trusts in the Lord is protected." You cannot be a people-pleaser and a God pleaser at the same time. Galatians 1:10 says, "If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ."

Second, realize God knows the real you. God is watching you at all times, and He knows who you really are. He sees your behavior, and He sees your thoughts and your heart. 2 Kings 19:27 says, "But I know your sitting down, your going out and your coming in, and your raging against me." Psalm 139:2 says, "You know when I sit and stand; you understand my thoughts." 1 Chronicles 28:9 says, "... the Lord searches every heart and understands the intention of every thought."

Third, do not associate with hypocrites. Hypocrisy, like all sin, is contagious. Psalm 26:4 says, "I do not sit with the worthless or associate with hypocrites."

Discussion Questions

1. What is sincerity?
2. What is hypocrisy?
3. How did Peter act like a hypocrite?
4. Why is sincerity important?
5. How can a person grow in sincerity?

FORGIVENESS

Colossians 3:13 “Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also are to forgive.”

Moses was leading the Israelites through the wilderness, and his brother and sister, Miriam and Aaron, rebelled against him. They criticized Moses for marrying a Cushite woman and were tired of following his lead. They wanted to be in charge. This angered the Lord, and He instantly struck Miriam with leprosy. Her skin became white and flaky like snow. When Aaron saw his sister he begged Moses, “Moses, please forgive us!” Numbers 12:13 says, “Then Moses cried out to the LORD, ‘God, please heal her!’” God healed Miriam. Not only did Moses avoid revenge, but he repaid his enemy by praying for her.

Defining Forgiveness

Moses displayed the grace of forgiveness. **Forgiveness is showing love and kindness to those who hurt you.** It may sound crazy, but it exactly what God wants us to do.

What Forgiveness is Not

To understand forgiveness, you must understand what it is not. First, forgiveness is not a feeling, it is a choice. You can and must forgive, even if you don’t feel like it, and even if you still feel hurt.

Second, forgiveness is not dependent upon the other person. Whether or not the other person has repented and asked for forgiveness, you still must forgive.

Third, forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. Reconciliation is the restoration of a friendship. It requires the repentance of one person, and the forgiveness of the other. Forgiveness only depends on you.

Fourth, forgiveness is not the same as trust. You are commanded to forgive those who hurt you, but not to trust them. Trust must be earned. Forgiveness is free.

Fifth, forgiveness does not mean hiding your pain. Even though you have forgiven, you don’t have to pretend that you are not hurt, or that your wounds have healed. Healing takes time, and it is impossible to heal if you pretend that you are not hurt.

Sixth, forgiveness is not always hiding their sin. In some instances, forgiveness means not telling others about the person’s sin. But there are some sins that must be exposed. For example, when someone has broken the law, the authorities must be contacted.

Seventh, forgiveness does not mean you can’t protect yourself. A wife can forgive her husband for being physically abusive, but that doesn’t mean she needs to continue living with him and exposing herself and her children to physical danger.

Eighth, forgiveness is not simply avoiding revenge. There is much more to forgiveness to that. It involves both negative and positive actions.

Ninth, forgiveness is not limited. It's not like baseball – three strikes and you're out. Peter asked Jesus, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? As many as seven times?" Jesus replied, "I tell you, not as many as seven, but seventy times seven."

What Forgiveness Is

Forgiveness involves nine actions. First, love your enemies. Matthew 5:44 says, "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." You may not like them, or enjoy them, or appreciate them, but you must love them.

Second, do not take revenge. Romans 12:17-19 says, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil.... Friends, do not avenge yourselves...."

Third, bless those who hurt you. That is, wish them well. Hope for their prosperity. Luke 6:28 says, "... bless those who curse you...." Romans 12:14 says, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse."

Fourth, do not rejoice at their suffering. Proverbs 24:17 says, "Don't gloat when your enemy falls, and don't let your heart rejoice when he stumbles."

Fifth, pray for them. Matthew 5:44 says, "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

Sixth, try to be reconciled to them. Matthew 5:23 says, "So if you are offering your gift on the altar, and there you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled with your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."

Seventh, help them in their adversity. Romans 12:20 says, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink."

Eighth, don't bring up past faults. 1 Corinthians 13:5 says that love "does not keep a record of wrongs." Once you have forgiven a sin, do not bring it up every time a conflict occurs. Leave the past in the past.

Ninth, don't stay angry with them. This is called bitterness or holding a grudge. Ephesians 4:31 says, "Let all bitterness, anger and wrath, shouting and slander be removed from you, along with all malice. And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ."

Ten Reasons to Forgive

Forgiveness is very difficult, and very unnatural. There are ten reasons forgiveness is worth the effort. First, it is commanded. Colossians 3:13 says, "Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you are also to forgive."

Second, God will not forgive you until you forgive others. Matthew 6:14-15 says, "For if you forgive others their offenses, your heavenly Father will forgive you as well. But if you don't forgive others, your Father will not forgive your offenses."

Third, forgive others because God has forgiven you. Matthew 18:32-33 says, “Then, after he had summoned him, his master said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgive you all that debt because you begged me. Shouldn’t you also have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’”

Fourth, forgiveness is necessary for a prevailing marriage. God’s will is for your marriage to last until one of you dies. You will offend and hurt one another. The only way to have a prevailing marriage is to forgive.

Fifth, forgiveness is necessary for peace. Romans 12:18 says, “If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” The only way that peace is possible is if you forgive.

Sixth, forgiveness is necessary for unity in the church. God wants the church to be unified so that it can be an effective witness to the world. But the church can only remain unified if church members repeatedly forgive one another.

Seventh, forgiveness improves relationships. Proverbs 17:9 says, “Whoever conceals an offense promotes love, but whoever gossips about it separates friends.” Luke 7:47 says, “Therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; that’s why she loved much. But the one who is forgiven little, loves little.” When you forgive someone, you make them love you even more.

Eighth, forgiveness show strength of character. Proverbs 19:11 (NIV) says, “A person’s wisdom yields patience; it is to one’s glory to overlook an offense.” Forgiveness is not a show of weakness, but a display of one’s strength. It is easy to hold a grudge. Forgiveness is difficult.

Ninth, forgive to receive a blessing. 1 Peter 3:9 says, “not paying back evil for evil or insult for insult but, on the contrary, giving a blessing, since you were called for this, so that you may inherit a blessing.”

Tenth, forgiveness leads to repentance. Romans 12:20 says, “If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. For in so doing you will be heaping fiery coals on his head.” When you forgive your enemy, you will cause him to feel guilty for his sin against you, which will motivate him to repentance.

Discussion Questions

1. What is forgiveness not?
2. What the definition of forgiveness?
3. Why is it important to forgive others?
4. What does it look like in practice to forgive?
5. How can you get better at the grace of forgiveness?

POOR IN SPIRIT

Matthew 5:3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.”

Jesus “told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and looked down on everyone else (Lk 19:9-14).” A Pharisee and a tax collector went up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee stood and prayed, “God, thank you that I’m not like other people – greedy, unrighteous, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of everything I get.” The tax collector stood far off. He wouldn’t even raise his eyes to heaven. He kept hitting his chest and praying, “God have mercy on me, a sinner!” Jesus went on to say that the tax collector went away reconciled to God, while the Pharisee did not.

What Does it Mean to be Poor in Spirit?

The tax collector is an example of being poor in spirit. Jesus spoke of being poor in spirit in the first sentence of His most famous sermon. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs (Mt 5:3).” To be poor in spirit has nothing to do with money. Poor people are not more spiritual than rich people, and rich people are not more sinful than poor people. **To be poor in spirit means recognizing your spiritual poverty**; it is recognizing that you are spiritually poor. Thomas Watson wrote, “Poor in spirit, then, signifies those who are brought to the sense of their sins, and seeing no goodness in themselves, despair in themselves and sue wholly to the mercy of God in Christ.”

Nine Traits of the Poor in Spirit

Those who are poor in spirit have the following traits. First, they realize that they are sinners (Rm 3:23). They are unlike the Pharisee in the story above who thought he was righteous but are like the tax collector who saw himself as a horrible sinner. They know they have done more than sinned; they know they have sinned many times, in horrible ways, against a holy God. They know they have offended God, rebelled against Him, offended Him, and rejected Him. They deny themselves any form of self-righteousness (Lk 9:23).

Second, they know they deserve hell. They understand that the wages of sin is death – eternal separation from God (Rm 6:23). They understand that the just penalty for their sin is not to spend a period of time in purgatory, but to burn in eternal hell. To sin against man is one thing, but to sin against almighty God deserves an infinite punishment.

Third, they know they cannot save themselves. They know that no matter how much good they do, they still deserve eternal torment. Even their righteous acts are like filthy rags (Is 64:6). They are not like the Pharisee who trusted in his righteousness to earn his way to heaven.

Fourth, they run to Christ for salvation. Since they put no faith in themselves, they know their only hope for salvation is the atonement of Christ. Like the tax collector, they cry out to Jesus, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner!"

Fifth, they adore Christ. The poor in spirit have the most affection for Christ. Theirs is not a cold, lifeless religion. They are full of passion and zeal for the Lord. Because of what Christ has done for them, they see Him as the most precious, the most wonderful, the most beautiful, the most worthy. They are like the woman who was a notorious sinner who entered the house where Jesus was eating. Because of her love for Christ, she stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and washed his feet with her tears and hair. She kissed his feet and anointed them with very expensive perfume. Jesus explained her deep affection. "Therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; that's why she loved much. But the one who is forgiven little, loves little (Lk 7:47)." The poor in spirit realize how much Jesus loves them and has done for them, and so love Him intensely. Thomas Watson wrote, "Until we are poor in spirit, Christ is never precious. Until we see our own wants, we never see Christ's worth."

Sixth, the poor in spirit are humble. They are not like the Pharisee, who looked down on everyone else. Rather, like the tax collector, they see themselves as more sinful than everyone else. They are like Paul, who referred to himself as the worst of sinners (1 Tim 1:15).

Seventh, the poor in spirit are thankful. The poor in spirit recognize what they have done against God, what they deserve, and how God has rescued them through the sacrifice of His son. Therefore, they are the most thankful, the most worshipful, the first, longest, and loudest to praise the Lord. The poor in spirit see clearly that they have it much better than they deserve.

Eighth, the poor in spirit know that they can do nothing apart from God's help. Not only are they unable to work their way to heaven, they know they cannot even seek Christ for salvation without God's prevenient, enabling grace (Jn 6:44). They rely upon Christ for salvation, and for the cultivation of Christlike character. They spend much time in the word, in prayer, and in reliance upon church family.

Ninth, the poor in spirit give all the glory to God – for salvation, for Christlike character, for good deeds, for prosperity, for everything. They boast only in the Lord (1 Cor 1:31).

You Can Never be Good Enough

Why is it important to be poor in spirit? In this book we have studied the Christian character traits. As important as character is, no matter how good you are, you cannot earn your way to heaven. You can never be good enough to go to heaven. You will always be a sinner who deserves hell. The only way you can be forgiven is because God sent Christ to die in your place for your sins. Jesus satisfied God's wrath against, paying the penalty you owed, so that you can be reconciled to God. God offers forgiveness and eternal life as a free gift, but the only way to receive this gift is if you are poor in spirit. You must recognize your sinfulness, your need for God, and your utter helplessness and total inability to save yourself. You must see that you have no hope but the grace of God through Jesus Christ. You must stop trying to

impress God, stop trying to win God's favor with your good deeds, and rely totally on Christ's sacrifice on your behalf.

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to be poor in spirit?
2. What are some of the traits of the poor in spirit?
3. Why is it important to be poor in spirit?
4. How did the tax collector show that he was poor in spirit?
5. How did the Pharisee show that he was not poor in spirit?

APPENDIX A: DEFINITIONS AND KEY VERSES

1. Loving God: Delighting in, desiring, and treasuring God above all else.
 - “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” Mark 12:30
2. Loving Others: Doing what is best people for people, not what makes them feel good.
 - “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Matthew 22:39
3. Joyfulness: Joy is the unshakable feeling of cheerfulness that results from the choice to praise the Lord, trust in His word, and walk closely with Him.
 - “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” Philippians 4:4
4. Peacefulness: Working hard to get along with others.
 - “If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” Romans 12:18
5. Patience: Being slow to anger when facing delay, hardship, or wrongdoing.
 - “Therefore, as God’s chosen ones,... put on patience.” Colossians 3:12
6. Kindness: Seeking to be helpful and beneficial to others.
 - “And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ.” Ephesians 4:32
7. Goodness: Always doing good works and acts of charity.
 - “He gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to cleanse for himself a people for his own possession, eager to do good works.” Titus 2:14
8. Gentleness: Staying calm and kind, even when you are angry.
 - “Therefore, as God’s chosen ones, holy and dearly loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience,” Colossians 3:12
9. Faithfulness: Keeping your word.
 - “But let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes,’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no.’ Anything more than this is from the evil one.” Matthew 5:37
10. Self-control: Doing what is right, even when you don’t feel like it.
 - Proverbs 25:28 (TLB) “A man without self-control is as defenseless as a city with broken-down walls.”
11. Endurance: Doing what is right despite adversity.
 - Hebrews 12:1 “Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every hindrance and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us.”

12. Humility: Seeing yourself the way that God sees you.
 - Philippians 2:3 “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves.”
13. Knowledge: Knowing God and His word.
 - 2 Peter 3:18 “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”
14. Godliness: Devotion to God resulting in a life that is pleasing to Him.
 - 1 Timothy 4:7 “Train yourself in godliness.”
15. Holiness: Moral blamelessness.
 - 1 Peter 1:15-16 “But as the one who called you is holy, you also are to be holy in all your conduct; for it is written, Be holy, because I am holy.”
16. Saving Faith: Relying on Jesus Christ alone for salvation.
 - Galatians 3:11 “Now it is clear that no one is justified before God by the law, because the righteous will live by faith.”
17. Living Faith: Confidence in God, that He is who He says He is, and that He will do what He says He will do
 - Jeremiah 17:7 “The person who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence indeed is the Lord, is blessed.”
18. Thankfulness: Gratitude for blessings.
 - 1 Thessalonians 5:18 “give thanks in everything; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”
19. Courage: Doing what is right no matter the cost.
 - Psalm 31:24 “Be strong, and let your heart be courageous, all you who put your hope in the Lord.”
20. Honesty: Speaking the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.
 - Colossians 3:9 “Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old self with its practices.”
21. Contentment: Being satisfied what God has given you.
 - Hebrews 13:5 “Keep your life free from the love of money. Be satisfied with what you have, for he himself has said, I will never leave you or abandon you.”
22. Respect for People’s Property: Avoiding all forms of stealing.
 - Ephesians 4:28 “Let the thief no longer steal. Instead, he is to do honest work with his own hands, so that he has something to share with anyone in need.”

23. Diligence: Always doing your best at whatever you do.
- Colossians 3:23 (ERV) "In all the work you are given, do the best you can. Work as though you are working for the Lord, not any earthly master."
24. Edification: Using your words to build up and not to tear down.
- Ephesians 4:29 "No foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear."
25. Generosity: Sharing your extra resources with those in need.
- Proverbs 22:9 "A generous person will be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor."
26. Chastity: Saving your sexuality for marriage.
- 1 Thessalonians 4:3 "For this is God's will, your sanctification: that you keep away from sexual immorality."
27. Responsibility: Accepting that you are where you are because of your own choices.
- Galatians 6:7 "Don't be deceived: God is not mocked. For whatever a person sows he will also reap."
28. Thriftiness: Using your money and resources carefully and not wastefully.
- Proverbs 13:7 "One person pretends to be rich but has nothing; another pretends to be poor but has abundant wealth."
29. Sincerity: Acting without hypocrisy.
- 1 Timothy 1:5 "Now the goal of our instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith."
30. Forgiveness: Showing love and kindness to those who hurt you.
- Colossians 3:13 "Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also are to forgive."
31. Recognizing your spiritual poverty.
- Matthew 5:3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs."

APPENDIX B: GRACE LISTS IN THE BIBLE

The following passages are lists of the Christian graces. It would be highly beneficial to read and discuss these with your children.

1. Romans 12:9-18
2. Galatians 5:22-23
3. Ephesians 4:1-3
4. Ephesians 4:32
5. Philippians 4:4-6
6. Colossians 3:12-17
7. 1 Timothy 3:1-13
8. 1 Timothy 4:12
9. 1 Timothy 5:9-10
10. 1 Timothy 6:6-11
11. 1 Timothy 6:18
12. 2 Timothy 2:22
13. Titus 1:6-9
14. Titus 2:2-6
15. Titus 2:11-14
16. Titus 3:1-3
17. James 1:19
18. James 1:27
19. James 3:17-18
20. 1 Peter 1:13-17
21. 1 Peter 3:8-12

APPENDIX C: VICE LISTS IN THE BIBLE

The following are vice lists – lists of the sinful behaviors that Christians must avoid. To help your child grow in Christlike character, read and discuss these with your children.

1. Romans 1:26-32
2. 1 Corinthians 6:9-11
3. Galatians 5:19-21
4. Ephesians 4:25-31
5. Ephesians 5:3-5
6. Colossians 3:5-10
7. 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7
8. 2 Thessalonians 3:7-12
9. 1 Timothy 1:9-10
10. 1 Timothy 2:8
11. 1 Timothy 3:3
12. 1 Timothy 3:8
13. 2 Timothy 3:1-4
14. Titus 1:6-9
15. Titus 2:3
16. Titus 2:11-14
17. Titus 3:1-3
18. James 3:17-18
19. James 4:11-12
20. 1 Peter 2:1

APPENDIX D: EIGHT PRACTICES YOUR CHILD NEEDS FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Anyone and everyone who grows to maturity in Christ practices eight things at a bare minimum. To lead your child to grow, help them to develop these eight practices.

1. Purposeful development. People who grow want to grow, and they have decided to grow. They have made it their goal to grow. Question: Is it your child's goal to grow?
2. Praise and worship. People who grow attend church regularly and praise God with passion and enthusiasm. Question: Does your child praise God passionately?
3. Practical Bible teaching. People who grow attend church regularly where they listen intently to practical Bible teaching. Question: Does your child bring their Bible to church and take good notes of the sermon?
4. Private time with God. People who grow have a daily quiet time of prayer and Bible reading. Question: Does your child have a daily quiet time?
5. Percentage giving. People who grow tithe. Question: Does your child tithe?
6. Personal ministry. People who grow are involved in accomplishing the Great Commission. They have people they are evangelizing, and people they are discipling. Question: Does your child have people they are witnessing to, and people they are discipling?
7. Positive relationships. People who grow have close friendships in church with others who motivate them to go all out for Jesus. Question: Do your child have close friendships with mature Christians in your church? If not, get involved in Home Group!
8. Passionate obedience. People who grow are passionate about being obedient to God in all areas of life. Question: Has your child repented of all known sin in their life?

APPENDIX E: HOW TO HAVE BIBLE TIME WITH YOUR CHILDREN

It is my hope and prayer that the preaching and teaching ministry of your church makes a big impact on your children. But if the only Bible they get is a thirty-minute sermon once a week, it is not going to be enough. To help your kids grow to maturity and cultivate Christlike character, you must be faithful to sit down with them during the week to disciple them.

Let me give you a glimpse into what that looks like at my house. On Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday nights, right after dinner, I sit down with the children for what we call "Bible Time." We start with a song, and then a prayer. Then we work on the catechism -- just a few questions each night.¹⁰ And then we have a lesson. The lessons have varied greatly. Sometimes we read the Bible together. Sometimes I read a book to them, such as this book, *Raising Kids of Christlike Character*, or my other book, *Home Discipleship Catechism*. When they were younger we read through Bible Story books for children. There are countless options. This is my part in their discipleship.

My wife Lydia also helps to disciple the kids. Each morning before school they have a time of group prayer together. Then they each go their separate ways for 20 minutes to have a quiet time with the Lord. Then they come back together and begin their schoolwork (they are homeschooled).

Take some time to develop a plan for home discipleship. Choose a time and a place. Decide what you are going to teach or read together. And then be consistent. Small habits practiced consistently over a long period of time pay huge dividends.

¹⁰ If you are interested in catechism, check out my book, *Home Discipleship Catechism: 51 Biblical Doctrines Defined and Explained to Assist Parents in the Training of Children*.

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