

# **LIFE IN THE VINE**

## **INCREASING THE LIKENESS OF JESUS IN YOU**

**Thirteen Lessons**

**by  
Richard Borg**

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# Life In The Vine

## *Increasing the Likeness of Jesus in You*

Every day your character is tested by people and events. Life In The Vine will help you develop Christ-like character and responses. Each sub-title below indicates the vital area of personal testing. Beginning with John 13-17 in Lesson 1, Jesus makes an amazing promise to send the Holy Spirit to dwell in his followers to grow the qualities of his character.

## Contents

Before You Begin	Notes to Participants
Introduction	Out of Your Heart
Lesson 1	A Greater Righteousness - <i>The Rebirth of a Pharisee</i>
Lesson 2	The Fruit of Holiness - <i>Resisting My Temptations</i>
Lesson 3	The Fruit of Love - <i>Empowered to Forgive Others</i>
Lesson 4	The Fruit of Humility - <i>Surrendering My Rights</i>
Lesson 5	The Fruit of Joy - <i>Deepening My Emotional Strength</i>
Lesson 6	The Fruit of Peace - <i>Calming My Fears</i>
Lesson 7	The Fruit of Patience - <i>Improving My "Waitability"</i>
Lesson 8	The Fruit of Kindness - <i>Taming My Tongue</i>
Lesson 9	The Fruit of Goodness - <i>Increasing My Generosity</i>
Lesson 10	The Fruit of Faithfulness - <i>Maintaining My Honesty</i>
Lesson 11	The Fruit of Gentleness - <i>Expanding My Influence</i>
Lesson 12	The Fruit of Self-Control - <i>Restraining My Desires</i>
Lesson 13	The Fruit of Wisdom - <i>Reaching My Greater Potential</i>
Final Thoughts	

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## Before You Begin

### A Note to Everyone

Every religion has its own set of rituals, values, morals and ethics. But these lessons on the fruit of the Spirit are much more than a mere study of ethics and virtues as some have called them. Rather the fruit of the Spirit are the very qualities of Christ's nature that he desires to grow in you. What makes Biblical Christianity truly unique is that faith in Christ's death and resurrection results in spiritual rebirth as described by Jesus in John's gospel, chapter 3. Your faith in Christ grants forgiveness of sin and the certainty of eternal life. But in this earthly life Christ lives in you by his Holy Spirit to transform your character into his very likeness. You are reborn to be transformed!

Life In The Vine invites you into that journey of spiritual growth.

### A Resource for Pastors

Life In The Vine is a Biblical resource that challenges every Christ-follower to grow in Christ-likeness through the Spirit-filled life. If you are looking for such a resource, consider the following suggested uses of Life In The Vine in your ministry:

- Supplement for preaching and teaching
- Spiritual development for all church leaders—pastoral staff, elders, deacons, teachers and small-group leaders
- Spiritual growth for participants in small groups and life-on-life discipleship
- Life transformation in pre-marital and marriage counseling and enrichment groups.

The selected scriptures in these lessons are based on two criteria. First, they are easily understood literally without difficulty for the young or new follower of Jesus Christ. Insights into definitions or context or culture are provided when needed. Second, the lessons employ the simple rule that “scripture interprets scripture” to demonstrate the unity and cohesiveness of the Bible. These lessons are not exhaustive studies, but an introduction to *inductive study*. All scriptures are from the New International Version.

## Introduction

### Out of Your Heart

Early in the ministry of Jesus he said to "...a large crowd of his disciples..." (Luke 6:17),

*No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn bushes, or grapes from briars. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.* Luke 6:43-45

Life In The Vine will take you into a deeper understanding of the good fruit as well as the evil fruit Jesus had in mind. But more important than mere understanding is the real growth of good fruit in your heart expressed in your everyday life in every relationship. The good fruit are the qualities of Christ's character or likeness that He desires to grow within you.

On the other hand, the bad fruit within us is the result of our fallen nature and the evil influences that shaped our life. The list of influences is long: our DNA, family, culture, education and our many experiences, relationships and decisions. At first glance, changing our character appears impossible against this list of influences! Our only hope is to be born all over again!

### Reborn To Be Transformed

The good news is that Jesus Christ came to give you a spiritual rebirth. Jesus explained this to a high ranking Jewish leader named Nicodemus in John's gospel chapter three. While transformation of your character begins with a spiritual rebirth, it continues progressively through the work of the Holy Spirit in you. You were reborn to be transformed to resemble Him--in other words, to restore the image of God in you that your sinful nature has corrupted.

### How Long Does This Transformation Take?

A good question. But here's a good question for you: how long do you plan to be a follower of Jesus and when do you think your need to be like Him will end? The reality is, every morning of your life you awaken to new and real events that will challenge your character. Your journey through life will be "abundant", in the words of Jesus (John 10:10) if you follow Him and are led by His Spirit in you (Galatians 5:18). These are big ideas and experiences you will come to understand.

### Keep The Following In Mind

As the knowledge of God in scripture is tightly woven, seamless and interdependent, so the fruits of the Spirit or the qualities of Christ's character are likewise interdependent

and function simultaneously. Therefore, it will be impossible to consider one fruit without thinking of the others. That's OK! That is to be expected!

Furthermore, most of the lists found in the Bible are not meant to be inclusive or complete. In *Life In The Vine* you'll find three additional qualities of Christ's character that are added to the Apostle Paul's list in Galatians 5. Each lesson on every character quality is structured around SOAP exercises: **S**.cripture, **O**.bservations, **A**.pplications and **P**.rayer.

Also keep in mind, the Holy Spirit has many ministries in and through us such as prayer, salvation and spiritual gifts. But in these lessons we will look exclusively at the Spirit's role in our character transformation into the likeness of Jesus Christ. Your desire to be like Christ will be rewarded as you remain in Him.

One last thing--four hindrances could stand in your way that you must intentionally overcome:

1. Shifting blame to the bad fruit influencers in your life. You can't use the excuse, "I'm a product of my environment and the people in it—I can't change!" So own your flaws!
2. Denial of your character flaws will block "confession", meaning agreement with God regarding your sin and sinful habits. Your pride stands in the way. So humble yourself!
3. Facing character flaws may remind you of a painful past you don't want to re-live. Perhaps you'll need to seek a good Christian counselor. So get help!
4. Another hindrance may be your over-achieving work ethic to finish these lessons quickly and prayerlessly. An authentic change in character is a marathon not a sprint. So slow down!

Let's get started!

Recommended Reading: The Introduction to The Grand Weaver: How God Shapes Us Through the Events of Our Lives, by Ravi Zacharias.

## LIFE IN THE VINE



## Lesson 1

### A Greater Righteousness

#### *The Rebirth of a Pharisee*

After the Apostle Paul became a Christ-follower (Acts 9), he wrote this: “I know that nothing good lives...in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out” (Romans 7:18). Paul understood that Jesus had raised the standard of moral goodness. Jesus told his early followers, “...your righteousness [or moral goodness and behavior] must exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees...” (Matthew 5:20). Before Paul’s spiritual rebirth (John 3:3), he was a certifiable Pharisee. He described his former life to the Philippians, “...in regard to the law [I was] a Pharisee...as for legalistic righteousness [I was] faultless” (Philippians 3:3-6). So Paul rightly understood his spiritual dilemma and ours as well— Christ expects us to live a life we cannot live by our own strength!

While Paul had achieved a high level of legalistic righteousness, he could not live the life Christ required of him by his own willpower or self-discipline. Jesus requires righteous behavior to come out of a righteous heart. Only a righteousness from within produces an authentic outward righteousness. By raising the standard, Jesus condemns our hypocrisy and pride in legalistic righteousness or mere obedience to the laws of God. This new standard begs a number of good questions you might be asking:

- “So how do I avoid a Christian phariseeism of outward obedience in my own strength?”
- “How do I overcome temptations and the sinful habits I can’t break?”
- “Why do I lack the joy of my salvation?”
- “How can I be more like Jesus and less like my old self?”

If you are asking one or more of these questions you really need the answer to the ultimate question: “How can I live the life Jesus requires me to live when he lifted the standard of righteousness so high?” Who better to answer this question than Christ himself?

Gathered in the upper room to observe the Passover, Jesus answers the ultimate question his confused disciples at this occasion were not even asking. Embedded in Christ’s teaching recorded in John chapters 13 to 17, he reveals an amazing reality these disciples would eventually come to understand and enjoy after his death and resurrection. Simply stated that reality is this: Jesus must leave so his Spirit can personally live within each of them and us as well. He taught them that his Spirit would empower them to live

the life he required of them. He repeated this reality over and over again and stated at the end of his prayer for all believers "...that I myself may be in them" (John 17:26). The personal presence of Christ through the power of His Holy Spirit enables his followers to live the greater righteousness He requires. How? The Spirit of Christ following our spiritual rebirth grows in us the character of Christ-likeness. This is the focus of these thirteen lessons on the fruit of the Spirit. In these lessons you will explore twelve qualities of Christ's character His Spirit desires to form in you.

Before you begin, read chapters 13-17 of John's gospel in one reading—it will give you an overall understanding of the context and content of Christ's teaching in the critical moments before his crucifixion and resurrection. This first lesson is foundational for your understanding and experience of the Spirit of Christ in you. You can live the life Christ has called you to live! Welcome to *Life In The Vine*!

**PAUSE** – Read John 13-17 in one reading.

### **S.O.A.P. 1 - The Amazing Promise**

The disciples' world is turned upside down in that upper room. Previously they witnessed their teacher entering Jerusalem to the applause given to a king, but now their king washes their feet! Then Jesus speaks of denial and betrayal by several of them. Then He tells them he is leaving but gives them an amazing promise. He promises to send a Counselor—a title given to Jesus in the prophecy of Isaiah (9:6). He tells them this Counselor is the Holy Spirit who will be in them to replace his physical presence with them. His amazing promise is to every disciple including you!

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

John 7:37-39; 14:15-23; 15:26-16:16; Ephesians 2:18-22; 3:14-21

### **O.bservations**

1. What do you envision when Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit (John 7) as "...streams of living water flowing from within [his followers]"?
2. In John 14, 15 and 16 Jesus describes many ministries of the Holy Spirit—list as many as you can find:

3. In Paul's inspired letter to the house churches in Ephesus he uses the metaphor of a "house" to describe what relationships?

#### **A.plications**

1. Based on Paul's metaphor of the "dwelling place of God" what are some of your feelings about that?
2. Jesus said, "...we will come to him [anyone] and make our home with him" (John 14:23). What thoughts come to mind when you think of Jesus being "at home" in you?
3. What are two or three expectations you might have of the Holy Spirit as a "Counselor" in your life?
  - 1)
  - 2)
  - 3)
4. Three times in Ephesians 3 Paul uses the word "power" by God's Spirit to strengthen us. In what two or three parts of your life do you feel you need more inner strength?
  - 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.

**P.rayer** - You have much to pray about. Open your heart to the Lord and tell him what you think or feel or desire from Him.

#### **S.O.A.P. 2 - Christ-like Transformation**

Most every child in elementary science learns the meaning of "metamorphosis" to explain the amazing transformation of caterpillars into moths and butterflies. This Greek word is used by the Apostle Paul to explain the real transformation God intends for everyone who experiences spiritual rebirth (John 3) through faith in Jesus Christ. Your

rebirth is not the end but the beginning of an on-going transformation of your character. God intended that Christ-likeness should permeate your entire life for his glory. The Spirit, whom Jesus sends, accomplishes this transformation when we choose to cooperate with him in his work within us.

**S.cripture** - Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

John 15:1-8; Romans 12:1-2; 8:29; II Corinthians 3:18; II Peter 1:3-11

#### **O.bservations**

1. Jesus uses the metaphor of “vine and branches” (John 15). He repeats “in me” and “in you” to describe his relationship with his disciples following his resurrection. What is Jesus telling them, and us, by using this metaphor?
2. How would you describe in your own words this transformation or metamorphosis that Paul refers to in his letters to the Corinthians and Romans?
3. What particulars come to mind when you read Paul’s words, “...the pattern of this world...” in Romans 12?
4. What are the reasons Peter gives for “...participating in the divine nature...” (v. 4)? In your own words list as many as you can from vs. 3-11.

#### **A.pPLICATIONS**

1. According to Paul, why is this “transformation” so vitally important both negatively and positively?

Negatively

Positively

2. In what particular ways do you feel you are you still “conforming” to the pattern of this world?

3. If you are a “branch” living in the “vine” of Christ (John 15) and “participating in the divine nature” (II Peter 1), how would you evaluate your progress in Christ-likeness to date? On a scale of 1 to 10, evaluate your progress.

Self-Likeness    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Christ-Likeness

**P.rayer** – Express your desire to the Lord to be transformed into the likeness of Christ.

### **S.O.A.P. 3 - The Vinedresser’s Task**

Since wine was the common beverage in Israel, the image of vines and branches and fruitfulness was easily understood. The vine is the single trunk of the plant from which every fruit-bearing branch is connected at the top. The vinedresser’s task is to cultivate each branch to produce as much fruit as possible. For instance, one task of the vine-dresser was to wash a branch that had fallen to the ground and was covered with dust and dirt. In the scriptures “fruit” is used to describe every good thing God wants to do in us and through us including the fruit of the Spirit which is the formation of Christ-like character qualities.<sup>1</sup> Let’s begin to examine these qualities here.

**S.cripture** - Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Galatians 5:13-25; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 15:1-8, 17

### **O.bservations**

1. If the Spirit of Christ dwells in us and the fruits of Christ-likeness increase (Galatians 5), do you think we lose our identity or personality in this transformation? How would you describe what happens?
2. How would you define “...the deeds of darkness...” (Ephesians 5) and why are they “fruitless”?
3. According to John 15, what does the “vinedresser” (the Father) do to cultivate more fruit? What might this mean practically in someone’s life?

## **A.plications**

1. What qualities (fruit) in your character have you and/or others noticed growth in Christ-likeness?
2. What did the vinedresser (the Father) do or allow to make this growth happen in you?
3. What qualities of character do you struggle with from the most to the least? Consider the 9 fruits in Galatians 5 and list them under the following three categories:

Struggle Most

Struggle Some

Struggle Least

**P.rayer** – Tell the Father (the Vinedresser) you want to not only live in the Vine (Christ), but that you want Him to cultivate your branch to bear the fruit of Christ-Likeness.

## **S.O.A.P. 4 - The Counselor Who Sanctifies**

Jesus concludes the Passover meal in the upper room by praying aloud to the Father. He asks the Father to “sanctify” these men. The word “sanctify” means to be separated from sin, that is, evil values or attitudes or speech, or desires or behaviors, and be separated to the righteousness of Christ. Jesus described sanctification earlier as a work of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8-11). This is to be an on-going work of the Spirit in every follower of Christ including you! Inspired by the Spirit the Apostle Paul deepens our understanding of sanctification in his letters to the house churches in the cities of Ephesus and Thessalonica. To the Ephesians, Paul writes in the Greek language, “...be continually filled with the Spirit...” (Ephesians 5:18) who sanctifies us. Let’s begin to find out how that happens!

**S.cripture** - Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Luke 4:1-15; John 17:13-19; 16:5-11; 14:15-17; I Thess. 5:19-24;

Eph. 5:17-18

## O.bservations

1. From Luke 4, write down the three phrases that describe the ministry of the Holy Spirit to Jesus during his temptations:
  - 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
2. In your own words summarize how Jesus overcame the temptations.
3. In his prayer Jesus asks the Father to “sanctify” the disciples (John 17). In John 16:5-11 he states three general categories to describe the work of the Counselor who accomplishes this sanctification. Find them and write them down here:
  - 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
4. In I Thessalonians 5, Paul uses the terms “fire” and “blameless” to describe the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. What could these terms mean in the experience of becoming like Jesus? Your thoughts:

“Fire”

“Blameless”

## A.plications

1. Paul uses the metaphor of darkness to describe your “old self” before rebirth (John 3) and light to describe your “new self” after your rebirth. Write down as many words or phrases as you can find that describe this “old self” and “new self” in Ephesians 4:17-5:18.

<u>Old Self</u>	<u>New Self</u>
-----------------	-----------------
2. In Ephesians 4:30, Paul cautions us “...do not grieve the Holy Spirit...”, and in 5:18 he exhorts “...be continually filled with the Spirit...” Do these statements beg the question, “How?” What do you feel or think? Explain here:

How would you “grieve the Spirit”?

How would you be “filled with the Spirit”?

3. If you are to “...be continually filled with the Holy Spirit...” what does “continually” imply? Circle one:

Once   Few   Annually   Monthly   Weekly   Daily   As Needed

4. On a scale of 1 to 10, circle the number that best measures your eagerness to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Not Interested   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10   Extremely Eager

**P.rayer** - Ask Jesus to help you understand and desire the filling of his Holy Spirit in your life.

Be sure to carefully read the following *Further Thoughts*, entitled, “How to be Filled with the Holy Spirit”.

### **Further Thoughts: How to be Filled with the Holy Spirit**

We live in a self-help culture with self-help books and formulas for everything imaginable. The internet provides steps for nearly every How-to-do-it project right at our finger tips. Instantly we can start, progress and finish. We marvel at the stories of people who have overcome great odds by persistence, sacrifice, willpower and self-discipline. But in the Word of God we find no easy formulas for being filled with the Holy Spirit. No easy steps. Steps, in and of themselves, imply simplicity, self-determination and quick results. Formulas would imply that God can be coerced by our words and efforts—that God must dutifully act when we do the right things in the right order. But truthfully, we have nothing with which to leverage God’s servitude toward us. Nor can we define or demand how God should help us. Why didn’t God give us a formula to be filled with His Spirit? Because his glory and reputation will never depend on our achievements. God’s glory is his goal in transforming our character into the likeness of his Son and God will not share or mix his glory with our pride (I Peter 5:5-6).

### **So What Am I Supposed To Do?**

The most important insight into being filled with God’s Spirit, for his purpose to transform you into the likeness of Christ, is humble surrender. God makes these profound statements about Himself to Isaiah his prophet:

*For this is what the high and exalted One says --He who lives forever, whose Name is holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.’ Isaiah 57:15*

*‘These are the ones I look on with favor: those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at my word.’ Isaiah 66:2*

How will you know when you are humble enough? How do you measure your own humility? Fortunately, only God can measure your “lowly spirit”—your humble surrender to the work and pleasure of His Spirit in you. God is anxious to fill you with His Spirit in response to your humble desperation for Himself alone.

### **Count Yourself Dead**

The Apostle Paul wrote of this humble surrender as a kind of “death to self” experience. To the Romans he wrote this,

*In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.* Romans 6:11

*For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live. For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.* Romans 8:13-14

In Paul’s letter to the Galatians he refers to the sinful nature six times in chapter 5 verses 13-26 concluding with, “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Galatians 5:24). This is not about co-mingling Christ’s nature with your sinful nature but practically applying Christ’s crucifixion to your sinful nature. As you do that the nature of Jesus will emerge in you. It’s quite exciting!

### **A Refreshing Breakthrough**

Every follower of Christ must become aware of their need of Christ’s Spirit to sanctify them (Romans 8). The first awareness will liberate you to grow toward Christlikeness and away from the sinful desires and habits that imprison you in guilt and hopelessness. Your emotional response to your first “infilling” experience may be determined by how long or how deep your struggle for self-righteousness has been. The greater your imprisonment—the greater your joy! This is a welcomed blessing from the “...exceeding riches of [God’s] grace...” (Ephesians 2:7). While there is no pattern of emotional response, this first experience of sanctification is a refreshing break-through for all followers of Christ. Sincerely make the filling of the Holy Spirit your on-going daily request as you “humbly surrender” in your private conversations with God. Undoubtedly you will need and desire this grace for each new day!

### **A Daily Surrender**

To be filled with the Spirit, who sanctifies or separates you from sinful desires and empowers you in the face of temptation and grows the fruit of Christ-likeness in you, is the result of daily humble surrender in prayer. Jesus taught in the upper room, “...the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name...” (John 16:23-24), meaning, sincere prayer “for only those things that glorify Christ”. His likeness in you brings glory to Christ. “Living”, “walking” and “being led” by the Spirit (Galatians 5:16, 17 & 25) requires a way-of-life daily surrender. No formula here. Paul summed it up simply, “...be continually filled with the Holy Spirit...” While you live in God’s presence you must actively choose to spend quality, uninterrupted time with God that is dedicated to intimate and deeply personal conversation with him. This conversation includes His written Word, His quiet voice that impresses and illuminates His Word for your heart and mind and your humble expressions of heart and mind back to the Lord. During this

conversation re-surrender your heart again to Christ's sovereign reign and the work of his Spirit to conform you to his own likeness. Keep in mind this time with God is:

- Not a religious ritual with fixed forms and recitations
- Not your achievement in Bible reading and prayer lists
- Not a discipline to endure.

Every religion or cult requires activities like these, but only Christ offers you his Spirit—his personal presence in you.

This conversation with God expresses a loving relationship. Just as you would not get up in the morning and ignore the spouse you love or remain silent and unaffected by the presence of the children you love, your daily humble surrender to God will be your deepest joy and source of true life. This conversation is intended to be a desired practice and pleasure.

In addition, each day brings new challenges to your character and new temptations to sinful thoughts, attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, your need of God's Spirit in your life is continuous. Living in the Vine and drawing life from the source of Christ's life never ceases.

Furthermore, Christ-likeness pleasantly impacts all of your relationships. If you are in the midst of parenting, your need of Christ-likeness is multiplied. If you manage others in the workplace your need for Christ-likeness is continuous. People who dislike you or annoy you for no other reason than their own dysfunction, make your need for the fruit of Christ's Spirit critical! Christ wants you to represent him to everyone you meet every day.

While you are positionally sanctified or separated from the condemnation of sin by Christ's atoning death and resurrection, you are still in need of a daily progressive sanctification by Christ's Spirit in you to live the righteous life of Christ's likeness. Therefore, your progressive sanctification is not one prayer or filling for a lifetime, but a lifetime of humble surrender and many fillings.

### **Does Obedience Count?**

Unquestionably Christ commands your obedience. But it can't be a bootstrap obedience in which you somehow, some way, find your own strength to obey by self-determination. In fact, that's where the problem lies. What you stand in need of is Divine intervention by the Holy Spirit who empowers you to overcome your disobedient nature (Ephesians 3:14-21). By prayer humbly and actively choose to obey God's commands and trust Him for the power of His Spirit. The Spirit delights to give you His power to obey authentically. In doing so God assures that His glory, not your willpower, is promoted. Remember, when God alone is glorified you will feel His pleasure.

Footnote:

<sup>1</sup>Milne, Bruce, The Message of John. InterVarsity Press, Downer's Grove, 1993, p. 222.



## **Lesson 2**

### **The Fruit of Holiness**

#### ***Resisting My Temptations***

What images come to mind when you hear the word “holy”?

- A joyless, expressionless face?
- Drab and colorless clothing?
- Regal robes and metal symbols?
- Socially secluded and disconnected?

Because of their pious hypocrisy, Jesus called the “holy” Pharisees of the day, “painted graves”—they appeared clean on the outside while on the inside lay the stench of death.

If you are genuinely holy on the inside you wear a smile, common clothes and are quite sociable! So dismiss the misleading images and embrace the enriching nature of holiness. The holy are liberated from self-destructive habits and the shame that creates distance between themselves and God and others. To be holy is to be free from evils that leave you lonely and full of self-loathing. God has called you to “...be holy, because I am holy...” (I Peter 1:15-16)--holy on the inside so your mind, emotions, will and conscience are free from the destructions of sin.

### **God’s Holiness**

God’s holiness is simply defined as *his moral purity and excellence*--we might say his total and absolute sinlessness. But his holiness goes immeasurably deeper. God did not attain his sinlessness by some moral standard outside of himself. Rather God was and is and will always be the standard of holiness. All holiness finds its origin in the eternal Godhead.

The trilogy of words used in Hebrew Literature as in “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty” (Isaiah 6:3) indicates that it is impossible for God to be any more holy or morally pure than he is already. God’s holiness permeates every characteristic of his Divine nature so He never acts or thinks or decides in any sinful way. Our understanding and language is inadequate to comprehend or communicate the enormous mystery of God’s holiness.

### **Our Sinfulness**

The evidence of our need for moral purity and ethical excellence is in us and all around us. The New Testament is filled with lists of evil in its many forms. Christ was

sent to forgive us and restore the likeness of God's holiness in us. In turn, Christ sent the Holy Spirit to fill you and make your holiness a growing reality. Your inner holiness determines what you are on the outside—a life free from accusation, a life of deep but morally pure relationships. As you come to understand inner holiness in this lesson, it does not mean you will reach a state of perfect sinlessness unaffected by temptations. Rather, you will learn how to overcome temptation through God's empowering work by his Holy Spirit when you cooperate with him.

Remember, you are positionally sanctified “from” sin and “to” Christ. That is your standing before God based on your spiritual rebirth. You are a child of God by faith in Christ's death for your sin. Your sanctification is also progressive throughout your lifetime till you reach your eternal reward of heaven. Till then when you are tempted to sin and fail to resist, you will not lose your “position”, but will need to do what God's Word tells us:

*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. I John 1:9*

That is good news and reassuring! We will look at confession later in the lesson. But let's take a closer look at the Christ-like quality of holiness that God's Spirit desires to cultivate in us.

### **S.O.A.P. 1- The Family Likeness**

It's always interesting to watch the family resemblance in a child as they develop physically. This is also meant to happen in your spiritual development. When you were spiritually born again (John 3), you became a member of the household and family of God (Hebrews 2:10-11), and Christ your Savior became your brother (Hebrews 2:11). Like natural babies, God the Father intends that you take on the family likeness, not physically, but in the transformation of your inner character. Holiness, or moral purity and ethical excellence, is a huge quality of God's nature. What does God say about his holiness and its importance to you? Let's find out!

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Leviticus 11:44-45, 20:7; Hebrews 2:14-18, 4:14-16; John 14:23

**O.bservations**

1. Given man's fallen nature, is “...be holy, because I am holy...” (Leviticus 11:44-45) an impossible command to obey or an invitation to accept? What do you think and why?

2. Notice the words “consecrate” and “makes” in Leviticus 20:7. Describe how these words shape your understanding of holiness.

“Consecrate”:

“Makes”:

3. According to Hebrews 2 and 4, what makes Jesus Christ your brother also qualified to be your great High Priest?
4. Why is “...approach[ing] the throne of grace...” (Hebrews 4) so important in the moment of temptation?
5. On a scale of 1 to 10, how secure and significant do you feel in knowing that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are “at home” (John 14:23) in you in spite of your sinful condition?

Not Sure   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10   Overwhelmed

#### A.plications

1. In your earthly family you may not have had a sibling or your mother or father in your life, but how do you feel about being a member of God’s family? Be specific.

God your father?

Christ your brother?

Holy Spirit your counselor?

2. From your observations and understanding of these scriptures, how hopeful do you feel about your personal holiness in spite of your sinful failures and impurity? Why or why not?

3. On a scale of 1 to 10, evaluate your hopeful feelings above by circling a phrase or a number.

Quite Hopeless    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Very Hopeful

**P.rayer** - Be honest with God. Tell the Father how you feel about your sinfulness and what you desire to be and become with His help and by His grace (love).

## **S.O.A.P. 2 - When Temptation Turns To Sin**

Even if you could live secluded from every temptation out there in the world, you would still have your own body and imagination to contend with. Your inner fallen nature is not your friend, but it is your constant companion. So your moral challenge is not with temptation since temptation is not a sin in itself. But temptation creates the tipping point of every sin. Through-out scripture light and darkness illustrate good and evil. Sin begins in a dark and secret place in your thought life. There, impure thoughts fuel the imagination that eventually desires to be acted out. This could happen quickly or slowly. Let's look more closely at this process in scripture—your Heavenly Father's very words.

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Matthew 5:27-30; Luke 6:43-45; Ephesians 5:3, 8-14; James 1:13-15;  
I Corinthians 10:1-13

### **O.bservations**

1. What does Jesus know about your heart that you must understand and must not ignore?

Matthew 5:27-30:

Luke 6:43-45

2. Write down the six specific steps in the process of temptation and sin as described in James 1 on the lines below.

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3. What do you think “full grown” means?
  
4. We easily understand the behaviors and actions of sin, but at what point does temptation become sin in our mind or heart? How would you describe the tipping point?
  
5. When we are tempted and then fall into sin, has God failed to “provide a way out” (I Corinthians 10 and James 1) How would you explain this “seeming” contradiction from these scriptures?

#### A.plications

1. In the midst of your temptations, how might God “provide a way out” for you?  

<u>God’s Possible Provisions</u>	<u>Your Possible Responses</u>
----------------------------------	--------------------------------
  
2. While some temptations take us by surprise, what could you do to avoid certain temptations in the first place? List as many as you can think of.
  
3. What is the recurring temptation you wrestle with most? Answering this simple question by writing it down may be your first step out of the darkness into the light.
  
4. What in your life could “die” (not physically) if the above temptation became “full grown”? List as many specific “deaths” as you can think of in both you and the lives of others in your life.

In You:

In Others:

5. Describe in your own words how secrecy and deception hinders your freedom from the guilt and shame of your sin.

**P.rayer** - Have you asked the Holy Spirit to fill you and grow the fruit of holiness? Why not pray for that now? Ask God to help you see any other provision of his “way out”.

### **S.O.A.P. 3 - Confession, Sorrow and Accountability**

When Jesus told a woman that her many sins have been forgiven, the Pharisees exclaimed, “Who is this who even forgives sin?” (Luke 7:48-50) In doing so Jesus revealed his Divinity, the basis for his authority and power to forgive sin. Now, when you **confess** your sin you are stating your agreement with God that you have disobeyed him. Confession must be followed by **repentance**—your sorrowful desire to turn from your sin and return to the pleasure of God’s holiness and fellowship (Luke 7:44-47). This woman’s return to holiness can be yours as well!

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

I John 1:9; II Corinthians 7:8-10; James 5:13-17; Galatians 6:1-5

#### **O.bservations**

1. What is the basis for God’s justice and faithfulness (I John 1) to forgive your sin and purify you from all unrighteousness? Hint: it is not your confession!
2. Re-read the above introduction to this S.O.A.P. then describe what you think most likely happens when confession is not followed by repentance?
3. Based on II Corinthians 7:8-10, how would you describe the difference between someone with “godly sorrow” and someone with “worldly sorrow” for sin?

Godly Sorrow

Worldly Sorrow

4. According to James 5 and Galatians 6, what are the benefits of confessing sin to a fellow Christ-follower? When and why is accountability most helpful?

When?

Why?

#### **A.plications**

1. Do you blame others for your sinful failures?

Check One: Yes\_\_\_\_\_ Sometimes \_\_\_\_\_ Never \_\_\_\_\_

2. If “yes” or “sometimes”, when will you take full responsibility for your sinful choices?

3. If you feel or felt the need for accountability to help you overcome sin in your life, what qualities of character would you look for in a fellow Christian? List as many as you can think of.

4. Write down the names of those who would qualify for you, whether you need them now or possibly in the future.

**P.rayer** - Thank God for these friends and tell him you will seek their accountability quickly, before “the desires of temptation conceive and become full grown” (James 1:14-15).

#### **S.O.A.P. 4 - The Perfect Father’s Discipline**

Human parenting is greatly weakened by abuse or neglect or coddling. Each contributes to a child feeling unloved or unwanted or angry or afraid or insecure or insignificant. These deep feelings emerge as dysfunctions including sinful choices and habits. However, in the family of God you have access to the perfect Father who lovingly offers forgiveness and a new beginning. Your Heavenly Father has the power to rescue, restore and renew-- perfect discipline when you submit to his gracious authority.

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Hebrews 12:1-15; I Peter 1:14-21

**O.bservations**

1. How do you think “...fixing our eyes on Jesus...” (Hebrews 12:2) helps us to “...throw off...the sin that so easily entangles...” us?
2. What are the possible “goods” (Hebrews 12:10-11) that result from the Father’s discipline? Take time to imagine and list them here:
3. From I Peter 1:14-21, what does Peter teach us about the Father’s discipline and his goal for us?
4. Do you know someone who has rejected God’s discipline? What is their life like now?

**A.plications**

1. Have you ever “grown weary” and “lost heart” over sin that “easily entangles” you?    Yes \_\_\_\_\_    No \_\_\_\_\_    Not Sure \_\_\_\_\_
2. What emotions or attitudes hinder your submission to God’s authority? Be honest before the Father and list them here:
3. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you measure your submission to God the Father’s discipline? Choose one phrase or number.  
Very Resistant    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Very Compliant

4. Your holiness (moral purity and ethical excellence) is achieved when you submit to the Father's discipline. How might God's discipline be a "hardship" or "painful" in your life (Hebrews 12:7, 11)? Check as many of the following that could apply to you:
- a. \_\_\_\_\_ Becoming accountable to a trusted spiritual mentor.
  - b. \_\_\_\_\_ Seeking professional Christian counseling to break sinful habits.
  - c. \_\_\_\_\_ Submitting to the discipline of spiritual authorities in the church.
  - d. \_\_\_\_\_ Asking for forgiveness from those you have sinned against.
  - e. \_\_\_\_\_ Making any restitution if possible.
  - f. \_\_\_\_\_ Hurting others by creating distrust and loss of loving relationships.
  - g. \_\_\_\_\_ The risk of not being forgiven by those you have sinned against.
  - h. \_\_\_\_\_ The humiliation and shame of exposure.

5. Are you willing to trust God the Father with any of the above painful outcomes?

Check One: Not sure \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_

**P.rayer** - If you are presently "dying the death of sin" (James 1), humbly surrender to God the Father and ask Him for the strength to face a kind of "death to self" (Romans 8:12-13) experience, and put the whole weight of your confidence in him for a result that glorifies him and restores your holiness as well as your fellowship with the Lord and others.

Don't miss the *big key* to resisting temptation found in the Further Thoughts.

### **Further Thoughts: The Big Key to Resisting Temptation**

When Paul described the evils that result from the "love of money" in his letter to Timothy, he laid down a profound spiritual principle:

*But you, man [woman] of God, flee from all this and pursue righteousness, godliness, love, endurance and gentleness. I Timothy 6:11*

If you missed it--"**flee and pursue**". Paul repeats the principle in his second letter (II Timothy 2:22). This is the big key to resisting temptation.

It's not enough to merely flee from a temptation to sin. When you only flee, you are looking back and the evil pleasure remains your focus. "Running away" from, must be changed to "running toward", God Himself. Flight and pursuit. When you determine to actually pursue God daily, you "Draw near to God and he will draw near to you" (James 4:8). In that intimacy with God you experience what David describes in his Psalm:

*You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand. Psalm 16:11*

God desires that you find pleasure in Him. God's pleasures will weaken your temptations because the pleasures of evil will grow less attractive to you. This is why

secular or godless counseling fails most of the time. These counselors suggest “flight” through behavior modification and dependence on your own strength or the strength of a counselor or the strength of a group of people who are victims of the same evil. For one thing, these are “pursuits” for strength from the strengthless! Furthermore, all of these fall short of the power and pleasure of the God you pursue.

How do you pursue God? How do you draw near? God tells you—by His inspired Word and His Holy Spirit. “The word of God is living and active. Sharper than a two-edged sword...” (Hebrews 4:12). “...if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live” (Romans 8:13). Remain in Christ. Be continually filled with the Holy Spirit. With a humble and contrite heart, surrender yourself each day in pursuit of the God who desires to share His holiness with you! Remember, the strength to resist temptation comes in your daily pursuit of God, not at the moment of your temptation. In other words, your failure to pursue God daily weakens your resistance to temptation. Put yet another way, failure to pursue God makes the lie of temptation (Romans 1:25; Hebrews 3:13) more believable.

### **No One Sins in a Vacuum**

Also keep in mind that no one sins in a vacuum. As hard as you try to compartmentalize your life and create a secret room of darkness sealed off from view, unchecked sin eventually leaks out to affect you and “...defile many...” others whether you are actually caught or not (Hebrews 12:14-15). Unconfessed and unrepented sin distorts, diminishes, infects, imprisons, dehumanizes and eventually destroys your character. Little by little sin rots the image of God in you and leaves you with spiritual, emotional and mental deficiency. This leak of habitual “secret” sin is hardly noticeable at first. The leak is so subtle it even emboldens you to give in to the temptation more easily over and over again. But as James, the half-brother of Jesus, was inspired to write, “...when sin is full grown it gives birth to death...” (James 1:13-15), not life! While life is always the false promise of sin, the true promise of sin is a slow death. Like most cancers, sin grows painlessly and undetected until it’s too late. Grim picture—right? You would do well to acquire the same fear of “full grown” sin as you have for cancer.

By contrast, “...be holy, because I am holy...” (I Peter 1:16) is God’s invitation to “...participate in the divine nature...” (II Peter 1:4). This is God’s enormous offer of life with a clear conscience and freedom from guilt and shame. Now that’s an offer only a fool would walk away from. Peter was also inspired to ask in light of Christ’s return, “...what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of Christ’s return...” (II Peter 3:11-12).

God’s offer of holiness is realized through the filling of the Holy Spirit who progressively sanctifies or separates you from sin when you humbly surrender yourself to him and the Father’s discipline. By the Holy Spirit you are empowered to resist temptation. You will find God’s “way of escape”. You will also value your intimacy

with God and be greatly enriched by your God-approved intimacies with others. All of this is yours when you “put to death” your flesh with all its evil desires and expressions.

*Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness. When you were slaves to sin, you were free from control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.*

Romans 6:19-22

Revisit Lesson 1 and read again, “How To Be Filled With The Holy Spirit”.

Recommended Reading: Steering Clear – Avoiding the Slippery Slope to Moral Failure, by Earl Wilson, InterVarsity Press, 2002

## LIFE IN THE VINE



## Lesson 3

### The Fruit of Love

#### *Empowered to Forgive Others*

Unrestrained, the word “love” is used flippantly to describe most anything we merely enjoy. Love is the deepest need and desire of all mankind for all time. Love is the most popular theme of music, literature, drama and the arts in every culture. If words have meaning, “love” should be reserved and used thoughtfully.

The word we find in the New Testament that refers to God’s love is even more profound than natural human love and rightly so. It’s the Greek word *agapê*. In fact, “*agapê*” is a noun that rarely appears in the original language. But the Apostle Paul turned it into a verb to form a new word to describe a new quality of love. Earlier Jesus said that our love is to be patterned after the love God has for us—“a love that always, without fail, seeks the highest and best good for all mankind.” The major qualities of the word *agapê* are generosity and forgiveness.

The Apostle Paul uses *agapê* 60 times in his letters to the early church. To the house churches in Ephesus he wrote,

*But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.* Ephesians 2:4-7

God loved us while we were dead in sin; he made us alive for this life and eternity! Unprecedented love! Nothing like it in human expression! Utterly other worldly! When God generously gave his Son (John 3:16), he gave us everything we need, especially forgiveness. *Agapê* love is a uniquely Christian phenomenon!

### Love’s Greatest Test

When asked by his disciples to teach them how to pray, Jesus made no direct reference in his model of prayer to the great and second commandments to love God and others (Matthew 22:37-40). But He did include love’s greatest test, “...and forgive us as we forgive those who sin against us...” (Luke 11:1-4). He knew forgiveness was the greatest test of natural human love. It’s always easy to love those who are loving toward you than someone who has sinned against you. Especially a sin so vile that it

requires your self-sacrifice and undeserved love to forgive. How is that even possible when every feeling inside you screams hatred and vengeance? Jesus is telling us in his model of prayer that Divine love and the power to forgive is now available. You are forgiven to be forgiving!

## **Unforgiveness Contaminates**

From Lesson 2 you discovered that when sin, including the sin of unforgiveness, becomes “full grown” it “gives birth to death” (James1:15). The evidence of this death are the evils of hatred and revenge. Here’s a simple test to determine if the condition of unforgiveness is present in you: **Who are the people that live rent-free in your head?** There are only two types—the people you love and people you refuse to forgive. Right? But remember this, no one sins in a vacuum. Sin always leaks! And the sin of unforgiveness will even contaminate those you say you love—they too will become victims of your toxic hatred and vengeance. Your own emotional and physical health weakens as well (Ecclesiastes 30:24). And worse yet, the God of love and forgiveness will not feel “at home” in you (John14:23)!

Go deeper now into the word of God to understand and access God’s power to love and forgive and to be freed from the contamination of unforgiveness. Whether you are contaminated now or not, you need to know how to avoid it yourself and help free others you meet along life’s journey. Perhaps such a person comes to mind right now. You can help them only if the fruit of love [agapê] is growing on the branch of your life in the Vine who is Christ!

## **S.O.A.P. 1 - God’s Extreme Love and Forgiveness**

In addition to agapê love, the Greek word Karis or grace is used often to describe God’s love as well. Grace means “undeserved favor” (Ephesians 2:4-7), “unrelenting” (Romans 8:35) and “sacrificial” (John 3:16). God demonstrated his extreme love and forgiveness by sending Christ, who never sinned, to die for our sin. As a follower of Jesus Christ you are now commanded to imitate your heavenly Father’s agapê and karis love. To make this effectual, Jesus sent the Spirit of God to dwell in you and bear the fruit of God’s love that empowers you to forgive even the most devastating sins committed against you! God’s extreme love in you births an extreme forgiveness. Check it out!

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Psalm 103:8-13; Isaiah 43:24-25; Romans 12:17-21; Ephesians 4:32-5:2

### **O.bservations**

1. In your own words, what impresses you about God’s anger, love and mercy from Psalm 103?  
God’s Anger:  
God’s Love:  
God’s Mercy:

2. After reading Isaiah 43:24-25, in addition to God's love, what other qualities of his character compel him to forgive and forget "for his own sake"?
  
3. Based on Romans 12:17-21, describe the tension that exists between God's vengeance and Christian compassion.
  
4. Based on Ephesians 4:32-5:2, if God chooses to forgive and forget sin, can we? Why or why not? Think carefully!

#### A.plications

1. Why is your righteous anger toward the sin of others healthy?
  
2. On a scale of 1 to 10, how difficult is it for your will to overcome your feelings of righteous anger and choose love and forgiveness?  
Very difficult    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Total Victory
  
3. How can, "It is mine to avenge, I will repay, says the Lord", assist you in overcoming the temptations of hatred and revenge?
  
4. Overall on a scale of 1 to 10, how would you evaluate your imitation of the Father's love and forgiveness? Be honest with yourself.  
No Imitation    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Perfect Imitation
  
5. Who is the most difficult person in your life to love and forgive? Name them here: \_\_\_\_\_

**P.rayer** - Pray for the person you just named above and ask the Father to pour his love and forgiveness into your own heart so you can choose to imitate him.

## **S.O.A.P. 2 - When Anger Turns To Hatred**

As with God, your righteous anger toward sin is justified and healthy be it against you or others. However, unlike God, your unresolved anger can turn into the many evils of hatred and revenge. The good news is God's "way of escape"—the power of his love and forgiveness. Review Lesson 2 – The Fruit of Holiness and the process of temptation and sin found in James chapter 1. While your righteous anger is healthy and permitted, it becomes a temptation that must be overcome. You can't justify your hatred or allow your righteous anger to go unresolved. Your right to be angry must be ended by the power of God's love and forgiveness.

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Romans 1:28-32; Galatians 5:13-21; Ephesians 4:29-31; Colossians 3:7-11;  
Titus 3:1-11; Hebrews 12:14-17; James 1:19-21; 3:3-11

### **Observations**

1. List as many words as you can find in the verses above from Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians and Titus that describe hatred and revenge.
2. Do you now understand the destructive nature of unresolved anger and your need of God's love and forgiveness? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ If no, why not?
3. How would you describe the "tension" in Paul's statement, "In your anger do not sin" (Ephesians 4)?
4. How does the taste of bitterness in your mouth describe bitterness in your heart (Hebrews 12)?
5. According to James 1, how is one's anger "slowed down"?

### **A.plications**

1. On a scale of 1 to 5, how well has your tongue been tamed? Circle one:  
Still Wild – Somewhat Tamed – It All Depends – Almost Tamed – Perfectly Tamed

2. If “It All Depends” --on who or what? Explain here:  
Who:  
What:
3. In your experience, or the experience of others, why is revenge never satisfied?
4. How might prayer slow your anger down? What happens when you pray immediately?

**P.rayer** - Ask God, by his Holy Spirit in you, to quicken your heart to pray immediately when someone has sinned against you.

### **S.O.A.P. 3 - The Urgency of Forgiveness and Reconciliation**

The stories of unforgiveness flood the media. Many are told, most are not. Unforgiveness runs through every social strata from marriage to family to neighborhoods to schools to communities to businesses to churches and even to whole nations. Unforgiveness spans human history from the garden of Eden to tomorrow’s news. Jesus was sent by the Father and voluntarily died to put an end to the ravages of unforgiveness in your life. Discover in the first recorded teaching of Jesus the urgency of forgiveness and reconciliation.

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Matthew 5:21-24; Luke 23:32-34; Ephesians 4:25-27; Matthew 18:15-17

### **O.bservations**

1. Describe in your own words how urgent forgiveness is, in light of the example Jesus uses in Matthew 5.

2. What do you think are the dangers to both parties when reconciliation is delayed by either the offender or the offended?

Dangers to the Offended

Dangers to the Offender

3. What could Christ's prayer on the cross in Luke 23 tell us about the availability of Divine forgiveness?
4. In Ephesians 4, what does, "Don't let the sun go down on your wrath", suggest to you? Give specifics.

#### A.plications

1. Based on Matthew 18, do you feel you need an apology from someone who has sinned against you before you forgive them? Yes\_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ If yes, what if they never apologize?
2. Does God's power to forgive others depend on their apology or your faith in God before God releases it to you?
3. Is there someone in your life with whom you have not been reconciled? If so, write their name here: \_\_\_\_\_ How long have you waited to be reconciled?\_\_\_\_\_
4. How do you excuse or justify your sin of unforgiveness that stands in the way of your will to choose forgiveness?

**P.rayer** - If you have admitted or confessed the sin of unforgiveness here, why not repent of it with godly sorrow and ask God to empower you with his love and forgiveness to be reconciled with the one who sinned against you or the one you have sinned against (Matthew 6:14-15)? Don't wait any longer! Go to that person as quickly as possible!

#### **S.O.A.P. 4 - Extreme Forgiveness, Loving Responses and Restitution**

Jesus, the master teacher, used exaggeration on occasion to drive his point deeper and make it memorable. On such an occasion, Peter asks Jesus a "reasonable" question, "Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother [or sister or mother or father or friend or boss or....]?" Jesus answered, "70 times 7." Really? So forgiveness ends with number 490? No. Forgiveness is endless. Is that even possible? If Jesus thinks so, then "yes" it's possible, not by human strength, but by divine power. It's not uncommon to hear someone say, "I just can't forgive so and so for what they did to me." The extreme forgiveness Jesus demonstrated while on the cross at his death (Luke 23:32-34) is the same forgiveness he desires to empower you with. What Jesus commands he also empowers. Let's look at the 70 times 7 journey of forgiveness.

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Matthew 18:21-35; Matthew 5:7, 11-12, 38-48; Luke 19:1-10; Ephesians 4:26-5:2; I Peter 4:7-8

#### **Observations**

1. To begin, what are some of the extremely painful sins that could require a 70 x 7 forgiveness? List them here:
2. How would you summarize in one or two sentences your understanding of the Heavenly Father's forgiveness based on Matthew 18?
3. Notice the actions and responses that accompany forgiveness in Matthew 5. What do they suggest to you?
4. What happens in us when we raise forgiveness to the level of loving responses, actions or restitution as suggested by Zacheus (Luke 19) and Paul (Ephesians 4)?

5. How does a Christ-follower's love and forgiveness of others support their witness of the gospel to unbelievers (I Peter 4)?

#### A.plications

1. Having experienced Christ's love and forgiveness for his triple denial (John 18 & 21), Peter writes, "...a deep love covers a multitude of sin." How deep is your love for those who sin against you? Circle your typical response to them here:

Shallow    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Deep

2. Have you ever been the victim of a 70 x 7 sin against you? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_  
Briefly describe your pain:

3. Have you forgiven that person or has hatred and revenge built up in your heart?  
Describe where you are now:

4. Another 70 x 7 sin is habitual sin against you by the same person. Do you have someone like that in your life? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Name them here:

\_\_\_\_\_

How would you measure your strength to forgive them? Circle one:

Very Weak    Weak    Acceptable    Strong    Very Strong

5. Have you ever committed a 70 x 7 sin against someone? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ If yes, write their name here: \_\_\_\_\_ Have you asked for their forgiveness? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ If yes, briefly write your story:

6. If you haven't asked for forgiveness, do you want to receive your heavenly Father's love and forgiveness (I John 4:16-21)? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

**P.rayer** - Tell God that you are willing, or will be willing, to go on the 70 x 7 journey of forgiveness. Ask him for the courage and perseverance to endure. If you have not asked forgiveness for sin you have committed, ask God for forgiveness, and then humbly ask for their forgiveness.

### **Further Thoughts – “The Prison of Unforgiveness”**

Dr. Lewis Smedes once wrote, “To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was you!” Since God “...blots out our transgressions for his own sake....” (Isaiah 43:25), we too do something good for ourselves when we forgive others. To use Smedes’ metaphor, there are three kinds of prisoners in the prison of unforgiveness:

- Those who refuse to grant forgiveness.
- Those who fail to ask for forgiveness, and
- Those who can’t forgive themselves.

Let’s briefly look at each prisoner.

### **Granting Forgiveness**

The pain caused by another’s sin against you can run the gamut from mild to severe depending on the sin itself. The following reality must always be at the forefront of every Christ-follower’s heart and mind: because you have been forgiven by God, you have access by prayer to His love and power to forgive others. God’s power to forgive is available to you by prayer whether you are asked for forgiveness or not. The Apostle Paul described this liberating power that is accessed through prayer in his inspired letter to the Corinthian Church. He wrote:

*If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven—  
if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ  
for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not  
unaware of his schemes.* II Corinthians 2:10-11

To forgive someone through prayer to Christ is to outwit the schemes of Satan. This fits well with Paul’s statement to the Ephesians (4:26)—“...*do not give the devil a foothold.*” In other words, the God-given power to forgive does not depend on others! If it did, you could carry that anger for a lifetime! Don’t wait for an apology! God wants to release your anger ASAP! While dying on the cross Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them...” (Luke 23:34). He didn’t wait for an apology. Remember, the weed of bitterness can grow a relentless root in the soul (Hebrews 12:15). Furthermore, when asked for forgiveness, never hesitate. Choose to grant it quickly regardless of how painful you feel. Listen carefully and then swiftly say, “I forgive you and I love you.” Both of you will need the comfort of God’s Spirit. End your time together with prayer and gratitude. See also the 70 times 7 journey of forgiveness below.

### **Asking For Forgiveness**

The typical “ask” is not an “ask” at all. It’s usually the short, quick statement—“I’m sorry”. A sincere ask is modeled after a prayer to the Lord of confession and repentance. When asking for forgiveness of sin, it must be an expression of humility, sorrow and vulnerability. Here’s a model of sincere asking:

“I know I sinned against you when I \_\_\_\_\_.”

“I hurt you and I feel sorrow and regret for that.”

“Will you please forgive me?”

By naming your sin, expressing your sorrow and asking the question, you make yourself humble and even vulnerable to the one you have injured. But in doing so God releases you morally, emotionally and spiritually regardless of their response. You have done all you can and God is pleased. Let’s face it, asking for forgiveness is humiliating and rightly so! But God gives grace to the humble (I Peter 5:5). Remember, by failing to ask you play the Devil’s friend in tempting the person you injured to hatred and vengeance toward you. Whose side are you on?

### **Forgiving Yourself**

Since you don’t have the power to forget your sins against others, the memory of such can lead to self-loathing even when God has forgiven you and the person you injured has forgiven you. Yes, there is regret. But don’t allow it to turn into prolonged false guilt. The enemy of your soul will find pleasure as you sit in the prison of unforgiveness when God has opened the prison door. By constant prayer claim the freedom Christ died for—your debt of sin has been fully paid! If you remain in false guilt, you will grow “a root of bitterness” toward yourself. Depending on the gravity of your sin and the depth of your guilt and shame, forgiving yourself may also be a 70 times 7 journey! Don’t give up! Christ paid your debt. Any form of penance is unbiblical and weakens the strength of Christ’s cross.

### **The 70 x 7 Journey of Forgiveness**

There are two wishful but false remedies applied to forgiveness—“time heals all wounds” and “forgive and forget”. Unfortunately time has no healing properties for the sin of hatred and vengeance and forgetfulness is impossible. Forgiveness through the love and power of God is the only antidote.

Sins against you run from mild to extreme. Mild moral injuries are more easily forgiven than an extreme moral injury—the kind that are damaging and deeply painful in which forgiveness seems utterly impossible. But when Jesus told Peter to forgive 70 times 7, could he have been thinking of two kinds of sins against you that require a journey? First, there are extreme immoral injuries and the pain of which never seems to stop. And second, the habitual sinner who inflicts injury on you continually. Both stir the temptation of righteous anger that must be tamed, lest it turn into a deep root of bitterness. How is God’s love and forgiveness applied?

First of all, both situations require immediate pleas to the Father declaring your choice to forgive and requesting His power to love and forgive be released in your heart and mind (I Peter 4:7-8). Stay in prayer till that happens. Remember, prayer is not magic; it is intimacy with God. In that intimacy, forgiveness comes when you surrender your self-pity to God's will, your weakness to his strength, your temptation to his victory, your pride to his glory. Then God delights to release in you his love and forgiveness.

In the case of a painful memory of an extreme immoral injury against you, you'll know when your 70 x 7 journey of forgiveness is "nearly" completed when the memory of that injury is no longer painful. Nearly, because you must remain "on your guard" for the enemy's attack as Paul warned (I Corinthians 16:13-14). Flee and pursue (I Timothy 6:11). It's hard to imagine how deep is the power of God's love and forgiveness until you need it.

The temptation to "get even" is immediate and strong regardless of the severity of the sin against us. We all know the ways of self-defense and revenge from silence to harsh words to abusive actions. Our abilities to humiliate and "even the score" are crafted early in our childhood. These evil abilities are difficult for us to break alone, but the Vine, Christ Jesus, will empower us by His Spirit to love and forgive when we cry out to Him in prayer.

Are you in the prison of unforgiveness? Have you played the Devil's accomplice by putting someone else in that prison by your sin against them? Divine love and forgiveness is the God-given power to change your past and the past of others, whether the past of just yesterday or many years ago. The fruit of love will grow on the branch of your life by the Spirit of Christ dwelling in you.

### **Hate the Sin – Love the Sinner**

Mercy is the companion and motivation of God's forgiveness. The common understanding of mercy is that "God withholds what we deserve, to give us what we need". We need forgiveness. Through faith in Christ our Savior we receive forgiveness because of God's mercy (Ephesians 2:4). And by the empowering presence of Christ in us, we can choose to be merciful and forgiving toward those who sin against us. Furthermore, your forgiveness does not let the perpetrator "off the hook" of Divine judgment. Nor is your forgiveness an expression of moral weakness or compromise but rather the deepest expression of love. Like God, you too can hate the sin and love the sinner simultaneously. Unbelievers cannot understand this until they experience Divine mercy and forgiveness for themselves.

### **A Warning**

But understand this—when you strike out in anger against the sinner, you fail to display the nature and character of Christ and the loving forgiveness of God. In your anger you "delete" the opportunity to prove your faith in Christ. In an instant, the light of

the Gospel is extinguished and Satan wins! Whose side will you be on? “Vengeance is mine saith the Lord” (Romans 12:19). Not yours!

**Further Help**

Read: Total Forgiveness, by R. T. Kendall, Charisma House, 2007.

If the journey of forgiveness is overwhelming, you might desire accountability to your pastor, a Christian counselor or a friend.



## Lesson 4

### The Fruit of Humility

#### *Surrendering My Rights*

*“She sure is full of herself!” “He’s really pompous!”* We smirk at excessively proud people and find their boasting annoying. We put up with their arrogance as immaturity and avoid them if possible. But it was pride that Satan appealed to in the Garden of Eden when he convinced Adam and Eve to eat the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil—*“With that knowledge you will be God’s equal. You will really be somebody! Eat and your best days are ahead!”* (Genesis 3 Paraphrased). They chose to believe the enemy’s lie—how irrational to think that a creature could be equal to its creator. But every temptation since is a false promise and every sin an expression of pride. Who of us has not believed the same false promises? When we resist or reject the truth of God, we, too, are saying we know what is good and best for us—we don’t need God and His commandments or “ten suggestions”.

There seems to be a universal tolerance of those who are self-centered, self-absorbed and self-exalted. We see it daily in social media. We put up with celebrities, athletes and politicians who are “full of themselves”. We put up with it in people we know. But should we “put up” with it in ourselves? This inner craving to prove our identity, self-worth and significance ultimately becomes our undoing. Pride always “...gives birth to death...” (James 1:13-15).

### An Extreme Humility

The Greeks and Romans considered humility a weakness in character rather than a strength. When Christ came on the scene, Israel was reduced to a colony of oppression under Roman rule. A once proud nation was humiliated but Jesus sparked hope for a new king. But in his self-humiliation Jesus dashed Israel’s hope and for the greatest reason—the oppression of sin and darkness! Jesus expressed the most extreme humility when He, our Creator, surrendered his rights in the Godhead and came to be your Savior through death for the sins of mankind, on a cross he did not deserve. On the other hand, your extreme expression of pride demands your rights to promote your ambitions and secure your comforts at the expense of others. Extreme humility expresses the opposite—that of voluntarily giving up what rightly belongs to you in order to meet the needs of others. A simple illustration of humility is giving up the borrowed seat that is rightfully yours on a crowded moving bus or train to someone who lacks the strength or stability to stand safely. But an extreme humility is to literally give up the right to life to save the life of another.

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In Paul's letter to the Christians in Colosse, he includes a list of Christ-like qualities like the list of the fruit of the Spirit in his letter to the Galatian believers (chapter 5). Along with the duplicates of "kindness", "gentleness", "patience", "love" and "peace", Paul includes "humility" (Colossians 3:12). In his letter to the Philippian church, Paul examines in greater detail Christ's self-imposed humility and your need of it if you are to bear this fruit of His likeness. Let's take a deeper look!

### **S.O.A.P. 1 - The Humility of Jesus Christ**

It's so easy to sit in judgment of the twelve disciples gathered with Jesus in that upper room (John 14), arguing over who was most qualified for the prominent positions in the coming kingdom! Their master was just hours from laying down his life to become their Savior! But didn't the disciples' lack of humility demonstrate the petty pride in all of us? And didn't their self-exaltation prove their need, and ours, of a sacrifice for sin? Jesus shows us the ultimate expression of humility compelled by love in choosing for Himself the way of the cross. Christ's humility still amazes us to this day. It will take an eternity of praise to adequately honor Him! Let's see why.

**S.cription** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Philippians 2:1-11; Isaiah 53:1-12; Luke 22:24-38

#### **O.bservations**

1. From Philippians 2:5-8, what are the phrases that best capture Christ's willingness to suffer and die for our sin?
2. What are some of the Divine attributes you can think of that rightfully belonged to Christ that He willingly "emptied himself" of, or set aside? Write them here:
3. Throughout his life on earth Jesus lived in dependence on the Father and the Holy Spirit. Do any of those events in the gospels come to mind? Write them here:
4. According to Isaiah 53 and Luke 22, how did Jesus fulfill what the prophet Isaiah described?

5. Sum up all your observations and answer this question—why was Jesus a Savior and not a martyr?

#### A.plications

1. How often are you awed by the humility of Jesus? Circle a number or words:  
Occasionally 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Every thought of Him
2. Describe a personal experience you would consider an extreme obedience on your part:
3. Can you remember an occasion when serving someone became very painful emotionally or mentally or physically? Write your story:
4. Can you remember a time when you humbly sacrificed something of value to you for the good of someone else? Write your story:

**P.rayer** – Tell Jesus how grateful you are for his great humility that provided salvation for you—praise him and worship him and tell him you want to be like him!

#### **S.O.A.P. 2 - The Destructive Nature of Self-Centeredness**

In the moment when Adam and Eve believed the lie and rejected the truth of God, pride gave birth to every evil from the most vile to the most subtle. But all evils are ultimately destructive. In six of the New Testament lists of evils you find these soft and subtle forms of pride you often tolerate: envy, jealousy, conceit, boasting, arrogance, falsehood, deceit and selfish ambition. These are destructive qualities of character that destroy relationships in marriages, families, work places, classrooms, neighborhoods and even churches. You must look at these evils before you understand how the humility of Christ in you can make a positive difference in your many relationships.

**S.criptures** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Philippians 2:3; James 3:13-16, 4:13-17; II Timothy 3:1-5

**O.bservations**

1. Describe how “selfish ambition and vain conceit” (Philippians 2:3) destroy relationships?
2. According to James 3, explain in your own words why “envy and selfish ambition” are so toxic?
3. In your own words what obvious truth, according to James 4, should keep boasting in check?
4. “Lovers of themselves” (II Timothy 3:2) sounds really sick! Who or what comes to mind when you read that?

**A.pPLICATIONS**

1. While the second command is to “love your neighbor as yourself”, when or how does your healthy love of self “cross the line” into “lovers of themselves” (II Timothy 3)?
2. Have you experienced or observed the destructive nature of self-centeredness in any of your relationships? Describe briefly:
3. In conversation are you more interested in talking or listening? Rate yourself as a conversationalist on the following scale—circle one:  
Telling/Talking    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10    Asking/Listening

4. How honest or transparent are you with others about your failures or shortcomings? Rate yourself:

Very Closed    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Very Open

5. How easy is it for you to literally laugh at yourself when you do something stupid or embarrassing? Circle one:

Very Difficult    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Very Easy

**P.rayer** – Ask the Holy Spirit to expose to you any of the eight expressions of pride in the Introduction to this S.O.A.P. Confess them as sin and ask God to help you become more aware of the temptations.

### **S.O.A.P. 3 - The Attitudes and Actions of the Humble**

The Jews were not a threat to the Roman occupation of Israel until Jesus was hailed as a rising king. Jesus, of course, was leading a spiritual revolution not a political one. Actually, his teachings on humility were radical and counter-intuitive—running against the grain of reason, Greco-Roman culture and common sense. For instance, a Roman soldier could require any Jew to carry his gear or weapon. But Jesus taught if a soldier forces you to carry his gear one mile, carry it two miles (Matthew 5). For Jesus it was not enough to humbly do only what was required. In other words, suspend your rights and love your enemy. Paul's letters to the churches raise the bar of humble attitudes and behaviors among Christians to reflect the likeness of Jesus and demonstrate the transforming power of the gospel by surrendering personal rights. Let's take a deep look!

**S.criptures** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Philippians 2:1-7; Matthew 5:38-48; Luke 22:14-30; Romans 12:3-16;

#### **O.bservations**

1. List the words from Philippians 2 that Paul uses to describe the unity and oneness of Christ-followers.
2. According to Matthew 5, why is it more difficult to humble yourself for the good of an enemy than the good of a friend?
3. According to Luke 22, why do leaders tend to oppress rather than serve?

4. Read Romans 12:3 & 10 and Philippians 2: 3 & 4, then describe in your own words the balance or tension God calls us to live in.

#### **A.p.plications**

1. When do you find it most difficult to surrender your rights for the good of others?

2. Whether you find it difficult or not to rejoice and/or mourn with others (Romans 12:15), compose a statement of brotherly or sisterly love you could say in each situation.

Rejoicing: \_\_\_\_\_

Mourning: \_\_\_\_\_

3. How would you evaluate your own leadership style in your family, church, business or elsewhere? Circle One:

Oppressive    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Servant-like

4. The gifts of the Holy Spirit in Romans 12, listed below, are given to empower you to serve humbly. Place an ☒ by the ones you enjoy and ☒ by the activities you simply could do more often:

\_\_\_\_\_ Serving    \_\_\_\_\_ Teaching    \_\_\_\_\_ Encouraging    \_\_\_\_\_ Contributing

\_\_\_\_\_ Leadership    \_\_\_\_\_ Mercy    \_\_\_\_\_ Hospitality

**P.rayer** – Ask God to show you how you could serve more humbly all the people in your life, not just your easy friends, but the difficult people as well.

#### **S.O.A.P. 4 - The Father's Reward**

In Christ's parable of the talents (Matthew 25: 14-30), the Master [God] said three times to three of his employees, "Well done good and faithful servant". Unlike many earthly employers, our heavenly Father is easily pleased when you His child imitate the humble servant heart of Jesus. But He draws the line at self-exaltation following all of your acts of service. Why? Because humility and self-exaltation are mutually exclusive—they cannot co-exist! For the servant's heart to remain humble, the servant's

acts must remain a secret as you wait for the Father's reward. Is that always possible? Let's see.

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Philippians 2:1-11; I Peter 5:5-7; Matthew 6:1-8

**O.bservations**

1. While seemingly very public, Christ's death on the cross was the "secret" act of a servant. According to Philippians 2 and in your own words, what was the "secret" no one saw?
2. Here's an interesting question, why didn't the resurrected Jesus show himself to those who crucified him? Explain here:
3. Peter 5 says, "In due time, God will lift you up"—what does "due time" mean? Explain.
4. Why is the reward of God (Matthew 6) superior to the "honor of men"? Explain all the differences here:

**A.pPLICATIONS**

1. Is it always possible to do every act of humble service "secretly"?  
\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Not Always Explain:
2. Have you ever had the experience of humbly serving someone, and only later to return to thank you? Briefly write your story:
3. Have you received your reward even though you weren't looking for it?  
\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ It All Depends, on what? \_\_\_\_\_

4. What would be a God-honoring verbal response to those who do recognize your humble “secret” service? Creatively write an appropriate response you would give here:

**P.rayer** – Ask God for greater awareness of opportunities to humbly serve others, and tell God you are willing to surrender your rights and do it quietly or “secretly”—just like Jesus would.

### **Further Thoughts – Let God Lift You Up—In Due Time**

If we had to guess who started the argument in the upper room over “who was the greatest” (Luke 22:24), no doubt there would be a unison finger-pointing in Peter’s direction. It was Peter who protested at the washing of his feet by Jesus (John 13:8). It was Peter who declared to Jesus, “I will never disown you...” (Matthew 26:36), “Lord, I am ready to go to prison with you and to death”. (Luke 22:33). It was Peter who valiantly cut off the servant’s ear in the garden that night (John 18:10). But it was Peter who disowned Jesus three times—“I don’t know this man!” (Matthew 26:74). It was the arrogant, self-exalting Peter who said so much and did so little, who needed the greater restoration by his Savior (John 21). Jesus knew that Peter’s heart was not broken and contrite—his pride had to be “sifted” or shaken loose (Luke 22:31) and so does yours. Later, Peter the Apostle to the Jews would write to persecuted Jewish Christians and quote this proverb, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (Proverbs 3:34). “Humble yourselves and God will lift you up in due time” (I Peter 5:6). Peter experienced the depth of God’s love and forgiveness because he knew the height of his own pride and arrogance.

The historical evidence is conclusive that Peter died a martyr’s death under the Roman persecution of Christians by Nero. “Prison” and “death” Peter once declared—his humble heart was finally made ready. Honored by Christ and rewarded by the Father, Peter’s name will forever appear on one of the twelve foundations of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:14), “...in due time...” (I Peter 5:6).

### **The Control Freak**

One of the worst symptoms of vain conceit and selfish-ambition (Philippians 2:3) is the compulsive and oppressive control of environments, decisions and especially people. As one comedian put it, “I’m not a control freak; I’m a control enthusiast.” Say what you will but a positive spin does not transform an evil compulsion. From bosses to friends to spouses to parents, controlling others for your ambition, success, reputation or pleasure is evil. When employees, spouses or children are controlled at the expense of their well-being or emotional health, it’s really a form of abuse by which the image of God is diminished in them. Little by little the spirit, soul and body of the abused are impoverished and many dysfunctions develop.

In every relationship you dare not trample the rights of others for your selfish ambitions. As a of Christ you must exercise oversight and leadership, including the discipline of children, in a humble Christ-like manner that always guards God's good will and purposes for them. In fact, in regard to parenting, research indicates that risk-taking, failure and independence are vitally important for a child's successful development into adulthood. Controlling parents are driven by their own reputation and fears, disguised as "protective parenting". By contrast, the follower of Jesus is just that—a follower. Christ does not "drive" you—He gently leads you by His Spirit (Galatians 5:25). And while God's ways and thoughts are superior to yours (Isaiah 55:8, 9), He allows you to discover them by your failures and pain. He is not a controlling Father—He is the Father of prodigal sons and daughters.

### **So How Humble Are You?**

At a family gathering with our kids and their spouses we got to talking about weird or strange uncles. I pondered and asked, "*I wonder who's the weird uncle in my family?*" My daughter-in-law was quick to respond, "*Well, Dad, if you can't figure it out it's probably you!*" We all laughed, including me. Her point is well taken. Most of the time we're unaware of how we're perceived by others. We don't see ourselves as clearly as others do, and to a greater degree, as clearly as God sees us.

Back to our question—so how humble are you? Yes, it is a trick question—don't answer it! The question, "How humble am I?", is best answered by someone else. But don't ask family members or friends because it's an unfair question. If they lie or tell you the truth, the result most likely will not be good for you or the relationship. Besides, the best answer is the one God's Spirit gives or shows you. The psalmist's inspired honesty before God should motivate you to ask the same,

*Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.*

*See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Psalm 139:23

Opening the dark secret rooms of your heart is not pleasant, but always and eventually liberating. Your Counselor, the Holy Spirit, will expose you to yourself if you ask him and let him. The pruning and cleansing of the Spirit will produce the healthy life-giving fruit of Christ-like humility for every relationship.

### **Symptoms of Arrogance**

Here are a few more questions to increase your awareness of your own arrogance. Answer at your own risk. If you are in a small group setting, you may keep the answers to yourself.

- How often would God say that you boast of your achievements to others to prove how important you are?

Circle One:    Never    Occasionally    Often    Every Day

- How often would God say that you use exaggeration to appear more intelligent, more clever or more successful than you really are?

Circle One:    Never    Occasionally    Often    Every Day

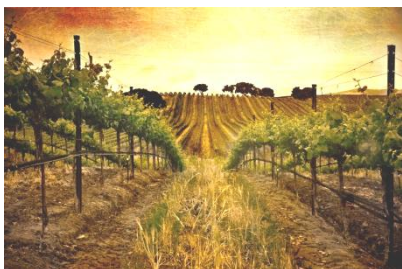
- How often would God say that you use “one-upmanship” to gain recognition or “win” verbal competitions with others?

Circle One:    Never    Occasionally    Often    Every Day

- How often would God say that you defensively justify yourself when you are wrong or caught in a deception or indiscretion?

Circle One:    Never    Occasionally    Often    Always

Paul wrote, “Put to death...whatever belongs to your sinful nature...” (Colossians 3:5), including the subtle expressions of pride and arrogance. Christ-like humility will deepen all your relationships, but especially your fellowship with your heavenly Father!



## Lesson 5

### The Fruit of Joy

#### *Deepening My Emotional Strength*

The “pursuit of happiness” in the Preamble of The Declaration of Independence is America’s ingrained mantra. But the American experiment has birthed extreme results. On one hand, we observe the amazing progress of a civil society that is free from the evils of oppression. Unbounded individualism has given rise to unparalleled opportunity, discovery and invention. On the other hand, the seeming unlimited pursuits of happiness we enjoy have actually multiplied our misery because happiness is always a temporal state of mind and circumstances. Most often happiness turns ugly when it turns. For instance, how long does the happiness last after you acquire your dream car, dream spouse, dream house or dream job? And while it’s hard to imagine that people were happy before modern medicines and conveniences, are Americans any happier now? And why are people just as happy who live in the most Spartan and disadvantaged places on earth?

Since the nature of happiness is relative and momentary, no matter how long it lasts, man’s natural response to its loss is to pursue even more—more of the same or different sources altogether. The pursuit of happiness is a weary emotional roller-coaster ride that is never finally satisfied. Like the well-worn definition of insanity, people compulsively pursue temporal happiness hoping for a permanent satisfaction. Check out this incomplete list of pursuits in our endless quest for happiness:

☐ Marriage ☐ Houses/Land ☐ Transportation ☐ Income/Money  
☐ Shopping ☐ Sports ☐ Entertainment ☐ Sex ☐ Alcohol  
☐ Drugs ☐ Gambling ☐ Hobbies ☐ Eating ☐ Travel  
☐ Technologies ☐ Social Media ☐ Career ☐ Position ☐ Power  
☐ Success ☐ Risk ☐ Legacy ☐ Experiences ☐ Children  
☐ Friends ☐ Other?

In and of themselves most of these pursuits are not evil until they become compulsive to the point of idolatrous—*a love that is equal or greater than our love for God himself*. We are all capable of making idols of most anything. One lady confessed her idolatrous love of classical music!

## **The Great Mistake**

The heart of fallen man desires a joy that only God can give. But until he or she pursues God, they look for that joy in other relationships and find instead a mere temporal happiness. In other words, they look to lovers, spouses, children or friends to meet their need of God's joy. Disappointed, they search for new relationships and leave a wake of pain and anger. In many instances they also leave fear in the hearts of abandoned mothers and fathers with young children. This is a great mistake! God did not create you with the ability to replace Him! No one else can fulfill your deep need of God's joy.

## **The Declaration of Dependence**

The gospel, the Christ-follower's declaration of dependence and true freedom, suggests the pursuit of joy. This joy is far different and deeper than mere happiness because it is found in the person of God Himself. David said it well, "You have made known to me the path of life, you will fill me with joy in your presence..." (Psalm 16:11). God makes possible your pursuit of Him through the presence of His indwelling Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God grows the fruit of joy (Galatians 5:22) in your life that gives you strength and gladness even in the darkest hours of life when your circumstances couldn't be more painful and uncertain.

This joy is so satisfying that it leaves the pursuer of God with peace, hope and contentment. Peace in the sovereign rule of a loving God. Hope for the future that is founded on the reliable promises of the God who cannot lie and is ever faithful. And contentment with our Father's provision. This is a joy of unimaginable proportions. By comparison, the pursuit of any temporal happiness ultimately offers little more than heartache, disappointment or despair. Apart from God, the one thing that never changes is that change is inevitable in a fallen world. Nothing is secure or certain making happiness a meaningless pursuit. But the pursuit of a changeless joy-filled God can be our satisfying daily experience! Let's take a closer look at the fruit of joy that the Vine, Christ Jesus, desires to grow on the branch of your life through His indwelling Holy Spirit.

## **S.O.A.P. 1 - The Joy-Filled God**

There should be little doubt that the Triune Godhead—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—partake continually of the immeasurable joy-filled pleasure of their fellowship. The joy of their fellowship was always complete. It is this fellowship that Christ invites us to enter, and the Holy Spirit imparts to us by His indwelling presence. As we will see, our joy in this Divine fellowship has nothing to do with our temporal happiness but is meant to be our daily experience. When we pursue God we enjoy His joy!

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Psalm 16:11, 43:4; Isaiah 29:19; John 15:9-12, 17:13; Hebrews 1:5-9

### **O**.bservations

1. Did the psalmists and Isaiah only know about Divine joy or did they experience it as well?   \_\_\_ Yes   \_\_\_ No   Why do you think so?
2. What do you think Jesus meant in John 15:11 when he said “complete” to describe the joy of the Godhead in his disciples?
3. In Hebrews 1, God the Father says of his Son that he is “...anointed with the oil of joy....” Where is the source of this joy and how would you describe its quality?

### **A**.pplications

1. If you enjoy delighting others for their own sake alone, where does that enjoyment come from?
2. Describe how you would compare your greatest temporal happiness with the joy in and of the Godhead.
3. Can you remember a time when you experienced an unexplainable joy simply from God’s presence alone? Where were you and what were you doing? Tell your story.
4. What is it about the Godhead that gives you the greatest joy or delights? List as many as you experience:

**P**.rayer – Praise God and thank Him for the many joys you find in Him alone.

## **S.O.A.P. 2 - A Joyless Fallen Humanity**

As you will read, “Chasing after the wind” is Solomon’s repeated description of a joyless fallen humanity. Solomon experienced firsthand the meaningless pursuit of happiness. History confirms Solomon’s extreme successes that gave him unlimited wealth, celebrity and pleasure. Yet all the while Solomon was wise enough to understand he acquired nothing that satisfied his soul except for God himself. As you read the brief excerpt from Solomon’s inspired thoughts, you’ll begin to feel the despair that awaits those who pursue happiness at the expense of the joy of the Lord. Later, the apostle Paul would describe them as “...without hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:11-13).

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11; Ephesians 5:3-5; Galatians 5:19-21; I Timothy 6:10;  
II Peter 2:17-19; Titus 3:3-8

### **O.bservations**

1. Write down the words found in the Ephesians 5 and Galatians 5 texts that suggest to you “meaningless pursuits of happiness”.

2. Why do you think greed (money) and immorality (sex) are such strong temptations to temporal happiness? Think deeply.

Greed(Money)

---

Immorality(Sex)

---

3. In your opinion what are some of the self-piercing “kinds of evil” and “many grief’s” that Paul had in mind (I Timothy 6:10) resulting from a love for money? List as many as you can think of.

4. Write down the two statements of “enslavement” used in II Peter 2 and Titus 3.

---

What images come to mind as you think about these two descriptions?

### A.plications

1. Can you remember something you “chased after” only to discover that your happiness was short-lived? Briefly write your story.
2. What desire or interest in your life right now could easily become an idolatrous “love” or “pleasure” and why?
3. Have you ever felt “enslaved” by a love for something that was good or evil? Or something good that turned idolatrous? What was it and how did you end it? (See chart in the introduction).
4. If you have not put an end to it—do you want to?  
\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ Not Applicable

**P.rayer** – Ask God by His Spirit to make you aware of any love or pleasure that is turning unhealthy or idolatrous in your heart. Ask for forgiveness for any pleasure that enslaves you.

### **S.O.A.P. 3 - Joy—The Strength of God’s Children**

Nehemiah declared, “Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10). The context is informative (Nehemiah 8 & 9). The people of Israel were gathered for the public reading of the Law of Moses after their months of hard labor to rebuild Jerusalem. Their response to the reading of God’s Word was one of brokenness over their many sins. But the Day of Atonement was still 10 days away—that was to be the day of confession and repentance (Nehemiah 9:1-4). Till then, Nehemiah calls them to “rejoice in the Lord”—for God alone is the source of their strength. As followers of Christ our Day of Atonement—his death for our sin—has passed and Christ is our source of immeasurable joy!

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Romans 5:1- 2, 6-11; John 16:21-24; Colossians 1:9-14; Psalm 51:10-12;  
Philippians 4:4; Hebrews 12:1-3

## Observations

1. According to Romans 5, Paul calls us to rejoice. What is so great about our salvation? List the words or reasons why.
2. Using the birth of a child in John 16, Jesus illustrates the joy his disciples will have in Himself that can never be taken away. When have you observed this among your fellow Christians recently?
3. According to Jesus in John 16, what is the one condition to answered prayer? What other conditions are you aware of?
4. To the saints in Colosse Paul exhorts them to “joyfully give thanks to the Father” for what? Describe the dynamic of “joy and thanksgiving”—“thanksgiving and joy”.

## Applications

1. Does the “joy of your salvation” ever diminish (Psalm 51:10-12)?  
\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ Sometimes  
What do you do to restore it? Explain.
2. How important is it to you to “rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4) not only in your time alone with God but throughout the day regardless of your circumstances?  
Unimportant    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Very Important
3. We try to push bad things out of our life, but how does your “consideration” of the suffering of Christ (Hebrews 12) strengthen your heart? Explain.

4. How would your pursuit of God each day renew your joy in Him?

**P.rayer** – In prayer spend five minutes rejoicing in Him for who He is and what He has done and what He will do and be for you today!

### **S.O.A.P. 4 - The Witness of Joy**

While holiness and humility are meant to be expressionless on the face of Christ-followers, the fruit of joy runs deep and finds expression. It's true that when all is well it is much easier to look and speak joyfully. Even faithless unbelievers exhibit happiness when all is well. The real test of Divine joy occurs when life is not well at all, when tragedy happens. Does Divine joy really work then? Can the fruit of joy grow at all in the "valley of the shadow of death..." (Psalm 23:4), or in the dark night of the soul? Human suffering happens any time in many ways. How followers of Christ suffer is meant to be a witness or evidence to the power of Divine joy that lifts the heart in spite of circumstances.

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

I Thessalonians 1:4-10, 5:16-18; II Corinthians 12:7-10; Romans 5:1-5

### **O.bservations**

1. Through their joy in the midst of severe suffering, what impact did the new Christians in Thessalonica have on others? Describe it in your own words:

How do you think unbelievers viewed them?

2. Is Paul's statement in I Thessalonians 5:16-18 a call to denial by suppressing our emotions? Describe how the dynamic of prayer and thanksgiving results in joy.
3. Describe in your own words God's purpose in allowing Paul to suffer physically according to II Corinthians 12.

4. According to Romans 5, what is the object of our rejoicing?

#### **A.plications**

1. Has your “joy of the Lord” been observed by others in the midst of your suffering? Tell your story here:
2. How does gratitude toward God in the midst of your suffering make a difference in your life?
3. How do you think unbelievers respond to your “joy in the Lord”?

Do you keep your “joy in the Lord” quiet for fear of embarrassment? If so, why?

4. According to Romans 14:17, the “kingdom of God” is marked by “joy in the Holy Spirit”. How would you measure this joy in your church family on a scale of 1 to 10?

Needs Improvement    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Over the Top

In your opinion what could be done to improve it?

**P.rayer** – Ask God to remind you that He has not abandoned you in your suffering, but is there with you in the midst of it, to comfort and sustain you with His love.

## **Further Thoughts – Consider It Pure Joy**

While the joy of salvation (I Peter 1:3-9) is a constant in your life, it does not inoculate you from suffering with its feelings of sadness or even despair. Christ has not called us to suppress or deny these emotions. All of us are subject to the miseries of a fallen world, but the joy of the Lord can be our core strength in the midst of them. Unfortunately, the preachers of a wealth, health and happiness theology have misled many Christ-followers!

James, the half-brother of Jesus, begins his inspired epistle with, “Consider it pure joy...whenever you face trials of many kinds....” (James 1:2). No exceptions here. Is joy possible when every natural fiber of your being cries out in pain? James goes on to describe that this process leads to “complete and mature” faith (James 1:2-8). Read it for yourself!

One of two questions describes our faith in the midst of trials. A mature faith asks, “What is your purpose in this, Lord?” The immature faith asks, “Why me, Lord?” The second question of self-pity surfaces quickly and must be silenced by the faith-filled first question. Taking this a step further the mature might even say, “Lord, I may never know your purpose for this in my lifetime, but I trust you. Give me the grace to get through this for your glory.”

To remain in self-pity is to remain immature at best, or at worst, to walk away from Christ. To remain faith-filled in your trial is to “...develop perseverance...” (James 1:3-5)—the character needed to endure the next trial. That’s good! Right? The writer to the Hebrews exhorts us, “...let us run with perseverance...let us fix our eyes on Jesus...for the joy set before him endured the cross...so you will not grow weary and lose heart” (Hebrews 12:1-3). So where is that happiness theology now? Read on—such a theology grows less believable!

### **“They Hated Me Without Reason”**

The first indication of the persecution of Christ-followers is found in the Messianic Psalm of David, “...they hated me without reason...” (Psalm 35:19). Jesus quotes this phrase in the upper room in his teaching on the hatred and persecution his disciples would face (John 15:18-25) which begins, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first” (v. 18)! Like an injured animal that turns against the person who attempts to offer healing, the angry sinner would rather die in their sin than be rescued by Christ. The anger that led to Christ’s crucifixion is the same anger that inspires your persecution today. Unbelievers most often believe the gospel of Christ is a moral threat when, in fact, it’s their own immorality that is their real threat. By silencing the messenger—you—they think they silence the message. When you are persecuted for the name of Christ the scripture says you enter the fellowship of His suffering (I Peter 4:12-16). In that fellowship you will experience a deep measure of His presence including “inexpressible and glorious joy” (I Peter 1:8). In every generation of church history there are stories of

persecution and martyrdom of Christ-followers. Such is the comforting and reassuring evidence that Christianity is real and true. Ponder that!

### **“We Despaired Even of Life”**

Suffering the loss of a loved one or the loss of your own health can take you to the deep darkness of depression and despair. For the apostle Paul, his suffering for the sake of the gospel led to that dark place—“We despaired even of life” (II Corinthians 1:3-11), he said, “...beyond our ability to endure...in our hearts we felt the sentence of death...” Can the fruit of joy grow in that kind of darkness? Paul answers this question in his letter to Christians in Rome:

*...but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. Romans 5:3-5*

In your deep grief and despair, you are with the One who loves you at the deepest level. Paul assures us, “...nothing can separate us from the love of God” (Romans 8:35-39). A fellow Christ-follower who was delivered from a life-threatening cancer testified, “I miss the cancer because it brought me so close to the Lord”.

Recommended Reading: *“Why Suffering? Finding Meaning and Comfort When Life Doesn’t Make Sense”*, by Ravi Zacharias and Vince Vitale, 2014.



## Lesson 6

### The Fruit of Peace

#### *Calming My Fears*

The Apostle James wrote: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers [and sisters] whenever you face trials of many kinds...” (James 1:2). If there was ever a paradoxical, counter-intuitive statement in the Bible, this is it! Our natural emotional responses to a crisis do not include joy, but rather worry, fear and despair. We worry for ourselves, our spouse, our children, our aging parents, our grandchildren and friends. We express fear when health, safety, finances, employment and possessions are in jeopardy. In hopelessness we despair over death or other great losses.

Therefore, peace is an enormous Bible topic. Two categories help to break it down—peace with God and the peace of God. Another breakdown further narrows our thinking—the fruit of God’s peace within us makes possible our peace in a fallen world of anger and fear. In lesson 3 (Fruit of Love), lesson 8 (Fruit of Kindness) and lesson 11 (Fruit of Gentleness) your need of God’s peace in the face of anger is addressed—your own anger and the anger of others. But in this lesson the focus is your need of God’s peace in times of fear.

#### **The Peace of God**

If we live in our past we recall both comfortable times and days as well as uncomfortable memories of trouble and loss and heartache. If we live in the future, imagining better days to ignite hope and anticipate joy, the fact remains that trouble and fear are waiting for us there. The “better days” to come are not all that better. But the fruit of God’s peace in our present is an overwhelming gift to his children to overcome the darkest shadows in our deepest valleys.

The fruit of peace is the calm assurance founded on the Father’s loving watchful presence. This peace is not a denial of your dreaded crises but the deep spiritual reality of Christ himself. He is your hope contrary to the evidence surrounding you. Leonard Sweet put it this way, “God is not in the business of making right everything that is wrong in your life, but rather meeting you in it and showing you Christ.”

#### **The Temptations of Fear**

Fortunately worry, fear and despair are not sins to be confessed and forgiven. But like the Apostle Paul’s statement, “In your anger do not sin” (Ephesians 4:26), we can also say, “In your fear do not sin”. Fear can become a temptation to sin. Peter is a glaring

example. While Jesus was interrogated in the house of Caiaphas before his crucifixion, Peter stood outside in fear. Three times Peter lied that he did not know Jesus (John 18). What other sins do your fears tempt you to commit? How about theft or murder or immorality or even a false excuse for failing to keep a simple promise, to name a few. Worry, fear, despair and even doubt are never listed as evils in the scriptures, but without the fruit of God's peace they can easily tempt you. You need not give in to the temptations of worry, fear and despair because God invites you to access his powerful peace that overcomes your greatest fear. In other words, God's peace is stronger than your strongest fear. Let's take a closer look!

### **S.O.A.P. 1 - The God of Powerful Peace**

The Apostle Paul begins all thirteen of his letters to the early churches with, "Grace and peace to you from God our Father...", and all but two includes, "...and the Lord Jesus Christ..." Peace is also a Divine title as in "...the God of peace..." (Romans 15:33), "...the Lord of Peace..." (II Thessalonians 3:16) and in the well-known prophecy of the birth of Christ—"...the Prince of Peace..." (Isaiah 9:6). The Godhead is the origin and source of the peace we desperately need to neutralize our fears. If the peace of God is supernatural, just how powerful is it? Let's find out!

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

John 14:1, 25-27, 16:33; Philippians 4:2-13; Matthew 11:28-29;  
Hebrews 13:5-8

### **O.bservations**

1. How would you compare the peace that Jesus offers (John 14 & 16) to the peace the world offers? Think of as many differences as you can.

The Peace of Jesus

The Peace of the World

2. In Philippians 4, Paul writes that the powerful peace of God "...will guard your hearts and minds..."—describe how important each is:

Heart (emotions)

Mind (thoughts)

3. In what ways do you think Christ's invitation in Matthew 11 fits his title of "Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6)?
4. According to Hebrews 13, what makes our contentment and peace a reality?

#### A.plications

1. Have you ever witnessed the peace of God in someone who is going through a crisis? What was their story?
2. Have you ever experienced the peace of God "guarding your heart and mind" during a crisis? If so, describe your experience and how you "felt" and what you "thought".
3. What did you do to gain access to God's peace?
4. How has Christ remained "the same yesterday, today and forever" in **your** life? What words or phrases come to mind for each key word underlined above?  
Yesterday:  
  
Today:  
  
Forever:

**P.rayer** - Praise and thank God for his powerful peace and declare your trust in Christ's faithfulness to you.

#### **S.O.A.P. 2 – Worry: The Loss of Focus**

Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus encountered multitudes of people in crisis. The gospels provide examples of the worried, fearful and despairing who reached out to him for help. In S.O.A.P.'s 2-4 we'll look at Christ's responses to them. Let's begin with his teaching on worry. He answers the questions: Why do we worry and how can we resolve it?

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Matthew 6:24-34, 7:7-11; I Peter 5:7; Matthew 13:18-23; Hebrews 3:1, 12:1

**O.bservations**

1. What are the phrases Jesus uses in Matthew 6 to describe God the Father? Write down as many as you can find here:
2. In your own words what does Jesus teach you about prayer in response to worry in Matthew 6 & 7?

Matthew 6:33:

Matthew 7:7 & 11:

3. In light of Peter's statement describe how interested is God in the things that make us anxious? Circle One: Interested    Somewhat    Very    Extremely
4. In light of Matthew 13, how do you think the "seed of the word" of God maintains your spiritual focus in your time of need and worry?

**A.pPLICATIONS**

1. Apart from food and clothing, list the things or needs you worry about for yourself and others.

Yourself:

Others:

2. Do you ever feel that God is unconcerned about you and the things that make you worry? If so, describe why:
3. On a scale of 1 to 10, how difficult is it for you to keep your focus on God the Father in your time of need?

Very Difficult    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Not Difficult At All

4. How would you describe the “soil” of your heart to receive the word or voice of God in the scriptures? Circle one: A Pathway A Rocky Place Thorny Good
5. Describe how often you read and meditate on the word of God.

**P.rayer** – Tell God you choose to maintain your focus on Him rather than the circumstances that cause you worry.

### **S.O.A.P. 3 – Fear: The Loss of Control**

Your ability to control your life is minimal at best. No matter how well or efficient you are at reducing your risks, life-threatening experiences most often appear without warning. A carefree day can suddenly turn into anything but carefree. When your life is threatened, a deep sense of fear and helplessness can easily overwhelm you. Where is Jesus when you lose control--sleeping in a boat?

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Luke 8:22-25; Luke 12:4-7; John 4:46-54

#### **O.bservations**

1. How does Jesus demonstrate his power and control in that seemingly out-of-control boat (Luke 8)?
2. Do you think God is distracted by tracking the hair count on everyone’s head and is unaware of your danger and fear (Luke 12)?  
Check one: ☐ Yes ☐ Probably ☐ No  
What is Jesus telling us?
3. Describe how the royal official (John 4) reacted to the words of Jesus.
4. What could the official have been thinking on his long walk home?

#### **A.pPLICATIONS**

1. Imagine you were that royal official (John 4) in the first century with a child close to death without hospitalization, insurance or a doctor. How fear-filled would you be? Circle one:  
Very 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Extremely

2. Have you ever felt like the frantic royal official? What's your story?
3. What did you do and what happened?
4. Have you ever felt helpless and that Jesus was sleeping in your boat? If so, describe the situation here:
5. Why do you feel God would not forget you and value you "more than many sparrows"?
6. Are you presently facing a crisis in which you have no control? Describe it here:

**P.rayer** – Thank God for his presence, protection and care for you in the past and present.

### **S.O.A.P. 4 – Despair: The Loss of Hope**

At the risk of sounding simplistic, following the helplessness of fear the human spirit can slip into the hopelessness of despair. When a life-threatening circumstance or condition fails to improve, a tipping point is eventually reached. In other words, when all the evidence is undeniable, when hope is gone, despair sets in often referred to as depression. Jesus responds to the hopeless despair of two of his disciples following his death by crucifixion—let's look in.

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Luke 24:13-35; II Corinthians 1:8-11; II Corinthians 11:23-29;  
Philippians 4:4-7; Romans 8:26, 39

## Observations

1. What did Jesus do (Luke 24) to pull these two disciples out of their despair and renew their hope?

2. In II Corinthians 8, how did Paul describe the depth of his hopelessness and the height of his hope?

Hopelessness

Hope

3. In Paul's defense of his apostleship he gives the Corinthians (II Corinthians 11) a peek into the crises he encountered. List them here:

4. Paul sat in the hopeless circumstance of imprisonment (Philippians 4). How did he experience God's peace?

5. Paul introduces to you an amazing expression of God's love in Romans 8. Describe it here in your own words:

## Applications

1. In the past have you experienced despair over a hopeless situation? What's your story?

2. Why is your pursuit of God through prayer and the voice of His Word vital to overcoming your despair?

3. How will a daily pursuit of God through prayer and His Word prepare you for a crisis and keep you from despair and hopelessness?

4. Are you presently in despair over a hopeless crisis? How would you describe your situation?

**P.rayer** – Pray daily for a fresh filling of the Holy Spirit and the fruit of Christ’s character—the fruit of peace.

### **Further Thoughts – The Five-Point Prescription**

As with anger, don’t give Satan a foothold in your times of fear. How? By pursuing God immediately in prayer. Let’s review Paul’s 5-point prescription of prayer that he penned to the Christians in Philippi while he himself was imprisoned in Rome.

- I. “Rejoice in the Lord” (4:4)
- II. “The Lord is Near” (4:5)
- III. “Don’t be Anxious (4:6)
- IV. “Petition with Thanksgiving” (4:6)
- V. “Present your Requests” (4:6)

Result: “...the peace of God will transcend your understanding...” and “...guard your mind [thoughts] and heart [emotions] in Christ Jesus” (4:7). Remember, prayer is neither magical nor powerful. You pray **to** the God who is both powerful and present with you in your crisis—the God who loves and cares for you—the God who is sovereign and Lord of all—including you in your crisis. Nothing is beyond his control. Read on.

### **A Powerful Peace**

God does for you what no one else can do. Your family and friends also feel helpless in your crisis. In the most severe hopelessness and despair, only God can touch you by his loving presence. I expressed it this way in my own bout with cancer: as I pursued God daily and drew closer to him, the sense of his presence grew stronger and with it my heart and mind grew more peaceful and joy-filled. I was ready to die and pass into God’s eternal presence. I said to my family, “I have more to die for now, than to live for.” That was difficult for them to understand. But when you surrender and trust God in the extreme darkness of a deep valley, the peace of his presence will grow more compelling than life itself. That is a peace that “transcends human understanding”.

Jesus promised this peace to his followers gathered in the upper room before his crucifixion. In essence he told them, “The peace I give cannot be found anywhere in this world” (John 14:27). It’s a peace that falls into Paul’s category of “immeasurable” (Ephesians 3:20) and beyond human reasoning (Philippians 4:7). You have access to God’s peace through prayer and the fruit of peace by the indwelling presence of Christ through his Holy Spirit.

**Shining Like Stars**

The fruit of peace by the indwelling Holy Spirit is sweet and powerful in a world of worry, fear and despair. By the fruit of peace our Christ-like character will “shine like the stars in the universe as you [we] hold out the word of life” (Philippians 2:15-16). Because Christ remains in you, the worried, the fearful and the despairing will reach out to you as they did to Christ 2000 years ago. When they do, you can point them to Christ—who can become their Prince of Peace.



## Lesson 7

### The Fruit of Patience

#### *Improving My “Waitability”*

Like every fruit of the Spirit, our patience is challenged nearly every day. What parent does not grow impatient with their toddler? What worker has not become impatient when equipment fails? What supervisor has not lost patience with an unproductive worker? Who hasn't become impatient in a grocery checkout line or a doctor's waiting room or on an airplane idling endlessly on the tarmac? From small inconveniences and interruptions to waiting for medical test results, your patience is tested relentlessly. Some challenges are momentary. Some conclude. Others never go away.

As the pace of life increases it seems that patience decreases. While technology delivers our first class mail in mere seconds and websites deliver the perfect recipe more quickly than pouring over cookbooks, lightning speed just might have the unintended consequence of contributing to our impatience. While the pace of life is quickened on some levels, others remain the same—we still wait nine months for the baby to arrive. And we wait years to graduate, get the promotion and retire.

It has been said that the average 70 year old will have spent on average 3 years of their life simply waiting. Since time is not a renewable resource, three years of waiting seems like a huge waste. However, waiting does give the Christ-follower many opportunities to grow the fruit of patience if they respond well. But if these opportunities are viewed as interruptions and irritations, there's a good chance your anger will shorten your life while you wait. Anger is very unhealthy!

No matter how much the pace of life quickens, there remains two unavoidable and uncontrollable realities that require great patience from you—people and events. In fact, at times each will require what the scriptures refer to as long-suffering—a descriptor all of us find disturbing. But take heart, God's sanctifying Spirit is more powerful than your weakest weakness.

In this lesson we'll rediscover the importance of patience as part of the foundation of our relationship with others, with God and even ourselves. The impatient are swift to anger, but those who increase in patience defer anger and even defuse it. As James, the half-brother of our Savior was inspired to write, “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires” (James 1:19-20). In the same epistle James introduces us to the deeper cause of impatience. Impatience and even anger are but temptations/

symptoms of a deeper evil. James also says much more about speech, but we will consider our communication skills in more detail in the next lesson on the fruit of kindness.

### **S.O.A.P. 1 - Our Long-Suffering Father**

The old argument of the unbeliever/atheist—“If your god is so loving, why doesn’t he put an end to evil?”—still remains hollow in the light of the logical end result: no one would survive! The very opposite is true. God’s love is so great that he patiently waits for everyone to have opportunity to respond to his love and be reconciled to him. So great is God’s love that he suffers long. From the events of world history to the events of your personal history, God’s patience is undiscourageable! For all the people of God’s creation including you, his patience is undefeatable. His long suffering is immeasurable! God calls and empowers us to imitate his patience through his indwelling Spirit.

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Exodus 34:1-14; Romans 2:1-11, 9:22-24; II Peter 3:8-16; I Timothy 1:12-16

#### **O.bservations**

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you measure God’s long suffering after Israel worshipped the golden calf due to their impatience with Moses’ return from Mount Sinai? (See Exodus 32:1). Circle a number or words:  
Very Short    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Off the Chart
2. How do people today show “contempt” for God’s “...kindness, tolerance and patience...” (Romans 2:3-4)?
3. Paul, who once persecuted the church, asks two profound questions in Romans 9:22-24 to explain the “why?” of God’s “...great patience...” Describe how this satisfies your love of God the Father.
4. How does Peter’s inspired explanation (II Peter 3:8-16) increase your appreciation of God’s patience, love and mercy? Explain.
5. Describe how amazing Christ’s long suffering was in the conversion of the Apostle Paul according to Paul’s testimony in I Timothy 1:12-16.

### A.plications

1. How does God's long suffering affect you—a license to sin or a reason to worship and trust Him? What's your history?
2. What is “the sin that easily entangles you” (Hebrews 12:1) that regularly challenges the long suffering of God toward you?
3. How would you generally measure your own patience?  
Very Impatient    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Very Patient
4. How has your personal history of “instant or delayed gratification” affected your patience with and your trust in God?

**P.rayer** – Thank God for his long suffering toward you. Ask him to show you clearly your own need of patience with him and others.

### **S.O.A.P. 2 - The Evil of Self-Centeredness**

The root cause of our impatience is self-centeredness. The Greek word is often translated selfish ambition or self-seeking. But in contemporary terms we understand self-centered, self-serving, self-absorbed and self-indulgent. These phrases describe the attitudes and behaviors of “me first”—demanding our “rights” while trampling on the rights of others even to the extreme evil of violence! Or the opposite extreme—to become quietly narcissistic—an emotional dysfunction in which “the world and everyone in it revolves around me”. It's hard to decide which one is worse! Paul writes to the Corinthian Christ-followers, “...love is not self-seeking...” (I Corinthians 13:5). Let's take a closer look at this evil we must rid ourselves of.

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Philippians 2:1-3; James 3:13-18, 4:1-2; Galatians 5:19-21

### **O.bservations**

1. According to Paul in Philippians 2, what are the good Godly values that self-centeredness destroys? List them here:

2. How would you explain that self-centeredness is found in “every evil practice” (James 3)?
  
3. In your own words, how does self-centeredness impact the health of the local church (James 4)?
  
4. In Galatians 5 Paul lists among the vile evils “selfish ambition”, followed by a severe warning. How or why do you think selfish ambition reaches this level when it seems so harmless?

#### A.plications

1. Has anyone ever made you aware of your own impatience and self-centeredness?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ If “yes”, how did you respond? If “no”, why not?
  
2. Has your own self-centeredness ever contributed to a “fight or quarrel” in your local church family? If so, describe your experience.
  
3. Have you ever taken the role of “peacemaker” in your home church or with two people in conflict? Tell your story.

If so, what did you discover about yourself?

4. Generally, how would you measure your impatience with others?  
Out of Control    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10   Perfectly Controlled

With whom are you most patient? Name \_\_\_\_\_

With whom are you most impatient? Name \_\_\_\_\_

**P.rayer** – Ask God to forgive your pride as expressed by impatience and selfish ambition or self-centeredness. Declare your desire to be Christ-centered and filled with His Spirit.

### **S.O.A.P. 3 -Surrender Your Rights First**

The fruit of patience by the Holy Spirit grows **first** out of a vertical relationship with your long-suffering heavenly Father. As soon as your patience is challenged you feel anger from the attack or irritation or interruption. In that moment what you choose to do next is all important. You can either give in to the anger or surrender your rights to God the Father in prayer. Prayer is the key that unlocks Christ-like patience. Paul wrote, “...love is patient...and always perseveres...” (I Corinthians 13:4, 7). When you surrender your rights in prayer, self-centeredness decreases and patience increases. Remember, prayer is not magic—God always requires a sincere and humble cry. We grow the fruit of patience by the indwelling Spirit one small test at a time. So never underestimate the value of small gains!

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Philippians 2:1-6; Ephesians 4:1-6, 5:21; Colossians 3:12-14

### **O.bservations**

1. What specific rights (Philippians 2) do you think Christ surrendered to become our Savior? List as many as you can think of:
2. Do you recall any events in the life of Jesus in which he surrendered his rights to the Father prior to his crucifixion? Describe them here:
3. How should Paul’s statement in Ephesians 4, “...one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all...”, change our view of life’s irritations and interruptions?
4. What do you think it means to “revere” Christ (Ephesians 5:21) by submitting to others?

5. Paul also stresses forgiveness and love in Colossians 3. How are these qualities foundational to both our patience and the surrendering of our rights? Explain in your own words.

Forgiveness:

Love:

### A.plications

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, measure your instinct to control the people and events in your life—be honest!

No Desire    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Control Freak

2. Describe your degree of difficulty to feel that, "...others are better than yourself..." (Philippians 2:3-4).

3. Who are the people and what are the events that regularly challenge your patience? List them here:

People

Events

4. What are the rights you really need to surrender to the "Father of all"?

5. Have you ever prayed in that moment of impatient anger? If not, do it next time. If yes, what did you experience and how did you feel?

**P.rayer** – Ask God to help you to be patient with the people you named above and to remind you by His Spirit to pray in your moment of impatient anger.

### **S.O.A.P. 4 - An Extreme Patience**

The fruit of patience grows **secondly** within your horizontal relationships—with the people you know and strangers alike. You cannot follow Jesus wholeheartedly or become like him without joining him in long-suffering service. The evils of self-

centeredness will not be broken till you surrender your rights, submit your will and serve others. "...in the name of Jesus..." (Colossians 3:17) and "...to the glory of God..." (I Corinthians 10:31). That includes serving, not ignoring, those who irritate and interrupt you! Long suffering is that extreme patience needed to serve people who are least deserving. This kind of patience brightens the "glory of God" and also results in your greater joy. "Really?" Yes, really!

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 22:24-27; Romans 12:3, 9-16; James 5:7-11;

John 13:1-17

**O.bservations**

1. What phrases or words does Paul use to describe the "attitude" of Christ as the long-suffering servant in Philippians 2:5-11? List them here:
2. At their last Passover meal (Luke 22), the self-centered disciples argue over who was most important. How does the cross of Christ seal the argument for long-suffering service?
3. How do each of these attitudes in Romans 12:3 & 16, "Do not think of yourself more highly than you should...Do not be conceited." contribute to long-suffering service to others?

How about Romans 12:10, "Honor one another above yourselves"?

4. James uses Job's perseverance as an example of long suffering. But what could be our reward if we never see, "...what the Lord finally brought about...." from our own long suffering? What do you think?

## A.plications

1. Peter tests the patience of Jesus once more in the upper room (John 13:1-17). Is there someone like Peter in your life who constantly tests your patience?

Who is it? Name \_\_\_\_\_

What potential do you see in them that your patience might contribute to?

2. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you measure the length of your long suffering in service to others?

Short    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Endless

Do you draw a line? In other words, is there something you would not do to serve others? What is it?

3. Have you ever "...made yourself nothing..." (Philippians 2:7), as Jesus did to serve you, in order to serve someone else? Describe your experience.

How did you feel afterward? Circle one number:

Proud    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Humble

4. When you serve others "in the name of Jesus" and "to the glory of God", how does this purify your motives?

**P.rayer** – Ask God to fill you with His Spirit each day so that you can serve others with great patience and humility. Ask Him right now.

## **Further Thoughts – Waiting for God to Show Up**

Trusting in God's promises can be spiritually exhausting at times. Waiting for God to show up will test your patience. You say to yourself, "I know God's timing is perfect and always just-in-time. But isn't the best time—right now?" Your patience with God can grow thin to the point of giving up hope. But the following scriptural evidence should encourage your trust and hope and perseverance. Take the time to read the texts in parenthesis.

The life of Abraham was a life spent in waiting for God's enormous and seemingly unbelievable covenant to bless him with "many descendants" (Hebrews 6:13-15). To begin with, his wife Sarah was beyond child-bearing age. God can do unexplainable things in your life as well.

Paul was inspired by God's Spirit to write to the Galatian church, "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem..." (Galatians 3:26-4:7). God patiently waits for the perfect time. In other words, the "when" is just as important as the "what" in the fulfillment of God's purposes and promises in your life as well.

Simeon, Anna and others spent nearly a lifetime of focused anticipation and waiting for the coming of their Messiah—the Lord Jesus Christ (Luke 2:25-40). Their hope was fixed and not disappointed. Fix your hope in Jesus.

At the wedding in Cana, Jesus waited for the perfect time toward the end of the seven-day feast to turn the water into a wine that was superior to the best (John 2:1-11). Wait for Jesus to offer you his best.

Both Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, questioned the arrival time of Jesus after their brother's death (John 11:1-44). He patiently listens to their lament and even weeps himself for his dead friend. Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead and proves that he can bring beauty out of the seeming ashes of your life as well!

Like farmers and prophets, James, the half-brother of our Savior, exhorts us to wait patiently for the fulfillment of the second coming of Christ (James 5:7-8). Your patience will be rewarded both in this life and the next.

## **Joy in the Journey of Waiting**

God's "sovereignty" means that He is absolutely free to work His will and purposes any way, any time and any where. He is free to exercise His power, knowledge and wisdom and does so perfectly in every detail. This is called God's sovereignty. To Isaiah the prophet God said,

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*      Isaiah 55:8-9

Would you want a god who was less than sovereign? Those who reject the great "I am" (Exodus 3:14) are left to their own power, knowledge and wisdom that produces a mediocre result at best, but more often than not, tragedy and regret. It has been said that "Jesus Christ is the difference between rejoice and regret".

Quietly and unseen God works "sovereignly" in your life when you put your trust in Him and wait patiently for His "higher thought" and "higher way". To you it may seem that God is unaware or does not care about your need or good desires, but He is not absent, He is ever-present in your life. And because He is who He is, you can experience joy in the journey of waiting--not only in the joy of what is to come from His higher

thoughts and ways, but joy in the journey of expectation. Patiently waiting for God “to show up” is not like waiting in a checkout line for annoying people to go away. Rather, waiting for God to work His sovereignty is more like the joyful waiting for a wedding day to come or a new born baby to arrive. There is joy in the journey of waiting! Patience is doubly rewarded with outrageous joy. Impatience, on the other hand, is a self-inflicted painful wound.

The promise of God is that when we draw closer to him he draws closer to us (James 4:8). This fellowship with God can grow to the point that whatever it is you are waiting for grows less important than your closeness with him! Even while waiting in the deepest darkness for death to arrive, God’s fellowship will be an unexplainable pleasure. David testified to this remarkable spiritual reality when he wrote, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me” (Psalm 23:4). Such is the testimony of Christ-followers throughout the world in every generation! God shows up and never disappoints!

### **Patience with Yourself**

Most everyone suffers to one degree or another with unrealistic expectations. Such expectations will drive you toward self-centered ambitions and impatience in which you “...think more highly of yourselves than you should...” (Romans 12:3). Instead of thinking with “...sober judgment...” (Romans 12:3) or self-awareness, you will fail to discover your own unique set of strengths and passions given by God. Such discovery will free you to develop what God has given you and pursue with abandonment His desires and purposes for your life, instead of unrealistic self-expectations

### **The Art of Daily Waiting**

When you find yourself waiting during the day, remember, you do not wait alone—you always wait with the One who loves you the most. In prayer steal moments with Jesus himself. Your awareness of God in those moments could become the highlight of your day in addition to silencing the temptations of impatience. In fact, God may have arranged those moments for fellowship with him or for protecting you from a danger you are unaware of. For instance, have you ever passed a highway accident and realized because you were delayed by something, that tragedy could have involved you? It just might have been that your heavenly Father exercised his sovereignty and providential care of you! Also, be sure to take your Bible wherever you go or a good Christian book. Don’t make those three years of life-time waiting a waste of time! Rather, invest that time in your spiritual growth and the fruit of patience.

### **Parenting and Patience**

Paul wrote to the Ephesians (6:1-4), “Fathers, don’t exasperate your children.” Unfortunately, toddlers especially can and will exasperate both parents! No doubt, parenting one of these little creatures is the most frustrating challenge to the patience of

mothers and fathers. “I thought I was patient till we had a baby” is a common reality. The extreme patience of long suffering is required. Teaching children to obey through tough love and discipline balanced by the mercy and compassion of long suffering requires an overdose of heavenly wisdom that is pure and peaceable (James 1:5, 3:17). Only Spirit-filled parents (Ephesians 4:18) have half a chance of executing that balance and, in the end, will gratefully and humbly give God all the glory for whatever good comes out of that creature!

Recommended Reading: *The Grand Weaver: How God Shapes Us Through the Events of Our Lives*, by Ravi Zacharias, Zondervan, 2007



## Lesson 8

### The Fruit of Kindness

#### *Taming My Tongue*

Kindness has two categories of expression—acts of kindness and words of kindness. While both are vital and complimentary, the focus of this lesson is words and the Christ-like use of our tongue and language. The importance of transforming our speech in cooperation with the indwelling Holy Spirit is underscored by Jesus in his warning to the Pharisees recorded in the Gospel of Matthew:

*You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.*

Matthew 12:33-37

Jesus points out both the source of our words and God's certain judgment on them. In Jewish thought one of the most common instruments of sin and harm is the tongue or mouth as evidenced in their wisdom literature, especially in the Proverbs.

#### **Toxic Speech**

Toxic speech penetrates all human interaction in every generation, society and culture. Today we're even entertained by toxic speech. Our shameless pagan world "approves" (Romans 1:28-32) cruel and vulgar speech as well as deception, slander and gossip. From celebrities to politicians and journalists, toxic speech has become the norm and no longer the exception.

Unfortunately the church is not immune to toxic speech. In the lists of evils in the New Testament letters to churches, not the pagan world, we find at least thirteen English words that describe the various uses of toxic speech intended to harm, humiliate, destroy, deceive, divide or poison the lives of others. All Christ-followers are in need of transformation by the fruit of kindness.

#### **Kindness Defined**

This transformation by the Spirit-grown fruit of kindness sweetens your temperament and puts others at ease by your words and actions--a kindness that shrinks back from causing any discomfort or pain in others. This kindness is tender-hearted, seasoned with love and gentleness--a kindness by which you treat others in the same way God has treated you. In fact, the only right response to God's kindness toward you is to retreat from every form of unkindness toward others.

This kindness should not be misunderstood as moral softness or weakness or passivity. You must always “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:14, 15) especially in the face of sin. Just as the kindness of God never gets in the way of his intolerance to sin, so you too must gently correct with kindness others caught in sin (Galatians 6:1-5). You’ll discover in the scriptures that kindness is not always easy, especially when you’re on the receiving end of unkind words or actions. Your kindness requires a controlled strength with every effort to resolve conflict and seek reconciliation if possible.

## **Participating in God’s Nature**

Like the other fruits of the Spirit, kindness never grows or acts alone. The scriptures are clear that love, with forgiveness, mercy and compassion, plays a major supporting role along with a cast of others such as peace, patience and gentleness to name a few. For kindness to be effective it must be expressed interdependently with other Christ-like characteristics. This is the evidence you are created in the image of God and participate in his nature (II Peter 1:4). The Spirit of God in you helps you fulfill your desire to be like Jesus. Let’s take an in-depth look at kindness!

## **S.O.A.P. 1 - The Kindness of the Godhead**

The scriptures are clear. God is kind toward the afflicted, the poor, the widow, the orphan, the humble, the repentant and even the ungrateful! His kindness is attractive and draws us to him. But the centerpiece of God’s kindness is “...expressed...to us in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:1-10). Jesus said, “If you’ve seen me you’ve seen the Father” (John 14:9). Throughout the gospels we see Divine kindness revealed and expressed in the tenderhearted action and words of Jesus Christ. There was never a moment of callousness. Even when he confronted sin, he always spoke the truth in love.

**S.criptures** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Isaiah 63:7; Psalm 86:1-8; Titus 3:3-8; Romans 2:1-4; Luke 6:27-36;  
John 4:1-30, 39-42.

**O.bservations**

1. Isaiah and the psalmist describe God’s kindness. In one sentence how would you describe God’s kindness?
2. God’s kindness, love and mercy (Titus 3) created an explosion of Divine blessings—which one stands out to you and why?
3. How do you think God’s kindness (Romans 2) helps make our repentance happen--the changing of our sinful direction and walking away from it?

4. According to Luke 6, what is the basis Jesus gives for his outrageous teaching on “...kindness to the ungrateful and wicked”?
  
5. Describe how the kindness of Jesus to the woman at the well changed everything (John 4).

#### **A.plications**

1. How difficult is it for you to express kindness to those who are least deserving of it? Circle one:  
           Impossible    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Easy
  
2. What part of Christ’s teaching in Luke 6 would be most challenging for you to act on and why?
  
3. Why would Jesus teach you to be kind and loving to “ungrateful and wicked” people?
  
4. How do you express kindness to the strangers in your life?

**P.rayer** – Thank and praise God for his specific and unique kindnesses toward you. Ask Him to help you to become just like him as a “partaker of His nature”.

#### **S.O.A.P. 2 - The Toxic Tongue of Unkindness**

The letter of James was written to Jewish Christians and seems to pick up the warning of Jesus back in Matthew 12 regarding the source of our words and our eventual accountability to God for the use of them. Furthermore, Solomon wrote that of the seven things that God hates, three involve a toxic tongue—“a lying tongue”, “a false witness”, and “dissension among brothers” (Proverbs 6:16-19). By the way, God hates more than seven evils. The pagan world of the first century is not that different from the cesspool of toxic speech we live in today. But Christ has rescued us to bear his character of kindness.

When we get our toes out of this cesspool, God's Spirit will bless us with the fruit of kindness with which to bless others.

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

James 3:1-12, Colossians 3:1-11; Romans 1:28-32; I Peter 2:1-3, 3:8-12

**O.bservations**

1. James (3:1-12) uses at least eight images to describe the out-of-control tongue. Which one strikes you as the most destructive and why?

2. Why is it so difficult to see the “likeness of God” (James 3:9; Colossians 3:10) in those we curse or who curse us?

3. Describe how gossip (Romans 1:29), the telling of truth that is meant to shame or harm someone, is so toxic and destructive.

4. Describe how slander (Romans 1:29), the telling of lies about someone, is so toxic and destructive?

5. Name at least three reasons Peter (2:1-3; 3:8-12) gives for keeping our tongue from evil.

1)

2)

3)

**A.pPLICATIONS**

1. At this time in your life, how would you measure the toxicity of your tongue?

Circle one:

Deadly Poison    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Perfect Kindness

2. Describe how “blessing” and “cursing” directed at you has influenced your life.

Blessing:

Cursing:

3. Do you feel a need to thank those who have blessed you?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ I have already - Name Several:

4. Do you feel a need to forgive those who have cursed you?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ I have already (See Lesson 3)

5. How have you used “blessing” and “cursing” to influence others?

Blessing:

Cursing:

6. Is there anyone you need to ask for their forgiveness?

\_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Yes If yes, write down their name: \_\_\_\_\_

7. Summarize Paul’s argument in Colossians 3 that Christ-followers have no excuse for their toxic speech:

8. Is there a recurring situation in your life that tempts you to use toxic speech?

**P.rayer** – Ask God for the courage to seek forgiveness for toxic speech against others. Ask God to make you more aware of the temptations to use toxic words.

### **S.O.A.P. 3 - The Blessings of Life-Giving Speech**

In Paul’s letter to the house churches in Colosse, he compares your transformation into the likeness of Christ to taking off your old self and putting on the new self like old and new clothes (Colossians 3:1-17). Paul wrote, “...clothe yourselves with...” (vs. 12) and then goes on to list the Colossian version of the fruits of the Spirit including kindness. One scholar calls kindness the “uniform” of the Christian. Kind words should be a distinguishing mark of the Christ-follower. Life-giving, life-changing and health-giving speech comes from the heart and strengthens the souls of others. Let’s discover the significant ways you can bless others with kind words, words that attract and shape the lives of others.

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

James 1:19-21; Ephesians 4:29-32; Romans 15:1-7; Romans 12:15.

**O.bservations**

1. How is “quick to listen” (James 1) a blessing to others? List as many blessings as you can think of:
2. Why is a follow-up question a blessing to others?
3. Since “edification” means to build up “according to their needs” (Ephesians 4), describe how we can bless others to their “benefit”.
4. Since “encouragement” means to emotionally strengthen others in their weakness, describe in your own words how to do this effectively.
5. Suffering and celebration (Romans 12:15) are two opposite and deeply emotional events that require emotional responses. In addition to “showing up”, how do we bless others with kind words?

In Their Suffering:

In Their Celebration:

**A.pPLICATIONS**

1. Name some of the people you remember who spoke kind words to you through listening, edification, encouragement or in your times of “weeping” and “rejoicing”.
2. Is there someone you know right now who needs to be listened to? Name:
3. Who in your life right now needs kind words of:  
Edification? Name:  
Encouragement? Name:

4. Describe how you feel and what you do or say when you hear about someone's suffering or celebration.

Suffering:

Celebration:

5. Who in your life right now needs kindness expressed in words in their suffering or celebration?

Suffering? Name:

Celebration? Name:

**P.rayer** – Ask God to help you think of a good question to ask or kind words to say to express your kind feelings to those you have named in questions 3 and 5. Thank God for those you remembered who spoke kindly to you in the past or recently.

### **S.O.A.P. 4 - The Extreme Test of Kind Speech**

Kindness is not always easy, especially in emotionally charged situations. We see this in the daily life of Jesus in the four gospels. His teachings of truth, while delivered with love and kindness, were often met with heated tempers. Whether it was family, hometown friends, his disciples, the crowds or religious leaders, the kindness of Jesus was tested--a kindness that did no harm and always spoke redemptively. Christ's remarkable kindness is what the Holy Spirit desires to grow in you especially for your own emotionally-charged situations. Let's consider three such situations in which you can further bless others with kind words.

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Galatians 6:1-5; I Corinthians 1:10-13, 3:1-9; Ephesians 4:29-32

### **O.bservations**

1. Situation #1 - What could hold us back from restoring a brother or sister in Christ who is "caught in a sin" (Galatians 6)?
2. Situation #2 - Where did the Corinthians go wrong spiritually, and how could they be reunited according to Paul?
3. Situation #3 - What makes forgiveness "emotionally charged" whether we are asking for it or granting it to another (Ephesians 4)?

Asking Forgiveness:

Granting Forgiveness:

## **A.plications**

1. Have you ever attempted to restore someone “caught in a sin”?

If yes, what happened?

If no, what happened?

2. Describe how important or unimportant it is to you to do all you can to maintain or restore unity in your family and in your church?
3. When you have had a heated disagreement with someone, do you initiate reconciliation or do you wait for the other person to make the first move? Explain why?
4. What happens in your heart if you wait?

**P.rayer** – Tell God that you intend to quickly restore broken relationships now and in the future. Ask for His power by His Spirit to accomplish it.

## **Further Thoughts – Five Practices of Life-Giving Speech**

### **The Golden Rules of Conversation**

The first golden rule of conversation is “...slow to speak...” , especially if you are going to say something about the person you are talking to or about someone else. “Slow” is for the purpose of pausing long enough to think through the following two rules. Failure to pause and think is dangerous. The second golden rule is this: “Is what I’m about to say true, is it kind and is it necessary?” If one of these qualifiers is missing—don’t say it. The third golden rule is like the second, “Would I say this to their face or in their hearing?” These rules are sniff tests to discover the presence of any slander or gossip or unwholesome thoughts before they reach your tongue. As Paul exhorted the Colossian Christ-followers, so these inspired words should exhort you:

*Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt,  
so that you may know how to answer everyone.* Colossians 4:6

### **Avoid Triangulation**

The Biblical evils of “divisions”, “factions” and “discord” often start with “triangulation” or finding a third party to take your side in a matter. Too often this third

party foolishly aligns themselves before hearing all the facts. What Jesus said is clear, *“If your brother sins against you go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over”* (Matthew 18:15). “Just between the two of you” is critical! The only exception for a third party is to invite a spiritually mature and unbiased mediator to intervene in an unresolved conflict or disagreement. This mediator takes only God’s side in the matter after hearing both sides!

If you are not invited to hear **both** sides as a mediator, then you have been invited to be a third party to “slander” or “gossip”. Early in Israel’s history God commanded them: “Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness” (Exodus 23:1). Paul warns Timothy with a similar principle, “Do not share in the sins of others” (I Timothy 5:22). Never allow yourself to be triangulated. Always tell those who try to triangulate you to follow Christ’s instruction in Matthew 18—“...just between the two of you.” If they are simply slandering or gossiping—speak the truth of their sin in love. This is the kindest thing you could say to them. Remember, triangulation cuts both ways—make sure you are not the perpetrator of such yourself.

As Christ-followers we live in a pagan culture of triangulation. Listen for it in politics, news media, entertainment, social media and the conversations around you. Don’t be a party to the “divisions”, “factions” and “discords” you hear. Christ-like kind speech is always life-giving—this is the reputation of the Spirit-filled.

### **An Extreme Kindness**

In so many words Jesus said, *“It’s easy to love those who love you...”* (Matthew 5:43). And it is equally easy to be kind to those who are kind. But what about the people and situations in which it seems impossible to be kind. It’s emotionally easier to simply ignore and avoid them and withhold kindness—right? There are people who are mean, demanding and difficult to please—people who criticize us for doing the ethical or truthful thing—people who even insult us for following Christ. If so, welcome to “...the fellowship of his [Christ’s] sufferings...” (Philippians 3:10). Jesus warned us that persecution “...because of my name...” (John 15:18-25) would be our experience. In Peter’s letter to persecuted Christians he wrote:

*To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats.*

*Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. I Peter 2:21-2;*

See also 3:8-17

If we lash out in anger to defend ourselves, the gospel loses credibility. Also Paul writes, “Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse” (Romans 12:14). This from the

man who was persecuted often because of Christ's name! This from the man who once led the persecution of Christians (Acts 7:54-8:1).

### **The Acts of Kindness**

A Pharisee attempted to “justify” his conditional love by asking Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” in response to Jesus’ teaching “...love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:25-37). Jesus must have seen in his heart his own love for himself. So Jesus uses a story of a Samaritan whom the Jews despised! This “Good” Samaritan expressed unconditional love by acting kindly, mercifully and compassionately toward a victim of violence, who was also the victim of neglect by a Jewish priest and a Levite. Kindness is always full of mercy and compassion toward the weak and vulnerable. Kindness always strengthens and never weakens. Kindness never seeks advantage but always builds up. Kindness always rescues and never ignores or neglects.

There are people in your life who are very different from you. The physical, ethnic, economic and racial differences can create fear or suspicion making kindness seem risky. Don't act like the priest and Levite and Pharisee. Act like the Samaritan with unconditional love expressed with kindness, mercy and compassion!

### **A Greater Kindness**

One of the greater kindnesses that deepens our love, unity and fellowship is to pray for others. How do you feel when a brother or sister in Christ says to you, “God put you on my heart so I've been praying for you”? That's a great comfort especially if you're going through a troubled time--that you were on their mind and heart and they partnered with God on your behalf. Prayer is a great kindness that binds our hearts together.



## Lesson 9

### The Fruit of Goodness

#### *Increasing My Generosity*

As you read through the list of the fruit of the Spirit does the word “goodness” fail to grab your attention? Why is that? Like our use of the word “love”, we most often use “good” to describe mundane things—a good book, a good pizza, a good car. All are enjoyable, but far from perfect; acceptable, but not excellent or great. To say that God is good might lead the uninformed to think there is some inadequacy or room for improvement. To them God as good is not impressive. Before answering the question posed by the rich young ruler, Jesus asked him, “Why do you call me good [teacher]? Is no one good but God alone?” (Mark 10:13-23) According to Jesus there is a “goodness” that belongs exclusively to the Godhead. And it’s also the fruit of goodness the Holy Spirit desires to grow on the branch of your life as you remain in Christ who is the Vine (John 15:5).

#### **So What Does God’s Goodness Really Mean?**

The Greek word *agathos* answers the question and will grab your attention! *Agathos* means to give to others more than they could earn and all that will benefit and help them. The primary idea is open-hearted and open-handed generosity. Applied to God, *agathos* means that his generosity is overwhelming and overflowing. Jesus described the Father’s goodness like this: “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap” (Luke 6:38). The blessings of God’s goodness are often surprising, always wise, timely and surpassing our expectations. Also, remember in Lesson 3 on the Fruit of Love, the two Greek words that describe God’s love—*karis* and *agapê*. *Karis* (or grace) means “undeserved favor” and *agapê* means “generosity” and “forgiveness. Add these two words together with God’s *agathos* and you end up with an enormous, indescribable and immeasurable side of our Father’s nature.

#### **Our Fallen Nature**

By contrast and opposite to God’s generous goodness is the English word “evil”. or “*poneros*” in the Greek meaning, *stingy*, *miserly* and *grudgingly*. The attitudes and actions of *poneros* are captured in a group of words found in the lists of evils in the New Testament apostolic letters. This group includes *covetousness*, *envy*, *jealousy* and *greed*.

*All these* words capture the ideas of bitterness, obsessions for earthly things and ultimately the selfish inability to bless others. At best, this evil person acts justly toward others, giving them only what they have earned or deserved, but grudgingly shows no love or generosity.

### **The Father of Two Sons**

Jesus captures perfectly the attribute of God's goodness or outrageous generosity in his parable of the prodigal son, the elder brother and their father (Luke 15). The prodigal son squanders his inheritance in sinful living but comes to his senses and humbly returns home, hopeful to become a mere servant to his father. The father, a figure of God the Father, welcomes the prodigal home with open-hearted, open-handed generosity. This parable does not teach us that God is permissive toward us but rather that God is generous with forgiveness when our hearts are truly repentant and humble. Let's take a deeper look at God's goodness and how his Spirit might grow this fruit in your heart and life.

### **S.O.A.P. 1 - The Generosity of God's Goodness**

The centerpiece of God's generosity has been, and always will be, the Lord Jesus Christ whom the Father sent to be our Savior (John 3:16), as well as the One who perfectly revealed the generous nature of the Godhead in many amazing ways throughout his earthly ministry. Remember, God's goodness (agathos) means open-hearted, open-handed, outrageous generosity. Because God's thoughts and ways are superior to ours (Isaiah 55:8, 9), so his goodness toward us is immeasurable and unimaginable. So generous is God's goodness toward you that it touches the lives around you both in the present and the future. His goodness runs silently and unnoticed according to his good will and purpose. Let's take a glance at the Father's goodness!

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Luke 15:1-2, 11-32; Matthew 14:34-36; Matthew 20:1-16; Luke 23:41

### **O.bservations**

1. According to Luke 15, how did the father's goodness touch each of his sons?  
The Prodigal Son:  
  
The Older Son:
2. According to Matthew 14, how did Jesus display the generosity of God's goodness in his earthly ministry?

3. According to Matthew 20, what does this statement tell you about God's goodness and our common reaction, "Are you envious because I am generous?"
4. According to Luke 23, how does God express his goodness to all mankind through the death of Christ?

## A. applications

1. How would you have responded in the parable of the prodigal son—like the older brother or the father? Explain
2. On a scale of 1 to 10, how well do you accept the Father's forgiveness when you sin and return to him?  
Divine Justice   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10   Divine Goodness
3. In what ways have you experienced the generosity of God's goodness? List as many ways as you can:
4. Why do people who are born again late in life regret not having followed Christ much earlier? List as many reasons as you can:
5. Apart from your own conversion experience, can you remember an amazing blessing from God that surpassed your expectation or imagination or explanation? Write your story here:
6. Are you waiting right now for God's goodness in some area of your life? What is it?

**P.rayer** – If you are waiting for God’s goodness, ask Him for the “goodness” He desires to give you and not what you “want”.

## **S.O.A.P. 2 - The Evils of Covetousness**

Early in the life of Israel, God gave ten commands that when obeyed would distinguish his people from the surrounding nations (Exodus 20). The eighth command, “Do not covet...” means to refrain from every evil “eagerness for earthly things”. In the New Testament Christ-followers are exhorted to abandon covetousness with its companion evils of envy (Romans 1), jealousy (Romans 13) and greed (Ephesians 5). This group of attitudes and behaviors originate in the “depraved mind” (Romans 1) and are acted out as the “fruitless deeds of darkness” (Ephesians 5). Remember also, the opposite of God’s *agathos* is our *poneros* meaning stingy, miserly, possessive, bitter and grudging.

**S.cription** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Exodus 20:17 & 15; Romans 1:28-32; Romans 13:11-14; Ephesians 5:3-13.

### **O.bservations**

1. In your opinion, how do commandments eight and ten (Exodus 20) relate to each other?
2. In Romans 1, why do you think Paul listed the seemingly mild evils of greed and envy with “murder” and “God-hating” and “deserving of death”?
3. From your personal observations, how have you seen envy and jealousy (Romans 13) acted out? Explain.
4. Paul states in Ephesians 5 that greed is a characteristic or form of idolatry. In your opinion, when does greed become idolatrous?

### **A.pPLICATIONS**

1. Can you think of other “contemporary” things that fall in the category of “anything that belongs to your neighbor” that you could covet? List as many as you can think of:

2. Be honest, is there any mild greed (wanting more of what you already possess) or mild envy (a bitter wanting of what others possess) in your heart right now? If so, describe it here:
  
3. What could easily tempt you to take greed or envy to a deeper level?
  
4. Is there presently any desire for some earthly thing (a person, a thing or activity) that is compromising your love for God or spouse or children? If so, admit it by writing it down here:

**P.rayer** – Ask God to show you a “way to escape” and express your desire to flee from and pursue Him. And then do it beginning today and never stop!

### **S.O.A.P. 3 - Imitating God’s Generous Nature**

Having considered God’s generous goodness and the evils of covetousness, look now at the transformation God’s Spirit desires to make in your heart and behavior. We all emerge from our mother’s womb as selfish creatures. We are born far from Christ’s ideal, “...freely you have received, freely give....” (Matthew 10:8). Teaching children to share is a long tedious lesson. Some parents do well. Many give up! Fortunately, God our Father will not give up. He desires to transform us by loosening the grip of covetous feelings and actions by growing in us His generous nature. When we choose to be filled and led by God’s Spirit, we’ll share, not merely ungrudgingly, but outrageously just like himself.

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Romans 13:8-10; Ephesians 4:28; I Timothy 6:3-10, 17-18; Romans 12:3-16

### **O.bservations**

1. According to Romans 13, describe in your own words what we must willfully choose to do to begin the transformation from covetousness to generosity?
  
2. How and why does “sharing” (Ephesians 4:28) break the power of covetousness in our life?

3. According to I Timothy 6, what might be the reasons why giving is so important?
4. Describe the specific gifts of the Spirit (Romans 12) and kind words (previous lesson) that are used to generously bless others?

#### A.plications

1. Can you recall something you have done recently or in the past to express genuine undeserved love and generosity to your “neighbor” with no strings attached?
2. What in your life is for you the most difficult thing to share or give to bless others generously? And why?
3. How spontaneous or intentional are you to share, give or bless others? Check all that apply below:
 

<input type="checkbox"/> Spontaneous	<input type="checkbox"/> As the Spirit leads
<input type="checkbox"/> I plan my giving	<input type="checkbox"/> I give after I pray
<input type="checkbox"/> I lack awareness	<input type="checkbox"/> When God hits me over the head
<input type="checkbox"/> My spouse is more spontaneous	
4. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you measure your own level of “godliness with contentment” regarding your material possessions?  
 Discontent    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Very Content
5. Do you know what your spiritual gift/s are and, if so, how do you use them and how often?

**P.rayer** – Ask God to give you a heart like His own and help you to examine your heart and make you aware of any greed or covetousness that stands in the way of His goodness in you.

## **S.O.A.P. 4 - When it's Difficult to be Generous**

Some people make it difficult for us to be good and generous to them, like those who have made bad choices even after being warned. Or how about those who hate us and insult us? What about those strangers in need? We can quickly and silently write-off people who are “undeserving” of our goodness. In fear or pride we think, “*This could be risky.*” “*I refuse to be their doormat!*” “*They made their mess—let them live in it.*” If we give at all, we give grudgingly and miserly rather than out of love and liberality. These are emotional responses to difficult people that get in our way of choosing to bless them generously and leaving the results with God.

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Matthew 10:5-10; Luke 10:27-37; Matthew 5:38-48; Matthew 5:14-16

### **O.bservations**

1. Just as Jesus revealed the generosity of the Godhead, he instructed his disciples to do likewise (Matthew 10:5-10) unconditionally. How would you explain this?
2. The Pharisee in Luke 10 posed a question to Jesus “to justify himself”—“Who is my neighbor?” According to Jesus, who was the neighbor?
3. Jesus saw the unreasonable commands of the occupied Roman soldiers (Matthew 5:38ff) as opportunities to demonstrate the love and goodness of God. Who would benefit from the outrageous generosity of two coats and two miles and why?
4. In your own words, why does Jesus require generous deeds (Matthew 5:14) of those who follow him?

## **A.plications**

1. What are some of the conditions we tend to place on people before we share generously? List as many as you can.
2. Have you ever helped a stranger in distress? How did you feel afterward? Tell your story here.
3. How often do you help strangers?
4. Can you remember a time when you gave something generously (time, skill, possession or money) to an unkind person who did not earn it or deserve it? Tell your story.
5. What happens when your generous deeds do not result in glory to your “....Father who is in heaven”? (Trick question)

**P.rayer** – If you dare—ask God for an opportunity to be generous in some way to someone who is underserving!

## **Further Thoughts – Generous Giving of Time and Resources**

As always, research and discovery confirm the statements of scripture. Who would have thought that this statement of Christ: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35), could be verified scientifically?

In their book, “*Well Being: The Five Essential Elements*”, Tom Rath and Jim Harter of Gallup, Inc., disclose the results of the research on financial wellbeing. Here’s one profound discovery:

*...donating money results in a greater return for our wellbeing than buying material goods for ourselves. Neuroscientists have discovered that the regions of the brain that are activated when we receive money (based on MRI brain*

*scans) glow even brighter when we give money.*<sup>1</sup> p.96

For those who follow Jesus, the joy of generous giving heightens the natural feeling of wellbeing--so much so that we gladly repeat the act of giving. In addition to the giving of money, the giving of time has similar results.<sup>2</sup> p.97 Their research is perhaps good evidence of God's goodness and generous nature that he imparted to man at creation.

"Chariots of Fire" is the true story of the 1924 Olympic gold medalist, Eric Liddell. After he won, in a conversation with his sister he said these memorable words: "God made me fast and when I run I feel his pleasure." The same can also be said of God's goodness—when we give generously, we feel his pleasure. When we imitate our Father's goodness, we align our hearts with his and we are blessed. When we give generously, we rise above our fallen tendency to be self-serving, self-centered and self-absorbed—in other words, "stingy takers".

In a light-hearted newscast it was reported that a Queen of England had a bowl of her favorite snack, assorted nuts, in most every room she frequents in Buckingham Palace. She noticed that the level of nuts in the bowls was lowering at a greater rate and suspected the palace guards were helping themselves. In an effort to catch the thief, she secretly marked the levels in the bowls. With immeasurable wealth at her disposal, is this not the height of stinginess? A sign at each bowl reading, "Help Yourself—The Queen" would have been a small gesture of goodness and generosity to those who would "lay down their lives" for her safety!

### **Creating Margin for Generosity**

Medical doctor, Richard Swenson, a Christ-follower, popularized the vital concept of "margin" in his book, *"Margin—Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives"*. According to Dr. Swenson, "Margin is the amount allowed beyond that which is needed." Why do we need margin or reserves? Two reasons—good health so we have the emotional, physical, financial and time reserves to truly love those we say we love, and also to respond to opportunities that advance Christ's kingdom through missional activities including generous giving of our time, talents and treasure. Creating margins is a vital part of a missional theology.

The truly wealthy live moderately and well below the amount needed, unencumbered by debt to meaningless things. True wealth has more to do with diligence and contentment. Imagine the impact on His kingdom if every Christ-follower was committed to building margins in every area of their life. Once God provides for your needs, you are set free to bless others and experience the pleasure of "godliness with contentment" (I Timothy 6:6).

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<sup>1</sup>

<sup>2</sup>

### **The Breadth of God's Goodness**

The enormity of God's generosity cannot be measured or imagined. The sun rises and the rain falls on both the righteous and unrighteous alike (Matthew 5:45). God loves all humanity so he gave his Son to die (John 3:16). He does not will for anyone to die for their sin but that everyone should simply repent (II Peter 3:9) including the most vile among us. God perfectly reveals his generous goodness in Christ as Jesus befriends the dregs of humanity (Luke 5:27-30) and assures the criminal on the cross beside Him, "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). A. W. Tozer wrote of God's goodness in Knowledge of the Holy, "...the God of heaven, though exalted in power and majesty, is eager to be friends with us." (p. 90).

On nearly every page of the gospel records, Jesus proves "If you have seen me you have seen the Father" (John 14:9). From the "best wine" at the wedding in Cana, to the feeding of hungry thousands, to the countless healings and even resurrections, to the transformation of a Samaritan woman and countless others—Christ was relentless, tireless, selfless and even indiscriminant in his generous life-giving ministries. To the deserving and undeserving, the grateful and ungrateful alike, Christ poured out blessings from the Godhead. Open-hearted and open-handed, Jesus revealed the outrageous goodness of the Father. Because Jesus "remains in you" and when you remain in him (John 15:5), the transforming power of his indwelling Spirit will empower you to display the same goodness to those who cross your path. Do so for the Father's glory!



## Lesson 10

### The Fruit of Faithfulness

#### *Maintaining My Honesty*

Long gone are the days when trust or faithfulness was guaranteed simply by a person's word and a firm handshake! Unfortunately, trust and faithfulness today begins with a stable of lawyers and a half ream of legal-sized paper, most of which describes the conditions for breaking the trust. The reason? Mostly, a lack of honesty. Trust, as the core of all human relationships, easily implodes by dishonesty. Every relationship, institution, culture and nation is brought down by lies, and the strength of such is measured by the level of trust. Trust is built slowly, but quickly lost. Lost trust is rebuilt even more slowly.

#### **The Father of Lies**

When the Pharisees challenged Jesus regarding his "father", meaning God the Father, he said among many things to them:

*You belong to your father the Devil...there is no truth in him. When he lies he speaks his native language, he is a liar and the father of lies.* John 8:44

By contrast Jesus instructed his followers, "Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes', and your 'No', 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one" (Matthew 5:37). In other words, on matters of moral and ethical absolutes, all attempts to justify, or even hesitate, reveals a deception to conceal the truth and cover-up sin.

Due to the fall of man into sin (Genesis 3), we are all natural born liars whom the "father of lies" attempts to train in the art of deceit. Deceit is the hiding of truth to maintain or gain advantage over a person or situation. Deception is used to cover and avoid shame and the loss of reputation, credibility, power, position and relationships. Deceit is often employed to break vows, values, promises, contracts or trusts out of anger or self-promotion or inconvenience or material loss or material gain.

#### **The Meaning of Biblical Faithfulness**

The meaning of Biblical faithfulness stated as a fruit of the Holy Spirit describes human relationships, not our faithfulness to God nor his faithfulness to us. The character quality of faithfulness describes the person who is reliable, trustworthy and dependable toward others. Their word is accepted as true. Their behavior is trusted as the right thing to do. Their motives are considered pure. A trustworthy person is changeless—identical in public, private and alone. Fidelity, honesty and loyalty mark the person who is faithful.

Just as the Godhead embodies faithfulness, the Holy Spirit grants and grows this quality in us when we remain in Christ and follow Him.

### **S.O.A.P. 1 - The Faithfulness of God**

The story of Israel's unfaithfulness to God is also the long and remarkable story of God's faithfulness to Israel. As wayward as Israel had been, God's promise-keeping was extraordinary. This is God's nature. The New Testament reveals the proof of God's trustworthiness by fulfilling his promise of a Savior in Christ Jesus. God's faithfulness secures our future, makes our hope unshakable and his promises certain. God is faithful when we are not! On the other hand, His faithfulness never gets in the way of his holiness, his judgment and the discipline of his children. (Jeremiah 18:1-12) Yet, even in his discipline God expresses trustworthiness and dependability. Like the prodigal son, God lets us experience the pain of sin that we might come to our senses, choose to repent and return to Him. Let's take a deeper look!

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Numbers 23:17-19; Hebrews 6:13-20, 13:8; I Thessalonians 5:19-24

#### **O.bservations**

1. Based on Numbers 23, in your own words how does God describe his own faithfulness?
2. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you measure God's faithfulness?  
Dependable    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Off the Chart
3. According to Hebrews 6 & 13, summarize how Abraham and Christ demonstrate or prove God's faithfulness.  
Abraham:  
  
Christ:
4. According to I Thessalonians 5:24, God is faithful to sanctify us, but what is required of us to develop faithfulness?

#### **A.pPLICATIONS**

1. Describe how God's faithfulness to you has impacted your trust in him. Do you have a story?

2. How does God-like and Christ-like faithfulness in you make a difference in you and in the lives of others?

In You:

In Others:

3. According to Paul in I Thessalonians 5, how would you describe what it means to become faithful “through and through”?

**P.rayer** – Ask God by His Spirit to make you more aware of his faithfulness to you and others. Thank God for the specific ways he is faithful to you.

### **S.O.A.P. 2 - Our Instinct to Deceive**

No one teaches us to lie. Where did that come from? When Adam and Eve believed the lie of Satan, “the father of lies” (John 8:44), they instinctively hid from God out of shame and fear. Ever since, every young child instinctively hides their disobedience out of shame and fear by their actions or deceitful words or both. Most every sin is compounded by the sins of cover-up and silence. Furthermore, like Adam and Eve, every child who is caught instinctively shifts blame to someone or something else to further compound the sin. Deceit hides a multitude of sin, so we think—deceiving even ourselves!

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Romans 1:24-32; Ephesians 4:14-28; Revelation 21:6-8

### **O.bservations**

1. In Romans 1, Paul sums up the fall of man into sin (Genesis 3) as an “exchange of the truth for a lie”. How does Paul describe the truth and the lie?

The Truth:

The Lie:

2. In Ephesians 4, Paul again describes the condition of the fallen man as “corrupted by deceitful desires” and engaged in “deceitful scheming”. List the many words and phrases that describe deceit in these verses.

3. Why do you think God's severe punishment of "liars" in Revelation 21 might seem too harsh?

### **A.p**plications

1. Can you remember a specific occasion when you "exchanged the truth of God for a lie"? What's your story of deceit and cover-up?

2. Be honest—what degree do you tolerate deception in yourself and others?  
Evaluate both below:

Yourself: Very Tolerant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Totally Intolerant

Others: Very Tolerant 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Totally Intolerant

3. When are you most tempted to hide or exaggerate the truth?

Hide the Truth:

Exaggerate the Truth:

4. Can you remember a sin you committed that you compounded with lies? What's your story?

5. Is there a sin in your life right now you are hiding from others?

**P.rayer** – Confess and repent of any sin you are hiding. Then confess and repent of the sin of deceit.

### **S.O.A.P. 3 - Qualities of a Healthy Conscience**

Having considered the evils of deceit that God wants to separate us from through sanctification, focus now on the fruit of faithfulness His Spirit desires to cultivate in you as you remain in Christ the Vine.

What are the qualities of a healthy conscience void of deception? Such a conscience is clean, transparent, sensitive and free. Clean simply means your past sin and failures are forgiven and cleansed by the blood of Christ. Transparent means that presently, nothing in your life is hidden from the view of others. Sensitive means having a desire for what is good and true as well as an abhorrence of what is evil and false. Free is the sense of liberation, well-being and joy. So how healthy is your conscience? Let's take a closer look into God's Word.

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Luke 16:10-17; Romans 2:12-16; I Peter 3:8-17; I John 1:5-10

#### **O.bservations**

1. According to Jesus in Luke 16, trust begins with small steps; but what is the guiding principle in verse 15?
2. In your own words describe how man's conscience works based on Paul's profound statement in Romans 2.
3. From I Peter 3, why does, "Whoever would love life and see good days", sound like a happy conscience?
4. According to I John 1, what does our purification from sin depend on?

#### **A.pPLICATIONS**

1. How would, "In your heart set apart Christ as Lord" (I Peter 3:15), strengthen your conscience?

2. Describe how well your conscience is working at accusing you and defending you.

Accusing you:

Defending you:

3. How often do you search your own heart for unconfessed sin?

Circle one or more:

When Convicted    When Caught    Daily    Weekly    Occasionally    Rarely

4. Have you ever broken the trust of someone by your unfaithfulness? If so, have you resolved it? If not, why not?

**P.rayer** – Tell God that in your heart Jesus Christ is Lord of your life. Invite the Holy Spirit to fill you and grow the fruit of faithfulness both to God and everyone in your life.

#### **S.O.A.P. 4 - When Your Faithfulness Is Challenged**

Your faithfulness to others is challenged by deceitful people and broken promises. Remaining faithful is emotionally painful especially when your faithfulness is trampled on by the unfaithfulness of others. The natural response and temptation is to withdraw your faithfulness and avenge the injustice. The Christ-like response is to remain faithful and changeless by the power of the Holy Spirit within you. Remember, forgiveness is the power to change the painful past and present, and promising is the power to secure the present and future of others as well as yourself. These powers are only possible when you “remain in Christ” (John 15:4). He will grant you these powers to be like him and maintain your faithfulness and honesty.

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Ephesians 6:5-8; John 13:21-27, 36-38; Matthew 5:11-12, 38-40

#### **O.bservations**

1. According to Ephesians 6, what are the keys for the Christ-follower whose faithfulness is challenged in any work environment by an oppressive person (co-worker, manager, client, customer, patient, etc.)?

2. Both Judas (betrayal) and Peter (denials) broke their trust with Jesus after three years of discipleship (John 13). Describe how Jesus must have been tempted or tested by their dishonesty and unfaithfulness.

3. Jesus describes in Matthew 5 two natural responses to insult and persecution at the hands of evil people. Summarize below what our spiritual Christ-like responses should be and why?

“Eye for eye and tooth for tooth”

“Love your neighbor, hate your enemy”

#### A.plications

1. Is there an oppressive or unfaithful person in your life right now? Who is it?  
\_\_\_\_\_ How would you measure your emotional pain on a scale of 1 to 10?

Annoying    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Unbearable

2. In what ways have you or do you “resist” an evil person?
3. How could you return evil with goodness (fruit of goodness) and faithfulness?
4. Has there been someone in your life who has trampled on your faithfulness and broken a trust with you? How did you respond?
5. Is the trust still broken?

## 6. How did Jesus respond to the unfaithfulness of Judas and Peter?

**P.rayer** – Ask God for the power to remain faithful to unfaithful people and difficult situations and to respond with love, forgiveness and faithfulness.

### **Further Thoughts – Living Above Accusation**

Cameron Tringale, a young golf professional, was questioned on national television, “why?” He reported to golf officials that he made a mistake on his official scorecard during a tournament. Pro golfers submit their own official scorecard at the end of every round of a four-round tournament. He scored four strokes instead of five on the 11<sup>th</sup> hole. No one caught his mistake but himself. He confessed and it cost him a disqualification and a \$53,000 paycheck. He answered the interviewer’s question, “I want to live above reproach with a clear conscience.” Above “reproach” means to be free from accusation of shameful acts or words that bring dishonor. Faithful people are the same in private as they are in public--no hidden corners or dark sides of the soul. Mr. Tringale valued a healthy conscience over fame and money.

### **The Danger of Small Compromises**

Unfaithfulness begins with small compromises. No one robs the corner market without first stealing cookies from the cookie jar. No one commits adultery without first enjoying the flirtation. Earl Wilson suggests that every moral and ethical compromise begins with minimization, the smallest violation of a moral or ethical absolute. Once we start moving the boundary line back, the next violation is much easier. Eventually rationalization sets in whereby we justify our behavior and ignore the evidence to the contrary. If we fail to come to our senses, sooner or later entitlement takes over—the feeling we are special or deserving. This self-deception runs through the drift toward unfaithfulness and ultimately to a full-blown betrayal of trust. The painfully long process of rebuilding trust, when possible, never equals the momentary pleasure or promise of sin.

### **Idleness: A Gateway to Many Evils**

In his mission to take the gospel to pre-Christian Gentiles, the Apostle Paul observed extreme evils. While he commended the new Christians in Thessalonica, he was troubled by a prevalent problem among them. He wrote, “*For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule, ‘If a man will not work, he shall not eat’*” (II Thessalonians 3:10). Paul saw idleness as a gateway to many evils. The refusal to work makes a person the Devil’s playmate. Without a work ethic time is not only wasted in laziness or senseless busyness, but is often justified by deceit. Unfaithfulness expressed in idleness makes a

person dangerous. So much so that Paul warns the church, “Do not associate with him in order that he may be ashamed” (3:14). Paul also observed this in the Ephesian church, “He who steals...must work...with his own hands that he might have something to share with those in need” (Ephesians 4:28). Paul also addresses the problem of idleness among some women in the Ephesian church in his letter to their Pastor, Timothy. Paul writes that these women are “busybodies” and engage in “gossip” and “slander” (I Timothy 5:11-15). The fruit of faithfulness is needed to invigorate the image and nature of God in us. Just as Christ works to sustain his creation (Colossians 1:16-17), so we must join him in it for his glory (Colossians 3:17) by meaningful labor.

### **An Extreme Faithfulness to God**

Jesus warned us that the world would hate his followers because the world hated him (John 15:18-19). The same hatred that resulted in Christ’s crucifixion would result in the martyrdom of his followers. It didn’t take long for this to begin as Stephen, in Acts 7, became the first martyr of the Christian faith. Stephen displayed a faithfulness that was extreme and amazing. From Stephen to the present and into the future, Christian martyrs display this uncommon faithfulness—rooted in a love for Christ that exceeds a natural love for life itself. Martyrdom always begs the question in every Christ-follower’s mind: “In such a moment would I remain faithful?” “Would I betray or deny Christ?” The account of Stephen suggests that as you draw close to God in that moment, would he not draw close to you? Christ’s presence in that moment would no doubt be uncommon—as you enter “the fellowship of his suffering” (Philippians 3:10). Furthermore, based on the teaching of Jesus, wouldn’t persecution and even martyrdom be proof to you of the truth and reality of Jesus Christ? If Christ was not the threat to every evil thing and every evil person, wouldn’t you simply be ignored and dismissed as a fool?



## Lesson 11

### The Fruit of Gentleness

#### *Expanding My Influence*

In a world of “me first”, gentleness seems to be the trait of timid or weak or passive people who “finish last”. Strength and assertiveness are what’s rewarded, not gentleness—unless you work in a nursery. But in a closer look at the Greek word “*praus*” we discover it means both gentleness and meekness which is “strength under control”. These two traits combine to make the disposition of such a person anything but timid, weak or passive.

In our English Bible these co-characteristics of gentleness and meekness are used inter-changeably and at times together. So when you read either English word, keep in mind the other characteristics as well. It makes sense then to conclude that **gentleness is the outward expression of inward meekness**. When inner strength is under control the outward disposition appears calm and even tender-hearted. While no harm or injury is done physically, emotionally or mentally, verbal communication is never timid or weak or passive. Truth must always be spoken in love (Ephesians 4: 15). And remember, the truth of God’s Word is stronger than a “two-edged sword” (Hebrews 4:12). It does not kill but intends to rescue us from spiritual death.

#### **Biblical Examples**

In the Old Testament we find a good example of gentleness, meekness and humility in the life of Moses. Numbers 12:3 reads:

*Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.*

But Moses wasn’t naturally meek or gentle or humble if you recall. He lost control of his anger and killed an Egyptian (Exodus 2:11-12) and fled to Midian. There he got married and worked as a shepherd for his father-in-law. While shepherding sheep, Moses developed humility, meekness and gentleness. Sheep are difficult to shepherd. They are dumb and constantly need to be led and protected. They are easily spooked because they are only prey, not predators. They require a shepherd who is gentle and meek lest they scatter.

In the New Testament we find a good example of gentleness and meekness in the life of Peter. Like Moses, Peter was anything but gentle and meek to begin with. In the gospel records Peter seems out-of-control most of the time. In the scene before the crucifixion he cuts off the ear of a Roman soldier in the garden (John 18:10), and several hours later he is “spooked” himself by a young girl and denies Jesus three times. But following the resurrection of Christ, Peter’s disposition begins to undergo transformation.

Jesus asks Peter three times, “Do you love me?” And three times Jesus responds, “Feed my sheep” (John 21:15-19). In other words, “Shepherd those who follow me”. We will see in Peter’s apostolic letters that he finally got it!

Let’s look now at gentleness and meekness in the Godhead. Following, we will look at the dark side of our sinful nature when void of gentleness and meekness.

## **S.O.A.P. 1 - The Gentle Godhead**

In David’s most beloved Psalm 23, he paints with inspired words the nature of God in “*The Lord is my shepherd...*” (verse 1). Later through the prophet Jeremiah, God describes his disposition toward Israel this way. “*Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!*” (Jeremiah 23:1)

In Matthew 11 Christ says of himself, “*I am gentle and humble in heart...*” (verse 29). Jesus came to the manager as “...*the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world...*” (John 1:29), and goes to the cross in meekness (Matthew 21:5). Out of immeasurable love for us, He fulfilled His mission with the perfect mix of tender gentleness and controlled strength. May the following scriptures deepen your love and admiration of the Godhead. Remember, Jesus said, “*The Father and I are one*”—“*If you have seen me you have seen the Father*”.

**S.criptures** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

John 10:1-18; John 4:1-42; I Peter 2:21-25

### **O.bservations**

1. The self-portrait of Jesus in John 10 as the good shepherd and the gate reveals both his gentleness and meekness. Write down the statements that describe each quality.

Gentleness:

Meekness:

2. In John 4, we see the gentle and meek nature of Jesus in real time with the woman at the well. How did He express His nature and what impact did it have?

3. In his first letter, Peter mixes the metaphors of sheep and shepherd to describe Christ—how is gentleness and meekness seen in both?

Sheep:

Shepherd:

## **A.p.plications**

1. How did gentleness and meekness play a role in your first experience of belief in Christ? Describe what you can remember.
2. In what ways have you experienced the gentleness and meekness of Christ in the transformation of your life?
3. Describe how Jesus Christ, as the gentle and meek "...Shepherd and Overseer of your soul..." makes you feel.
4. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you measure your feeling or awareness of Christ's gentleness and meekness in your life currently?

Totally Unaware    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Very Aware

If unaware, how would you remedy that?

**P.rayer** – Thank God for His love expressed with gentleness and meekness in the sending of Christ to be your sacrificial Lamb for your sin.

## **S.O.A.P. 2 - The Evils of Out-of-Control Anger**

When a person's inner strength is not controlled, they are easily provoked to anger resulting in any number of harmful abuses. The abuses run the gamut from verbal to physical injury, from subtle to confrontational behavior, from silence to rage and from coarse joking to humiliating humor. When emotional abuses are not satisfied, physical abuses are sure to follow. Both are evil, violent and harmful. Most every apostolic letter to the early church refers to the evils of out-of-control anger and its destruction of relationships. In fact there are 23 English words translated from the Greek that describe attitudes and actions of hatred and violence.

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Galatians 5:19-21,26; Ephesians 4:29-31; Luke 22:24-30

## O.bservations

1. List the words from the evils Paul mentions in Galatians 5 that are specifically opposite to gentleness and meekness.
2. What do you think about Paul's statement in verse 21 "...that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God."?
3. How would you describe the relationship between "unwholesome talk" in Ephesians 4:29 and the out-of-control behaviors listed in verse 31?
4. Why do you think position and authority often lead to "lording it over" others as Jesus described in Luke 22?

## A.pPLICATIONS

1. How would you measure the "wholesomeness" of your family talk when you were growing up?  
Extremely unwholesome   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10   Very Wholesome
2. Describe the influence your family talk had on your character.
3. Read the introduction to this S.O.A.P. again and be honest—how easily are you provoked to anger and in what sinful ways do you usually express it?  
How Easily:  
  
What Ways:
4. What easily provokes you to anger?

5. What positions of authority do you presently have in which "...lording it over..." is a temptation?

**P.rayer** – Confess and repent of any sins of anger and ask God, by His indwelling Spirit, to grow the fruit of gentleness and meekness in you.

### **S.O.A.P. 3 - The Disposition of a Shepherd**

When you “put to death” (Colossians 3:5-8) the evil abuses of strength and “clothe yourself” (Colossians 3:12-14) with the gentleness and meekness of Christ-likeness, you become more kind, respectful and sensitive to others. No longer easily provoked to anger, you will even suffer injury without seeking revenge as Jesus did. With meekness you’ll be able to quietly submit to the will and purpose of God in that suffering. In your words, attitudes and actions the fruit of gentleness and meekness will make you a joy to be with, talk with, live with, work with, play with, serve with and lead with. You will have the disposition of a shepherd who does no harm.

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Ephesians 4:1-6, 29-31; I Thessalonians 2:10-12; I Peter 3:1-11

### **O.bservations**

1. In Ephesians 4:1-6, how does Paul describe the gentle and meek disposition of a Spirit-filled follower of Christ?

Why do you think Paul is inspired to insert, "...do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God..." in Ephesians 4:29-31?

2. Paul describes how he dealt with the young Christians in Thessalonica like “a father deals with his own children”. What were his inward qualities of meekness and his outward qualities of gentleness?

Meekness:

Gentleness:

3. After Peter describes the tender disposition needed for a good marriage he says, “Finally, all of you...” (verses 8-11). List the outcomes of gentleness and meekness.

### A.plications

Below are detailed biblical expressions of inward meekness and outward gentleness. Measure your own progress toward Christ-likeness on a scale of 1 to 5.

I bless those who insult me	Not growing	1	2	3	4	5	Christ-like
I respect those who are weak	Not growing	1	2	3	4	5	Christ-like
I'm compassionate to those in need	Not growing	1	2	3	4	5	Christ-like
I seek unity and peace	Not growing	1	2	3	4	5	Christ-like
My wholesome speech is helpful	Not growing	1	2	3	4	5	Christ-like
My wholesome speech builds up	Not growing	1	2	3	4	5	Christ-like
I am patient with others	Not growing	1	2	3	4	5	Christ-like
I urge others to godliness	Not growing	1	2	3	4	5	Christ-like
I'm humble toward everyone	Not growing	1	2	3	4	5	Christ-like
I'm sympathetic to others	Not growing	1	2	3	4	5	Christ-like
I encourage others	Not growing	1	2	3	4	5	Christ-like
I comfort others	Not growing	1	2	3	4	5	Christ-like

**Prayer** – Ask God to help you to be more aware of the expressions above which you need to grow in Christ-likeness. Humbly surrender those areas of weakness—no excuses!

### S.O.A.P. 4 - When Gentleness and Meekness Are Needed Most

In your journey with Christ you'll meet people who test your gentle and meek disposition by provoking an angry response in you. These “special” people will need a shepherd-like response in order to help them. Who are these people? In the last S.O.A.P. marriage was addressed which could be a great test. But the scriptures indicate at least three others: children, fellow Christians who need correction and unbelievers who insult you for your faith. Let's discover the value of “strength under control” as we respond to each of these with gentleness and meekness

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Ephesians 6:1-4; Galatians 6:1-10; I Peter 3:13-16

## O.bservations

1. By nature children “in training” easily provoke an angry response in parents and others. What harmful “exasperating” affects (Ephesians 6:4) could be avoided by meekness and gentleness?
2. According to Galatians 6, what is needed to effectively “restore” a brother or sister who is “caught in sin”? List as many principles as you can find.
3. I Peter 3 instructs us that some unbelievers will view our faith in Christ as foolish and/or unreasonable. In what ways is Christ such a real threat to unbelievers? List as many as you can think of.

## A.pPLICATIONS

1. Name the children in your life and how you would evaluate your gentle and meek response to each of them.

Name:	Negative	1	2	3	4	5	Christ-like
Name:	Negative	1	2	3	4	5	Christ-like
Name:	Negative	1	2	3	4	5	Christ-like
Name:	Negative	1	2	3	4	5	Christ-like
2. How fearful or willing are you to “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15) to “restore” a fellow believer who is caught in sin? Circle one and explain why?  
Very Fearful   Somewhat Fearful   Unsure   Somewhat Willing   Very Willing
3. Compose a short, non-judgmental yet compelling reason for your faith in Christ that you could tell an unbeliever in a gentle and meek way with a smile on your face!

**P.rayer** – Ask God daily to fill you with His Spirit and grow the fruit of gentleness and meekness in your speech and behavior.

## Further Thoughts – The Right Time and the Wrong Time

Someone said, “The gentle and meek person is always angry at the right time and never angry at the wrong time.” In Paul’s letter to the Ephesian Christians, he instructed them to “Be angry and sin not!” (Ephesians 4: 26). Anger is permitted, but “when?” and “how?” are the critical questions.

In the case of fellow believers and children who need correction, the right time to be angry is always in the face of willful disobedience to the truth of God’s Word.

*Don’t have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will. II Timothy 2:23-26*

Remembering that anger is a temptation and out-of-control anger is sin, you are “to speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). Truth should be communicated even with a controlled sternness to make the point, but it should never be abusive or dehumanizing. Expressions of out-of-control anger may actually undermine the strength of truth. We can’t make God’s truth stronger, but spoken in meekness with love avoids the damage and distraction caused by an angry attack.

In the case of unbelievers and their insults to your faith in Christ (I Peter 3:13-16), your gentle and meek response will keep the conversation alive. Someone once said, “Our witness to unbelievers is like building a bridge of friendship for the Gospel to walk over.”

## When “the truth in love” Doesn’t Work

While you always hope for a “Bible-book ending”, when you attempt to “restore” a fellow Christ-follower who is “caught” in sin, you may find resistance. If this happens, the teaching of Jesus is clear:

*If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.*

Matthew 18:15-17

With gentleness and meekness you are taught to find a third-party mediator to reinforce their need for restoration. If this fails, take the matter “to the church”. This should first be the pastor or elders of the church. If this fails, Paul instructs the church to dis-

fellowship the unrepentant sinner (I Corinthians 5:11). Every stage requires gentleness and meekness with the truth “spoken in love”. The gravity of sin must be expressed in and by the redemptive nature of Christ through his church. In the family of God we are not called to police each other, but to love and care enough to restore one another with gentleness, meekness and humility (Galatians 6:1-5).

### **Your Spiritual Growth and Maturity**

The fruit of gentleness and meekness in you is also vital to your own response to the authority of God’s Word in your life. James, the half-brother of Jesus was inspired to write this insightful instruction:

*...humbly accept the word planted in you...the man who looks intently  
into the perfect law that gives freedom...will be blessed. James 1:21-25*

Whether through preaching, teaching or meditation, the Word of God searches the heart. Among other benefits, the scriptures are convicting and uncomfortable. But a gentle, meek and humble spirit within you will welcome the discomfort and not reject the truth. The Word of God always exposes the darkness and slavery of sin and offers freedom. May you follow God’s Spirit as he leads you like a gentle and meek shepherd (Galatians 5:16-18, 25) into the growth and blessing of Christ-likeness.



## Lesson 12

### The Fruit of Self-Control

#### *Restraining My Desires*

“At just the right time God sent his Son” (Galatians 4:4). But what made the time right? God orchestrated many religious, political and historical conditions that made the time perfect. But when Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well, another condition was clear. His knowledge of her past five husbands and the fact that she was presently living with a man outside of marriage was a snapshot of the immoral condition of the entire world of the first century. The immorality of this woman and her “live-in” was not exceptional.

When the apostle Paul was commissioned by Christ to take the gospel to the Gentile world, he found godless cultures immersed in moral decadence. In Greece there was no shame in sexual relations before marriage and outside of marriage. Wealthy Greek men had a mistress, a concubine and a wife to mother his children. The Romans were as degenerate as the Greeks, openly practicing incest, orgies, pedophilia and homosexuality. One early church father wrote, *“We live in an age when shame seems to have vanished from the earth.”* The church fathers highly valued self-control as a gift from God and a foundation for the Christian life. Many Bible scholars believe the virtue of self-control was a quality of character the Christian gospel introduced to the world. When we read the lists of evils in the New Testament epistles, we see the evidence of unrestrained moral depravity and the great need for self-restraint.

#### Unlimited Applications

Beyond sexual immorality, self-control has unlimited applications to your fallen sinful nature. Self-control must dominate to prevent unrestrained desires and passions from becoming the dictator of your values, feelings and behaviors. Spirit empowered self-control will spare you from self-destruction as well as the heartache inflicted on others.

In Peter’s second letter to the Hebrew Christians he warned about the evils of the false teachers including sexual immorality and greed. He wrote:

*They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity—for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him.* II Peter 2:19

In this lesson you will consider the choices and behaviors that have or could “master” you. Some are definitely evil. Other desires are good and God-given but have the potential to be habitual or enslaving or even idolatrous without the fruit of self-control. This fruit of the Holy Spirit empowers you to live a pure and balanced life—a life “worthy of Christ” (Colossians 1:10) on every level, for every duty, in every relationship.

## Self-Controlled or Spirit-Controlled?

When you have self-control (Galatians 5:23), you may be led to think that control is self-willed by your natural emotional strength. But what if you don't have any strength? On the other hand, when you read Paul's statement in Romans 8:5-8 you might think the Spirit's control of you is against your will. This doesn't seem right or true either—which is it? Answer--there is yet a third and correct understanding. The fruit of self-control grows in a cooperative and collaborative dynamic between you and the indwelling Spirit of Christ. As you intentionally and humbly remain in Christ the Vine (John 15:1), you draw from him the inner strength of self-control to overcome temptation. More will be said about this dynamic as you move through the lesson. Let's get going!

## S.O.A.P. 1 - The Temptations of Jesus Christ

Since the Godhead cannot be tempted by evil (James 1:13), it's difficult to understand how self-control could possibly be a quality of the Divine nature and Christ-likeness. We know God is holy. We know God did not *attain* holiness—He always was, is now, and will always be holy or morally excellent. But when the eternal Christ was sent to take on human flesh, he voluntarily suspended the independent use of his Divine attributes and became dependent on God the Father (Philippians 2). In doing so, Christ Jesus became subject to the human condition including temptation to sin. He faced temptation in order to become the sinless and only sacrifice for the sins of all mankind. His temptations were real so that He would be the legitimate sacrificial Lamb of God that satisfies the judgment of God on your sin and likewise satisfies the love of God for you as well! His temptations required self-control.

S.cripture – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Luke 4:1-12; Luke 22:39-46; Hebrews 2:18; 4:15

### O.bservations

1. How was Jesus prepared for his temptations and his verbal exchanges with Satan in the wilderness (Luke 4)?
2. How would you describe the mixture of emotions and temptations Jesus was facing in the garden just before his crucifixion (Luke 22)?
3. Did you notice the words “as usual” and “the place” in verses 39 and 40? What do they tell you about the prayer life of Jesus?

4. Why is it reassuring that Christ “suffered”, was “tempted in every way” and is “able to help” us resist our temptations (Hebrews 2 & 4)?

#### **A.p.plications**

1. If Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit and led by the Spirit when he encountered his temptation, indicate how much more you need to be filled and led by the Holy Spirit. Circle One: Not Much    1    2    3    4    5    A Lot More
2. In John 8:45 Jesus calls Satan the “Father of lies”. Why are your temptations to sin lies? So what makes your temptations desirable to you?
3. When and to what are you most vulnerable to temptation and sin?
4. Do you have a “usual” time and place to be with the Father in prayer—a conversation about you and him and nothing else? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_  
If yes—describe it. If no—why not?
5. How would you describe your time spent in God’s Word and what is your goal?  
Check any of the following:  
\_\_\_\_\_ Speed-read a set number of chapters.  
\_\_\_\_\_ To remember and understand the truth.  
\_\_\_\_\_ Read and meditate till God speaks to your heart.

**P.rayer** – Tell God how much you need to spend time in prayer and in His Word every day, and how much you need to be filled and led by His Spirit. Then thank Him!

#### **S.O.A.P. 2 – The Enslavement of Unrestrained Evil Desires**

In addition to the immorality of the Samaritan woman Jesus met at the well, we discover that Israel did not escape the worldwide moral decay. Jesus was rightly accused by the Pharisees of being a friend of hookers, cheats and drunks (Luke 7:34-39). He knew he came to be their Savior from all their unrestrained desires. Along with sexual immorality, the lists of evils in the New Testament epistles include unethical practices

and destructive addictions. These evils permeate every society today. Unrestrained desires are not only self-destructive, but they destroy marriages, children and innocent victims. They fill our hospitals, courtrooms, prisons and counselor waiting rooms. They create dysfunction in the human soul and the souls of their generations that follow.

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

I Corinthians 6:7-11, 18-20; Romans 1:21-32; I Timothy 6:6-10

### **O.bservations**

1. How does Paul offer hope to the new Christ-followers in Corinth (I Corinthians 6) who were enslaved by the evil practices of sexual immorality, greed, addiction and idolatry?
2. What statements does Paul use to build the case for idolatry in his letter to the church in Rome (Romans 1)?
3. Is Paul's description of the evil results of the love of money (I Timothy 6) an under-statement or over-statement?  
What do you think on a scale of 1 to 10?  
Under-Statement    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10   Over-Statement
4. Who are some of the lovers of money in the Bible that come to mind?

### **A.pplications**

1. Briefly note some real temptations you have faced, or are currently facing, in each of the following categories:  
Sexual immorality:  
Greed:  
Addictions:  
Idolatry:

2. Can you recall a time in your life when you “exchanged the truth of God for a lie”? What sinful desire did you give in to?

3. Does the powerful temptation to love money ever go away? Your opinion:

4. Describe how a “loss of self-control” by you or a family member affected you or your family.

You:

Family Member:

**P.rayer** – Confess and repent of any loss of self-control and experience God’s forgiveness. Tell God that you are willing to ask for the forgiveness of others you have sinned against.

### **S.O.A.P. 3 – The Freedoms of Self-Control**

No doubt that sounds contradictory to the godless who believe the lie that we will be happier if we throw off all restraint and marginalize every authority. But personal anarchy always fails to deliver the promise of freedom and happiness. However, the opposite is true. The fruit of self-control offers the freedom of health and joy on all levels of life—be it spiritual, relational, emotional, mental or physical. A long list of specific freedoms falls under each of these levels. Both the gospel of salvation and sanctification breaks the chokehold of temptation and sin. Holiness, love, peace and joy grant immeasurable guiltless pleasures. Spirit-empowered self-control restrains us from “returning to the vomit” (II Peter 2:22) of out-of-control immorality, unethical practices and addictive behaviors. The ancient church fathers saw Spirit-empowered self-control as a great gift from God and so must you!

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

II Peter 1:3-9, 2:17-19; Romans 13:8-14; Hebrews 12:1-13

### **O.bservations**

1. Summarize in your own words what Peter (II Peter 1:3-9) claims will spare us from the “corruption” caused by evil desires.

2. Note below the language used by “these men” to deceive and enslave according to II Peter 2:17-19.
3. Find at least three reasons why Paul gives the Christians in Rome a “wake-up call” (Romans 13).
  - 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
4. How does fixing our eyes on Jesus (Hebrews 12) help us “throw off” and “run the race”?

#### **A.p**plications

1. Name a sin that easily “entangles you”. Now, how do you know when you begin to feel enslaved or mastered?
2. How has God the Father disciplined you and how did you respond?
3. How do you actually fix your eyes on Jesus and what difference has He made?
4. Is there a behavior in your life that poses a threat to others—especially “weaker brothers” (Romans 14:12-13), children or spouse?

**P.rayer** – Surrender your spirit, soul and body to the Holy Spirit right now and each day. Pursue God. Walk in the Spirit. Keep in step with the Spirit. Ask for the fruit of self-control!

## **S.O.A.P. 4 – When Good Things Are Unrestrained**

While self-control is especially needed to restrain the passions of sexual immorality, unethical desires and destructive addictions, we are all vulnerable to over-indulgences of most anything good. The Apostle Paul wrote that God, "...richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (I Timothy 6:17). Unfortunately, we can enjoy good things too much to the neglect of more important things. Also, unrestrained we can turn good things into harmful habits even obsessions or compulsions. We can also take the unrestraint of good things one step further—loving something good more than we love God. It's called idolatry.

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

I Corinthians 6:12, 10:33; Titus 2:11-15, 3:3-6; I John 2:15-17

### **O.bservations**

1. What does Paul's inspired statement, "I will not be mastered by anything" (I Corinthians 6) say about Christ-like self-control?
2. How would you define "beneficial" and "constructive" (I Corinthians 10)?

And give an example of each.

Beneficial:

Constructive:

3. In Titus 2, how does Paul develop the description of the grace of God that teaches us to say, "No"?
4. What criteria does I John 2 give us for evaluating the difference between the "things of the world" and the good things God has given us to enjoy (I Timothy 6:17)?

### **A.pPLICATIONS**

1. Name five of the best good things God has given to you to enjoy:
  - (1)
  - (2)
  - (3)

(4)

(5)

Now, how or when could these good things cease to be beneficial or constructive?  
Write your response next to it above.

2. What important things might you neglect or spend excessive resources on (skill, energy, time, money) if these good things became “out of control”?
3. How do you personally know when you’ve loved a good thing too much--or worse yet, more than you love God?
4. What could you do to maintain the balance between “contentment” and “enjoyment” of every good thing?
5. On a scale of 1 to 10, how open are you to the observations and warnings of those closest to you regarding your over-indulgence in good things? Circle one:  
Closed    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Open  
What number would *that* close person circle? \_\_\_\_\_  
Why not give them permission to hold you accountable?

**P.rayer** – Ask God for his Spirit to fill you and give you awareness and wisdom and self-control.

### **Further Thoughts – Pursuing God Daily**

Growing the fruit of self-control is a cooperative dynamic between you and the Spirit of Christ within you. You are neither self-reliant nor passive. Self-control grows in you as you “pursue” (I Timothy 6:11) God daily before you face temptations, just as Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit before he encountered the temptations of Satan (Luke 4:1). If you are not “drawing near” to God daily, and if you are not “...being filled with the Spirit...” (Ephesians 5:18) daily, you are like the person in desperate need who runs to his neighbor for help but has no relationship with him. The inner strength you need at the moment of temptation comes from a daily pursuit of God. God is not your servant to be called on, begged or manipulated only in emergencies. By pursuing God daily, your

temptations are weakened. In other words, your love for God weakens your desire for evil things or the overindulgence of good things. Your heart, soul and mind will be satisfied in Christ alone. Remember, mere “flight” (I Timothy 6:11) is ineffective. Self-willed obedience is never enough and never dependable! Being filled with the Spirit of Christ *daily* is the “pursuit” of God which makes your obedience in the face of temptation effective!

Notice in the inspired prayer of the Apostle Paul that God desires to empower the believers living in the morally decadent city of Ephesus.

*I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.*  
Ephesians 3:16

### **Restraining Good Desires**

Since each of us is unique and complex, it’s difficult to know, even for ourselves, when good desires become unhealthy and spiritually dangerous. When does a good thing God has given for your “enjoyment” (I Timothy 6:12) become an idol? How do you know when “too much of a good thing” results in not-so-good out-of-control side effects? What questions could you ask yourself to increase your awareness and maintain a more balanced life that glorifies God?

Here are some questions to test the condition of your own heart toward good desires:

1. Is there something I think about too much that distracts me?
2. Is there something important in my life that I am neglecting?
3. Am I wasting resources (time, skills, money, etc.) on things of lesser importance?
4. Have I reached my potential in serving Christ in his church and on his mission to a lost world?
5. Who in my life deserves and needs more of me?
6. Am I pursuing God daily with humility and transparency?

Probably the best approach is to ask your spouse or children or a close friend for honest feedback to some of these questions. How transparent are you?

### **Moral Relativism and Self-Control**

Moral relativism to the simple-minded may seem harmless: “the standards of right and wrong behavior are determined by each person”. Moral relativism appears inviting and liberating! However, a deeper look uncovers a dangerous and destructive view of life and relationships and the need for self-control.

**First** of all, moral relativism dismisses moral absolutism which means there are universal standards of right and wrong determined by man’s Creator. Created in God’s likeness we have within us his moral standard “written on our heart” (Romans 2:12-16).

**Second**, when a person exercises his freewill to choose moral relativism, it opens the door to self-absorption and a lack of self-control. By constantly making evil choices, this person satisfies their desires and pleasures, ultimately making their conscience reprobate.

A reprobate conscience has lost its ability to feel and distinguish the difference between right and wrong, good and evil. Their conscience is seared or scarred. Having lost feeling, the reprobate conscience grows hardened. Paul describes this conscience in Ephesians 4:17-19 and Titus 1:15-16. This person leaves a wake of destruction and heartache in the lives of others as well.

**Last** of all, the position of moral relativism is logically indefensible. Those who claim to believe in “moral relativism” are using an absolute statement to defend it. Furthermore they are always caught in a contradiction of enormous practical consequence. That consequence shows up when they are violated by someone who holds to the same position of moral relativism when violated by a mugger or a rapist or a murderer. They suddenly kick moral relativism to the curb and moral absolutism goes into high gear.

Moral relativism is not liberating. It always imprisons the soul. We are moral creatures who bear the likeness of our Creator (Romans 1 & 2). Don’t for a minute entertain the lie of failed promise and failed logic of moral relativism. It always leads to destruction and heartache. Self-control through the power of God’s indwelling Spirit will keep you from the enslavement of evil desires and behaviors. Pursue God daily!

Recommended Reading: Steering Clear – Avoiding the Slippery Slope of Moral Failure, by Earl Wilson, InterVarsity Press, 2002.



## Lesson 13

### The Fruit of Wisdom

#### *Reaching My Greater Potential*

Fourteen times in his first recorded teaching Jesus said, “You have heard...but I tell you....” What was he implying? Simply this—“I have come, in part, to replace your conventional wisdom with the truth of Divine wisdom.” He concluded,

*Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.* Matthew 7:24

My brother has spent much of his ministry career teaching and practicing Christian counseling. Through the years he has often said, “Common sense isn’t very common anymore.” On occasion he says he’s embarrassed to be paid for dispensing it. If there has been a drain of common sense time-tested workable solutions among Christians, how much more has there been a drain of Divine wisdom!

When we look at the fruit of Divine wisdom in the scriptures, we discover God’s wisdom is often counter-intuitive—running against the grain of natural common sense and reasoning. Why is that? First, its origin is supernatural. And second, God’s wisdom requires an unimaginable intervention. To put it another way, when God intervenes in our life and we have no reasonable explanation, we are left in awe. We use many expressions from “God-thing” to “miracle” to label it. The Christ-follower is left with a passion for God to write his story on their life. One thing the Christ-follower knows for certain is that God writes a far better story than they could! By divine wisdom we reach a greater potential for our life.

#### **Thinking Outside the Box**

Thinking “outside the box” is a worn-out expression meaning to disregard the boundaries of conventional wisdom and knowledge—sometimes called creative thinking. But compared to God, man’s best creative thoughts are all “in the box”. God alone is outside the box with unlimited capacities to know, create and execute. God’s wisdom goes far beyond mere words or thoughts. His plans are perfect, his execution flawless, his timing impeccable and his results eternally excellent. His wisdom and power have no boundaries. And by his generous indwelling Spirit his children are recipients of his wisdom for his glory, the highest good of others and ourselves as well! Pretty exciting—right?

#### **The Foundation of Wisdom**

The foundation of wisdom is revealed truth or the knowledge of God that comes from outside of man’s reasoning. The inspired scriptures are God’s voice, His very words. So

when we meditate on the scriptures, we are meditating on God's thoughts which are endlessly true and reliable. Therefore when God wisely intervenes in your life, it is always consistent and complimentary to his revealed word. "...the word of our God stands forever..." (Isaiah 40:8). His wisdom is never in contradiction to His eternal inspired Word.

### **S.O.A.P. 1 - The Enormity of God's Wisdom**

Three major themes in scripture demonstrate God's infinite wisdom—creation, salvation and the return of Jesus Christ. Our limited capacity to comprehend God's immeasurable wisdom is simply stated in Deuteronomy, "*The secret things belong to the Lord our God but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever that we may follow all the words of this law*" (29:29). Even the "revealed things" are overwhelming to us in part because they stop short of the secret things of God that exceed our mental capacities. But the revealed things satisfy our need to believe in and trust God. The following scriptures summarize both the mystery and magnitude of God's incomparable wisdom—his purposes, plans, strategies, timings and eternal results. In a single word—God's Sovereignty!

S.cripture – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

John 1:1-14; Ephesians 1:3-14; Revelation 22:12-16; Isaiah 55:8-9;  
Ephesians 3:20; I Corinthians 2:4, 10

### **O.bservations**

1. In your own words briefly state how creation (John 1) reveals God's wisdom.
2. In your own words briefly state how salvation (Ephesians 1) reveals God's wisdom.
3. In your own words briefly state how Christ's return (Revelation 22) reveals God's wisdom.
4. Do you think the enormity of God's wisdom (Isaiah 55) removes "luck", "fate" and "coincidence" from a believer's vocabulary? Explain.

5. What would happen to our view of God if we could understand and comprehend every secret or mystery of the Godhead (Deuteronomy 29 and Isaiah 55)? Explain.
6. How does the phrase “immeasurably more” (Ephesians 3) describe God’s wisdom to you? Explain.

## A. applications

1. How confident are you in your own common sense and conventional wisdom?  
Circle one:      Not at All      Occasionally      Quite Often      All the Time
2. Do the statements in Isaiah 55 and Ephesians 3 deepen your confidence in God's wisdom? Measure your level of confidence in God's wisdom on this scale—circle one:  
No Confidence    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Very Confident
3. Have you ever had one of those unexplainable occurrences--no explanation except God! Describe it here:
4. How has God's wisdom deepened your faith?

**P.rayer** - Ask God to make you more aware of his wisdom in your life and in the world around you.

## S.O.A.P. 2 - The Futility of Secular Thinking/Wisdom

As you consider Paul's description of Godless (secular) thinking, your first response might be, "Yes, that was me before Christ"; or, "I see this in the lives of unbelievers today." But before you excuse yourself from the descriptions of secular thinking, remember that the effects of your fallen nature have not been fully overcome. Furthermore, Paul and James are addressing Christ-followers in the following letters.

We, too, live with an ever-present proneness to futile Godless thinking. Let's take a deep look in the scriptures at your own natural and empty thinking.

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Romans 1:18-32; Ephesians 4:17-19; James 3:13-17; I Corinthians 1:17-25

**O.bservations**

1. List as many words as you can think of to describe “futile or empty thinking”.
2. Did you notice in Romans 1 and Ephesians 4 how futile thinking and the rejection of God's truth leads to immorality? Give several examples you observe in the world today.
3. While unbelievers reject the truth of God (Romans 1), James 3 warns that envy and selfish ambition disqualifies believers from heavenly wisdom. In your own words explain why:
4. Think deeply and then describe how human wisdom empties the cross of Christ of its power (I Corinthians 1:17).

**A.pplications**

1. How long have you been a follower of Christ? \_\_\_\_\_
2. To what degree has your formal education influenced you to futile thinking or the rejection of God's truth? Circle one:  
Very Little    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Greatly

Give an example from your education:

3. How would you evaluate your present understanding of “the truth of God” (Romans 1:25)? Circle one:  
                     Weak    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Strong
4. How often do you presently meditate on God’s Word and pray? Circle one:  
                     Sunday Only    Occasionally    Somewhat Often    Every Day
5. Based on the scriptures you’ve read, how would you recognize futile thinking, foolishness and earthly wisdom?
6. Are there any futile or foolish ideas that you are holding on to that you know are Godless, that hold you back from believing the truth of God?

**P.rayer** - Ask God for the courage to face and resolve any futile thinking and foolishness in your own mind and heart.

### **S.O.A.P. 3 - Experiencing Divine Wisdom**

Whatever God thinks, it is far beyond your idea of brilliant. Whatever God does, he does it in the best and most efficient manner. Whatever he does, it is done precisely at the optimum time and place. Whenever God acts, he pleases and glorifies himself completely without regret! When he wields his wisdom for you to observe, you will marvel and be filled with wonder and worship. You might ask, “So how can I experience Divine wisdom when I’m challenged with problems and decisions?” “How can I recognize God’s intervention, see his direction and plan?” “How can I wisely discern between truth and falsehood?” “Are there conditions to be met before receiving Divine wisdom?” All good questions—let’s find some answers.

**S.cription** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

Daniel 2:19-23; I Corinthians 1:26-2:16; James 3:13-18; 1:2-8;  
 Psalm 111:10; Ephesians 5:15-20

### **O.bservations**

1. What does Daniel’s situation tell us about God’s gift of wisdom?

2. Did looking foolish hinder or enhance Paul's credibility with the Corinthians?  
Think carefully—explain here:
  
3. Why do you think "...fear of the Lord" (Psalm 111) is the first requirement for wisdom?
  
4. How do "selfish ambitions" (James 3) hinder heavenly or divine wisdom?  
Explain:
  
5. God gives wisdom "for the asking" (James 1), but what are the possible ways he delivers it? List them here:
  
6. In Ephesians 5:15-20, Paul makes several suggestions for acquiring wisdom.  
Find them and write them down.

#### A.plications

1. Have you experienced God's wisdom for a personal decision or challenge or opportunity? If so, briefly write your story:
  
2. How do you most often recognize God's wisdom in your life? Rank order the following: (1= most often to 4 = least often)  
 \_\_\_ Looking Back \_\_\_ In the Moment \_\_\_ Looking Ahead \_\_\_ Opinion of Others

3. Have you ever sensed a “warning or caution” in your mind or heart and later regretted not heeding it? Or later were glad you did? What are your stories if you have them?

Later Regretted:

Later Were Glad:

4. Have you ever had an “unusual” thought to “do something good” and later regretted not doing it? Or were pleasantly surprised for having done it? What are your stories?

Regretted:

Surprised:

5. What hinders you from receiving God’s wisdom? Check as many that apply to you:

- ☐ Lack of fear of God
- ☐ Unwilling to look foolish to non-Christians
- ☐ Pride in your knowledge or common sense
- ☐ Envy or selfish ambitions or doubt
- ☐ Lack of moral or ethical excellence
- ☐ Impatience with God -- unwillingness to wait

**P.rayer** - Ask God for forgiveness and repent of any of the above hindrances.

#### **S.O.A.P. 4 - Settling for Less at the Expense of God’s Best**

One of the common flaws of our fallen nature is that we don’t “wait” very well (see Lesson 7). At best we quickly settle for common sense solutions for some of the most important decisions that alter the course of life. At worst, we throw common sense to the wind and rely on our unreliable feelings and passions. “It seemed so good at the time” is a common lament! We can’t wait, so we settle for less at the expense of God’s best (Isaiah 55:8-9) and his “immeasurably more” (Ephesians 3:20). In the Gospel of John we find Jesus as a guest at a wedding feast. The host of this seven-day feast was responsible to dilute the wine with water to make it last. That was common sense—to run out of wine was considered shameful in that culture. What did Jesus do? Let’s see.

**S.cripture** – Before reading each scripture, read the question assigned to it below.

John 2:1-11; Ephesians 3:20; James 1:2-8; Romans 8:28

## Observations

1. Why do you think Jesus did “immeasurably more” (Ephesians 3:20) at the wedding feast in John 2?
2. How was his timing and the result? Explain:
3. Does Ephesians 3:20 give us license to ask God for anything we want? (Yes, this is a trick question) Explain:
4. Describe the conditions required for God-given wisdom according to James 1.
5. How does God’s wisdom impact our definition of “good” in Romans 8:28? Does “all things” include suffering or evil? \_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_ Unsure  
Not sure? Read the story of Joseph (Genesis 37-50) or the crucifixion of Christ (Matthew 26-28).

## Applications

1. How does common sense or creative thinking fuel your own pride?
2. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would God rate your patience in waiting for his wise intervention?  
Impatient    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10    Very Patient
3. Describe an occasion when you failed to wait for God’s wisdom and acted impulsively only to regret it later:

4. How might a Christian mentor help you to wait for God's timely intervention?  
Explain:

5. Who might that mentor be? Write their name here: \_\_\_\_\_

6. Are there some things in your life right now for which you need God's wisdom?  
Write them down here:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**P.rayer** - Ask God to reveal anything in your life or heart that stands in the way of his wisdom, and then ask for his wise intervention and tell him you promise to wait.

### **Further Thoughts – The Pride of Knowing**

Man's obsession with knowledge and education, while very good on one hand, has an extremely dark side--pride that rules out the knowledge or truth of God. The Apostle Paul warned, "knowledge puffs up" (I Corinthians 8:1; Colossians 2:18). In Athens (Acts 17:16-34), Paul confronted the godless philosophers who "...spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas...." (vs.21). Perhaps the earliest reference to the "faculty lounge" (I Corinthians 1:20ff)! A few believed the gospel, but eventually "...Paul left...." (vs.33). The intellectual elitists of our day are also spiritually and morally dangerous, rejecting the truth and wisdom of God. Be wise and discerning in your pursuit of education and the education of your children.

### **Discerning the Wise Will of God**

Big topic—so little space! Major life-changing decisions are like new chapters in your story that require greater understanding, discernment and Divine wisdom than lesser things. These life tipping points require:

- Continual prayer to cleanse your heart of "selfish ambitions" or secular motives.
- Patience in waiting for God's best through his providential timing and powerful sovereignty in connecting people and places.
- The leading of his faithful indwelling Holy Spirit.
- Confirmation by objective Christ-centered mentors.
- And all of the above built on the foundation of God's revealed truth (the scriptures).

Since God works outside of your box, he has no set of predictable patterns to follow; only that he is true to himself. But eventually his "hand prints" will appear when you get past your self-centered ambitions and emotions and humbly desire his will more than life

itself. As in the filling of his Spirit, broken and contrite hearts see God (Matthew 5:8). Make the first paragraph of each new chapter in your life begin with an amazing God-story! God always desires to lift you up to reach a greater potential than you could reach without him.

### **The Value of Prayer**

In prayerlessness you rush and stumble through life with your mediocre plans hoping that by “good or dumb luck” something great might happen that makes you feel significant. The prayers you do pray are most often for God’s blessing on your “wise” plans rather than asking and waiting for his wise and unimaginable plan. God has in mind greater things for you! But remember, there’s no power in prayer. Prayer in itself does not make you wise or powerful. By prayer you cannot control God or your destiny. Prayer is merely your humble access to intimacy with the God who desires to work powerfully in you or on your behalf for his glory. God alone knows how to achieve that. Prayer is your position of fear. Fear of your own selfish ambitions and the fear of the Lord—that you will miss his best purpose for you. This is why David wrote, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Psalm 111:10).

### **Take Faith-Filled Risks**

The Bible is filled with one account after another of God’s infinitely wise interventions in the lives of his humble, selfless servants. We call these faith-filled risks. These are occasions in which by faith you humbly trust God for a result that glorifies Him alone. When your heart is cleansed from selfish ambition, you are positioned to see God do amazing things. A favorite example of this is the faith-filled risk taken by Jonathan, the son of King Saul, and his armor bearer (I Samuel 14:1-17). These two men were willing to selflessly risk their lives for the glory of God. If God was not with them, they would surely die. But God proved their plan was his plan and intervened to defeat the Philistines. The story will inspire your faith to rise to cutting edge opportunities for the glory of God. Check it out!

In addition to the truth of God’s Word, God imparts his wisdom to your unique challenges, decisions and opportunities. The Spirit-filled life, in which you live and walk and are led by God’s Spirit, creates the needed intimacy for your awareness of God’s wise activity. In that intimacy you release your flawed ambitions to his sovereign plans and wait for his perfect time. This is not a passive fatalism, but an active faith in the God who does immeasurably more than you can ask or think. This is not fantasy or science fiction but Divine wisdom quietly introduced into your personal reality. You will see and experience your greater potential. You will recognize Divine opportunities. “Interruptions” will become Divine appointments. “Coincidences” become Divine interventions. You humbly become more significant as God writes your story and leaves his fingerprints on your life! He desires to do this regularly as Jesus described the Father.

*Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! Matthew 7:7-11.*