

CULTIVATE

DISCIPLESHIP LESSONS

Leader Edition



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Handbook for Discipleship

1. Discipleship in the Church

The Teaching Ministry of the Church

At conversion a transformation occurs. The convert has new desires and new priorities—the change is so great that the Bible describes him as a “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

But, some things take time. The convert does not immediately see how to apply Christian principles to all parts of his life. He has to learn the principles, then see ways to apply them.

There is also a process of personal spiritual maturation. The new convert is an infant in Christ.

- ▶ Read 1 Corinthians 3:1-2. According to these verses, what is typical of a new convert?
- ▶ Read Hebrews 5:13-14. What is the milk the verses talk about? What is the meat? What is a characteristic of spiritual maturity?
- ▶ Read Matthew 28:18-20. In this passage, what responsibility did Jesus give beyond evangelism?

Before giving the Great Commission, Jesus stated that he has all authority in heaven and earth. Then he gave the church the responsibility to bring people into obedience to his authority.

Jesus told the disciples not only to preach the gospel, but to teach all the things he had commanded. Evangelism is only the first part of the task. Teaching converts to obey all of Jesus’ commands is the process of discipleship. To fail in discipleship is as serious as to fail in evangelism.

The teaching ministry of the church is to bring converts to spiritual maturity.

In Ephesians we are told that God calls people to special roles of ministry for the purpose of building up believers so that they are no longer children (Ephesians 4:11-14). A result of their reaching spiritual adulthood is doctrinal stability.

A pastor is especially responsible for discipleship. Paul told Timothy, “...devote yourself to the public reading of scripture, to exhortation, to teaching” (1 Timothy 4:13). He was not referring to Timothy’s personal study; he was talking about ministry. Timothy’s ministry was to focus on reading and explaining scripture, giving spiritual direction, and teaching Christian doctrine. One of the qualifications of a pastor is that he be able to teach (1 Timothy 3:2).

Because learning is part of spiritual formation, teaching is part of the work of discipleship. Teachers are important in the church, and the church must always be working to develop teachers.

"And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2). This instruction was given by Paul to Timothy, as from an experienced evangelist and pastor to a younger minister. Paul was not confident that the faith would be passed down by preaching only. Individuals would need to be trained with special effort and be prepared to train others. If such training would not be accomplished by preaching to the congregation, these faithful men would have to be trained individually or in small groups.

There is a lot of teaching to do. What pastor has time to do it all, especially since not everyone is ready for the same instruction at the same time? But Ephesians 4:11 doesn't say, "He gave a pastor" (only one person and only one role). Instead, there are various roles and several people to fill them. God calls teachers, gives them teaching ability, and equips them through the church for a teaching ministry.

"The initial objective of Jesus' plan was to enlist men who could bear witness to his life and carry on his work after he returned to the Father."
- Robert Coleman, *The Master's Plan*

Christian Community and Spiritual Accountability

True discipleship is more than teaching information; it includes the shaping of values, priorities, attitudes, and lifestyle. This process can happen only in a Christian community with spiritual accountability.

We see throughout scripture that God intended that people live in community, beginning with God's statement that Adam should not be alone (Genesis 2:18).

Some advantages of community are described in Ecclesiastes 4:9-10: "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!"

God told Moses that his plan for Israel was that they be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6). The heritage was to be passed down through families, described in what is called the "Great Commandment" (Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

The Holy Spirit inspired the New Testament writers to use those terms in the New Testament to refer to the church (1 Peter 2:9).

God always intended for the people who are in relationship with him to also be in relationship with each other. Our relationship with God forms us into a community of faith. Just as our relationship with God calls for commitment, our relationship with the people of God calls for commitment. It is wrong for a person to think he can be in right relationship with God but choose not to be in relationship with God's people.

Paul used the metaphor of the body to describe the relationship among members of the church (1 Corinthians 12). No member can function properly if it tries to be independent of

the body. Members must cooperate and care for one another, or there will be no body. If one member is harmed, all suffer. A member's actions affect the whole body. Paul spoke of this when he dealt with the situation of the man in an immoral relationship, although he used the metaphor of bread instead. He said, "...Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?" (1 Corinthians 5:6). We must see ourselves as vital parts of a Christian community.

Many New Testament commands cannot be obeyed without a sense of community. To fulfill the commands of God, Christians must live in commitment to one another. This means that Christian community leads to spiritual accountability.

We find many places in the Bible where Christian community is connected to spiritual accountability.

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you (Hebrews 13:17).

This verse tells believers to submit to those in positions of spiritual authority. The command also gives a great responsibility to spiritual leaders. Their responsibility is not just to lead by authority, but to watch for the souls under their care. To do that, they must be well enough acquainted with their people to give individual spiritual direction, and they must have a relationship with their people that makes such direction possible.

Christian community and spiritual accountability are described also in this passage:

► Read Hebrews 10:24-26. What is commanded in this passage?

We are commanded here to be aware of other Christians' needs and to encourage them up to do what is right.

► Describe the relationship that would be necessary among believers for them to fulfill this responsibility.

Our encouragement is not effective if we do not have the right relationship with others. We have to know them well and show love and concern. Otherwise, they are offended by personal advice.

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Hebrews 3:12-13).

We are called to hold one another accountable. The exhorting here must go beyond scheduled meetings of the entire church body, for we are commanded to exhort daily. This requires fellowship on an individual or small group basis. Fellowship of this kind would not merely be eating together or visiting, but would have a spiritual purpose. To accomplish

this purpose, we must purposefully plan conversations and small group meetings with that priority.

The way that we can benefit one another is illustrated in Proverbs 27:17:

Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.

One person need not be superior to another before benefiting him with spiritual direction and encouragement. In fact, spiritual direction given humbly is more likely to be accepted.

...confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.

The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working (James 5:16).

Confession of personal faults will not ordinarily happen in large groups; therefore, this command is not easily carried out in church services. The context shows the reason for the command: that those who have erred may be restored.

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2).

Often a Christian feels that nobody cares what he is going through. Fellow Christians would care if they could really understand what he is suffering, but they usually do not know him well enough to understand. How can we bear another's burdens if we don't really know what they are?

In the early days after the birth of the church, a close relationship among believers was the norm.

And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts (Acts 2:46).

John Wesley said that there is no such thing as individual Christianity.

► What do you think Wesley meant by his statement?

Spiritual accountability occurs in a healthy Christian community.

To have spiritual accountability is to establish a relationship with a person or group to whom we report our spiritual condition, our success or failure in spiritual disciplines, and our commitments for development.

Without spiritual accountability we will not fulfill all of the commands of scripture, and we will neglect a means that God has designed for giving us grace.

Characteristics of Spiritual Maturity

What does it mean to be spiritually mature? How would you describe a mature Christian?

Because maturity takes time, it tends to come with age (Titus 2:1-5). Obviously, some people get older without maturing spiritually like they should, and there are young people that demonstrate unusual maturity.

Most characteristics of maturity are not completely achieved at a certain point, but are gradually increased. At times they may increase suddenly because of a spiritual experience or an experience in life. Even though a person should continue to develop all of his life, there is a level he can reach that can be called spiritual maturity.

Characteristics of spiritual maturity are described in several scripture passages.

► Read Ephesians 4:11-14, Hebrews 5:12-6:1, 1 Corinthians 3:1-2, 1 John 2:12-14.

Below is a list of characteristics that are signs of spiritual maturity. It is not a complete list, and some points in the list are not completely distinguishable from other points.

A mature Christian may not demonstrate all of these characteristics completely, but is growing. He may not realize some of his faults, but will respond to the continuous work of the Holy Spirit in his heart.

Ten Characteristics of Spiritual Maturity

(1) Christlikeness in motives, attitudes, and actions

Christlikeness comes from the passion to know Christ in his nature, by spiritually experiencing his death and resurrection (Philippians 3:10). It may include sharing his suffering in persecution. A person who loves Christ like this will be transformed to be like him.

To be like Christ is to be motivated by love and not by selfishness or pride. A Christian wants to be like Christ and is sad any time he realizes he was not like Christ in something he said or did.

(2) Close relationship with God

A person should grow closer in his relationship to God. Signs of a good relationship with God are enjoyment of God's presence, love for God's Word, and time spent in prayer.

(3) Demonstration of the fruits of the Spirit

The Holy Spirit produces fruit in the life of the believer, which includes love, joy, patience, and self-control. A believer becomes more consistently kind and gentle as he lets the Holy Spirit work in his temperament.

(4) Victory over outward and inner sin

The believer learns how to depend on God for victory over temptation. He yields to God's cleansing so he can have a holy heart. He develops habits and disciplines that help him live consistently in victory.

If he yields to a temptation, he confesses it to God and prays for forgiveness and strength. He should share his failures with close Christian friends who pray for him (James 5:16).

(5) Spiritual disciplines established

Spiritual disciplines are ways to practice making our relationship with God the first priority. A person who does not consistently pray, read the Bible, and attend church is not a mature Christian.

(6) Developed Christian character

A Christian learns to pattern his life on principles of honesty, reliability, and faithful work.

(7) Consistent Christian living

A believer learns to apply Christian principles to life. A mature Christian should want to look like a Christian all the time in his behavior and attitudes. As he realizes that something he says or does is not consistent with love in his heart, he depends on God's strength to make changes.

(8) Healthy relationships

A mature Christian develops deep friendships with other Christians. He maintains relationships by showing honesty, patience, and forgiveness. He is humble and admits mistakes. Because he may misunderstand a situation, he may not be as patient as he should, admit a mistake quickly, or have the right opinion about another person.

(9) A personal ministry

A believer should identify his spiritual gifts. He should find his place in the church to be a blessing to others. A believer can minister in the church by helping to evangelize and disciple others in the Christian life.

(10) Endurance of hard conditions

A believer should learn to trust God when bad things happen. He should depend on God when he is in difficult situations. A mature believer does not lose faith when he does not understand why something is happening.

Conclusion

The characteristics of spiritual maturity do not depend on natural talent.

They are not the same as ministry skills.

They do not necessarily accompany leadership ability. It is good if a leader is spiritually mature, but sometimes a person becomes a leader because of his abilities, while he is still not spiritually mature. Sometimes a person is spiritually mature, but does not have leadership ability.

Certain personality types seem naturally more patient and kind. Natural traits of personality are not the same as spiritual maturity. God works in our personalities and helps bring

balance to our tendencies. If we analyze a particular person, we cannot distinguish exactly between his natural personality and the characteristics of spiritual development.

Health problems may also affect a person's discernment and reactions. We should not be quick to judge others.

Application Exercises

(1) Examine yourself by the ten characteristics of spiritual maturity. Prayerfully consider which ones you lack the most. Plan how to purposely develop in those, through prayer, study, counsel from others, and dependence on God's help.

(2) How can a church purposely fulfill its responsibility for teaching and spiritual accountability? Write two pages describing a plan of action for a church.

2. Small Group Discipleship

The Value of Small Groups for Discipleship

Small group ministry takes many forms around the world. There are many types of small groups, designed for different purposes. Small groups may meet for study, spiritual accountability, ministry, prayer, or special projects.

Some churches are divided into groups that meet in homes. The groups function like small churches. The churches of the New Testament apparently functioned like this.

Growing, effective churches usually have some kind of small group system.

In this section, we will talk about the effectiveness of small groups for discipleship.

The Wesleyan Model

John Wesley (Great Britain, 18th century) was not the first to organize small groups, but he developed a system that was highly effective.

Wesley developed a system of discipleship with various sizes of groups called societies, classes, and bands.¹ Wesley's methods were not a complete system at the beginning, but were developed gradually to meet needs. Many of Wesley's converts asked for encouragement, advice, and prayer. Because there were so many, he arranged for them to meet every Thursday.

In each place that Wesley and his preachers took the gospel, they organized converts into groups that met regularly. Because the congregations were large, many could not tell about personal spiritual needs and were not getting the attention they needed. Smaller groups were formed called classes, where leaders served as pastors to encourage and guide the members. Any member who continued in open sin and did not change was removed from membership and not allowed to come to the meeting.

Groups smaller than classes were formed so members could share their spiritual struggles and provide each other with spiritual accountability. These small groups were called bands. In these meetings the leader would describe his own spiritual condition, then ask others searching questions concerning their condition, sins, and temptations. In these groups, the members were all of the same gender.

Wesley's success caused the famous George Whitefield to make this statement: "My Brother Wesley acted wisely—the souls that were awakened under his ministry he joined in class, and thus preserved the fruit of his labor. This I neglected, and my people are as a rope of sand." Wesley's methods were continued by the American Methodist church in the early

¹ See "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists," in *The Works of John Wesley, Volume VIII* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 249-258.

years, but both his discipleship principles and his doctrines have been neglected by modern Methodism.

Understanding the Essential Church

The earliest church building that has been found was built at approximately A.D. 250. For the first two centuries, the church saw itself as people, not as a building or organization. The church is composed of the groups of Christians that worship together, evangelize, and obey the Bible.

Small groups of people are the basic building blocks of every effective church structure. A small group discipleship program is not a new institution that will someday become obsolete. It is not a new method that may work in some places and not in others. Instead, small groups are the basic building blocks of the church. Ministry in small groups can be done in various ways to meet the challenges that any local church faces.

A church will not accomplish its purpose unless its people are regularly edified and trained in a setting more personal than the whole congregation or most Sunday schools.

A Caution

Small groups are only as spiritual as the people involved. If they are not committed disciples with the priority of pleasing God, living faithfully, and accomplishing the mission of the church, there are many ways for the group to go wrong.

The Need for Spiritual Accountability

To have spiritual accountability is to establish a relationship with a person or group to whom you report your spiritual condition, your success or failure in spiritual disciplines, and your commitments for development. They tell you when they think you are doing wrong. You tell them your commitments, and they ask you later if you are keeping your commitments.

The biblical basis for spiritual accountability in a healthy Christian community is more thoroughly explained in a previous section. Without spiritual accountability, we will not fulfill all of the commands of scripture; and, we will neglect a means that God has designed for giving us grace.

...confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed...
(James 5:16).

A person will not confess private faults except in a relationship that makes it easy. If he is not confessing to someone who is praying for his faults, he is neglecting the means God has designed for meeting those needs.

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2).

Unless we know someone very well, we do not know what his most serious burdens are. We cannot fulfill this scriptural command without being in a relationship that makes it possible.

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24).

We are to examine one another closely with a motive of love in order to see what encouragement and reproofs are necessary. Encouragements will be shallow, and reproofs will be resisted unless we have a special relationship with the other person.

The following questions can help a person determine whether or not spiritual accountability is established in his life.

What relationships do I have which make it possible that someone is helping me bear my most serious burdens, I am confessing my faults to someone, I am helping someone with his burdens, and someone is responding to my present spiritual condition?

Are there times when there is nobody I can lean on, times when I am glad that nobody knows my condition, and times I would be embarrassed to report my prayer time or Bible study time?

Most churches do not fulfill their responsibility of spiritual accountability unless they arrange a system for doing so. For many, that is a system of small groups.

Qualifications of a Small Group Leader

Jesus demonstrated the priority of discipleship. From the beginning of his ministry he chose a few men who would receive the responsibility of guiding the church. He did not spend all of his time preaching to the thousands who followed him; instead, he was often taking time to train the twelve. He extended his ministry through those that he trained.

"Though he did what he could to help the multitudes, he had to devote himself primarily to a few men, rather than to the masses, in order that the masses could at last be saved. This was the genius of his strategy."
- Robert Coleman, *The Master's Plan*

A person who does discipleship should have the following characteristics. He may not excel in every quality, but should try to improve in them all. If he lacks any one of them, he will be much less effective.

- 1. Spiritually mature.** He should have the qualities of spiritual maturity described in a previous section. If he is not spiritually mature, he will not set a good example and will not have the experience he needs.

- 2. Available.** If his schedule is already too full and not well managed, he is not available for small group ministry. He must make it a priority.
- 3. Reliable.** He must be a person who fulfills his commitments. He must be able to keep appointments. He must be able to remember to hold others accountable for their commitments.
- 4. Confident.** He must believe that he is able to learn how to lead a group. If he has the ability but does not believe it, he first needs some guided experiences that will build his confidence.
- 5. Able to resolve conflict.** He needs to be able to keep the right attitude when people disagree and cause problems. He needs to be able to help resolve conflicts between others.
- 6. Able to teach.** Do people understand his explanations? A leader must be one who does not confuse people.
- 7. Hungry for God's Word.** He must have an enjoyment of God's Word, so he can invite others to enjoy it also. He must make the Bible important in his relationship with God.
- 8. Dependent on God.** He must realize that spiritual results can happen only by the work of the Holy Spirit. He must be ready to cooperate with the Holy Spirit. He must depend on anointing from God. He must not be confident that his explanations will succeed because of his ability alone.
- 9. Ready to serve.** He must be a person who feels that he is doing something valuable when he serves others. He should not be a person who wants to be served. He should not be looking for a ministry for the purpose of displaying his talents. He must be responsive to needs and ready to volunteer.
- 10. Under spiritual authority.** He should be spiritually accountable to someone. He should follow the direction of spiritual leaders.
- 11. Faithful to the church.** The group leader should be a committed member of a local church. The ministry of discipleship should cause people to appreciate the church and become more committed to it.
- 12. Zealous to succeed.** If he has zeal to succeed, he will not quickly give up. He will adapt to circumstances. He will look for information to help him be more effective. He will take initiative when there are problems or opportunities. He will have energy and enthusiasm.
- 13. Doctrinally accurate.** He should have a good foundation of biblical, evangelical doctrine.

14. Trained for ministry. It is not necessary for ministry training to occur in an academic institution. Training starts with observation, as a believer sees how ministry is done. Training increases with participation, as he is given responsibilities under direction. Reading and study of good material is very important.

Developing a Discipleship Program

The best way for discipleship to happen is by a local church that understands the responsibility and priority of discipleship, working in unity.

Therefore, these directions are addressed to the leaders and committed members of a church.

If a church realizes that they need to do better at discipleship, they should first study the scriptures and points in this course about discipleship. Leaders can present the material. All the committed members of the church should be involved if possible, so they can share the vision.

A second part of development is to observe what the church is already doing. Most churches have some groups already operating, even if they have not purposely started a small group program. For example, there may be a group of musicians in the church that meets frequently. There may be a choir that practices. There may be a board of deacons. There may be Sunday school classes, and the Sunday school teachers may also form a group. The youth of the church may meet occasionally. Committees may exist to take care of various responsibilities. A group may form informally of people who work together on a project. There may be families of the church that occasionally get together for fellowship. There may be home Bible studies and prayer meetings.

These groups may not have formed for the purposes of discipleship or spiritual accountability, but they may help serve those purposes. Any church that has spiritual life already has some groups operating to support that life. When a church decides to improve its program for discipleship, it should examine the existing groups and discover what is happening, then think about how the purposes can be achieved better.

New groups may be needed. Maybe different kinds of groups are needed. There may be groups that give practical training for ministry. There may be groups that primarily study the Bible and pray. There may be small groups for serious spiritual accountability.

The purpose of the group determines who should be there and how the group should function. For example, a group for serious spiritual accountability should have fewer than ten people. If the group is too large, confidentiality is reduced, sharing becomes shallow, greater control is necessary, less participation is possible, and attendance tends to be worse. The depth of the personal sharing will be limited if both men and women are present.

The purpose of the group determines whether or not it should be open to new members. If the purpose is spiritual accountability, it should not be adding new members after the group

has met several times. Most people will not share about their spiritual condition until they feel secure with the others in the group. If the purpose of the group is to cover a series of lessons, it is not practical to be adding people throughout the series of meetings.

There may be a group for new converts. It is important that a new convert not wait for several weeks to join a group. Therefore, this group needs a revolving series of lessons so that new people can join at any time. The leaders must realize that some new converts will drop out. The fact that some people leave the group does not mean the group is not doing well. Even though some will drop out, a new convert group should be open to new people.

If a group is for ministry training or deeper spiritual development, the group members must be people who desire to grow spiritually and are willing to commit to the goals of the group. If some of the members are not committed, the group will not do as well at achieving its purpose.

Most members must be recruited by personal invitation. Do not wait for people to ask to join.

Not everyone in the church will get involved in a small group program. If you are a leader in the church, do not drive people away by criticizing them for not being in a small group. Promote the group ministry by describing its benefits.

At the first meeting, make sure everyone understands the importance of the group. Share scripture and information that shows the importance of discipleship.

To help attendance, the group can be scheduled to meet for a certain number of weeks. Explain that the group is covering a specific series of lessons and tell them when the series will be finished. That way, each member knows exactly what he is committing to. Emphasize the need for perfect attendance. At the end of that time, the group can start again with those who want to continue.

Scenario for Consideration

Andre has been a Christian for several years. He is a church member and helps in his church. He is concerned that his church does not have a plan for discipleship. He thinks the church should start small groups, but the leaders are not interested.

► What should Andre do?

Andre should talk to the church leaders and ask their approval to lead a small group. He should not criticize the ministry of the church, but instead describe the benefits that would come from the group. If the group does well, the church will begin to understand the benefits of that kind of ministry.

Leading an Effective Group

At the beginning of a group, there is excitement and expectation. Many members do not know exactly what to expect, but they hope to get help from the group.

The following directions will help the group to be effective and fulfill its purpose. There are important principles for the functioning of small groups. If the leader helps the group to follow these principles, he will reduce frustration and discouragement.

The first meeting may be different from the others because the group is learning how the meetings will be done. However, the first meeting will set the style for future meetings. If a person does not talk in the first meeting, he will expect to be silent in the future. If someone dominates the discussion, the group will expect future meetings to be dominated by the same person. If the meeting is disorderly, they will expect the same in the future. If the meeting is like a class with little participation, they will expect the same pattern.

Some members may drop out after a few meetings because the group is not what they expected. It is important to lead the meeting properly so that the members who were expecting the right things will not be disappointed.

Guidelines for Effectiveness

(1) Schedule the group to meet weekly, if possible. Some may need help arranging child-care.

(2) The format of meetings should be (1) study time, then (2) sharing of personal needs for prayer, then (3) prayer.

If the group's primary purpose is study, the study time may be long and the other parts short; but the three parts should still be included. If the purpose of the group is spiritual accountability, the study time may be short, but they should have some material that they are studying.

If a group has personal sharing and discussion but no lesson material to study, it will tend to become chaotic. It will be dominated by some members' personalities. Lesson material makes them all respond to truth beyond what is in their own minds.

(3) Start and end the meetings on time.

If you start and end late, those who value their own time will start coming later or skip some of the meetings.

(4) Set the date when the group will end.

Members need to know how long their commitment is for. Normally, new members should not be allowed join the group after several meetings, unless the group is rotating lessons for new converts. If the group is studying a lesson series, the number of lessons may set the number of weeks they will meet. If they are meeting for spiritual accountability, they could set a period of six months. At the end, they can organize again. At that time some members may leave, and the group can consider whether or not to allow new members to join.

(5) When studying, emphasize a life-changing purpose rather than knowledge for its own sake.

A member will feel that the group is worthwhile if he is able to draw personal, specific applications from the study.

(6) Follow up on commitments.

If someone has shared a problem then agreed that he should take a certain course of action, ask at the next meeting if he has done what he said he would do.

(7) The leader should be available to meet with a member individually to give spiritual guidance.

Other members may also get together at other times for encouragement.

(8) Select a good meeting place.

It should be an informal meeting place with a home atmosphere. Seating should be as circular as possible, so that each member can see every other member's face. This will encourage participation. Meet in a place where there will not be interruptions or distractions.

(9) Practice good listening habits.

Signs of good listening are eye contact, a concentrated expression, ignoring distractions, and responsiveness to the speaker's humor or other emotions.

(10) Make sure no member is always silent.

Direct a question to a member who does not speak much ("What do you think about this, Charles?").

(11) Do not pressure a member to share something personal.

Instead, try to create an atmosphere where he will feel free to speak. Build a member's confidence by giving him eye contact and commending something he says.

(12) Try to ask questions that they can answer to build their confidence.

If someone gives a wrong answer, try to affirm something good about the answer before critiquing it.

(13) Try to affirm every comment in some way before criticizing it.

(14) If someone has a tendency to talk too much and answer all the questions, find a way to limit him.

One way is to direct questions to specific members. Or you can ask, "What do the rest of you think?" In a discussion, you could say, "Let's hear from someone who hasn't spoken about this yet."

If a member still talks too much, the leader could talk to him outside of the meeting. He could say something like this: "Charles, you are a quick thinker and able to respond quickly in discussions, but I'm concerned that some of the others will not participate if we answer everything quickly. Can you help me get everyone involved?"

(15) Don't let two or three members have their own discussion while ignoring the group.

If someone wants to keep arguing for a long time about something, tell him that the discussion will have to be finished later outside of the meeting.

(16) Don't allow anyone to interrupt others.

Raise your hand, assertively stop the interrupter, and allow the first speaker to finish. Otherwise, a discussion will always be dominated by the less mannered members. People who are less assertive will feel frustrated that they cannot finish their sentences.

(17) Listen to complaints.

Any complaint may show a problem that can be corrected. Don't ignore signs of dissatisfaction. If someone is dissatisfied with the group meeting, he may not understand the purpose, or he may have a valid complaint.

(18) If a member persistently acts hostile, disruptive, argumentative, or bored, he may not accept the goals of the group.

The group may not be what he expected. Talk to him privately to help him see the group's purpose.

(19) The leader does not have to know the answer to every problem.

His role is not to have the answer to everything but to lead the group to bear burdens in prayer.

(20) Be flexible and patient with interruptions of the schedule.

Remember that the events in our lives are part of God's development of us. A problem is an opportunity.

(21) If a member often takes the whole meeting to share his needs, offer to counsel him at another time.

Otherwise, the other members will feel that the meeting is being stolen from them. Do not let the group lose its purpose, unless the members agree together that the purpose should be changed.

(22) Don't allow the discussions to become subversive.

Don't let the group become a forum for criticizing the local church and other leaders.

(23) Remember that the effectiveness of the group depends on the power of God working through it.

The group is only a scriptural structure that God uses.

3. Meeting the Needs of New Disciples

Quick Response to a New Convert

Discipleship starts at conversion. A new convert has several urgent needs. To continue the relationship with God that he has just begun, he needs to know how to pray and read the Bible. He also needs a new community of friends because he will lose many of his old friends. He needs guidance in many lifestyle issues.

The church must begin discipleship of a new convert immediately. *Immediately* does not mean the following Sunday. It means when he lifts his head from praying to be saved. Someone must take responsibility for daily contact with the convert for at least the first week. He should meet several other Christians in the local church. He should have opportunities to discuss the changes that are happening to him and to ask questions.

The convert should be invited to join a small group where he can ask questions and get encouragement. If possible, he should be introduced to several others in the group during the days before the first meeting that he attends. Several members could give him a phone call ahead of time to make his acquaintance and welcome him to the group. This begins building his feeling of being in a community.

A new convert should join the group at its next meeting. The lessons should be covered in rotation so that a member can be added at any time. This way the new convert gains a support group immediately. Members graduate from the course individually when they finish all the lessons.

Praying Paul's Prayers for Believers

Paul's prayers for new believers tell what needs to happen to a new Christian. These prayers guide us in praying for young Christians because we should pray the same things for them that Paul prayed. These prayers also guide our ministries because we should cooperate with what God is doing for them.

Let's look at Paul's prayers for three different groups.

The Thessalonians

► Read 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24.

The first letter to the Thessalonians gives a call to holiness. Every believer is called to live in victory and purity, and God promises that it is possible by faith. We should pray and teach with the goal of bringing every believer to victory and purity.

The Philippians

► Read Philippians 1:9-11.

These verses tell about an ongoing process in the believer's life. His love should be continually increasing. As that happens, his ability to discern what is best should increase. As he discerns, he adapts his life to focus on what is best. This must be happening in order for him to be pure (sincere) and without offense.

The people that Paul wrote to in these verses had been Christians for some time already. Yet, Paul was praying that they would keep increasing in their love for God and, by that love, be able to understand God's will for them better.

Here are some questions that a young believer should consider:

- What is an example of a change that I made in my life when God showed me that an attitude, habit, or action was not the best?
- Is there anything in my life that I have doubts about?
- Am I willing to let God show me in prayer any changes I should make?

The Colossians

► Read Colossians 1:9-12.

He prayed that they would receive knowledge of God's will, in wisdom and spiritual understanding. A new convert does not yet understand all about the will of God for his lifestyle. He will gradually see that certain habits, words, and attitudes in his life should change. Since he loves God, he will more and more conform his life to God's will. The discipler should be praying and carefully teaching the young Christian to recognize God's will.

He said that they would walk worthy of the Lord as a result of better understanding God's will. They would become more appropriate representatives of God. Their lives would better match their profession of being transformed by grace. What the discipler must remember is that until this process has gone on for a while, some inconsistencies will show in the life of the young Christian.

A walk that is worthy includes being fruitful in every good work. We should not be surprised when a young Christian is not yet fruitful in every good work. He may not yet be as responsible and conscious of duty as he should be.

The verses also tell us that we can have endurance and patience with joy. A person who can keep Christian joy as he serves and endures has gained some spiritual maturity.

Conclusions about Paul's Prayers

The prayers of Paul for young Christians tell us much about the work of discipleship. We should have the right goals for believers' development. We should be able to recognize progress. We should not be surprised to see inconsistencies, misunderstandings, and irresponsibility in a young Christian. We should not expect that all Christian qualities will appear suddenly.

We should notice that Paul was not most concerned about their ministry training or development of ministry skills. He was most concerned about the development of their faith and Christian character. We should not be satisfied with people who can do ministry jobs but lack Christian character.

The teacher is important because of his example and because of the value of information. Learning is emphasized in two of the above prayers. Knowledge is involved in the spiritual process. The teacher has a great impact through his use of truth.

We should pray Paul's prayers for the young Christians that we influence. We should cooperate with the Holy Spirit to help these processes occur in their lives.

The following prayer is based on Paul's prayers for new Christians.

A Prayer for a Young Christian

Heavenly Father,

I pray for _____ that you would sanctify him completely. I pray that he would be holy in his actions, attitudes, and motives.

Help his love for you to keep growing, so that he understands better and better what your perfect will for him is. Help him to discern what is best and always to choose it, so that his life will bear fruit for your glory.

Help him to live daily as a Christian should, pleasing you in everything and learning more about your ways. Help him to draw strength from you, so that he can live in victory and endure trials with joy. May he always be thankful for the grace you give.

Amen

4. Introduction to Lesson Series

Introduction to the Lesson Series

The lessons are designed to be used in a group of new converts or believers who are interested in spiritual growth. The lessons are easy to teach, with discussion questions provided. There should be much discussion during the lesson, then personal sharing at the end.

In preparation for each meeting, the leader should read over the lesson, making sure he understands the concepts and their importance. He should be prepared to start the sharing time by sharing from his own experience. He should consider how he would answer the sharing questions at the end of each lesson. The depth at which he shares will tend to set the depth at which others share.

The Lesson Design

The Leader Text shows the full lessons, including teaching material, discussion points, and scripture passages. The Student Text only includes the most important points from each lesson.

Notes to class leaders are included throughout the course with directions for specific parts of the lessons. *They are italicized.*

In the leader's materials, the symbol ► indicates a discussion question or scripture to read. In the case of discussion questions, the leader should wait for responses after asking the questions, rather than giving answers immediately. Often the responses will help prepare for the material to follow.

Each participant should use his Bible during the lessons. Most scripture verses for the lessons are printed in the leader's material, but not on the student pages. The leader should ask someone to look up the verse and read it aloud. Occasionally, he can save time by reading it himself from his notes, especially when many verses are used, but he should not do it himself often. Having students look up verses gives them another way to participate, gives them practice and familiarity with their Bibles, and gets them accustomed to seeing verses in context. It continually reinforces the sense that the Bible is our final authority.

The section labeled "For Group Sharing" provides questions to start discussion at the end of the lesson. For many topics, the discussion may start easily, and the questions may not be needed. Not all of the questions have to be used.

The prayer at the end of each lesson helps the members pray for fulfillment of the truth in their lives. Someone should read the prayer at the end, and the members should be encouraged to go back to it during the week and truly make it a prayer from their hearts.

Each lesson ends with a study assignment. The group could occasionally make time to discuss the results of their individual study.

Many of the lessons call for the members to make specific commitments to apply the truth learned. The leader should take note of the commitments made and ask members later if they have followed through.

CULTIVATE
DISCIPLESHIP LESSONS
Leader Text

Lesson 1

The Life Worth Living

Big Idea

"I find personal significance only in relationship with my Creator."

Lesson Objective

To see how sin destroys the wholeness and purpose of life, and how conversion begins restoration.

Introduction

► What can make a person's life seem worthwhile?

It seems that many people never wonder what life's purpose is. They go through their routine of work and entertainment, and live as if this life will never end.

Other people are very concerned about their purpose, or the significance of their life. Some live with a sense of desperation. They wonder if they have the right goals, and feel unsatisfied even if they do achieve them. They feel that somehow they are missing the main thing in life.

Some people deny that there is any purpose to life.

We know that we have purpose because we know that we were created. If God made us, he must have had a purpose for us. That purpose is the way of fulfillment and satisfaction. Using our life for something else would be only a waste.

I don't want my life to be wasted. I don't think that you do either.

► What purpose did God have for us?

God's Design for a Fulfilled Life

We can find the answer in the Garden of Eden, the place that God set up for the first people he created. Before sin changed anything, everything was as God designed.

So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion..." (Genesis 1:27-28).

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (Genesis 2:18).

These verses show us something about God's design for human life. The first man was made in God's image, and was in relationship with God. He was given a wife to love and be in relationship with. That first marriage was the beginning of a family and further relationships among people. He had the task of caring for the garden, and ruling over the rest of creation, so he was also in relationship with the world God made.

So we see relationships in three dimensions:

- Relationship between people and God
- Relationships among people
- Relationship between people and God's world

The relationship with God is the one that sets the others right.

Try to imagine what the world would be like today if there were harmony in all three of these relationship dimensions.

- ▶ How would things be different between people and nature? (People would use the earth properly. Nothing in creation would be harmful.)
- ▶ How would things be different among people? (No crime, no war, no oppression)
- ▶ How would things be different between people and God? (No sin, no guilt, people directed by God)

I don't want my life to be wasted, so I need to fulfill the purpose I was created for. The reason you and I exist is to be in relationship with God, his people, and his world. If I do not follow that purpose, I might as well not exist!

It's easy to see that the world today is not what God planned it to be. So what happened?

The Biblical Record of Man's Fall

The explanation of the world's present condition is in Genesis 3. Notice the following aspects of this record. (Briefly tell the story of man's fall into sin.)

- 1. The probation:** God's original plan was interrupted by man's sin.
- 2. The temptation:** Satan tempted Adam and Eve with the prospect of being independent of God, able to govern their own lives, when he said, "...you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5).
- 3. The doubt:** Satan's questions were designed to make them doubt God's wisdom and sincerity. A person who sins doubts God—that he knows and intends the best. Before their act of sin, they first yielded to the temptation to disbelieve God—unbelief.
- 4. The rebellion:** By Adam and Eve's action, they rejected God as the authority and guide of their life.

- 5. The separation:** Sin destroyed the harmony in all three relationship dimensions. They tried to hide from God. Their attitudes toward each other changed, and there would later be a murder in the family. They would struggle with nature to make it produce what they needed. All future humanity would be born with a sinful tendency, commit acts of sin, and live with damaged relationships in all three dimensions.

Finding the Way Back

God did not just abandon the first people to their fate because they had sinned. He came and called to them with the question, "Where are you?" He didn't ask that question because he couldn't find them. He asked it because he wanted them to realize and admit what had happened to their relationship with him.

God still seeks to bring lost people back to himself. He desires reconciliation—renewal of the intended relationship.

Now God asks you the same question: "Where are you?"

If you are out of relationship with God, that is the reason for your sense of lostness and purposelessness. Separation also causes fear of the future, of death, and of judgment.

The Bible is a large volume about prophets, prophecies, kings, laws, and history, but it has one theme all the way through. The message of the whole Bible is that God wants to bring sinners back into relationship with himself and his people.

The most important thing about you is your relationship with God.

For Group Sharing

Ask someone to share how getting into relationship with God brought meaning to his life.

Ask these questions for voluntary responses:

- ▶ How would you answer the question, "Where are you?" in relation to God? Are you in relationship with him, or is he still a stranger to you?
- ▶ Does it seem that you once knew God but have broken your relationship with him?

Ask for reflections on the statement, "The most important thing about you is your relationship with God."

- ▶ Do we tend to forget that? Do we live in a way that is consistent with that truth?

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

I thank you for creating me, making me for the purpose of knowing you.

Thank you for bringing me back from my sin into a renewed relationship with you. Thank you for your forgiveness.

Because I want to live in the joy of knowing you, I will live in obedient love for you. Make my obedience possible by your Holy Spirit within me.

I pray in the name of Jesus, who died for me.

Amen

Study Assignment

Read Genesis 1-3. Look for references to relationship. In chapter 3, look for the aspects described in this lesson in the section "The Biblical Record of Man's Fall." Write a few paragraphs about what you see.

Lesson 2

The Saving Encounter

Big Idea

"A saving encounter with God begins my relationship with him."

Lesson Objective

To understand why repentance and forgiveness are necessary for a sinner to begin a relationship with the Holy God.

Introduction

► What is the very beginning of any relationship?

Before people can have a relationship, they must meet. The very beginning of a relationship is a personal encounter.

What would the first encounter between God and a sinner be like? It would not be like two strangers meeting, greeting one another, and casually beginning to get acquainted. It would be more like your first meeting with someone whom you had already seriously wronged.

Imagine a man named Laurence who rents a house. While he lives there, he works on his motorcycle in the living room and ruins the carpet. He shoots arrows at targets drawn on the wall. He keeps his donkey in the house, and it kicks holes in the wall when it gets restless or hungry. Laurence has never personally met the owner of the house.

Then, sitting in a dentist's waiting room one day, Laurence begins conversation with a stranger and likes him, but finds out that it is the owner of the house he is renting.

► What will have to happen before they can be friends?

What is necessary for reconciliation when someone has wronged someone else?

1. The wrongdoer must admit and repent. To repent means that he will not keep doing what is wrong against the other person.
2. The wronged one must be willing to forgive, even if it means that the wrongdoer cannot pay for his damage.

This story illustrates our wrong to God, though we have done far worse. The first time we meet God, there is already a problem because we have done wrong against him. That problem must be solved before a relationship can begin.

Now let's look at the condition of the person separated from God and see what is necessary for him to become a friend of God.

The Condition of the Person Separated from God

The condition of the person separated from God is described in Ephesians 2:2-3:

In which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

According to this verse, we all once lived under the control of fleshly desires, which would be to live a sinful lifestyle. We were among the sons of disobedience, who are directed by Satan. By nature, we lived in a way that made us enemies of God, children of wrath, with only a matter of time until we received the wrath of God that we deserved.

► But not every unsaved person seems to be that bad, right? Have you ever met someone who seemed like a good person, honest, kind, and responsible? Does it seem hard to think of a person like that as guilty and needing to repent?

There are some unconverted people whose lives do not seem to show wickedness. They may think that they are not sinners, but they have lived their own way instead of submitting to God. Is it a serious problem for a good person to live his own way?

Look at Isaiah 53:6.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

For a person to claim the right to choose his own way is to deny his Creator the right to direct him. This is the essence of sin. It is rebellion against the authority of God. It was the sin of Adam and Eve, the first people, when they were tempted to be their own gods, trying to be independent of God.

There is a type of person who quickly thinks that he is saved when he hears that salvation is received by faith. He hasn't truly repented, because he didn't see that he needed to. He never saw himself as a sinner deserving God's judgment. Because he accepts the truth of Christianity and considers himself to be a good person, he considers himself a Christian; but he has had no transformation. He never submitted his own self will; instead, he merely accepted God as a part of his life and still lives mostly according to his own will. This is not the beginning of a saving relationship with God, according to the scriptural description.

A person may appear to be good; but if he is not serving God, he is breaking God's first commandment: that we have no gods before him. This person does not live each day with concern for God's commandments; instead, he sets his own goals and lives his own way. He knows about God, but has not glorified him as God—that is, he has not made him truly God of his life—therefore, he is without excuse (Romans 1:20-21).

The Bible describes the unconverted person as blind, in darkness, in slavery, driven by depraved desires, and even dead. His condition would be hopeless if God had not reached out with the help the sinner needs.

God's Intervening Grace

God has made the first steps toward bringing us to an encounter with him, so that our sin problem can be solved and our relationship with him can begin. He provided the sacrifice for our forgiveness and gives us the desire and ability to respond to his offer.

God is willing to forgive and to pay the cost of forgiveness. He demonstrated his willingness by providing the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

Even with a sacrifice provided, a sinner would be hopeless without God's grace working in his heart. God's grace reaches into the heart of the sinner, convicting him of his sins and showing him that he is to blame for his separation from God. God's grace not only shows him his guilt, but causes him to desire forgiveness and gives him the ability to respond to God.

► Would someone like to share how God brought him/her to a saving encounter with God?

Without grace, a sinner could not even come to God. Grace comes to every person before he begins to seek for God, even though he has not done anything to deserve it.

Remember Ephesians 2:2-3 – what a hopeless description it gives? But, look at the two verses that come after that description.

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved... (Ephesians 2:4-5).

If a person is not saved, it is not because he never had grace, but because he would not respond to the grace that he had.

The Personal Encounter

A Christian is a person who has experienced a personal encounter with God. There may be a process as a person begins to understand the gospel and becomes willing to repent. But a person becomes a Christian in a moment of encounter with God. At that time, he responds to God's grace by repenting of his sins and believing God's promise to forgive him.

The repenting, believing sinner receives forgiveness and transforming grace. Salvation is compared to gaining sight, coming into the light, being redeemed from slavery, being released from evil desires, and being resurrected into life.

Acts 26:18 describes the change that the gospel makes in a sinner. Jesus sent Paul "to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to

God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.”

► Based on what we have learned in this lesson, what is a real Christian?

A real Christian has had an encounter with God when he repented of his sins (Luke 13:5), by faith received forgiveness (Ephesians 2:8), and committed to a life of obedience to God’s Word (1 John 3:6). This encounter begins his personal relationship with God (1 John 1:3).

If a person is not in this kind of relationship with God, he has been resisting the grace that God is offering him. He should repent of his sins and by faith receive God’s forgiveness and transforming grace.

For Group Sharing

► Some could briefly share their testimonies of saving encounters with God, making some “before and after” contrasts.

► Each person should ask himself, “Have I had an encounter with God when I repented and believed, beginning my relationship with God; or have I assumed myself to be a Christian for the wrong reason?”

► Someone who is not in relationship with God may want to share his sense of need so that the group can pray with him.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for reaching out to me when I was lost and separated from you. Thank you for providing the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross so that I could be forgiven.

Thank you for showing me my guilt, for giving me the desire to be forgiven, and for making me able to respond to you.

Thank you for the great changes you have made in my life. I want always to live in obedient love for you.

Amen

Study Assignment

Read Ephesians 2. Reflect on the great intervention God made in our lives. Verses 1-3 describe our previous condition; verse 4 begins describing the change God made. Notice the references to relationship throughout the chapter, especially in verses 4, 6, 7, 14, and 19. Write a few paragraphs about what you see.

Lesson 3

Assurance of God's Acceptance

Big Idea

"God accepted me as his child when I repented and believed his promise."

Lesson Objective

To see that genuine assurance of salvation depends on following the directions of the gospel.

Assurance

- How can a person know for sure that he is saved?
- Is it safe to trust your feelings? Why not?

Affirm a variety of answers as much as possible. You can explain more thoroughly later in the lesson.

Some people depend on their inner feelings, but feelings are changeable and can be misleading.

The Bible tells us that we can know for sure that we are saved. We can have confidence that God has accepted us. We don't have to live in fear, because God's Spirit assures us that we are adopted children of God.

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Romans 8:16).

This assurance is so complete that we can have boldness on Judgment Day, not wondering whether or not we will pass God's evaluation. Some people say they hope they will make it to heaven, but we can have a better assurance than that.

By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world (1 John 4:17).

- A changed life is evidence of salvation, but that cannot be the first assurance a person has. Why not?

A changed life is evidence that a person is saved, but that evidence does not exist at the first moment. At the moment of conversion, results of salvation have not had time to appear. Therefore, at the time of conversion, a changed life is not the basis of assurance. The believer can be sure of his salvation by knowing that he has followed the scriptural way to salvation.

The way to salvation starts with repentance. **Repentance** means that a sinner sees himself as guilty and deserving punishment (1 John 1:9), and that he is willing to quit his sins.

Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon (Isaiah 55:7).

If a person has not seen himself as truly guilty, without excuse, and deserving punishment, he has not repented. If he admits that he is a sinner but wants a religion that will allow him to continue sinning, he has not repented because he wants to keep doing what made him guilty. He is not really admitting that sin is evil.

Repentance does not mean that a sinner must correct his life and make himself righteous before God will forgive him. That is impossible because the sinner is under the control of sin; but the sinner must be willing for God to deliver him from his sins.

With or after repentance comes the faith that is necessary for salvation. To have **saving faith** means that a person believes certain things.

1. He sees that he can do nothing to justify himself.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).

He realizes that nothing he can do (works) will make him deserve to be saved, even partially.

2. He believes that the sacrifice of Christ is sufficient for his forgiveness.

He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2).

Propitiation means the sacrifice that makes our forgiveness possible. Nothing is necessary in addition to Christ's sacrifice for our forgiveness.

3. He believes that God promises to forgive him on the single requirement of faith.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

If he thinks there are other requirements, he expects to be saved partly by works instead of completely by grace.

If he has truly repented and believed as the Bible directs, he has the right to believe that God forgives him. It is not enough only to believe that salvation is offered; a person must believe that he himself is saved.

There is a special confirmation that God gives to the repentant believer at the time that he repents and believes.

...you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Romans 8:15-16).

If a person follows the scriptural way of salvation and depends on the scriptural means of immediate assurance, rather than some other kind of assurance, he is unlikely to be deceived. This assurance is based on God's Word, which is absolutely reliable. God always keeps his promises.

For Group Sharing

At the time of a person's conversion he may not have known the definitions of repentance and saving faith. Now that he is converted, he should be able to look back and see that they happened.

Ask members of the class:

- ▶ Are you sure that you would go to heaven if you were to die right now?
- ▶ What elements of repentance or faith have you experienced?

Discuss the potential harm of a person's thinking he is converted while denying one of the listed elements. For example:

- ▶ What harm would it do if a person really did not think that his sins made him deserve God's judgment?
- ▶ What if a person thinks that the good he does added to God's grace will save him?

The harm of each error is implied in the text above.

This lesson should help someone see if he has had the wrong reason for thinking he is converted, and it should help a real convert to have a clearer understanding of the gospel he has already accepted.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for your promise to forgive a sinner who repents and believes. I have repented of my sins, and I believe your promise.

I know that the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is enough for my forgiveness.

I know that I don't have to fear the judgment because my sins are forgiven.

Thank you for the witness of your Spirit that I am your child.

Amen

Study Assignment

Study Hebrews 10:11-25. What basis for personal assurance is given in this passage? What directions are given to us because we have this assurance? List the commands and consider how to fulfill them personally.

Lesson 4

Communicating with God

Big Idea

"I will know God better because I communicate with him in prayer."

Lesson Objective

To understand that our relationship with God is expressed in our communication with him.

Introduction

The practice of prayer is one of the marks of a Christian. However, it is possible for a person to have a custom of prayer that is not true Christian prayer. Sometimes a person has the wrong reason for praying.

► What kind of situation might cause a person to pray who has not prayed before?

A person may pray for the first time because of a crisis (even nonreligious soldiers will pray when under fire), or because he thinks that prayer will get him what he wants. The fact that a person is interested in prayer may not mean that he is interested in being saved and knowing God. He may be interested only in getting things from God by prayer.

Many people are interested in spirits, angels, and psychic powers for benefits in business and health. People are not sure that science has all the answers, and they look to the supernatural for help. This search for benefits from the supernatural sometimes takes the forms of pagan idolatry or the occult.

Some people think that prayer has power like a magical formula. They consider prayer worthwhile only to the extent that it manipulates God to give them what they want.

► People of other religions also pray. How is a Christian's praying different from a pagan's?

A Christian Seeks God's Will in Prayer

An important distinctive of Christian prayer is that we submit to the will of God rather than just trying to get God to do what we want.

The pagan tends to think that his prayer is only for getting a supernatural power to do what he wants. Many people take a pagan approach to prayer, praying only when they need something or have a crisis. They try to get God to do their will, instead of trying to find out what his will is.

As Christians we trust the will of God to be better for us than our own desires. We know that because God has perfect wisdom and perfect love, the will of God is the best thing that

can happen to us. So, though in prayer we ask for what we think we need, we leave the choice to God – not just because we must, but because we trust him.

We must pray specifically to have answers to prayer. If we always pray vaguely, we won't often see specific responses of God to our prayers. We talk to God about our needs, letting him show us how we should see them. As we pray for the solution, he helps us to know what to pray for.

Prayer is not just turning in a list of requests; it is interaction with God. As we tell him about our needs, we trust him to meet those needs his own way. Sometimes he shows us what he wants to do.

A Christian Seeks God in Prayer

A Christian values his relationship with God more than what he gets from God.

What we seek most in prayer is God himself.

There was once a great saint who is now remembered as Saint Bernard. Bernard of Clairvaux said, "Our time with God, and the priority we give it, are the true measurement of our love for him." Love exists in a relationship, and the relationship is expressed in communication. A relationship cannot grow without communication and declines if communication is neglected.

How would you feel if you had a friend who talked to you only when he wanted something from you? What if he seemed to have no interest in knowing you better or in hearing about your interests and concerns? You wouldn't call that a good relationship, but many people have a relationship with God like that.

Our love for God is not measured by how much we work for him (though love for him should motivate us) or by the strictness of our lifestyle (though love for him should cause us to carefully guard ourselves from sin). An employee who focuses on his work but does not want to see his employer or talk to him probably has a bad relationship with the one he is working for. Our relationship with God should be better than that.

Communication can be on various levels. In a shallow relationship it consists mainly of clichés, phrases repeated from habit. A deeper relationship will have communication of opinions and feelings. The best relationship has total honesty.

So it seems that Bernard was right. Our prayer life does measure our love for God, just as any relationship is measured by the communication in it.

Prayer Is a Sign of Spiritual Life

Our spiritual life exists in our relationship with God, and prayer is a sign of spiritual life.

One of the signs that Saul the persecutor had changed was that he had begun to pray (Acts 9:11).²

► When a paramedic comes to the rescue of someone who is seriously injured, what does he do first?

He first checks “vital signs” (signs of life), such as heart rate and breathing. He is looking for signs of physical life. There are also spiritual vital signs. Prayer is a sign of spiritual life.

Prayer is the breath of the soul—a spiritual vital sign.

We breathe in spiritual life from God and breathe back praise and worship, expressed especially in our praying. How long can a person live physically without breathing? How long can a person live spiritually without praying?

► When should you pray?

Times to Pray

- Pray when you are starting the day.
- Pray at a special time scheduled every day.
- Pray when you are especially tested.
- Pray when you have failed.
- Pray when you should thank God for something.

Summary

1. Christian prayer differs from pagan prayer because we want God’s will, and we value knowing God more than we value what we get from him.
2. Prayer is a measurement of our love for God.
3. Prayer is a spiritual “vital sign” showing that we are spiritually alive.

² See also 1 Corinthians 1:2. Praying is something that all Christians have in common.

For Group Sharing

Discuss the truth that in prayer we should seek God himself more than the things we get from God. Ask the students:

► Do you really pray with that priority? How does it show?

Invite responses to the concept that our prayer life demonstrates our love for God. Ask if that causes some uncomfortable self-evaluation, with a question like:

► Do you feel that your love for God could really be measured by your prayer life?

► Do you feel that your love for God is greater than your prayer life shows?

Ask for some resolutions:

► For my prayer life to better demonstrate and increase my love for God, I should...

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for the great privilege I have to talk to you. I'm glad that I can talk to you about my needs. But, most of all, I thank you for the privilege I have to know you.

Help me to show my love for you by talking to you often. Make my love for you grow because I am beginning to know you better.

Help me to make my time with you the greatest priority in my life.

Amen

Study Assignment

Look at the statements that Jesus made about prayer in Matthew 6:5-18. List the references to personal needs and references to relationship with God.

Lesson 5

Reading What God Wrote

Big Idea

"God's Word guides my relationship with him."

Lesson Objective

To see how God's Word helps us to know and please God.

Introduction

- ▶ What is the longest chapter in the Bible? (Psalm 119)
- ▶ What is that chapter about? (Clue: Is there something mentioned over and over, at least in synonyms?)

Psalm 119 has 176 verses. God's Word is mentioned in every verse except seven of them. Obviously, that is the subject of this psalm.

Different terms are used for God's Word, such as precepts, statutes, commandments, and judgments.

The inspired writer of this psalm described what God's Word meant to him and the effect it had upon him. Psalm 119 shows us the importance of the Bible for the Christian.

Some people use the Bible as a source of doctrine, as a source of evidence to prove points, as a boost for their mood when they are discouraged, or as a book for religious routines. The Bible is good for those purposes, but if a person uses the Bible only in those ways, it may seem to become separate from his relationship with God. The Bible is supposed to be much more for a believer.

Let's look at some verses in Psalm 119 and see what this writer was inspired to say about the importance of the scripture for him.

He mentions many benefits of God's Word:

- It gives life (50).
- It comforts (52).
- It is a lamp (105).
- It makes him part of a fellowship of worshippers of God (74, 79).

The Psalmist's Passion for Scripture

In this lesson, look especially at the verses given in bold print.

- He loved God's Word and delighted in it (16, 24, **47**, 48, 77, **92**, **97**, **103**).
- He rejoiced about having it as if it were great riches (**14**, **72**).

- He observed that those who have it and keep it are blessed (happy) (**1, 2**).

► Why did he love scripture so much?

The Psalmist had a passion for scripture because of his love for God.

Why did he love God's Word so much? Why did he consider it such a treasure? It is not just good information. He constantly referred to it as "your" (God's) Word. He loved it because he loved God. God's Word is an expression of the nature of God.

Look at verse 137. As he looked at God's law and its requirements, he saw the justice and wisdom of God. Because God is upright, his law is just.

His love and worship of God are expressed in his use of the scripture—scripture is a link between God and his worshipper—revealing God to the worshipper and guiding the worshipper's response to God. It is inspired by the Holy Spirit, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, and fulfilled in the worshipper's life by the power of God.

Because he saw that scripture expresses the nature of God, he was angry at those who dishonor God by breaking his law. He was not angry because of personal rights but because of love for God (53, **104**, 126, **136**).

He did not just honor God's word when he was with others who did. He said he would not be ashamed of God's Word even before kings (46).

Scripture Guided the Psalmist's Response to God

God calls people into relationship with himself. The purpose of scripture is to reveal God so that we can enter a relationship with him. Therefore, scripture calls for a response from the reader. A person is not really getting the intended effects of scripture unless he is responding to it the right way.

Notice the Psalmist's response to scripture:

- He prayed that God would teach his own Word (12, **18, 27**, 33, 34).
- He prayed that he would be able to live according to it (**35-37**, 5, 10).
- He prayed that even his heart would match God's will (32, **80**).
- He knew that cleansing would occur through his interaction with God in his Word (**9, 11**).
- He claimed blessings from God on the basis of having kept God's laws (22, **121, 153**).
- He promised to obey (8). "I will" or "I shall" occurs constantly, promising a response to scripture.
- He committed time for meditation on scripture throughout the day (15, 97) and early in the morning (147-148).

This ancient Psalm writer had an inspired look at the significance of God's Word for a believer. His experience was not unique and only for him. It is the experience that each of us should have as God's Word guides our relationship with him.

Our Response to Scripture

Start now to have right response to scripture:

- Realize the role of God's Word in your relationship with God.
- Get into right relationship with God if your repentance still is incomplete.
- Commit to time in God's Word. Start with Psalm 119, and pray these verses as you read. Philippians, Titus, and Ephesians could come next in your reading.
- Determine to continually respond to the work of God's Spirit through his Word.

For Group Sharing

As was explained in the lesson, some people use the Bible as a source of doctrine, as a source of verses to prove points, as a boost for their mood when they are discouraged, or as a book for religious routines.

- ▶ Has your use of the Bible been too separate from your living relationship with God? Is that because you have not seen scripture as what it should be in your life?
- ▶ What can you do to give scripture its proper place?
- ▶ What specific commitment are you ready to make for your future use of scripture?

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for giving me the scripture, revealing yourself to me. Thank you for giving me understanding of it by your Holy Spirit working in my heart and mind.

Help me to understand more and more what you are like and what I should be in order to please you. Help me to always respond to your work in my heart as I read. Let your word continually change me into your image.

Lord, I commit to spending time daily meditating on your word. Give me a love for your word that comes from my love for you.

Amen

Study Assignment

This week meditate on Psalm 119. List some things the writer said he would do because of God's Word. Commit to do the same, and pray for fulfillment of it in your heart and life.

Lesson 6

Spreading the Invitation

Big Idea

"I want to lead others to know God as I do."

Lesson Objective

To learn a method for sharing the gospel.

Introduction

► Why should we share the gospel?

There are many good reasons. Let's look at the reason the Apostle John gave for inviting people to be saved.

That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3).

We have experienced what it means to encounter God and be saved, beginning a relationship with him. Since God loves people (John 3:16), we should care about them and want them to know God. We have a great invitation to share with them.

A Gospel Presentation

This presentation of the gospel is concise and memorable. It uses a drawing that will be remembered by anyone who sees it presented. It can be presented in two minutes, or expanded to include discussion and explanation if the listener is interested.

It is not necessary that you be a skilled artist. The drawing is simple, and its simplicity helps the listener remember it.

We will now go through the stages of the drawing, with the explanatory wording to go with each part to be drawn.

The students should look each stage of the drawing as the class leader draws it on something large enough for the class to see. The class leader should try not to add extra explanations into the presentation. It should be short so that the students can learn it easily. After the first demonstration, the class should go on to cover the explanations given in the next section, then go back to practice the presentation.

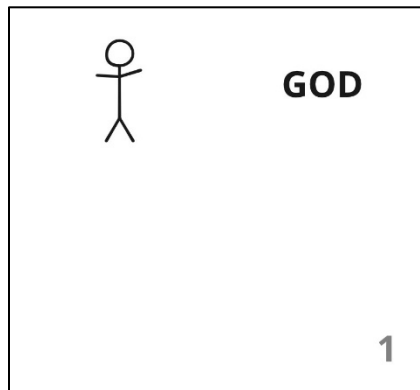
The words to say are provided along with each part of the drawing to be added.

What to Say During Each Part of the Drawing

Part 1

"God created each person to be in fellowship with him and live a blessed life. He did not design life to be full of problems and suffering."

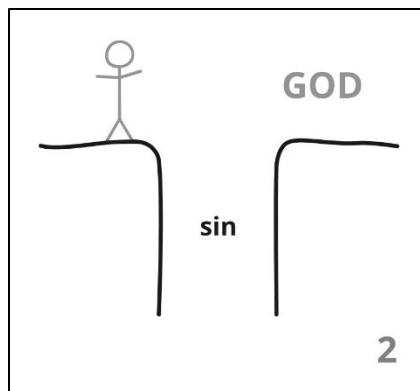
[Write the word "God" and draw a person.]



Part 2

"Man is separated from God because of sin. The first people sinned, and every person since then has committed sin against God."

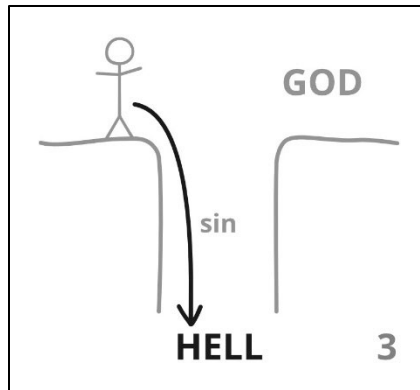
[Draw the separation and write the word "sin."]



Part 3

"God is a righteous Judge, and sinners will someday be condemned to eternity in hell unless they find mercy and come back into relationship with God."

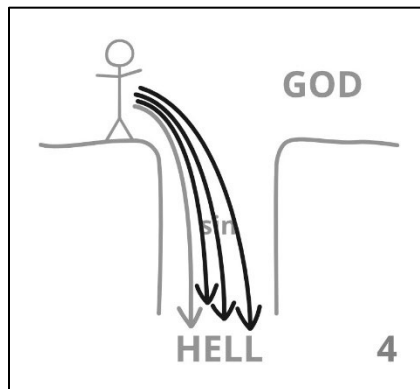
[Draw the arrow and write the word "hell."]



Part 4

"Nothing that we can do brings us back to God or earns mercy – not good works, going to church, religious customs, giving money...."

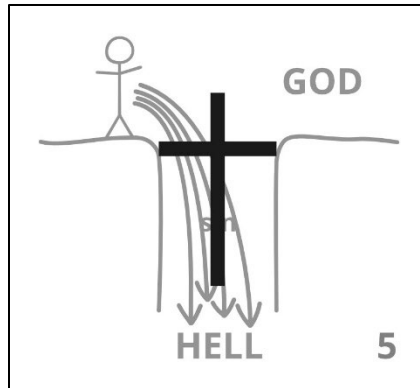
[Draw arrows with each item in the list.]



Part 5

"Our situation would be hopeless if God had not made a way for us to come back to him. Jesus the Son of God died on a cross as a sacrifice so that we can be forgiven. After three days, he was raised from the dead."

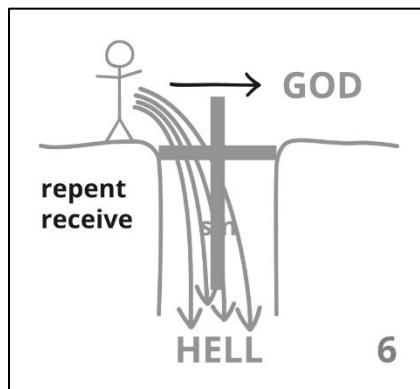
[Draw the cross.]



Part 6

"But it is not enough just to know this. Each person must individually make the choice to be saved and come back to God. A person must repent, which means to be sorry enough for sin to be willing to quit. A person who repents can receive forgiveness by asking God in prayer."

[Draw the arrow and write the words "repent" and "receive."]



Part 7

"Where do you think you are on this diagram? Has there been a special time in your life when you repented of your sins, received God's forgiveness, and began to live for God; or, are you still separated from God by your sin?"

[Wait for an answer. Many people will admit that they are still separated from God.]

"Are you ready to make this step—to repent, receive forgiveness, and begin living for God? I would be glad to pray with you right now."

[Pray something similar to the following.]

"Lord, I know I am a sinner and deserve eternal punishment. I am sorry for my sins and willing to quit them. I ask you to forgive me, not because I deserve it, but because Jesus died for me. Thank you for salvation. From this time on, I will live for you."

After the class leader has demonstrated the presentation, the class should cover the following explanations about the parts of the presentation.

Explanations

Part 1

The beginning of the presentation can be adapted to apply to the listener. Instead of "life full of problems and suffering," the evangelist can mention something more specific that relates to the experience of the listener.

Part 2

It is important for the listener to realize that he is personally guilty of sin and separated from God. He is not just in a situation that has resulted from the sin of Adam.

Part 3

This shows the most serious aspect of the sinner's condition.

Part 4

The purpose of this part is to show the listener that he should not trust in the wrong thing for salvation. This part can be adapted to the needs of the listener. The evangelist should try to name the things that the listener is likely to be trusting in.

Part 5

The simplest way to explain the atonement is to say that "Jesus died on the cross as a sacrifice so that we can be forgiven." The purpose of this part is to help the listener realize that he should depend on the salvation God provided.

Part 6

The evangelist tries to bring the listener to a moment of decision. The listener needs to realize that he must make an individual choice. He needs to know the right definition for repentance, so he knows that repentance is more than regret and more than just saying he is sorry. He needs to know that he should pray to ask God for forgiveness.

Part 7

At this point, the evangelist tries to get the listener to admit his need for salvation. The presentation is designed to help the unsaved person realize that he is unsaved. The question is worded carefully. Many people think they should daily ask for forgiveness while they continue to live in sin. The question asks about a special time when the person is saved and a new life begins. He needs to realize that if he has not experienced conversion, he is still separated from God by his sin. Then, the evangelist offers to pray with him for salvation.

If the listener does not understand his need or is not ready to repent, the evangelist should not push him to pray. If he prays without truly repenting and experiencing conversion, he may have a false assurance of salvation or may believe that conversion cannot happen for him. Either way, he may be less likely to be saved later.

The drawing can be presented quickly. If you have an opportunity to share the gospel, you can simply ask, "May I take two minutes to show you a drawing that illustrates what the Bible says is the way to know for sure that you are saved?" That lets the person know that you are not going to take a lot of his time. If he gets interested and wants to talk about it, then you can take more time.

Usually, people do get interested in the drawing. Often a person will ask to keep the drawing after the evangelist is finished.

Demonstrate the presentation again several times for the students. Avoid inserting extra comments or explanations into the presentation because the students will learn it more easily if it is short. After several demonstrations, various students could take turns demonstrating the presentation to the group, while the members of the group help them remember the details. Then, students could divide into pairs and practice the presentation with each other.

Creating Opportunities to Share the Gospel

If someone seems already open to hearing you share the gospel, you can simply ask, "May I take two minutes to show you a diagram that illustrates what the Bible says is the way to know for sure that you are saved?"

Opportunities usually appear in conversation. Here are some examples of ways to recognize opportunities and adapt to them.

If a person is complaining about something, after some conversation, ask, "May I take two minutes to show you a diagram that illustrates what the Bible says is the reason life is hard and full of problems?"

If a person seems to be religious, ask him what his most important belief is. Then ask, "May I take two minutes to show you a diagram that illustrates what the Bible says is the most important thing to know?"

If a person is talking about national problems, world hunger or poverty, or the danger of war, ask, "May I take two minutes to show you a diagram that illustrates what the Bible says is the reason the world is like it is?"

Show that the world's condition is because sinners are separated from God. Do not imply that salvation instantly ends all problems, but show that individual salvation is the beginning of God's solution. Someday there will be a new heaven and earth, and those problems will not exist for those who are now reconciled to God.

A Call for Commitment

Call for commitment with the following questions:

- ▶ Do you think this approach to sharing the gospel is practical?
- ▶ Do you think it is something you could do?
- ▶ How many will try this week to show this diagram to at least one believer and one unbeliever?

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

I am glad that you want to save not only me, but also my family, my friends and neighbors, and every person in the world.

Thank you for providing salvation so that every person can be saved and enter this wonderful fellowship that we have with you and with other believers.

You loved the whole world enough to give your Son for them.

Father, help me to be faithful to spread your invitation.

Amen

Study Assignments

1. Prepare to carry out your commitment to share the diagram this week.
2. Make a list of the unsaved people that you know you will be able to have conversation with this week. Plan to bring up a subject that will open the door for sharing the gospel.
3. Make a list of some Christians that you could show the diagram to with the goal of helping them feel more equipped to witness.

Lesson 7

Extending My Obedience

Big Idea

"I discern and follow God's will better as my love for him grows."

Lesson Objective

To learn to follow God's will in ten areas of daily living.

Introduction

► What would be some results if a person loved God more?

One result of loving God more is described in Philippians 1:9-11.

And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

These verses tell about an ongoing process in the believer's life. His love should be continually increasing. As that happens, his ability to discern what is best should increase. As he discerns, he adapts his life to focus on what is best. This must be happening in order for him to be sincere and without offense.

We do not understand all the truth that we should be living by at the time that we are first saved. The people that Paul wrote to in the above verses had been Christians for some time already. Yet, Paul prayed that they would keep loving God more and, by that love, be able to better understand God's will.

We should expect to continually improve our lives as God gives discernment. God wants our complete obedience in all aspects of our lives, not just in religious observance.

We should not assume that we already know everything that we need to know about how to live. We should not assume that we have made all of the adjustments to our life that it needs.

Some Areas in Which a Believer Should Improve

- 1. Carefulness of influence.** Are there things you do that you would not want others to do?
- 2. Self-control.** Do you control your feelings and desires enough to do what you should, or do you sometimes act in a way that would be expected of a non-Christian?

- 3. Care of health.** Do you care for your body as a set of irreplaceable tools to work for God? Since your body belongs to God, it should not be damaged. You are not to treat it carelessly.
- 4. Choice of entertainment.** Does your entertainment tend to bring you into struggles with temptation by causing wrong thoughts or attitudes? Beware of anything that presents sin as attractive or funny.
- 5. Manners.** Treat others respectfully, like people in the image of God with eternal destinies. The people you are among have their customs for showing courtesy. You should learn to be courteous in a way that they recognize. Be kind even when someone doesn't deserve it.
- 6. Business ethics.** Are you completely honest in all dealings? Do you describe things exactly as they are or cause someone to think something that is not true?
- 7. Punctuality.** Time is a valuable resource that we should use for God. Do you put value on your time and others' time by keeping a schedule when possible?
- 8. Dress.** Does your clothing show the values of decency (concealing the body sufficiently), humility (not trying to attract attention or admiration by what you wear), and thriftiness (not buying more expensive clothes than you need)?
- 9. Language.** Is your conversation pure and respectful of God and others? Many of the words the world uses as exclamations come from obscenities or terms for God.
- 10. Reliability.** Do you keep commitments? Can people expect you to do what you say? Do you forget your promises if they are not convenient?

Many people don't take seriously their need to improve. They feel responsible only for the plain commands of scripture, not realizing that those commands have many applications.

We need to realize that improvement is linked to the increase of our love for God. We need to seriously meditate on the verses we started with in this lesson. If our love is increasing, our discernment and choice of right behaviors should be improving.

For Group Sharing

Ask these questions for individual response:

- ▶ What is an example of a change that you made in your life when God showed you that an attitude, habit, or action was not the best?
- ▶ Is there something in your lifestyle that you know you should change? Will you do it?
- ▶ Is there anything in your life that you have doubts about?
- ▶ Are you willing to let God show you in prayer any changes that you should make?

Say, "Let's commit to pray this week with an open heart so that God can show us his values and any changes he wants to make in our lives. Will you commit to do that? Next week I will ask you if you did."

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

I want my love for you to continually increase. I want to better understand your will for me.

Help me to learn to discern what is most pleasing to you so that I can live a life that is pure and without offense.

Help me to see habits and attitudes that need to change and to gain habits and attitudes that glorify you.

I want to bear fruit for the glory of God.

Amen

Study Assignment

Study 1 Corinthians 13. This chapter describes the life of a person who has the love that he should have for others. Let God show you how he wants to change you to make your life more consistent with love. List some changes you would like to see.

Lesson 8

Devotional Bible Study

Big Idea

"God's Word daily impacts my life and faith."

Lesson Objective

To learn the right reasons and right approach for personal Bible study.

Introduction

- ▶ Why should Christians read the Bible every day?
- ▶ Why is it difficult for some people to do regular Bible study?

Reasons to Study the Bible

(1) For a relationship with God

Psalms 119, the longest chapter in the Bible, mentions God's Word in almost every verse. It says that God's Word is an expression of God's own nature and, therefore, scripture is a means of knowing God.

Several more reasons for Bible study are given in 2 Timothy 3:16:

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.

From this verse we know that we should study the Bible:

(2) To know and believe the truth

This may be the reason for Bible study that most people think of first. It is important. Teaching refers to the truth that we believe and teach. The Bible is our source of doctrine. The Bible reveals the nature of God, the human condition, and salvation.

(3) To get directions for life

Reproof, correction, and training in righteousness are actions of God's Word to show us how to live.

(4) For effective ministry

Reproof, correction, and training in righteousness occur not only in personal study, but when we use God's Word to minister to others.

That the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:17).

(5) For spiritual maturity

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child (Hebrews 5:12-13).

As a person practices discerning truth from God's Word, he matures and develops his ability to use the Word of God to teach others.

Improper Goals for Devotional Bible Study

- 1. To invent new interpretations.** Some people look for strange, new interpretations that have little support in the passage. We should be creative in applying and communicating scripture, but not in interpreting it. Whatever it means is what it means, and we must not create a meaning for it.

"The inexhaustibility of scripture is not in a fertility of meanings" (John Calvin).

- 2. To collect evidence for debate.** Sometimes the Bible must be used in controversy, and study is necessary for that purpose. However, that is not the purpose of devotional Bible study. If a person reads the Bible only for argument, he gets distorted vision and may see only what he wants to see.
- 3. To feel encouraged.** Of course, we need the Bible to maintain encouragement and joy, but not every passage is written to cause joyful feelings. Purposes of scripture include doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness. If a person always goes quickly through passages looking for verses that help his feelings, he is not letting the Bible speak its whole message.

If a person neglects Bible study, it may be because he does not have the right reasons to study, listed first in this lesson. If he did not have the right reason for study, he may have begun to feel that his study was not succeeding or was not worthwhile.

How to Study the Bible Devotionally

(1) Begin by praying for understanding of the passage.

Prepare your heart to receive the real message of the passage. You are not studying just to know God's will, but to do it. Your beginning prayer prepares you not only for understanding but for obedience.

(2) Interpret the passage.

What is the passage actually saying? Paraphrase and list statements. Make sure your interpretation fits with the verses that come before and after the passage. Make sure your conclusions don't contradict plain scriptural teaching elsewhere. Consider how the first readers would have understood the passage.

(3) Apply the passage personally.

Is there a

- Sin to confess or shun?
- Promise to claim?
- Attitude to change?
- Command to obey?
- Example to follow?
- Prayer to pray?
- Error to shun?
- Temptation to avoid?
- Something to praise God for?

There may be several of these in a passage.

(4) Pray for fulfillment of the truth in you.

Pray that God will make the needed change in your heart and life.

(5) Prayerfully determine what you will change because of this application.

The specific change should be:

- **Personal** – something you yourself need to do.
- **Practical** – not just theoretical, but result in something actually to be done.
- **Accountable** – acted upon within a set time frame.

Examples: Not "I need to pray more," but "I will reserve time at 8:00 every morning to pray." Not "I need to encourage people," but "I will today encourage and help my cousin who is in a difficult situation."

Sometimes we will not be able to make applications that are so specific, but we should always look for ways to apply God's truth in our actions and attitudes.

For Group Sharing

► We talked about some benefits of devotional study. Are some of them ones you have not really thought of as reasons for Bible study?

► What is a reason for Bible study that will be especially important for you?

If a Christian looks for applications, such as those listed in step 3, and commits to make changes as specific as described in step 5, his life will begin to show great development.

► If you started applying the Bible to your life like this every day, how do you think it would impact you?

Ask members to commit to following these steps for Bible study daily for at least a week, then report. Make a note to remember to ask them about their results.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for the treasure you have given us in the scriptures.

Thank you for revealing to us the truth about how to know you, how to live, and how to help others.

Help me to study your word diligently. Give me understanding of the truth you have revealed. Help me to live by it faithfully.

Amen

Study Assignment

Study 1 Thessalonians 5, following the steps of devotional Bible study listed in this lesson. Describe some personal applications you discovered.

Lesson 9

Praying Like David

Big Idea

"Talking to God gives every part of my life the right meaning."

Lesson Objective

To learn that prayer is sharing all of our events and feelings with God and accepting his perspective.

Prayer: Talking to God

Many of the Psalms are prayers. Many of them were written by David.

► Did you know that in one of the Psalms a writer prayed for God to break someone's teeth? Have you ever noticed things in the Psalms that are hard to understand?

The Psalms tell us something important about prayer.

Prayer is talking to God, and talking has significance. Just the fact that talking is going on is significant. The fact that some people won't talk to each other shows that talking has significance in itself.

One leader said before a negotiation that was called to prevent a war, "When men run out of words, they reach for their swords; let's pray that we can keep them talking." He knew that when the negotiators stopped talking, it meant they had given up on coming to an agreement.

If you stop talking to God or don't want to talk about some things, it may be because you think you can't agree with him on those things.

The Psalms have always been popular for use in personal devotions, but there are some things there that are hard to understand. What are we supposed to think about the verse that prays for God to break someone's arm (Psalm 10:15) or the verse that prays for God to knock their teeth out (Psalm 58:6)?

The Psalms demonstrate that we should be talking to God about everything in our lives and everything we feel. There are things in the Psalms that could seem shocking if we think of them as formal prayers about religious subjects. But, if we remember that we should be talking to God about everything, then we should expect those things to be there.

Why should we be talking to God about everything? Because what you talk about shows the scope of your relationship.

A relationship is sharing life. We all have some limited human relationships. There are people you work with, and with them maybe you share only one aspect of life. Because of that, there are many things that you don't talk about.

► Has anyone been to a doctor or dentist recently? Did you talk to him about your financial concerns? Did you talk about your family problems? Did you talk about his financial concerns or family problems?

With your doctor, you share one aspect of life and talk about that. It is unusual to have a very personal conversation with your doctor about things unrelated to your physical condition. That's because your relationship with him is limited; it relates to only one aspect of your life.

What do you talk to God about? Are there just a few types of things? Do you treat God like a professional (like a doctor, mechanic, or plumber) to whom you take certain kinds of problems? Are you keeping your relationship with God in a small area called the "religion zone"? Why do you not share the other parts of your life with God?

If there is not much for you to talk to God about, your relationship with him is narrow and shallow. Some people don't talk to God unless they have "God-type" problems to bring to him.

Most young people who think they are in love think they need lots of time to talk. They talk about many subjects and also about each other. While talking about anything, they are explaining something about themselves, and each is learning more about the other.

Sometimes things happen in a relationship that put limits on it. Sometimes in a marriage, the husband and wife do not talk much. They purposely don't talk about certain things. Their relationship has reached a limit.

What about your relationship with God? It is shallow if there is not much to talk about. It may mean that you see most aspects of your life as unconnected to God's place in your life.

In relationships between people, sometimes certain topics become off limits. It may be that you want the person to do something or to stop doing something and he or she is unwilling. After that has been discussed many times, that topic becomes a sensitive one, and neither person brings it up except to start an argument.

Sometimes a person does not want to talk to God about something, because he already knows God's will and does not accept it. What will happen in your relationship with God if you keep refusing to do something that God wants you to do?

► What makes a relationship keep growing?

A relationship grows as people learn more about each other and as each person adjusts. A relationship stops growing when it seems there is nothing more worth learning about the other or when people stop adjusting. We can keep getting more acquainted with God, but

he does not need to change. We must be willing to keep being changed by our relationship with him.

The Psalms show that every part of life is to be included in our relationship with God, because the Psalm writers expressed in prayer their feelings about everything that was happening to them.

Besides all the concerns that people commonly pray about, the Psalms have some concerns that might seem inappropriate for prayer.

What about anger against people and the desire for vindication? These prayers are calling for God to show that he is a God of justice. Is it right for a person to have all of the feelings that we see in the Psalms? Maybe not, but what if a person does feel that way? What should he do? Wouldn't talking to God about it be the best thing to do? He should give God a chance to respond to his feelings. That would be better than taking some kind of rash action.

What about when it seems that God is not helping you as he should? Some Psalms ask God, "Why do you stand so far away; why do you hide from me when I need you?"³ Does God really do that? We know that God is faithful, but sometimes we don't understand why he doesn't do something we think he should do. It is a mistake to think that God is not being faithful; but if you feel that way, what is the best thing to do? Talk to him about it. Give him the chance to explain. He will help you to see things as they are. That is much better than becoming bitter.

Is it right to pray for justice when others are doing you wrong? Is it right to ask for rewards for your faithfulness when you think you deserve better than you are getting? Is it right to pray for help even when you know you deserve the situation you have gotten yourself into? All these prayers are in the Psalms. The Psalms show us that we should go to God with everything.

If we are in a relationship with God that does not have limits, he shares every part of our life; everything is devoted to him. That means that everything in our life gets its real meaning from God. We should understand the things that happen to us by the light of that relationship.

Everything gets its proper place and value by being brought to God for adjustment. Unless you are praying about everything, soon many things will not make sense. Feelings will be far out of proportion. Decisions will be misguided. Attitudes will be inconsistent. You will begin to yield to discouragement and bitterness.

A person who is depressed, worried, frustrated, bitter at others, or even prosperous and wrongly-focused is not talking to God about everything like he should. A person who is worrying a lot is not praying a lot; a person who is praying a lot is not worrying a lot.

³ Paraphrased from Psalm 13:1.

A guitar must be tuned occasionally, especially if it is being carried around, bumped, dropped, stepped on, or kicked. We are like guitars. We need the constant tuning that God gives us when we present ourselves to him.

The Lord is near to those with a contrite spirit (Psalm 34:18). We must be humble and submissive, presenting all to God and letting him answer his way. We can interpret things right when we have presented them to God for his response.

► What are you talking to him about? What are some things you need to talk to him about?

For Group Sharing

Use some of the following questions to encourage sharing:

- Have you ever been tempted to be angry at God?
- Have you ever felt that God should do something differently?
- Have you ever had a change of attitude about something while praying about it?
- Can you think of areas of your life that you are avoiding talking to God about? Why?
- Are there areas of your life that you have not really considered praying about?

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

I want you to set the proper value of everything I have and the meaning of everything that happens to me. I want to bring my feelings about everything to you for your adjustment.

Help me to open to you all the parts of my life.

I want to be completely devoted to you. I want my relationship with you to include everything about me.

Help me to keep being changed by knowing you better.

Amen

Study Assignment

Study Psalm 34. Write a paragraph about David's confidence that everything can be brought to the Lord. Notice especially verses 15 and 18.

Lesson 10

The Refining of Faith

Big Idea

"I grow spiritually as my faith endures trials."

Lesson Objective

To see how seven types of trials test and increase our faith.

Trials of Faith

- ▶ Has anyone had any hard times lately?
- ▶ Do you ever wonder why hard times come?

We all have some hard times, and there will be a few times in your life when you will go through some extremely hard circumstances.

An explanation of why hard times are valuable is given in 1 Peter 1:6-7.

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Gold goes through an intense process of refining because of its value. Coal is weighed by the ton; gold is weighed by the ounce or gram.

Faith is even more valuable and is, therefore, worth refining.

- ▶ What is faith?

Sometimes people quote Hebrews 11:1 as a definition of faith: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

There may be various kinds of faith. But, there is one kind that is basic to all others, and it is necessary for our relationship with God.

A verse a little farther in Hebrews 11 gives another definition of faith:

And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him (Hebrews 11:6).

The most basic faith is to believe that God responds to those who seek him in the right way. It is to believe that God's reward is attainable and worth more than anything else.

This faith is tested during trials. During trials, we are tempted to doubt that God will really give what is best for us. We are tempted to think that some action outside of God's will is what we need to do.

Disobeying is the opposite of diligently seeking God's blessing because of faith. A person decides to disobey God because of a lack of faith. When a person has a bad attitude against God, that is also a lack of faith because it is distrusting God.

Every trial is a trial of faith. It is a temptation to give up your faith and do a wrong action or accept a wrong attitude instead of trusting God. Faith is the victory over every trial, because by faith we trust God and keep seeking his will by prayer and obedience.

For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith (1 John 5:4).

The direction of the world is against God. The world tries to make things look different from reality, to make wrong look normal. By faith, we remember that God is the rewarder of those who seek him diligently. So, every trial is a trial of faith; faith is the victory over every trial.

Trials of faith destroy us if we give up our faith, but they benefit us if our faith endures. Our faith increases and becomes more powerful by surviving trials. That is one reason God allows trials to come to us. They allow a process that we need.

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2-4).

Trials of faith develop patience. Patience doesn't just mean willingness to wait. To have patience means to endure by faith. James said further on, "You have heard of the steadfastness of Job" (James 5:11). Job was confused about some things, but he held on to his faith in God in spite of terrible tragedies and circumstances (Job 2:9-10, 42:7).

Patience brings all other Christian qualities. Enduring by faith completes us and equips us spiritually. If a person keeps giving in to unbelief, he will not grow in faith. Not only will he not increase in patience, he will not increase in love, honesty, self-control, and most other Christian qualities. It is by the work of patience, enduring by faith, that a believer becomes complete, lacking in nothing.

Types of Trials

Trials could be divided into at least seven categories.

1. Difficult circumstances. The trial of faith is the temptation to

- Yield to frustration or anger, accepting a wrong attitude
- Act rashly to change circumstances
- Disobey God to fix the problem your way

2. Injustice and mistreatment. The trial of faith is the temptation to

- Treat others wrongly because they did wrong
- Be unwilling to wait for God to execute his justice
- Refuse to forgive and love as Christ did

3. Physical affliction. Faith may seem lifeless; zeal may be weak. The trial of faith is the temptation to

- Yield to depression
- Seek happiness or entertainment outside of God's will

4. Tragedy. Tragedies are the terrible events that may seem to destroy us. The trial of faith is the temptation to

- Doubt God's love and goodness
- Doubt that God is in control

5. Confusion. The trial of faith is the temptation to yield to your own understanding against the known will of God.

6. Persecution. Persecution is a time when it seems that earthly, evil powers are in control. The trial of faith is the temptation to yield to avoid suffering.

7. Temptation to sin. Temptation to sin is a time when something the world offers appears to be better than spiritual joy and eternal reward. The trial of faith is the temptation to yield to sin's attraction.

Each of these brings the temptation to doubt that following God's will, seeking God's reward, is the best way. That's why it is a trial of faith. If a Christian keeps obedient faith in God no matter what happens, his faith will grow stronger as it is proved to be right.

God knows our limits. When a person decides to give up, it's not because what he has been through was really too much, but because he thinks he cannot endure what is coming. That's why a person says, "I can't take any more," or "I can't go any farther." He gives up in order to escape something he thinks is coming. If we trust God's knowledge of our capacity and his enabling grace, we can face whatever comes, knowing that God will give us victory.

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it (1 Corinthians 10:13).

The same kind of trial may happen to you many times. Therefore, yielding temporarily does not get you past it. We tend to think of some trials as unique, never to happen again. Really no trial is unique, and it will come again in a different way. A failure of faith weakens you and makes you likely to fail again. Conquering a trial will strengthen you for the next trial.

For Group Sharing

Ask some to share about a trial they have had recently and what its result was. Ask them to explain how it was actually a trial of faith. Some may like to share about a trial of faith they are facing now. After they have shared, ask:

► What do you need to remember so that you can endure this trial with faith?

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for always being with me, helping in every trial. Help my faith to be strong. Help me remember that hard times are a challenge of faith, and that my faith must endure.

I want to keep trusting you no matter what happens. I will show my trust by obeying you all the time.

Thank you for the development of faith that happens as you take me victoriously through trials.

Amen

Study Assignment

Study James 5:7-11. Notice the reasons that are given for us to endure in faith. The prophets are mentioned as examples. What people have you known who endured hardship by faith? What if they had not?

Lesson 11

Establishing Spiritual Disciplines

Big Idea

"I commit time and effort to develop my relationship with God."

Lesson Objective

To see how ten planned practices help us spiritually.

Introduction

► How does an athlete show what his priorities are? What about a musician? A student?

For all of these, the answers are similar. Because they are serious about their priorities, they discipline themselves to develop and succeed.

► What about spiritual priorities? Does our relationship with God require any purposeful discipline?

Spiritual disciplines are voluntary practices that are scheduled and maintained for the purpose of keeping spiritual priorities and developing our relationship with God. Examples are regular prayer, Bible reading, and church attendance. We must plan them, commit to them, and schedule them, rather than assume they will occur spontaneously. Any worthwhile goal requires discipline.

These practices may be called "means of grace" in the sense that God has designed these as channels through which he gives grace in response to our faith. They do not gain grace in a mechanical sense—as though twenty minutes of prayer would either manufacture twenty pounds of grace. Instead, they are effective only as the believer's faith is expressed through them. Therefore, if a person does them as mere formalities, he will not gain much from them.

Spiritual disciplines do not serve the purpose of making us acceptable to God. We are accepted because of grace. If a person is not sure of God's forgiveness, he cannot get forgiveness by means of spiritual disciplines.

Some Considerations about Spiritual Disciplines

- They are means to a goal, not goals in themselves.
- They are not precise measurements of spiritual status.
- They do not substitute for obeying God.
- They must be voluntary for the best results.

► Why must spiritual disciplines be voluntary for the best results?

Some reasons that they should be voluntary:

- Because true personal priorities are voluntarily set. If someone forces you to do it, it is his priority instead of yours.
- Because a relationship based on love develops only voluntarily.
- Because grace is given only if the disciplines express personal faith.

To promote spiritual disciplines, a leader must describe their benefits rather than trying to force people to practice them.

A List of Spiritual Disciplines

It is not necessary to look up all the references in this section. The study assignment will ask the student to look them up later. You could select some to look at during the lesson as time allows.

- 1. Prayer.** Every Christian should have a set daily time for prayer.
- 2. Bible study.** Psalm 119 shows the work of God's Word in a worshipper's life.
- 3. Fasting.** Great Christian examples throughout history set an example of scheduled fasting. The Bible contains many examples of God's response to fasting. Jesus expected that his disciples would fast after his earthly ministry was over (Matthew 9:15, Matthew 6:16-18).
- 4. Church attendance.** Believers should gather for worship, prayer, edification, and scripture study (Hebrews 10:25).
- 5. The Lord's Supper/Communion.** 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 describes Christ's institution of this custom and shows that the church practiced it literally.
- 6. Spiritual accountability.** We need to be under spiritual guidance from a mentor (Hebrews 13:17). We are to pray together about personal spiritual needs (James 5:16). We need to know the needs of our closest Christian friends so that we can share their burdens (Galatians 6:2).
- 7. Giving.** Hebrews 13:16 tells us to remember to do good and to give. 1 Corinthians 16:2 describes the church giving weekly offerings for a particular need. The principle of tithing is the means God has designed for the support those in full-time ministry.
- 8. Ministry.** God has given spiritual gifts for Christians to use to benefit one another (1 Corinthians 12). Every person has a role of ministry. He should find his calling and set specific plans for fulfilling it.
- 9. A spiritual diary.** This discipline is not specified in scripture, but it is important to remember the work of God (Psalm 78:11). A spiritual diary can be a record of

struggles, victories, answers to prayer, ministry events, and spiritual lessons. It can also be a means of maintaining a list of prayer concerns in order to pray with purpose.

10. Devotional study. A believer should read books on prayer, doctrine, and spiritual growth.

It is not good for a person to become proud of his discipline. However, a person should not reject spiritual disciplines in order to avoid pride, just as a musician should not stop practicing.

For Group Sharing

Now, use the form provided at the end of this lesson to make specific commitments to these spiritual disciplines.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Help me to maintain my focus on spiritual priorities by making a place for these spiritual disciplines in my life. I want to give you the time that you deserve.

Help me to be faithful in my commitment. Guard me from pride in my spiritual progress.

Help me to remember that my spiritual disciplines are to express my love for you and my faith in you.

Thank you for your grace that works in me beyond all that I can do.

Amen

Study Assignment

Look up the references that were given in the list of spiritual disciplines. Observe how these disciplines are spoken of as vital to the Christian life. (Psalm 119 was studied previously, so it is not necessary to review that whole chapter again this week.)

Commitment to Personal Spiritual Disciplines

1. **Prayer.** I will pray daily at _____ for _____ minutes.
2. **Bible study.** I will study the Bible daily at _____. I will measure my study by _____ (time or other means).
3. **Fasting.** I will fast each week on _____ for _____ (length of time).
4. **Church attendance.** I will attend the following church services and Bible studies regularly:
Day _____ Time _____
Day _____ Time _____
Day _____ Time _____
5. **The Lord's Supper/Communion.** I will participate in the communion offered at my church, which is offered every _____ (estimate frequency).
6. **Spiritual accountability.** I will report my spiritual condition and receive spiritual direction from _____ (specific spiritual mentor) every _____ (time).
7. **Giving.** I will pay tithe at _____ (specify church).
8. **Ministry.** I will regularly minister in the following way:
9. **A spiritual diary.** I will maintain a journal which I will update _____ times per week.
10. **Devotional study.** I will do the following devotional reading:

Date of commitment: _____

To be maintained until: _____

Name: _____

Lesson 12

Accepting Spiritual Accountability

Big Idea

"God develops me in a close spiritual community."

Lesson Objective

To see the necessity of interaction with other Christians for spiritual growth.

Introduction

Important work gets evaluated by someone. When we work, we know that we need to satisfy the one we work for. When we work with people, we want them to think that we do good work. We respect the opinions of certain people about our work.

The opinions of people are important in relationships also. In every relationship we learn to adjust our manners and behavior. The responses of others show us when they are pleased and when they are not.

Even when we play a game we are evaluated. There are rules to follow. Other players and spectators make comments. Points are counted. Achievements are cheered, and mistakes are criticized.

- ▶ What would happen if a worker didn't care whether or not his coworkers think he does good work?
- ▶ What happens to a person who doesn't care if people think he is rude?
- ▶ What is a game you like to play? How do the rules of that game affect how you play it?

What about our spiritual lives? Is evaluation from others important? Does it matter to you what others think about your spiritual condition? Do you know what your closest friends think about your spiritual condition? Are you willing to be evaluated and to adapt according to what you hear? Do you know where to look for the right evaluation?

We need spiritual accountability.

Spiritual accountability gives us accurate evaluations from those who can help us adapt and develop spiritually.

To have spiritual accountability is to establish a relationship with a person or group that gives spiritual direction.

A person with spiritual accountability reports

- His spiritual condition
- His successes and failures in spiritual disciplines
- His commitments for the future

Why We Need Spiritual Accountability

Without spiritual accountability, we do not fulfill all of the commands of scripture; and we neglect a means that God has designed for giving us grace for victory and spiritual growth.

...confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed...
(James 5:16).

A person will not confess private failures except in a relationship that makes it easy. If he is not confessing to someone who will pray for his faults, he is neglecting the means God has designed for meeting those needs. After the instruction in this verse comes the promise, "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much."

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2).

Unless we know someone very well, we won't know what his most serious burdens are. Most people won't tell about their serious burdens in a large congregation. We cannot fulfill this scriptural command without being in a relationship that makes it possible.

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24).

We are to examine one another closely with a motive of love in order to see what encouragement and reproofs are necessary. Encouragements will be shallow, and reproofs will be resisted unless we have a special relationship with the other person.

Obeys your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account... (Hebrews 13:17).

Many Christians want to be independent of any spiritual authority. They feel free to reject any instruction from their pastor and others. God wants us to be under spiritual authority. God appoints people with maturity and discernment to be responsible for the souls of others.

Ask yourself these questions to determine whether or not spiritual accountability is established in your life.

What relationships do I have which make it possible that...

- Someone is helping me bear my most serious burdens?
- I am confessing my faults to someone?
- I am helping someone with his burdens?
- Someone is responding to my present spiritual condition?

Are there times that I feel the lack of this kind of relationship:

- Times when there is nobody I can lean on?
- Times when I am glad that nobody knows my condition?
- Times I would not want to report my spiritual disciplines?

Is there someone whose spiritual authority I accept?

- When have I submitted to his directions?
- Do I heed his warnings about spiritual dangers?

Let's consider how to form relationships that will establish spiritual accountability.

Spiritual accountability works best when there is...

- 1. Privacy.** You don't want your personal sharing to be told to others.
- 2. Assurance that others accept you and care about you.** You don't want to open up to those that might use your weaknesses against you.
- 3. A scheduled time to share.** It may not happen spontaneously, at times when you just happen to be together.

This kind of spiritual accountability can function between individuals or in a small group.

To hold someone spiritually accountable means that you regularly ask...

- How are you doing in your spiritual disciplines?
- Do you have spiritual victory?
- Are you following through with the commitments you have made recently?
- What specific commitments do you need to make because of truth you have recently learned?

John Wesley established small groups to provide spiritual accountability. They stated their purpose and method, as follows:

The purpose of our meeting is to obey that command of God, "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.

For this purpose, we intend

1. To meet at least once a week.
2. To come punctually at the set time, unless unusual circumstances prevent it.
3. To begin exactly on time, with singing or prayer.
4. To each describe plainly and freely the true condition of our souls, with the faults we have committed in thought, word, or deed, and the temptations we have felt since our last meeting.

5. To end every meeting with prayer, according to the needs of each person present.
6. To desire one person present to describe his own condition first. Then, to ask the rest, one by one, as many searching questions as are needed, concerning their condition, sins, and temptations.

Many small groups have found it beneficial to have each member set goals for personal spiritual disciplines, then report each week on his success in meeting those goals.

Some groups establish a covenant that each member commits to. Here is an example of a group covenant:

I covenant to meet with this group every week, when possible. I will share honestly the spiritual events and condition of my life. I will try to provide encouragement, direction, and accountability to my fellow group members. I will open my heart to the life-changing truth of God's Word. I will keep in absolute privacy the personal needs shared in these meetings. I will pray for each member of my group daily. I will submit to accountability for spiritual disciplines.

A believer needs spiritual accountability, whether it is provided by a spiritually mature individual or a group. It is one of the means that God uses to give us grace.

For Group Sharing

Ask members of the group:

► Do you see a personal need for spiritual accountability?

Ask some of the questions in the lesson that help a person realize his need of accountability.

Ask if they think they are fulfilling the scriptural commands of spiritual care for one another.

Lesson 11 included a form for setting individual goals for personal disciplines. The group should discuss how to report. In a very small group, members could report to the group in turn. A larger group could divide into clusters of three for this reporting. If new members join the group, do not require them to report immediately. They need time to feel comfortable in the group.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

I want to be faithful to obey all of the commands of your Word. I want to help my brothers and sisters carry their burdens; I want to encourage them; I want to admit my failures to them so they can pray for me.

I want to accept the spiritual leaders that you have called to watch over me.

Give me the humility I need to admit my faults and the love I need to help others with their faults. Help me to not be angry when I am corrected or hurtful when I help correct others.

Thank you for the spiritual family you have given to help me grow spiritually.

Amen

Study Assignment

Look at James 5:16; Galatians 6:2; Hebrews 10:24, Hebrews 13:17. Read the passage surrounding each of these verses. Try to think of specific ways that you have recently obeyed those instructions. What are some actions that you could begin in order to better obey them?

Lesson 13

Benefits of Prayer

Big Idea

"Prayer is a channel for God's blessings."

Lesson Objective

To learn to pray for eleven categories of blessings from God.

Introduction

- ▶ Is there any value to having a list of things to pray about?
- ▶ Can someone describe how you use a prayer list?

A prayer list is helpful because it reminds you of certain things you ought to be praying about. Many people tend to pray about certain kinds of needs but not about others that are also important.

In this lesson we are looking at a list of benefits of prayer. By listing benefits of prayer, we see some of the things we should be praying about.

Reasons We Should Pray

We should pray:

- 1. To know God.** Imagine having a friend who never talks to you except to ask you for something. That is the relationship many people have with God. They do not show interest in really knowing him. A lifetime of acquaintance with the infinite God will continually open exciting discoveries.
- 2. To grow in Christlikeness/holiness.** As we know God better, we should want to be more like him. We cannot really worship him (which means to honor him for what he is) while being unconcerned about sinful characteristics or impurities in ourselves. If we really honor God for being loving, just, compassionate, patient, and pure, we should desire to see those characteristics increase in ourselves.
- 3. For family salvation and blessing.** The blessings in this list will come to you but also flow through you to those closest to you. Better than having a rich uncle, if your family has a member with a rich prayer life, the benefits that will come to them through those prayers are immeasurable. Be that person for your family—the channel through whom the blessings of God flow because of prayer. They will reach even into future generations.
- 4. For personal anointing and extension of ministry.** Every Christian has a ministry. Not only as pastors and teachers but as parents, spouses, friends, fellow

believers, witnesses, coworkers, and citizens, we have potential to bless the lives of others. Blessing comes by the work of the Holy Spirit in our ministries. Your special gift will not have its full usefulness unless it is submitted to God's direction, empowered by his Spirit, and used for his glory. Seek that focus and increase it through continual prayer.

- 5. For wisdom, discernment, and guidance.** Because of infirmity, we don't know even how to pray as we should, but the Holy Spirit helps us. In all areas of life it is the same. What mistakes could we have avoided if we had sought the discernment that God gives? That doesn't mean we should seek unusual signs or impulsively follow irrational ideas, but let God give understanding of situations as he sees them.
- 6. For understanding of the Bible.** The same Holy Spirit who inspired the Bible illuminates it for our understanding now. In prayer we seek not for new revelation but for better understanding of God and his will revealed in the Bible. We don't read just to feel blessed or be encouraged, but to let the passage speak its message to our lives.
- 7. For financial needs.** We can come to God about our needs, because he is our Father. As Jesus, taught in the Lord's Prayer, we should ask God to provide daily. We can talk to God about anything we need, and even the things we want, as long as we remember that he will decide what is good for us.
- 8. For joy and fulfillment.** The joy of the Lord is strength. We resist discouragement with faith. Without faith, we do not expect great things from God. Don't yield to depression. Seek joy in your relationship with God more than anywhere else.
- 9. For purpose and order in our lives.** We best demonstrate the priority of God in our lives by praying. When we put him first by putting prayer first, all of life takes on new meaning and order. We have a sense of fulfilling the purpose of our existence.
- 10. For specific answers and miracles.** God's responses to our prayers are all miraculous interventions, but we see some of them better than others. He changes things from what they would have been. There should be times when we realize that God wants us to believe him for specific help. When we understand the will of God in a particular situation and trust him, he does miracles for us.
- 11. For extension of God's kingdom through mission.** God's kingdom is advanced when a sinner repents, receives grace, and becomes a worshipper of God. Pray for the effective spread of the gospel, not just in your own community, but everywhere in the world, especially where you know a missionary is working.

For Group Sharing

- ▶ Are there any of these that you have not been praying about?
- ▶ Do you see why you should pray about these needs?

Ask members to commit to pray through the above list daily for the next week.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for helping me see that you want to bless me in ways that I had not thought of before.

Help my prayers to be a channel of your blessings to my family and others around me.

Most of all, I want to talk with you so that I can know you better.

Thank you, Father, for the privilege of prayer.

Amen

Study Assignment

Read Psalms 141-146. These psalms are all prayers. Look for the kind of things prayed for there. Look for statements made about God as reasons for prayer.

Lesson 14

Praying Like Jesus

Big Idea

"I pray best when I see what God wants to do."

Lesson Objective

To learn from the Lord's Prayer the importance of praying for God's will to be done.

Introduction

► If you were preparing to present a request to someone in authority, what would be some good things to know ahead of time?

It would help to know what he cares about. It would help to know what his goals are.

Jesus has given us this information about his Father. He has given it in the form of a model prayer. If we know what God wants to do, we can pray according to his will and know that he will answer.

The prayer that we call the "Lord's Prayer" was given in response to the disciples' request, "Lord, teach us to pray."

The Kindergarten of Prayer

This prayer contains Jesus' first instructions to them about prayer, so in a school of prayer it would be kindergarten level. That does not mean there ever comes a time when the principles taught in this prayer become insignificant to us. In mathematics, for example, the simple addition learned in kindergarten never becomes unimportant even in algebra, calculus, or geometry. A person who forgets the elementary principles of math cannot do the higher math. Likewise, if a person is ignorant of the principles that are the kindergarten of prayer, he cannot pray well.

It is good for us to pray these words occasionally, as Jesus said to, and all of our praying should be consistent with the principles he taught in this model.

Jesus did not start his lesson on prayer by promising that God would give them everything they ask. If a person does not know what kind of things to pray for, he will be disappointed. Don't tell a person that he can get whatever he wants by praying. In other scripture passages, Jesus did make some great promises about answers to prayer, but a person who prays needs to understand what God wants to do.

Let's look at Matthew 6:9-13.

The Model Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever.
Amen

The Primary Principle of the Lord's Prayer

Many applications could be drawn from the Lord's Prayer, but one principle stands out: We are to pray with God's perspective, values, and purposes in mind.

The prayer has a threefold pattern. There are three sections, and each of them has three parts.

The first trio of requests is (1) that God's name be hallowed, (2) that God's kingdom come, and (3) that God's will be done. These requests are quite different from the ones that usually fill our prayer time. They show what it means to pray from the perspective of heaven.

The Lord's Prayer can be prayed in thirty seconds, but we never have enough time to pray all that is implied there.

To pray that God's name be hallowed, or revered, implies first that we want to reverence him ourselves. We should want everything in our lives and hearts to be what can glorify God; otherwise, it does not make much sense to pray that his name be revered. We can also pray for those around us, that they would reverence God, which would mean that sinners would repent and lives would be transformed to glorify God. It is praying that those who live carelessly, as if there were no God, would begin to live with the regard for God that they should have.

To pray for God's kingdom to come is to pray for his authority to be extended in the hearts of men. In a sense, God's kingdom is the universe, and he is sovereign over all. Yet there are many within this kingdom who are in rebellion against God's authority. God's kingdom is extended every time a rebel surrenders to God. It would be ironic for a person to pray this prayer while intending to disobey God. We should first pray for his kingdom to come completely in our own hearts, then that it be extended by the surrender of those who oppose God.

To pray that God's will be done here as it is in heaven is similar to praying for his kingdom to come. A person could not pray this with sincerity while he does not intend to obey God completely himself. It would hardly make sense to pray for God's will, as if it is a good thing, while one's own heart has not accepted God's will. To pray this sincerely would be to start by praying for a holy heart.

The believer with a holy heart should be able to pray for the reverence of God, the coming of his kingdom, and the fulfillment of his will as if nothing better could happen than for the world to be exactly what God wants it to be. That is praying from the perspective of heaven.

Pause for Reflection

Do you really believe that God's will is the best thing that could be done in the world, in the place where you live and work, in your home, and in your heart?

Praying for Personal Needs in the Lord's Prayer

The next three requests are for personal needs. They are the prayer for daily bread, forgiveness, and deliverance from evil.

The request for daily bread could be expanded to include any basic needs. The fact that we are to pray for daily needs shows that God wants us to continually depend on him, rather than on resources we have accumulated. It is difficult for many people to really depend on God if they have what they think they need.

The prayer for forgiveness admits that we fall short of the perfect will of God and need his daily grace.

Then comes a request that God protect us from harm from Satan, both spiritual and physical.

The prayer ends with the threefold reason for praying this way. The kingdom, power, and glory all belong to God. We want everything to serve its created purpose in God's kingdom. We know that only God's power can accomplish what we pray for. The glory of the kingdom and its victory all belong to God.

We want every aspect of our lives and ministries to be according to God's will, enabled by God, and glorifying to God. We pray for that and submit to that purpose.

This is a kindergarten lesson in the school of prayer. It provides the basis of all of our praying which we must never forget.

The principle of praying like Jesus is this: Prayer causes us to see everything from God's perspective, so we can ask for what is good in God's eyes.

For Group Sharing

Share about our tendency to pray from our own perspective; that is, to pray for what seems to be good for us.

The prayer for God's will and kingdom should lead to deep heart searching, as one considers whether he really wants God's will to be done completely in his own life and whether or not he is willing to completely do God's will.

► Do you really believe that God's will is the best thing that could be done in the world, in the place where you live and work, in your home, and in your heart?

Members may realize a need to pray for changes in their own hearts so they can truly pray with heaven's perspective.

Prayer

Our Heavenly Father,

We pray that your name would be honored; that your kingdom would be extended; that those who resist you would surrender to you.

We pray that your will would be done completely in our world, in the place where we live, and in our hearts.

Provide day by day what we need.

Forgive us for falling short of your perfect will, and help us to forgive those who fail us.

Protect us from falling to temptations, and protect us from anything that the evil one would bring against us.

Because it is your kingdom; it is your power; and it is your glory forever.

Amen

Study Assignment

Write out the Lord's Prayer, leaving space under each line. Go through the prayer and list under each request the specific requests that you could be praying for in order to apply the Lord's Prayer personally.

Lesson 15

The Privilege of Victory over Sin

Big Idea

"Sin cannot conquer me while I let God's power work in me."

Lesson Objective

To realize that God gives grace for victory over sin.

Victory over Sin

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people... as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets... that we should be saved from our enemies... to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days (from Luke 1:68-75).

► What is our worst enemy?

The devil would have no power over us if we were not sinners. We would never have been separated from God and under judgment if we had not been sinners. The world would not be a place of conflict and suffering if it were not for original sin and continued sins.

Our worst enemy is sin.

God promises to deliver us from the power of enemies that would keep us from serving him in righteousness and holiness every day of our lives.

The epistle of 1 John emphasizes that the main characteristic of a true believer is victory over sin. This characteristic is given as a basis of personal assurance of salvation.

The apostle knew that there will be times when a believer needs assurance. He showed that it is proper for a believer to look for evidence on which to base his assurance, because after giving some evidence for that purpose, he says this is how we can assure our hearts.

By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him (1 John 3:19).

John gives many criteria for this purpose—he shows that he is giving criteria by repeatedly saying "This is how we know." Personal assurance is one of the main themes of the epistle. In fact, John said it was his reason for writing:

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life (1 John 5:13).

The criterion that is most emphasized throughout this epistle is victory over sin. The normal condition of a believer is freedom from sin.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin... (1 John 2:1).

Here the apostle shows that the believer should live without committing sin, and he says that he is writing to show them the importance of victorious living.

...But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:1-2).

Here he recognizes that sin may occur, though it is not necessary. He assures us that if a believer sins, the atoning sacrifice ("propitiation") of Christ can atone for that sin. We should not assume that this sacrifice automatically atones for a former believer when he commits sin. The verse simply says that the sacrifice is available, as it is for the whole world. We know that the whole world is not automatically saved. Repentance is necessary for any sin to be forgiven, whether the sinner was once a believer or not.

The following verses from 1 John show his emphasis that the great distinction of a believer is victory over sin. The phrases in brackets are added comments.

And by this we know [this is an evidence] that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him (2:3-4).

Everyone who makes a practice of sinning [whether he was a believer before or not] also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him (3:4-6).

Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. [Righteousness is real, not pretended—the person who actually does what is right is righteous.] Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil (3:7-8).

No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God (3:9).

Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. [If he stops abiding in Christ, he will sin. If he sins, he has stopped abiding in Christ.] And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us (3:24).

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments (5:2-3). [Real love motivates obedience. Disobedience shows a lack of love.]

For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world [its temptations and spirit]. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith (5:4).

From these verses, it seems obvious that the distinctive characteristic of the believer is that he lives in obedience to God. Victory over sin is a great privilege of the believer.

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him (James 1:12).

For Group Sharing

Some people argue against the points of this lesson. Try to keep the discussion focused on the scriptures used. Ask the group:

- ▶ If you are struggling with a temptation, how would this truth be important for you?
- ▶ Ask members to share how conversion brought deliverance and power over temptation.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for deliverance from the enemies that would keep me from serving you, and from the greatest enemy, sin.

Thank you for helping me to reject sin when I repented and came to you.

Help me remember to depend on you for grace every day. I know that with your help I can endure temptation and live in victory over sin.

Thank you for the privilege of living in victory. I want to be faithful and receive the crown of life you have promised to those who love you.

Amen

Study Assignment

Study Romans 6. Look for the statements that imply that a believer should have complete deliverance from sin.

Explanation of 1 John 1:8

The following material will be helpful if a certain objection is brought up.

Sometimes people who deny that a believer can live in victory over willful sin quote 1 John 1:8: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." But what does it mean to "have sin"? Does it mean that even believers are continuing to commit willful sin? That would not be consistent with the statements in chapter three that are quoted above. How could John have made those statements in chapter three if he had previously said, "Every person, including every believer, continues to commit sin"? That would not make sense.

The context shows the meaning. In verse seven, a cleansing for sin is promised. This cleansing is for those who walk in the light, which means to walk according to truth, in obedience to God. Those who are now living in obedience to God are cleansed of their past sins by the blood of Christ.

But there may be some people who deny that they have sinned and need cleansing. Those are the ones who say they have no sin, and deceive themselves. They are claiming that they never sinned, or that they solved their sin problem without Christ.

Again in verse nine, forgiveness and cleansing are promised. In verse ten he again says that the ones who say they have not sinned are contradicting God himself.

John was writing to correct the error of those who did not think they needed the cleansing and forgiveness provided by Christ—those who thought they did not need to be saved. He was not saying that even believers continue to commit sin, for that would contradict his main emphasis and direct statements in this letter.

Lesson 16

Passion for the Mission

Big Idea

"I have zeal for the salvation of sinners."

Lesson Objective

To examine the reasons that motivate us to spread the gospel.

Introduction

- Is it true that every Christian should work for the salvation of sinners? Is it something that only preachers should be concerned about?
- Okay, so what are you personally doing for the salvation of sinners?

Evangelism is a Scriptural Priority

Ask students to look up each scripture in the section below. After the verses are read, ask, "How does this scripture show that evangelism is a scriptural priority?" After they answer, give the sentence that goes with the scripture.

- **Matthew 9:36-38.** Jesus asked his disciples to share his compassion for sinners.
- **Matthew 28:18-20.** Jesus gave the Great Commission to the church, showing that evangelism and discipleship is our task.
- **Acts 4:29.** When the church first faced persecution, their first concern was not the physical danger. They prayed that persecution would not stop the spread of the Word of God.
- **Acts 11:18.** The Jewish church praised God that salvation was offered to the Gentiles.
- **Philippians 1:18.** Paul rejoiced that Christ was preached even while Paul was in prison.
- **Ephesians 6:19.** Paul requested prayer for effective evangelism.
- **Romans 10:13-15.** Paul emphasized the urgent need for messengers of the gospel, because salvation is for those who hear and believe.

Reasons a Believer Should Desire the Conversion of the Lost

- He should desire to follow the example of Jesus, who left heaven to live and die for the salvation of the lost.
- He should desire that God be glorified by the conversion of a rebel into a worshipper of God.
- He should see the spread of the gospel as a triumph of Christ and his atonement.
- He should want to participate in the work that is God's priority.
- He should have compassion for the lost who are facing eternal judgment for their sins.

Reasons Some Christians Don't Evangelize

Let members mention various reasons, then give them the ones in the list that were not mentioned.

- A lack of general spiritual zeal
- Not feeling personally responsible for evangelism
- Not knowing how to begin a spiritual conversation
- Not knowing how to present the Gospel in an acceptable way
- Fear of being unable to answer objections
- Embarrassment at being different from the world
- Doubt that his efforts will be effective

► Are any of these reasons good enough excuses?

Beginning to Evangelize

► If a person is not doing anything for the salvation of the lost, what is needed to get him started?

If a believer has no spiritual zeal, he needs personal revival.

If a person is spiritually alive and fervent and realizes his personal responsibility to participate in fulfillment of the Great Commission, the two following factors are most likely what he needs to get him started.

1. Faith – He needs to realize what God does to make the gospel powerful.
2. Preparation – He needs to be equipped to communicate the gospel.

► What do you need to get you started?

For Group Sharing

- ▶ Tell us what you are doing to spread the gospel.
- ▶ Are you satisfied with what you are doing?
- ▶ How many have shared the gospel with an individual during the last month?
- ▶ What do you think would help you begin sharing the gospel more zealously and effectively?

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

You loved the world so much that you sent your Son to die for our salvation. I want to love you enough to share your desire to save the lost. I know it pleases you for me to carry the message to sinners.

I want you to be glorified by sinners' repenting and becoming worshippers of you.

I want to feel the compassion that Jesus felt for the lost.

I ask you to guide and empower my efforts. Help me to cooperate with the work of your Holy Spirit drawing the lost to you.

Amen

Study Assignment

Review the gospel presentation that is taught in Lesson 6 or another method of presenting the gospel that you prefer. Consider your recent incidents of presenting the gospel and try to determine what additional study or training would increase your effectiveness. Make a specific commitment for that preparation.

Lesson 17

Faith That Survives

Big Idea

"My trust in God does not depend on exemption from suffering."

Lesson Objective

To see why our confidence in God should endure all events and circumstances.

Faith for Real Life

► Do you ever tell a bedtime story to children?

Here is a bedtime story for you:

Once there was a little girl named Lucy. Lucy was a very good girl. She never argued with her parents or teachers, and she liked broccoli and spinach. She was so good that the mayor of her town awarded her three gold medals: one for patience, one for diligence, and one for honesty. Lucy wore the medals always.

A rich man in the town owned a private park. He didn't allow most people to walk there, but he heard about how good Lucy was, so he told her that she could walk in the park anytime she wanted. There were many trees in the park, but there were no flowers, because the rich man liked pigs, and had many pigs there. The pigs had dug up all the flowers long before, but the man decided that he would rather have pigs than flowers.

One day Lucy polished her medals and went to walk in the park. She saw the beautiful trees and the beautiful pigs. There were pigs of all sizes. There were pink ones, black ones, white ones, and spotted ones.

But then Lucy saw something that terrified her. It was a wolf who had come to catch a pig for his dinner. He had not yet seen Lucy, so she jumped behind a bush to hide. The wolf came closer and stopped, trying to decide which pig to eat. He smiled as he thought about how much he would enjoy his dinner.

Lucy was peeking out through the bush and saw the wolf smile. She saw his big teeth and gave a little shiver of fear. Unfortunately, when she shivered, her medal for diligence clinked against her medal for honesty, and the wolf heard the sound. He jumped over the bush and found Lucy. When he looked at Lucy he saw how good she was. He decided that she would be much better than a pig, so he ate her.

The next day when the owner of the park came to that spot, all he found remaining of Lucy was the medal for diligence, the medal for patience, and the medal for honesty.

► Would you tell your children a bedtime story like this? Why not?

This is not a bedtime story that most parents would tell to their children. We like stories that demonstrate that wrongdoing is punished and good is rewarded. Parents want children to think that's what usually happens. But if our faith depends on a happy ending to every story, our faith doesn't match real life.

If bad things do happen to people who don't seem to deserve them, how should we approach life?

Christian faith is not:

- Irrational optimism ("Don't worry. Everything will be okay.")
- Stern stoicism ("Life isn't fair so you have to be tough.")
- Mindless escapism ("Don't remind me... I don't want to think about it.")

The most basic and most important kind of faith is a basic trust for God that endures no matter what is happening. A person with this enduring faith keeps obeying God.

Hebrews 11 describes many heroes of faith. They are people who by faith chose to serve God even when it meant they would suffer. We have the record of spiritual heroes who suffered, not because they lacked faith, but because they had it. Their faith made them willing to suffer and helped them to see beyond material things to the invisible and eternal.

Because of God's justice, there will be a final judgment. Eternal rewards will be given, and eternal punishment will be pronounced. Faith in the justice of God helps us to endure the circumstances that do not always work out right in the short term.

► Read Job 1:1, 13-22.

The drama of the book of Job is introduced with the statements "There was a man," and "Now there was a day." First the character of Job is described in high terms. He worshipped God and shunned evil. But then there came a day when everything important to him except his faith was taken away.

It seems to us that for such a man there should never come such a day, right? When calamities come to somebody, we always look for a way to blame him for what happened to him. We do that partly to protect our belief that justice rules in the world, and partly to retain our sense of security. We want to think that those things won't happen to us if we don't deserve them. But faith should continue even if those things happen. The Bible gives Job as an example of a person with enduring faith (See James 5:11 and Job 42:7-8).

An evidence of faith is when the believer endures and keeps trusting God in all circumstances. If a person does not understand this kind of faith, he will only pray for a miracle when situations are bad, but God does not always take away problems with a

miracle. Some people give up in discouragement because they think their faith is not working or that God has failed them. We need to remember the other ways that faith works.

A good story writer knows how to take the characters in his story through problems that seem to have no solution. At the end of the story, the writer surprises the readers. Real life seems to have many sad stories, but Christian faith is the confidence that God is writing the real end of the story.

A pastor and his wife Beth planted a church in California several years ago. It was a successful church plant, but some terrible things began to happen a few years into the experience. Their house was burned down. A few months later, the pastor was beaten unconscious by criminals. Then he was accused of crimes, thrown in jail, and later murdered, though the exact cause of death was never known. All of this occurred within about four years.

What has sustained Beth through all this trauma? To a great extent, faith in the character of God. She knows that,

- Since God is omniscient, he knows her situation intimately. God knew beforehand everything that would happen.
- Since he is sovereign, everything is under his control. He is still accomplishing his ultimate purposes for her life. Nothing has happened without God's permission.
- Because God is all-wise, he is able to guide her in all the decisions she must make now that her husband is gone.
- Because God is omnipresent, he has always been with her. Even through the worst part of the trial she was aware that he was near and that everything was under his control.
- Since God is omnipotent, he can bring about great answers to prayer. She can pray with confidence that God will meet her needs, bring glory to himself, and advance the Kingdom of God through this situation.
- Because God is all-loving, he has been looking out for the best interests of Beth and her family. God kept his loving arms around them the entire time. God had a loving purpose for the evil things he allowed them to face.
- Because God is holy, he wants Beth to have pure motives, just as he has pure motives. God wants Beth to continue to walk closely with him, and be careful not to have any unholy attitudes as she deals with all her problems. He wants her to forgive the attackers, the arsonists, and the accusers.
- Since God is personal, he relates to Beth as a real Person. He wants her to deepen her personal relationship with him.

Faith is not a guarantee that we will be exempt from suffering. Faith is a confidence in the character of God that sustains us during times of suffering that we cannot explain.

For Group Sharing

The goal of this lesson was to correct the tendency to think that God should always remove problems instead of helping us to endure. Ask some members of the group to share:

► What are some examples of situations when faith helped you to endure?

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

I want to trust you even when things happen that I don't understand. I know that you are always taking care of me.

Help me to have the faith that endures so that I can keep following you in all circumstances.

Thank you for your faithfulness to me.

Amen

Study Assignment

Read Hebrews 11. Notice how various people of faith persistently followed God's directions because they trusted him.

Lesson 18

We Need the Church

Big Idea

"I cannot fulfill all of God's purpose for me acting alone."

Lesson Objective

To help the believer commit to the local church.

Introduction

- What is the purpose of the church?

Affirm a variety of answers. It is not necessary to explain much yet.

- Who is responsible to fulfill the church's purposes?

Every Christian is responsible to help.

- Who needs the church? (*Everyone needs the church.*)

The church is one. Jesus said, "I will build my church [singular]..." (Matthew 16:18). The book of Ephesians speaks of the church as one.

And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all (Ephesians 1:22-23).

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call (Ephesians 4:4).

The church is universal. Because only God has the membership roll and no earthly, human organization contains the whole church, it is sometimes called the "invisible" church.

Yet, the church is also local. The church must take local forms in order to fulfill its tasks. For example, a believer cannot have daily fellowship with the universal church throughout history; he must fellowship with specific people.

God uses individuals, but he also uses the local church in special ways. The local church (not a building, but a group of believers) is a temple where the Holy Spirit dwells.

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? (1 Corinthians 3:16).⁴

⁴ To see that Paul was speaking to them as a local group and not as individuals, see 1 Corinthians 3:9. Individual believers are spoken of as temples of the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 6:19.

Some Purposes of the Local Church Found in the New Testament

Read the comment, then have someone to read the verse.

1. Worship and edification in a congregation (1 Corinthians 14:12).
2. Teaching established doctrine (1 Timothy 3:15).
3. Sending people to evangelize and disciple (Matthew 28:19-20).
4. Financial support of pastors (1 Timothy 5:17-18).
5. Sending and supporting missionaries (Acts 13:2-4, Romans 15:24).
6. Financial help for members in need (1 Timothy 5:3).
7. Discipline of members who fall into sin (1 Corinthians 5:9-13).
8. Baptism and the Lord's Supper (Matthew 28:19, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26).
9. Nurture of believers in a Christian community (Acts 2:42).

- Are all of these purposes important?
- Which ones in the list have you participated in recently?
- What would happen if the church did not do one of the tasks listed?

These purposes cannot be fulfilled by individuals acting independently. Groups of believers must cooperate locally to accomplish these biblical purposes of the church.

God has a plan of operations for a local body of believers. He gives what is needed and requires commitment from us.

Here are some examples of how the local body works:

Necessary Element	God's Action	Member Response Needed
leadership	calls pastors	submit to shepherding
finances	commands support	commit financial support
spiritual gifts	gives spiritual gifts	use gifts to serve in harmony
cooperation	design of "body"	recognize interdependence

Some people like to feel spiritually independent. They are glad to be part of universal Christianity, but they never join a local church, feel free to attend wherever they want on any Sunday, refuse any responsibility for regular ministry in the local church, and give their tithe to whatever interests them. If all Christians were like that, there could be no local churches.

Some people hardly see their need for the church. They expect to survive alone. It is difficult for them to see the benefits of attending church services.

Some churches have adapted their programs to attract and keep uncommitted church visitors. They compete with other churches by putting on services like performances. Their congregations become audiences without much more connectedness than the audiences at a concert or opera.

Every Christian should commit himself, his resources, and his abilities to helping a local church accomplish its biblical purposes. Unless he does, he is not fulfilling his purpose as a Christian.

For Group Sharing

Have members consider the following questions:

- ▶ Am I under a pastor's authority? In what specific way?
- ▶ Am I financially supporting a local church ministry?
- ▶ Am I using my abilities for my local church?
- ▶ Do I feel that I need my church?
- ▶ Do I feel that my church needs me?

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for giving me a spiritual family that shares life with me. Thank you for making me part of the body that is doing your will on earth.

Help me to remember that I need the church and that the church needs me. Help me to make the commitments that the local church needs from its members so that it can fulfill its purposes.

Help us together to be a temple where the Holy Spirit lives and gives life to your people.

Amen

Study Assignment

Study 1 Corinthians 12. Meditate on the description that is given of the interdependence of members of the body.

Lesson 19

Winning over Temptation

Big Idea

"I can win over temptation by the Holy Spirit's guidance and power."

Lesson Objective

To understand how temptation comes and how to depend on God for victory.

Temptation

- ▶ Did you ever have a temptation that you thought nobody else would understand?
- ▶ Did you ever wonder if it is really possible to live in complete victory over sin?

God has promised enabling grace that more than compensates for our weakness in temptation:

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it (1 Corinthians 10:13).

This verse tells us several important things.

- 1. Every temptation is common to humanity.** It comes because of our humanity and attacks some human weakness. That means that your struggles are not really unique to you.
- 2. God knows our limits.** He understands how much we can take. We don't really know how much we can take, but he does.
- 3. God intends that we live in victory.** This verse tells us that he will not let temptation be more than we can endure with his help. He limits the temptations that come to us, because he wants us to live in victory. Some people think that victory over temptation is impossible because we are human. According to this verse, victory is possible and expected.
- 4. God provides what we need to live in victory. He makes a way of escape.** Grace for victorious living is given in response to faith.

For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith (1 John 5:4).

If we understand how it happens that a believer is sometimes defeated by temptation, maybe we can understand how to prevent it. It is useful to analyze the process that a person goes through in falling to temptation.

The process is described in James 1:14-15:

But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin...

John Wesley observed that the steps to sin usually occur as follows.⁵

1. A temptation arises (from the world, the flesh, or the devil).
2. The Spirit warns the believer to be watchful.
3. The person gives attention to the temptation, and it becomes more attractive to him. (This is where the person makes his first mistake in this process.)
4. The Spirit is grieved, the person's faith is weakened, and his love for God grows cold.
5. The Spirit reproves sharply.
6. The person turns from the *painful* voice of the Spirit and listens to the *attractive* voice of the tempter.
7. Evil desire begins and fills his heart; faith and love vanish; he is ready to commit outward sin.

This process may not take a long time. It can happen in a few minutes.

Since temptation increases its power while holding our attention, the person who takes time to decide whether or not to yield puts himself in greater danger. The believer who is serious about maintaining victory over sin must have his heart established so that he can reject temptation immediately. A person who hesitates demonstrates that his heart is not fully determined to please God.

Temptation is a challenge to our faith, for temptation gives us the opportunity to doubt that obedience to God is the best way at that moment.

If a believer cannot seem to live in victory over sin, it is probably because of one or more of the following problems.

1. He does not see that God requires obedience.
2. He does not see or believe God's promise of enabling grace.
3. He does not depend on God's enabling grace instead of personal strength.

⁵ Paraphrased in *A Timeless Faith: John Wesley for the 21st Century*, edited by Stephen Gibson.

4. He serves God with selective obedience, instead of complete, unconditional obedience.
5. He has not sought by grace to have a single motive to do the will of God (Philippians 3:13-15).
6. He does not maintain spiritual disciplines that keep strong his faith-building relationship with God.

Scenario for Consideration

Three men applied for a job as driver. The first one, wanting to impress the prospective employer, said, "I am such a skilled driver that if I drove at high speed within a few feet of a cliff you would not have to worry." The second did not want to be outdone, so he said, "I could drive at high speed within a few inches of a cliff without going over it." The third driver hesitated, then said to the employer, "I would not risk your life by going near the cliff." Which one do you think got hired?

We should not be trying to see how close we can get to temptation. God wants to give us personal guidelines that will guard us from our areas of weakness. When we have choices, we should stay away from the things that make us spiritually weak, such as wrong entertainments.

What If a Believer Sins?

► If a believer sins, how long does he have to wait before restoring his relationship with God?

If a believer does commit a sin, he should repent immediately, and he can be restored through our advocate, Jesus Christ (1 John 2:1-2). He should not wait for any future time that he thinks would be more convenient. If he wants to be restored, the Holy Spirit is already giving him that desire and drawing him back to his relationship with God. If his repentance is real, he can be restored immediately.

God has already made the supreme investment for our salvation, in the sacrifice of Jesus. He is not going to let that investment be wasted by failing to give us the grace we need to continue.

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Romans 8:32).

The following scripture is printed on the student's worksheet.

Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen (Jude 1:24-25).

For Group Sharing

Share from experience how understanding the steps from temptation to sin can help a person to stop letting temptation take control in his mind. Allow others to share similarly.

Ask that someone share how one or more of the six problems listed above has kept him from living victoriously.

Ask those who have been struggling with a temptation to commit to practice the teachings of this lesson. For example:

► Will you determine that when temptation comes, you will not meditate on it but immediately reject it and depend on God for strength?

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

I am thankful that you understand all about me. You know my limits and weaknesses. Thank you for limiting the temptations that come to me and giving grace so that I can live in victory.

Help me to always follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Help me always to reject sin as soon as I recognize it.

Help me to remember that only you can satisfy my heart.

Amen

Study Assignment

Read Revelation 2-3. These chapters contain letters to seven churches. They were facing many different temptations and challenges. Notice at the end of each letter the promise that is given to the one who overcomes.

Lesson 20

God's Guidance

Big Idea

"I win life's battles only with directions from my commander."

Lesson Objectives

To learn to be sensitive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer - Communication in War

► What is something that is installed in every military vehicle?

Every tank, jeep, plane, etc. has a radio. It's not a radio for listening to their favorite music station, but a radio for communication.

Communication is essential to winning a battle. Soldiers in the battle cannot see the whole field of action. They may not know where their friends are and where their enemies are. They don't know which direction they should be shooting, and which direction they should be moving, except by communication from the commander.

There have been many cases where soldiers have been killed by "friendly fire," misdirected bullets from their fellow soldiers. There have been times when missiles and bombs have struck friends instead of enemies because of bad communication.

In modern warfare, it's a common strategy to try to knock out the enemy's communication center. The side that succeeds at that will probably win the battle.

We are in a spiritual war. The devil tempts and tries to deceive us. The world tries to pull us into its lifestyle and values. People around us sometimes hinder and discourage us from living for God. We are like soldiers in a hostile country, with only a few friends and many enemies.

God wants us to win the spiritual war. Prayer is our means of communicating with our commander.

Imagine a soldier in a battle who decided to ignore his orders and go on his own. He might do harm instead of good; he might fail to help people who are depending on him; and he would probably be killed or captured.

Praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints (Ephesians 6:18).

This verse comes at the end of a passage where Paul illustrated a Christian's spiritual armor with the military armor of his era. He said that our enemies are not physical, but spiritual.

Maybe if radios had been available for soldiers at that time, Paul would have used them to illustrate another part of the equipment of the spiritual soldier—prayer. After describing armor, he did talk about prayer to be used along with the spiritual armor.

While we are standing in battle against spiritual evil, we are to be praying, staying in communication with our commander. We are called to be vigilant in prayer, being watchful and perseverant.

God has promised guidance for those who will listen and trust him.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths (Proverbs 3:5-6).

The steps of a good man are established by the Lord (Psalm 37:23).

We need God's guidance all the time, and he is guiding us in ways that we are not always conscious of. He never forgets us, even when we are not thinking of him. But there are some times when we especially need to seek his direction and ask him to help us see choices as they really are. God may want to change our course in an unexpected way.

We need to be ready to listen to him...

- 1. When making life-changing decisions:** marriage, occupation, education, commitment to a local church.
- 2. When making practical decisions:** job opportunities, where to live, large purchases.
- 3. When planning and doing ministry:** personal calling, where and with whom to minister, themes to preach and teach.
- 4. When participating in the life of the church:** how to worship, what to learn, what to give, how to be a part of the body of Christ on the earth.

Ways to Better Discern God's Guidance

- 1. Stay close to God in prayer.** If much of your life becomes disconnected from your conversations with God, you are following your own inclinations and limited perceptions.
- 2. Don't trust your own reasoning more than definite Scriptural truth.** As the verse above says, "...do not lean on your own understanding" (Proverbs 3:5).
- 3. Always obey what you know for certain to be God's will.** That will improve your perception. A person who is disobeying God's Word does not really want God's will because God expresses his will through scripture. If you obey only part of what you know of God's will for you, you will get more confused—the light will turn to darkness (Luke 11:35).

- 4. Don't postpone obedience to the will of God.** Don't wait for circumstances to change before you obey God. You will not experience God's best unless you stay in his time.
- 5. Be patient.** You may need to wait while God opens doors and prepares situations for you. Don't take matters in your own hands because of impatience. "Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him" (Psalm 37:7). Never do something you know is wrong because of a sense of urgency.
- 6. Listen to good advice,** "for by wise guidance you can wage your war, and in abundance of counselors there is victory" (Proverbs 24:6). When God wants you to make a big decision, he will often show that to other important people in your life. If there are godly, older people who know you and care about you, you should not easily decide to do something they think is a mistake.

For Group Sharing

Share an example of a decision that you know was directed by God. How did God show you that it was the right decision?

It would be helpful if you could also share an example of a wrong decision. Did you fail to follow one of the four principles for being better guided by God? Allow others to share similarly.

Someone may be presently trying to make a decision that they would be willing to discuss with the group.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

I'm glad that you know what the results will be of any choice I make. Thank you for planning good things for me. I know that you are guiding my steps even more than I can see.

Help me learn to better follow your guidance. Help me to stay close to you in prayer. Help me to pay attention to the truth that you show me. Help me to patiently wait for your direction.

I want to trust you in every decision. I want to follow your will with wholehearted obedience.

Thank you for wanting the best for me.

Amen

Study Assignment

Study Proverbs 3:1-12. What values, attitudes, and character are described here that would be typical of a life that God guides and blesses? How can you personally develop those?

Lesson 21

Hindrances to Prayer

Big Idea

"I must avoid the errors that would hinder my prayers."

Lesson Objectives

To learn to guard against nine problems that make prayer less effective.

Hindrances in Prayer

► What could keep a person's prayer life from developing as it should?

In spite of the many reasons to pray⁶ many people find it difficult to establish a deep and faithful prayer life. Here are some common but avoidable hindrances to prayer.

(1) Lack of Motivation

And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed (Mark 1:35).

Some people don't make time to pray, because they don't see the importance of it. They feel that they are too busy to spend much time in prayer.

If a person often feels that he needs to get some worthwhile things done before taking the time to pray, or that he needs to shorten his prayer time so that he can get busy, he is not putting the right value on prayer.

A busy person neglects prayer because he feels that what he is doing is more important than what God is doing.

When you have prayed, you can do more than pray, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed.

(2) Pride of Spirituality

The hypocrites... love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you (Matthew 6:5-6).

Have you ever been in a conversation when you realized that the person talking to you was really speaking for someone else to hear? How would that make you feel? You wouldn't feel like it was a real conversation.

⁶ See the lesson entitled "Communicating with God," and the lesson entitled "Benefits of Prayer."

Sometimes when people pray they are not really talking to God but speaking for others to hear. They want others to approve of what they are saying. This is similar to the error of the hypocrites who prayed publicly just so that people would admire them. It would be the same mistake to want people to know how much you pray or how early you pray so they will admire you. This is spiritual pride and will hinder your relationship with God.

Jesus said that your main prayer time should be in a private place.

(3) Impersonal Prayer

And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words (Matthew 6:7).

In pagan religions prayers are often repeated phrases. Pagans hope to manipulate their gods by impersonal, magical means.

God is not moved mechanically by our prayers. He is a Person. Therefore, we do not say phrases as if they have magical power in themselves. Don't let your praying be impersonal.

(4) Unforgiveness

But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Matthew 6:15).

I desire then that in every place the men should pray... without anger (1 Timothy 2:8).

Your relationships with people affect your relationship with God. If you are unwilling to forgive others, then you cannot expect God to be forgiving to you. To forgive means to be willing for the penalty they deserve to be cancelled.

Without the grace of forgiveness, we cannot continue in a relationship with God.

(5) Unconfessed Wrong toward Others

So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift (Matthew 5:23-24).

Jesus said that a sacrifice to God should not be offered while you know you are guilty of wrong done to someone else. You should go make apologies and restitution if it is owed, then your sacrifice to God can be accepted.

We do not offer sacrifices the same as they did then, but we offer worship to God. If we want our worship to be acceptable to him, we must confess any wrong we have done to others.

Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered (1 Peter 3:7).

A husband is to treat his wife as something valuable and fragile. If he is inconsiderate of her fragility, his prayers will be hindered.

The same principle applies to anyone else that you have power over. If you are unkind, oppressive, and inconsiderate of someone's feelings and rights, God is not pleased with you, and it will be difficult for you to pray.

(6) Failure to Persist

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you (Matthew 7:7).

According to the Greek tense of these verbs, the one who keeps asking will receive, the one who keeps seeking will find, and the one who keeps knocking will get the door opened.

Jesus was emphasizing persistence in prayer. Often people pray for something once or twice, then forget about it. They do not pray long enough even to discern if their request is according to the will of God.

Persist in prayer by using a list to remember needs you have resolved to pray about. A list helps you concentrate in prayer at times when you are tired or struggling with wandering thoughts.

Think about this: "I may not hear from God every day, but I make sure he hears from me every day."

(7) Disobedience

And whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him (1 John 3:22).

This verse shows that obedience is a basis for faith. Obedience shows that we love God, so it is essential to our relationship with him. Disobedience shows a lack of love for God which will hinder a prayer life.

(8) Sinful Motives

You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions (James 4:3).

A person with sinful desires cannot see things from God's perspective and sincerely ask for what God sees as good. He desires the things of the world and tries to use God as a means of getting those things.

A Christian should be able to desire God's best. The Holy Spirit will guide him to pray according to the will of God.

We must be willing to obey and be willing for him to satisfy our hearts in his own way.

(9) Unbelief

And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him (Hebrews 11:6).

To not believe God's promises is to distrust his character. A relationship with God in prayer increases our faith in him.

Concluding Thoughts

Sometimes people fail to deal with a hindrance and almost stop praying completely. These hindrances can all be avoided with God's help.

A person should stop and look for the problem when he realizes he no longer has a desire to pray, or if he does not often feel spiritual life in his praying.

For Group Sharing

Share what has sometimes been a hindrance to your prayer life. Ask others to look at the list of potential hindrances and to share similarly.

► Make specific commitments aimed at resolving current hindrances.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for giving me the privilege of talking to you.

I want to please you in my actions toward others. I want to be humble and forgiving. I want to persist in prayer until you show me what you want to do about my request.

I want my motives to be honest and pure. I want to pray in faith for your will to be done.

Father, I value my time with you. Help me avoid the things that would hinder my relationship with you. Teach me how to pray.

Amen

Study Assignment

Read 1 Timothy 2:1-8. From this passage, how would you describe the character of a person who can pray like God wants him to?

Lesson 22

Relationships

Big Idea

"God's principles guide and fulfill my relationships."

Lesson Objectives

To apply the principles of love, peace, and respect.

Introduction

You could not have the Christian qualities of patience and forgiveness without being in relationship with other people.

► What are some other Christian qualities and activities that require other people? (*Love, unity, fellowship, accountability, kindness.*)

These things happen in relationships with other people. The qualities can be developed and demonstrated only in relationships. That means that our relationships with people have much effect on our spiritual development.

There are at least three principles in scripture that apply to any kind of human relationship: the principles of peace, love, and respect.

The Principle of Peace

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14).

This verse states the importance of relationships very emphatically. Holiness is closely connected to pursuing peace with everyone.

To pursue peace, you will at least give every person the treatment that you owe him. To those whom you owe gratitude, respect, or obedience, you must give it. If you don't, you are guilty of causing conflict. If you fail to fulfill your responsibilities, keep your promises, or pay what you should to others, you are not pursuing peace. When you realize you have failed to give what you should, you should seek forgiveness and fulfill your obligations as much as you can.

But to pursue peace requires *more* than giving what you owe. It includes giving the love and kindness you do *not* owe.

If you want peace you will seek reconciliation when there is a conflict. You will be willing to forgive and to be forgiven. You will not be quick to assume that peace cannot be restored. You will not easily accept a permanent separation.

Jesus said that you must go to the person who wronged you and explain to him what he has done (Matthew 18:15). If you consider the matter too small to be worth confrontation, then you should not tell others about it or hold resentment against the wrongdoer.

Jesus said that we must be willing to forgive 77 times (Matthew 18:21-22). A common reason that people leave the church and give up spiritually is resentment of mistreatment from Christians. Resentment often comes before other kinds of spiritual failure.

When a person refuses to forgive, he puts an area of his life in resistance to God's authority, for God requires us to forgive. That area becomes a territory from which Satan can affect other parts of the life. If a person refuses to forgive, he will soon be unable to resist temptations that seem totally unrelated.

The basis of every personal offense is our value of our rights. Because we believe we deserve certain treatment or respect, we are offended when we do not receive it. We believe we deserve better than we get.

The key to forgiving others is to understand redemption. To redeem means to buy back. Since God has redeemed us, we belong to him, and our rights belong to him. We must consciously yield our rights to God. You can pray, "Lord, I know that all my rights belong to you. I want you to take charge of them and give me only what you see is good for me to have." Then, when people treat you well, you can thank God that he allowed that privilege to you. When someone treats you badly, you can remember that God has charge of your rights, and he saw that you could be better developed without having that right at that time.

Worldly counselors often give advice aimed at helping you manipulate and change the person who gives you problems. That is not the priority.

By forgiving others, you are submitting to God and letting him develop you as he chooses. This principle of surrendering your rights to God applies to every human relationship. (Other references to forgiveness include Colossians 3:13, Matthew 6:15, and Romans 12:19.)

The Principle of Love

The person to whom we owe nothing we still must treat with love. Because we have received grace, we are in debt to God. We cannot pay him back. He has no needs, but he has told us to give to others the undeserved love that we have received.

Owe no one anything, except to love each other (Romans 13:8).

Love is evidence that a person is a real Christian.

If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen (1 John 4:20).

There is a special love among Christian believers, and Jesus takes personally your actions and attitudes toward other believers. He will say at the judgment, "As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40).

But Christian love is to be expressed not only toward other Christians.

In Matthew 5:44-45 Jesus said,

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

Some people find it difficult to be kind to those who offend them, but there is never an excuse to be rude. We are not to treat people as they deserve. We are to treat them with love and kindness whether they seem to deserve it or not. We need to remember that when we were sinners, we were not fit for God's love, but he loved us anyway (Titus 3:2-3).

The Principle of Respect

► If I offered you for free a hundred-dollar bill that is dirty and torn, would you want it? Would you reject it because it is dirty and torn?

You would take it because it has a value that does not depend on its condition.

Every person deserves respect because human beings are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:17). The image of God gives every person inherent value.

Even if a person does not have high intelligence, or lacks skills, training, and anything else that could make him successful or useful by ordinary standards, he has value because he is a person made in the image of God.

A person's inherent value remains even if he has made himself less valuable in other ways by foolish choices. He may have dropped out of school, destroyed his health, and formed bad habits, but he is valuable as a person with an immortal soul in the image of God.

Because of the inherent value of the image of God in man, respect should be demonstrated in every contact between people. Courtesy is the minimum.

Manipulation and deception are wrong, because every person makes choices with eternal consequences and needs to know the real factors for a decision. To cause a person to do something right for the wrong reason is not a success, for he still hasn't made the right choice.

As much as possible, we should treat a person respectfully even when his behavior is wrong. Even correction of mistakes and punishment of wrongdoing (by those who have the proper authority to do it) are done with consciousness that we are dealing with immortal beings with something of God's nature.

Conclusion

The Bible gives directions for relationships that are based on the principles of peace, love, and respect. There are directions for relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, employers and employees, pastors and churches, and elderly people and young people.

For Group Sharing

There should be abundant examples of applying these principles.

Share and ask for examples of when someone made an effort to follow peace.

Share and ask for a commitment from members to forgive those against whom they have had resentment.

- ▶ When could a person show someone more love than they seem to deserve?
- ▶ Discuss what it means to treat a person with respect even when his behavior is wrong.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Help me to live by the scriptural principles of peace, love, and respect in all my relationships.

I want to be forgiving to those who do wrong against me. Help me to seek reconciliation with those who are in conflict with me.

I want to have love for others that is beyond ordinary human patience.

Help me to respect every person as someone made in your image.

Amen

Study Assignment

Read Ephesians 5:22–6:9 for specific directions for behavior in various relationships. List what you should do differently in your relationships.

Lesson 23

A Careful Christian Lifestyle

Big Idea

"My daily life shows that I am serious about pleasing God."

Lesson Objectives

To learn nine principles that guide us in specific lifestyle decisions.

Introduction

► Have you ever noticed differences among Christians, especially in practical questions of what they do and what they don't do? Why are there these differences, when they use the same Bible? Since there are so many differences among Christians, does it really matter what we do? Why?

Not all Christians agree on the details of how to live out biblical principles and values. Yet a Christian must be serious about living consistent with what he believes.

Behavior, choices of entertainment, and clothing all show something about the inclinations of the heart.

Here are some principles that every believer should remember as he tries to discern what is best in specific lifestyle issues.

Principles for Lifestyle Decisions

(1) We must obey all of the Bible's commands to Christians.

Jesus said in Matthew 5:19,

Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

We cannot simply choose the points that we think are most important. No scriptural command is unimportant enough to ignore.

(2) God's commands are for our benefit.

Deuteronomy 10:12-13,

And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all

your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you today for your good?

God does not keep from us something that is good, nor command something that is harmful for us. We would not be better off without his restrictions. To reject his directions is to doubt his wisdom and love. We prove that we truly have faith in God's goodness and wisdom when we obey the instructions of his Word instead of following human ideas.

(3) Christian freedom is not freedom from obeying God.

Paul wrote this to Christians in 1 Corinthians 9:21:

To those outside the law [of Moses] I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.

We are delivered from the law—both the Mosaic system and God's moral requirements—as a means of justification, because we are saved by grace and not by fulfilling God's commands. We are also delivered from the condemnation of the law, because the sins we committed are forgiven.

However, we are not freed from the requirement of obeying God. As the verse above shows, we are under God's authority. His will for us is revealed in the Bible.

And, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness (Romans 6:18).

(4) If we love God we want to know his will, not avoid it.

1 John 5:2-3 says

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.

A person who loves God will not first ask, "Will God condemn me for doing this?" but, "What would God be most pleased with?" (Colossians 1:10).

(5) Scripture gives a basis for establishing specific rules for our lives.

The Bible does not give only general principles. Some passages are listed in the study assignment that provide a basis for careful Christian living. Some of them give specific directions for the Christian lifestyle.

(6) Rules about details of life are not our most important beliefs.

The Pharisees made the mistake of putting the most emphasis on minor things. In Matthew 23:23, Jesus said to them

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.

This verse does not say that there is any truth that doesn't matter, but it says that some things matter more than others. We should talk most about the most important things.

(7) Keeping rules is not enough to prove our obedience or love for God.

In the same discussion with the Pharisees Jesus said (Matthew 23:25),

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.

A person may live a very strict lifestyle yet not love God or even be obeying him completely. On the other hand, a person may love God with his whole heart and yet not see the reason for some standards. Therefore, the stricter person is not necessarily more spiritual.

(8) Our confidence in the testimony of others does not depend on the small details of their lifestyle.

In Romans 14:10 Paul asked Christians

Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

This verse comes in a passage discussing the different views Christians have on practical issues. There are sincere disagreements about what a Christian should and shouldn't do.

Another believer may not agree with our interpretation of a particular scripture passage, or he may not see the harmfulness of something we have rejected. It may be that God is working on different aspects of his life, or that God has placed him in a different cultural context. That doesn't mean that the person is not a true Christian.

(9) Tolerance of diverse opinions does not excuse personal carelessness.

Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind (Romans 14:5b).

But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin (Romans 14:23).

There are disastrous results when one violates his conscience. If a person decides to do something that he thinks is wrong, he is guilty of sin. There are blessings when one walks in the light God has given him (1 John 1:7).

For Group Sharing

There will be no difficulty in starting discussion on this topic. Some students may emphasize the need for churches to require rules of behavior. Others may emphasize tolerance of differences.

Try to get fair consideration for each of the nine principles listed above. Ask the group:

- ▶ Which of these principles do you think many people forget?
- ▶ Which of these principles are you most likely to forget?

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Help me to live consistently by the commands of your Word. I know that everything you command is important.

Help me to be faithful to my conscience, whatever others do. Help me to have a Christian attitude toward those who disagree with me.

I want my faith to show in all that I do. Help me in every area of life to make the choices that will make my life a good example of your grace.

Amen

Study Assignment

Study the following scriptures that provide a basis for careful Christian behavior:

- 1 Corinthians 6:19-20
- 1 Corinthians 10:31
- 1 Corinthians 11:14-15
- 1 Timothy 2:9-10
- 1 Peter 3:3-4
- Deuteronomy 22:5
- Psalm 19:14
- Psalm 101:3

What personal standards should you base on those scriptures?

Lesson 24

A Christian's Speech

Big Idea

"There are biblical principles for my conversation."

Lesson Objectives

To learn nine scriptural rules that help a Christian's conversation glorify God.

Introduction

There is an old statement that says, "The pen is more powerful than the sword."

► What does that mean?

It means that there is power in an idea, in persuasion, in communication. You can accomplish more by motivating people than by forcing them. An idea—a concept—can spread and influence many people.

The Bible talks about the power of words to do either good or harm. The plan of salvation is being finished by the power of the gospel, entrusted to human messengers.

Biblical Principles for Conversation

How can we use our words to accomplish good and avoid harm? The Bible gives some principles.

(1) Don't talk too much.

A fool multiplies words... (Ecclesiastes 10:14).

When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent (Proverbs 10:19).

Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent (Proverbs 17:28).

So don't talk too much. An excessive talker does not properly value either his own words or others' words. He says things that he doesn't really mean, and he assumes that other people do the same. He gives opinions without knowledge. You don't have to give an opinion about something you don't know; not every opinion is of equal value.

(2) Don't speak before you think.

Don't let your feelings cause you to make statements that you will regret.

Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger (James 1:19).

A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back (Proverbs 29:11).

Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly (Proverbs 14:29).

(3) Don't judge a situation at first sight.

If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame (Proverbs 18:13).

The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him (Proverbs 18:17).

Most conflicts are based on misunderstandings. Time and carefulness can usually resolve them. If a person with a reputation for honesty says something that seems wrong to you, don't be quick to judge him.

Whoever meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears (Proverbs 26:17).

(4) Be careful with humor.

Because of the effect that words can have, uncontrolled humor is like a weapon in the hands of a crazy man.

Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows, and death is the man who deceives his neighbor and says, "I am only joking!" (Proverbs 26:18-19).

Don't cause people to make serious mistakes because of believing your joke. Don't tell them you are serious when you are not—they will not believe you again. Don't make fun of defects that people can't help. Don't joke about someone's failures. Don't tell jokes that make sin seem trivial.

(5) Don't say anything to the wrong person.

There are many situations in which that can happen.

Relationships for spiritual accountability require confidentiality. You have great potential to help and heal others if you can keep things confidential. People will not trust you with personal information if they think you will tell others.

Do not spread information about people's mistakes.

Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered (Proverbs 11:13).

For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases (Proverbs 26:20).

There are times when something may need to be said, but you may not be the right person to say it. You cannot say it in the place of the authority who ought to say it.

A coward tells the wrong people about his conflict instead of following the procedure in Matthew 18:15-17.

Argue your case with your neighbor himself, and do not reveal another's secret (Proverbs 25:9).

(6) Be careful with criticism.

There is a right time and way to criticize.

Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend... (Proverbs 27:5-6a).

Make sure your criticism is intended to build, and not to destroy. You should demonstrate that you care about the person you are criticizing and that you want to help them. Usually a healthy relationship is necessary before your criticism can help.

(7) Don't deceive.

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices (Colossians 3:9).

Deception fits in the sinful life, not in the Christian life.

Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight (Proverbs 12:22).

(8) Keep your speech pure.

Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving (Ephesians 5:4).

Don't tell about past or present scandals except when appropriate to officially deal with a situation. Don't tell jokes that you must tell secretly. People of the world commonly use sexual terms or terms for private body parts in their exclamations, but that is not appropriate for a Christian. It is irreverent to use terms referring to God or Jesus as an exclamation in a time of stress, unless you are sincerely calling upon God for help.

(9) Don't divide people with your words.

A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends (Proverbs 16:28).

There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him... [the seventh] one who sows discord among brothers (Proverbs 6:16, 19).

Don't try to make yourself look better at another's expense. Don't cause conflict between others. Don't hurt the effectiveness of someone's ministry by gossip.

Before speaking, consider not only "Is it true?" but also "Why should I say it?"

Conclusion

A Christian should be willing to apologize if he realizes he has done harm with his words. He should be willing to correct anything that he said if he realizes it was not accurate.

Harmful and offensive words from others do not justify wrong words from you.

There are some errors in speech that you can gradually improve. For example, you can learn to think before speaking. There are other errors that show a problem in the heart, such as the desire to hurt someone with your words. If you are guilty of that kind of speech, you need to ask God to forgive you and to cleanse your heart of that tendency.

Your speech reveals much about your heart. Don't damage your Christian testimony by speaking in a way that is not consistent with Christian values.

Your speech can bless those around you. Most ministry consists of communication. The effect of your words can be greatly increased if you follow biblical principles.

For Group Sharing

Most people see the faults of others' speech, but not their own. Share an example of a time when you failed to follow one of these principles, or admit which one you are weakest in. Then ask members to choose a principle they are weak in and to commit to improving with God's help.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Help me to remember the effects that my conversation can have, and to take responsibility for my words. I want my words to accomplish good and not harm.

I want my testimony for you to be respected.

Help me to be pure, honest, kind, and careful.

Thank you for the privilege of communicating your truth.

Amen

Study Assignment

Study James 3. Observe the great potential of conversation described here. In verses 13-18 notice how speech flows naturally from the person's spiritual condition.

Lesson 25

Christian Work Ethics

Big Idea

"I do my best at work because God is my employer."

Lesson Objectives

To see why a Christian should work and what traits a Christian worker has.

Introduction

► How should a Christian be different from an unbeliever at work?

The principles of responsibility and honesty provide some ethics for Christians to apply to their work.

► Should a Christian work? Why?

A Christian Perspective on Work

A Christian should work because he has responsibility for himself and others.

For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

A person should not expect others to take care of him if he is not willing to do what he can.

Are there many people who truly cannot work? No. Even if a person is unable to work an ordinary job for wages, he probably could do something to help meet the needs of others.

A believer has responsibility for his own family.

But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever (1 Timothy 5:8).

What if a person's needs are already provided because of his previous work, or what he has been given, or "good fortune"? Is he free to stop working because he personally needs nothing? No, a believer is commanded by scripture to work so that he can meet the needs of others.

Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need (Ephesians 4:28).

Notice the contrast between the one who steals, taking something for nothing; and the one who works so that he can give. A Christian is not just one who does not steal, but one who works in order to give.

So a believer should work to provide for himself and his family, and to be able to give to others who have needs.

Now let's look at some scripture that tells us how a believer should work.

The Principle of Responsibility

► A student should read Ephesians 6:5-8 for the group. Discuss the meaning of this passage, then look at the list below to add to your observations.

Ephesians 6:5-8,

Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free.

The term *servants*, used in the New Testament, referred to slaves. However, that does not exempt modern employees from these directions. An employee differs from a slave in that he is more free to move to different employment. That freedom makes it possible for him to accept or reject the terms of employment. However, once he has agreed to work for certain benefits, he is required by scripture to apply certain ethics to his work as long as he remains with the employer.

Principles from Ephesians 6:5-8:

1. A worker is to obey his employer, not only when watched, but always. That also means that he should not neglect matters that he knows are unlikely to be inspected. ("...not by the way of eye-service...")
2. A worker should maintain the quality and diligence of his work as if working for God. ("...as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God ...")
3. A worker will be blessed by God for faithfulness in his work. ("he will receive back from the Lord...")

The Principle of Honesty

► A student should read Titus 2:9-10 for the group. Discuss the meaning of this passage, then look at the list below to add to your observations.

Titus 2:9-10,

Bondservants are to be submissive to their own masters in everything; they are to be well-pleasing, not argumentative [arguing or responding disrespectfully],

Not pilfering [stealing], but showing all good faith, so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior.

Principles from Titus 2:9-10:

1. A worker should be respectful in his response to his employer's directions ("...not argumentative...").
 - ▶ What are some results when a worker speaks disrespectfully about his employer to other workers?
2. A worker should not steal from his employer, even if he thinks he deserves more pay ("...not pilfering...").
3. Faithful work is a testimony for the gospel; unfaithfulness is a reproach on the gospel ("...that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God...").

For Group Sharing

In this lesson, guidance for sharing is provided in the two lists of application points.

A member should examine himself by the points of application, and consider whether or not his conscience is clear.

Ask students to share the changes they commit to make because of applying these passages.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for the ability to work and the privilege of working.

Help me to work well for my employer, showing respect for him, understanding what he needs from my work, and doing well even when my work will not be inspected.

I want to be faithful with what I earn, taking responsibility for my needs and giving to help others.

Help me to remember that I am working for you and that the best reward is from you.

Amen

Study Assignment

Study these verses on the subject of work and laziness:

- Proverbs 6:6-11
- Proverbs 10:4-5
- Proverbs 12:11
- Proverbs 12:24
- Proverbs 12:27
- Proverbs 13:4
- Proverbs 13:11
- Proverbs 14:23
- Proverbs 18:9
- Proverbs 20:13
- Proverbs 22:29
- Proverbs 24:30-34
- Proverbs 26:13-16

Lesson 26

Making Right Decisions

Big Idea

"Eternal values direct my decisions."

Lesson Objectives

To learn the questions that should be considered before a decision.

Introduction

The story is told that a preacher named Charles Stalker was praying one morning when God spoke to him and said, "I want you to go to China." Stalker was amazed because he did not have contacts or money to go. The impression was so strong that he packed his suitcase and went to the station where such a journey would begin. There a stranger approached him and asked, "Are you Charles Stalker?" then went on to say, "I was sent here with a ticket to send you to China."

- Is this the way that we should normally expect God to show us his will?
- Would there be a problem with a person expecting to find God's will for his decisions in this way?

Some people expect supernatural directions for every decision they make. They ignore normal reasoning and circumstances, because they assume that God's will might be opposite to all reasoning and circumstances.

It is wrong to insist that God must give supernatural revelation for our decisions because he often does not show his will that way. If a person ignores reasoning and circumstances, he may think he is getting direction from God when really he is following his own emotions or imagination.

Whenever something is clearly commanded or forbidden by scripture, we know the will of God. However, there are many decisions in life where we have alternatives that are not specifically commanded or forbidden. How can a person know where he should live, what job he should have, and how he should spend his money?

Some people, because they expect that God's will must be supernaturally revealed apart from reasoning and circumstances, find a nonrational method that they think God will use to give them directions. They may ask God to give a certain sign to show his will. Or they may open the Bible to a random verse that they apply to their situation.

Practical Advice for Making Good Decisions

John Wesley gave some practical instructions on how to discern the will of God. He said that we know that God's general will for us, revealed in the Bible, is that we be holy and that we accomplish good. Therefore, **to make a specific decision, we must consider which option will most enable us to be holy and accomplish the most good.**

We learn from experience which circumstances are spiritually helpful for us and which are dangerous. Some circumstances are spiritually dangerous for anyone; others are dangerous for some people, but not for everyone. As far as we are able, we should put ourselves into the circumstances that help us be spiritually strong and should avoid situations that will bring us temptation (1 Corinthians 10:12-13).

By reason and experience, and by the advice of others, we can also discern which option will allow us to accomplish the most good.

God does not ordinarily show his will by special revelation. **He expects us to apply scriptural principles as we reason carefully and examine the circumstances.** The Holy Spirit guides us even when we do not realize it. For most decisions we should not expect revelation but pray for wisdom and understanding.

People who claim special direction from God sometimes refuse to listen to other people (Proverbs 12:15). They may become angry when people question their decisions. They show pride and stubbornness rather than humility. Since they consider themselves to be directly instructed by God, they ignore all human counsel except what agrees with them.

For questions that are not clearly answered in the Bible, it would be better for a person to not always claim that God told him what to do. It would be better for him to say that he is trying to make the best decision. If he makes a mistake, it will be confusing to people if he said he had instructions from God. Also, a person should not usually reject the advice of others by claiming that he has a special knowledge of God's will.

Besides the principles Wesley gave, when thinking about your options, consider:

- 1. Is it consistent with clear Scriptural commands?** God never wants you to disobey his Word.
- 2. Is it consistent with Scriptural priorities?** The Bible shows us the things that are important to God. Does your decision keep first things first?
- 3. Is it consistent with a realistic view of the circumstances?** You should be able to see how God has been preparing your situation for this decision.
- 4. Is it reasonable?** God may sometimes lead you to do something that does not seem reasonable, but if so, he will make his will clear. Never reject reason as a means of helping you discern God's will.

- 5. Is it Christian behavior?** Don't think that any situation is so exceptional that you can do something that would ordinarily be displeasing to God.
- 6. Is it consistent with loving others as yourself?** Selfish motives will distort your discernment.
- 7. Will it have a good influence?** What if others do as you are doing? Would that be good?
- 8. Is it confirmed by godly advisors?** We all know how to find friends who will agree with us, but what would the people who seem the most spiritual and wise say about your decision?

When God's will is something very unusual, he is able to make it known to you beyond doubt. An angel, or vision, or a burning bush has given certainty for some people in the past. God may simply give an inner assurance that is beyond doubt. But when no clear message from God has been received, you should follow reliable principles for discerning the right option. Don't expect to receive special revelation for every decision. If you sincerely and prayerfully reason with the right priorities, God will be faithful to guide your decision.

In Romans 12:1-2 Paul wrote,

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

These verses show how a person's spiritual condition affects his decisions. To find the will of God, one must first devote himself completely to God. A Christian's decisions contrast with the decisions of the world, because he is not conformed to this world but transformed and making decisions with a renewed mind.

Motives are the most important factor in discerning God's direction. A person who seeks the will of God only so that he can decide whether or not to do it will probably become confused. If a person seeks God's will according to Scriptural and reasonable means, and with wholehearted determination to do it, he will not miss God's will.

For Group Sharing

► Discuss some applications of Wesley's principle. Some examples could be choice of friends to spend time with, options of employment, or a dating relationship (if unmarried). Consider, "*Which situation will help me be holy and accomplish the most good?*"

► Some people cannot seem to maintain their Christian identity when they are with certain kinds of people, or in certain places. Consider examples.

Other possible points for discussion:

► The role of motivations in decision making.

► The error of waiting for a sign.

► The danger of trusting inner feelings too much.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Help me learn how to listen to you. I want to be holy and to accomplish as much good for your glory as I can.

Make my motives pure, so that they don't lead me away from your will. Guide me through the wise counselors that you have placed in my life.

Help me to see things as they really are and to make the right choices.

Amen

Study Assignment

Examine James 4:13-17. Notice God's sovereignty over circumstances. What is the evil, the arrogance that is referred to in verse 16? What is this passage telling us about planning for the future?