



HOMES *that Transform* the NATIONS

52 LESSONS FOR FRIENDSHIP GROUPS
MANUAL 2016



Apostolic Assembly



HOMES THAT TRANSFORM THE NATIONS

52 lessons for Friendship Groups

Manual 2016

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of the Faith in Christ Jesus

Presentation

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Esteemed pastors and Friendship Group Leaders in the United States and in the whole world, ¡Paz de Cristo!

We share with you the 2016 Friendship Groups Manual **“Homes that transform the Nations,”** which contains 52 lessons.



We thank our Bishop President John Fortino for his vision to continue promoting the “Jesus Strategy” program’s original spirit. We also thank the International General Board of Directors for their support of this program. Thanks to this vision and support we can provide free of charge this manual to the 750 Apostolic pastors in the United States and the 700 apostolic pastors in all nations.

We plead, encourage, and exhort all Apostolic pastors to give this manual’s pdf freely to all Friendship Groups leaders in their churches. We believe that the best way to share this manual is through a pdf (“portable document format”), for in this way we show our stewardship over creation, we protect hundreds of necessary trees, we cut spending and we make it completely accessible to anyone in the world. In this day and age, practically and friendship group leader can obtain an electronic tablet at a very accessible price and hold within it this manual and many other resources.

The International GROWTH Team thanks Missionary Gabriel Pereira for writing the 52 lessons in Spanish and thanks Pastor Jacob Rodríguez for writing the 52 lessons in English. We are taking advantage of the 2015 Ministerial Symposium week in Long Beach, California, to give these lessons to our pastors in the United States.

“Go and make disciples of all nations”
Matthew 28:19

Bishop Ismael Martín del Campo,
International GROWTH Team Coordinator

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Key Verses:

Psalms 27:4; Luke 10:42

Introduction:

Life is unpredictable, and sometimes a little crazy. It's amazing how quickly your plate can fill up with responsibilities, errands, chores, business and yes—problems. To date, I've yet to meet a man or woman who is immune to problems. The main difference between people is how they handle their problems. Our two key verses were written ages apart, but share a common thread in life. The psalmist David penned the first as a declaration of faith. In the second verse, Jesus responded to Martha's busyness and worry. Both instances include the words "one thing" with regards to the presence of God.

Let's take a closer look at David's words. To fully grasp what David said in **Psalms 27:4**, you have to look at what he penned in the prior verse. He said, "The LORD is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid? When the wicked came against me To eat up my flesh, My enemies and foes, They stumbled and fell. Though an army may encamp against me, My heart shall not fear; Though war may rise against me, In this I will be confident." (**Psalms 27:1-3**).

David's desire for "one thing"—God's presence—opened up some divine secrets about drawing closer to God. When you narrow your focus in life and devote yourself to the "one thing" that really matters, you too will discover these secrets.

Four Secrets Found in God's Presence:

1. Secret Light (**"The LORD is my light"**)

When you walk in darkness, you can easily trip and hurt yourself over the smallest things. Because you're in darkness, you can't fully guard yourself against danger. When the Lord is your light, however, He illuminates your path. Subtle dips and bumps in the road won't cause you to lose your way. Light represents revelation, clear understanding and focus. When God's light is shining in your life, you have nothing to fear.

2. Secret Deliverance (**"The LORD is...my salvation"**)

David realized that no matter what trap he fell into, there was always an escape route. No conflict was too strenuous. No pain was too deep. No situation too impossible for God to re-

solve. God's people were slaves to Egypt for generations until one day God decided it was time to deliver them. That's when he summoned Moses to stand before Pharaoh and say, "Let my people go". God is a deliverer. The Lord didn't just save us on the Cross; He saves us everyday by removing the shackles of the enemy and untangling the issues that often strap us down.

3. Secret Strength (**"The LORD is the strength of my life"**)

David understood that God was the source of his strength. This is simply recognizing that you cannot do it all on your own. You are not super-man or super-woman. You're only human. Whatever amount of energy and strength you have will eventually run low or run out. But God's strength has no limits. **2 Corinthians 12:9** says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." God's grace is plentiful, and His strength flourishes in times of human weakness and difficulty.

4. Secret Beauty (**"to behold the beauty of the LORD"**)

David said that when he gets into the temple, he's able to "behold the beauty of the LORD". When your heart is focused on "one thing", you can behold the beauty of God, even in the midst of ugly circumstances. Sometimes, the problems of life pollute our perception about God and his goodness. The will of God doesn't always make sense. But when your life is positioned in his presence, you can find the beauty of his sovereignty and love.

Once David discovered the power of "one thing"—God's presence, he could see God's light, experience his deliverance, live in his strength, and appreciate his beauty.

Conclusion:

Perhaps life has consumed your heart with worries. Maybe you find yourself consumed with fear, emotionally drained or stressed out. Maybe you're trying to do too much. Maybe you've placed unrealistic expectations on yourself or those around you. If you're tied up with too many things, it's time to refocus your heart. It's time to rediscover the value of "one thing". Entertain the presence of God through daily prayer and times of worship. He's waiting for you!

Discussion:

- Of the four secrets mentioned in this lesson, which one speaks to you the most, and why?



Key Verses:

Matthew 6:19-21, 24, 33

Introduction:

Everything today is so focused on “me, myself and I.” All you need to do is look at the things we buy and the stuff that interests us. Naturally, we’re all selfish creatures - some to higher degrees than others - but nonetheless, we’d be dishonest if we say that we’re not concerned with how we look or what we feed ourselves. However, if we’re not careful we can obsess about these things to the point where they become gods in our lives.

Jesus said, “You cannot serve God and mammon.” The word “mammon” is an Aramaic word that implies “accumulated resources” or “material and physical belongings.” Basically, it’s anything that has a price tag, expiration date, or made from earthly materials. Jesus is concerned with people who place all their hopes in material things. Materialism is not necessarily about having money. Materialism is when your stuff has you. It’s when you depend more on things (possessions, technology, people, careers) more than you do on God. In our key passage of scripture, Jesus noted several threats that can destroy our material things.

Three Dangers that Destroy Material Things:

I. The Moth

If we all drew a picture of what wealth looks like, it would probably include money, large houses, expensive clothes and luxury cars. In Bible times, clothing was the most obvious symbol of wealth. What is true today was even truer then - moths feed on clothes. I’m sure you can remember a time when you pulled out your favorite coat only to find a hole on the sleeve or somewhere else. It’s amazing how one small hole ruins the entire garment.

A moth symbolizes anything in life that chews away at the happiness and pleasure you find in material things. A moth is any unseen, hidden threat that eats away at your possessions. You don’t see the affects of the moth until its too late. One day you’ll simply wake up and discover the holes and wonder what happened - the stock market crashed, your house fell into foreclosure, your car was repossessed, or your company went bankrupt. Now, if those things don’t define you, you’ll dust yourself off and keep going.

2. The Rust

Rust represents the gradual loss of luster and shine. When metal begins to rust, it becomes dull and discolored. Over time it loses value and depreciates. Remember how you felt when you bought your new car? It was shiny, sleek and polished. It had that euphoric “new car smell.” You couldn’t wait to drive it. But we all know what happened. Now your car probably smells like Cheetos, has a blown speaker, and the service engine light keeps coming on. Or worse, the carmaker has already rolled out a newer, better, upgraded and redesigned version of your car. Suddenly you realize you’re outdated.

Every material thing you have, including your own body, will get rusty. Don’t blame the devil; it’s just apart of life. It’s the process of time. Our culture is obsessed with having “new” things. Of course there is nothing wrong with new things. Let’s just not crave them and let them rule our lives.

3. The Thief

Finally, we get to the worst of all three destroyers. Basically, the thief takes what the moth and rust couldn’t destroy. No one fits this profile better than Satan - whose sole job is to steal, kill and destroy (**John 10:10**). Unlike the moth and rust, which are both natural occurrences, the thief has an agenda, a strategy, a scheme to rob you. The moth and rust cannot think and set up traps. But, the thief is cunning. He has a surveillance system on your life. He looks for opportunities to take advantage of your weaknesses and exploit your negligence.

The thief will use the material things in your life as weapons to steal your joy, and draw you further from God. Jesus shocked

his listeners with an ultimatum, essentially saying, “Serve me or your stuff - let me be your Lord or let your stuff be your lord. Who’s it going to be?” In the end, wherever your treasure is, that’s where your heart is.

Conclusion

If you keep your affection on Jesus and treasure the things that are eternal . . . the moth, the rust and the thief will never be able to rob you of your joy. You will say like Job “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; Blessed be the name of the Lord” **(Job 1:21)**. God is a good father who takes pleasure in blessing us, in giving us gifts. But sometimes He will allow our material things to be stripped from our lives in order to test our faith. In those “moth” moments of life, we recognize that God is worthy to be praised – no matter how little or how much we have.

Discussion:

- Of the three destroyers mentioned in this lesson, which one poses the greatest threat and why?



Key Verses:

Matthew 6:6-8

Introduction:

In life, nothing is more important, more crucial, more needed than prayer. Prayer is and will always be the nucleus of your relationship with God. So much has been said, documented and written about prayer. Yet it seems to be the one area people struggle with most. For many, prayer is a difficult thing to do. If you're honest you'll agree that prayer isn't something your body (the flesh) yearns for. Your soul craves communication with God, but your flesh can think of plenty of reasons why you don't have time.

Jesus knew prayer better than anyone. Don't think just because he was God in flesh, that prayer was the easiest thing. On nearly all occasions, he followed a routine of prayer that required effort and time. Jesus gave us three habits for developing a prayer life.

Three Habits for a Healthy Prayer Life:

1. Pray Always ("when you pray")

Notice Jesus didn't say, "If you pray." He said "when", implying that prayer is something that should be continual. Paul also said, "Pray without ceasing." That doesn't mean to pray twenty-four hours a day, but be persistent in prayer. We are called to be prayerful, to not lean on human wisdom or ability. When we work... "we work". When we pray... "God works."

Building a prayer life takes baby steps. As you discipline your time and set your priorities, prayer will become a foundation of your daily life. Train yourself to pray at least 15 to 30 minutes a day. As you get accustomed to praying like this, then challenge yourself to go an extra 5 or 10 minutes. You will soon develop a habit of praying and could eventually spend an 1 hour in prayer every day.

2. Pray Alone ("go into your room")

Praying in groups is wonderful, and great things can happen. However, this shouldn't replace the personal prayer time. Jesus tells us to go into a room and shut the door.

Can it get anymore plain than that? This practice will limit distractions and get you alone with God. Your “room” might be your bedroom, your office, your closet, your car, or any place where you can shut out the world around you. Not sure why I like this scripture so much, but Luke 5:16 says, “So He Himself often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed.”

The devil will sometimes attack your prayer routine by tempting you to multitask (pray and watch TV, or pray and work out at the gym). Of course you can talk to God anytime, anywhere! Many Christians pray in their cars as they drive because they’re alone. That might be a good option for people with long or early commutes to work. Jesus modeled that the most effective prayer life consists of getting away from all the noise and visual distractions that compete for your attention. If at all possible, designate a place in your home where you can meet with God.

3. Pray Authentically (“do not use vain repetitions”)

Using eloquent words doesn’t impress God one bit. Neither does praying in the King James Version of the Bible (Old English), as if your prayer is more holy that way. And let’s put away religious rhetoric. God wants you to be honest, authentic and candid. Pour out your heart, let your tears flow, praise with liberty, pray in tongues, say what you really want to say.

God is more interested in how you pray, more than what you pray. Of course your specific requests are important and necessary. But even if you don’t have the words to express or don’t know where to begin, just start by being honest and real. You can also pray the scriptures. Pick out a passage and pray through it. There is power when you mix prayer and the Word of God.

Conclusion

Jesus would spend hours in prayer, then cast out devils with very few words. That's the power of prayer. But Jesus knew how to pray. When you pray, try to remember these guidelines. In doing so, you will improve and enrich your moments with God. The better we understand prayer, the more significant it will become in our lives.

Discussion:

- Of the three habits mentioned in this lesson, which one might be the hardest to do consistently and why?



Key Verses: **Psalm 43**

Introduction:

When David wrote **Psalm 43**, he was hurting, afraid and spiritually cold. His heart was heavy. Have you ever felt that way? Do you ever felt like you're running from something frightening or painful? I think we all do. We all face situations that consume our hearts with fear and uncertainty.

Sometimes it's the devil attacking us. Other times it's just everyday life – unpaid bills, unread emails, or unchecked items on your to-do list. Look at how David's heart responds in his time of trouble. It reveals a God who draws near and lifts our heavy burdens. Based on **Psalm 43**, let's consider four personal actions we can take when life gets heavy.

Four Things to do When Life Gets Heavy

I. Be Strong in the Lord

David said, “For You are the God of my strength.” Sure, he followed that very statement with worries and doubts. However, before merely complaining or whining to God, he recognized that he needed His divine strength. Often times we grumble without seeing the power God has already given us. David could have already been killed. But God’s strength had preserved him.

Sometimes we need do to what **2 Chronicles 20:17** says, “You will not need to fight in this battle. Position yourselves, stand still and see the salvation of the LORD, who is with you, O Judah and Jerusalem!” Do not fear or be dismayed; tomorrow go out against them, for the LORD is with you.” What a life-changing scripture! Stand still in God’s strength and trust that He will never leave you nor forsake you.

2. Stay in God’s Word

David went on to say, “Oh, send out Your light and Your truth!” David yearned for God’s word. I have found, that when you’re in a desperate place, you get hungrier for God’s word. Being in a place of brokenness unties the often-petty issues in your heart, and allows you to receive God’s word openly. Turning to the Word of God is the most powerful thing you can do when in a tough situation. Simply reading or hearing the word empowers and enlightens us.

David also said, “send out your light”, which harmonizes with **Psalms 119:105**, “Your word is a lamp to my feet, And a light to my path.” Like the light from a lighthouse cuts through the fog

and guides ships towards the shore, so God's word sheds light in dark places—guiding us through the thick fog of discouragement.

3. Keep Praising God

As synonymous with David's entire life, he can't help but worship God in his time of need. He said, "I will go to the altar of God...And on the harp I will praise You". This part is so powerful. In the midst of calamity and despair, with nowhere to turn, no one to talk to, David musters up a heart of worship. When it appeared that all hell was breaking loose, and the end was near, all he could do was worship and praise God. He yearned for the altar. He hungered for the presence of God.

This was a defining moment in David's life. And the same can be true for you. Worship changes the spiritual atmosphere. The highest worship is not on the mountaintop, but in the lonely cave, when your flesh would rather complain. This is where God gets the glory. This is where you can exchange your spirit of heaviness for a garment of praise.

4. Stay Hopeful in God

Finally, David hopes again. He said, "Why are you cast down, O my soul? Hope in God." A number of years ago researchers performed an experiment to see the effect hope has on those undergoing hardship. Two sets of laboratory rats were placed in separate tubs of water. The researchers left one set in the water and found that within an hour they had all drowned. The other rats were periodically lifted out of the water and then returned. When that happened, the second set of rats swam for over twenty-four hours. Why? Not because they were given a rest, but because they suddenly had hope.

Those animals somehow hoped that if they could stay afloat just a little longer, someone would reach down and rescue them. If mindless rodents can be sustained by such hope, how much more would this be true for us? If we remember that help is coming, we can swim a little longer, we can hope a little more.

Conclusion

Life can lead us into caves of pain and distress. Life gets heavy. But if you can cry out to God, like David did, He will come to your rescue. Does it mean your situation won't hurt anymore? Does it mean that all your problems will be wiped away? Maybe not. What will be evident is the hand of God, pulling you through each step and changing the lenses on your life--so that you can see him more clearly.

Discussion:

- Thinking about the illustration of the swimming rats, why is hope so important when life gets heavy?



Key Verses:

Mark 1:40-42

Introduction:

Jesus Christ exemplified so many great qualities in his life, but perhaps the most essential of all was his compassion towards people. We sometimes fail to recognize that many of Christ's miracles, such as healing the sick and even raising the dead, were a result of his compassion. He wasn't just a power-filled man, walking around, zapping people with miracles and wonders. Was he a miracle worker? Yes. But his miracles were driven by deep sense of compassion.

In Mark's gospel, we discover a story that powerfully illustrates the compassion of Christ and His willingness to cross over any barrier to touch someone's life. In this scene, a man who was suffering from leprosy (a horrific disease) came to Jesus with hopes of being healed. When Christ saw him, his heart sank. He felt pity. And the verse says, "Then Jesus, moved with compassion." That's a key detail—compassion moves you. It compels you to act. There is a huge difference between feeling sorry for someone, and having compassion. You can feel sorry for anyone and sympathize, but not be moved to action. Let's look at how compassion moved Christ to action and what lessons we can learn.

Three Expressions of Christ's Compassion:

I. Stretch

Because of compassion, Christ stretched out his hand to this man. Compassion will cause you to stretch yourself into areas you would normally go. It will take you out of your circle of comfort. It will stretch you beyond your own needs and desires. We need God to stretch us so we can reach others. We need him to extend and enlarge our sphere of influence. Having compassion will do this to you.

Compassion is what drove God to come down to earth and save us! Wouldn't you agree that from heaven-to-earth is quite a stretch? In fact, Jesus himself—is simply God stretching! Let's not be so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly good. Hidden within the word "preach" is the word "reach". And hidden within the word "reach" is the word "each". So therefore, let us "preach" to "reach" "each" person we can for kingdom of God.

2. Touch

Compassion will drive you to touch people and places you wouldn't normally touch. By "touch", I'm referring to connecting or embracing people in the middle of their pain. Sometimes we are afraid of touching people's lives, especially those without God. Maybe it's because we're afraid of being rejected or possibly because we doubt God's power to flow through us. Jesus placed his own hand on the area of infirmity. He touched what others feared. Compassion will cause you to touch people and situations that others avoid and even ignore.

As **Hebrews 4:15** says, "For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities..." Jesus isn't afraid to feel our pain and problems. In fact, Jesus feels our pain before He heals our pain. We should adopt that same attitude when extending our hand to those in need. Compassion will lead us into the trenches of human pain and dysfunction. But that's where the gospel needs to be planted.

3. Speak

Lastly, Jesus spoke a word of healing to the leper. It wasn't until he spoke, did the leprosy vanish. Many times, it's just your spoken words that bring healing and restoration to people. Never underestimate the power of your words. Interject Christ into your conversations. Talk about His love. Testify of your own healing and deliverance. Speak uplifting words. Speak faith into someone's situation.

Proverbs 18:21 says, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits." Your words can either inject hope or defeat, acceptance or rejection, love or

hate. Life becomes a reflection of the words we speak. Let compassion motivate you to declare and confess words of life!

Conclusion

Ask God to help you become more compassionate. If you grow in compassion, you will be able to reach and ultimately lead people to Jesus. There is a saying, “people don’t care how much you know, until they know how much you care.” That’s the truth. None of our doctrines or messages will make an impact until we stretch, touch and speak with compassion.

Discussion:

- Of the three expressions of compassion, which one might be the hardest to do consistently and why?



Key Verses: **Exodus 4:1-3**

Introduction:

Moses was at a critical time in his life when God asked him the question “What’s in your hand?” On the brink of delivering the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, he began to feel unqualified. It’s normal to doubt your abilities and even your purpose, when facing a challenging task. Moses, who couldn’t speak very eloquently, was being summoned to be the voice of God’s people. We’ve all had to do things that we didn’t feel qualified for.

We’ve all been in situations that challenge how we view ourselves. Moses was no different. He questioned his value by say-

ing, “suppose they will not believe me or listen to my voice...” Notice he mentions whether they will listen to his voice—which was his weakness. Many of us have a tendency to focus on our weaknesses.

However, God asked Moses a question that He’s also asking us today, “What’s in your hand?” Moses answered, “a rod”, which was his shepherd’s staff. God chose to ask that question because Moses’ rod represented three key areas of life that he needed to lay down in faith. The same calling applies to us as God’s people.

Three Areas we are Called to Lay Down:

I. Income

Being a shepherd, Moses’ staff signified his income. Shepherding was a common way of earning a living. And having spent many years in the wilderness, Moses learned this trade. The staff, with a large hook on the tip, was used to either pull in sheep, or to poke them to move. That tool was his means of income—his career.

God is calling us to trust Him with our finances and careers. Let us not forget that God is our provider.

2. Identity

Moses’ staff gave him his identity. He could relate to the staff, because it represented his role with God’s people. He would pull them towards the promise and poke them to live by God’s guidelines. Moses found significance in this staff, so much so, that he later used it to strike a rock that would spring forth water. His staff represented who he was.

God is calling us to trust him with our identity and image. When we are born-again, we lose our lives in order to find our lives.

(Reference **Matthew 16:25**).

3. Influence

Beyond income and identity, Moses' staff signified his influence. His staff didn't have magical powers, as some believe, but it symbolized his ability to sway masses of people and unleash God's power. The purpose of influence is to speak for those who have no influence. That is exactly what Moses did when he walked into Pharaoh's palace and said, "Let my people go!"

God told Moses to lay down his rod. The object that signified everything about him, God asked him to throw it down. God is calling us to do the same, to lay down our glory for His Glory.

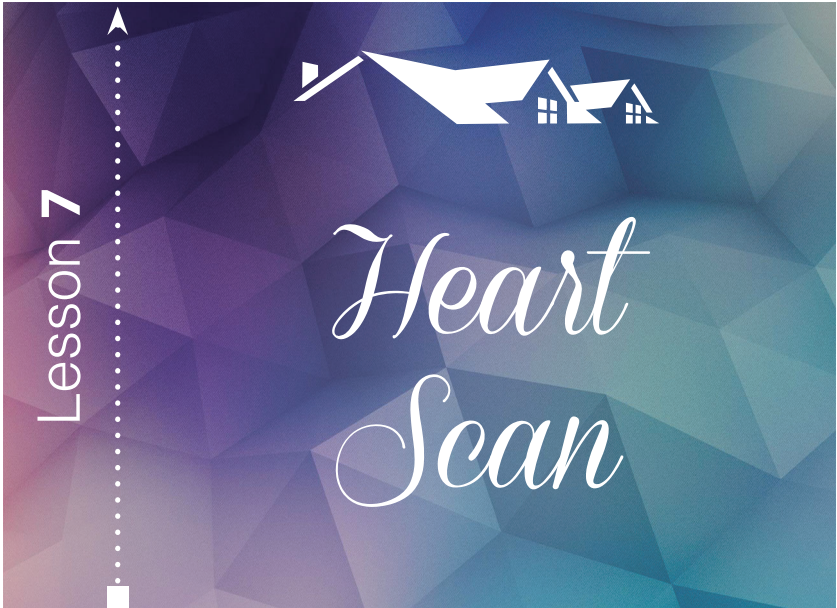
When Moses laid down his staff, it turned into a serpent. This was a sign to Moses that God will do miracles with what we lay down for Him. Here's the principle: what we lay down, God brings to life.

Conclusion

Today, God is asking you to trust Him with your income, your identity, and your influence. Cast them down, and what is in your hand will never be the same again. Instead of thinking of what you'll lose, think of what you'll gain. Your income, identity and influence will never be the same after you lay them down. Release what's in your hand, and God will do miracles!

Discussion:

- What types of fears or doubts could prevent someone from laying down the “rods” of life? (Rods of income, identity, influence).



Key Verses: **Psalm 139:23-24**

Introduction:

How's your heart today? Not necessarily your physical heart, but the heart of who you are. Every now and then, we need a heart check up—we need God to thoroughly examine us. Let's face it; things can easily build up over time, just like the heart and arteries in our bodies. So it's important that we ask God, as often as we can, to check our hearts.

David understood this principle when he said, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (**Psalm 139:23-24**). This is an honest prayer, a

heart scan. Over time, we can accumulate and harbor all sorts of emotional debris. So our hearts must be cleansed and purified.

During Jesus' days, it was a common practice for fishermen to wash their nets. You might wonder: Why would a fisherman need to wash his nets if they had been under water the whole time? Well, apparently the debris from the sea would get caught in the nets, making them less effective. So after each night of fishing, the nets had to be cleansed. The same is true for your heart. Like a net, your heart can accumulate things that not only can harm you, but also make you less effective.

Asking God to search your heart will save you from hidden heartache. David was honest. He was transparent before God. His prayer of cleansing is one we should pray often. In his prayer we also learn the benefits of a heart check. Two groups of issues are addressed when we pray these prayers:

Two Parts of a Spiritual Heart Scan:

I. Reveal my Fears

David said, “know my anxieties”. Anxieties can be fears, worries, stress, sickness, pain, and weakness. Spiritual heart scans can clarify these issues and help you deal with them effectively. For instance, sometimes God has to show us that “stress” is killing our joy.

Sometimes we don't talk about our fears because we don't want to face them. But that isn't a healthy approach to life and ultimately those fears will come back to haunt us. Rather than run from what scares us, David's prayer encourages us to bring our fears to the surface so we can conquer them in faith.

2. Reveal my Sins

David said, “see if there is any wicked way in me” .This prayer refers to the unconfessed sins, addictions, hang-ups, and/or any hint of disobedience in our hearts. David understood the condition of the human heart and how it leans towards fleshly desires. Many of us live unaware of the issues lurking deep within our hearts and the potential harm they can cause. This is why **Jeremiah 17:9** says “The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?”

Trying to search your own heart is an exercise in futility. It sounds like a nice idea, but personal introspection has its limits. Which is why we are encouraged to come to the Lord in prayer and seek His help. Only God can totally search the chambers of our hearts and reveal what needs to be changed.

Conclusion

Just like a physical heart scan reveals hidden life-threatening issues, a spiritual heart scan also detects the issues threatening our emotions and relationship with Christ. When was the last time you had a heart check up? Ask God to check your heart. Ask Him to test you, to uproot issues that are interfering with your relationship with Him. Be open with God. Be honest. After all, God already sees your heart. He’s just waiting for you to come clean and fall into His grace.

Discussion:

- What is more difficult to face, our fears or our sins? Explain why.



Key Verses: **1 John 1:9**

Introduction:

You’ve heard the term before, “I’m not a bad person.” This ideology stems from the erroneous belief that all people are inherently good. The truth is, we are all born sinners, and are inherently bad. From the time you’re born, sin is already in your spiritual DNA. The psalmist David said, “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (Psalm 51:5). This honest self-examination is a stark reminder that sin is not merely an action, a thought or a motive, but a condition. And although it may not be fair, it is reality.

To illustrate this truth, consider the following scenario. If a mother smokes cigarettes during her pregnancy, it can cause seri-

ous health problems when the baby is born, such as brain function and underdeveloped lungs. This baby never lit up a cigarette in his life, and yet he is born with nicotine in his system. It is fair to the child? No. But, unfortunately he inherited his mother's problem. The same is true about sin. As descendants of Adam and Eve (who fell into sin), we are all born with an inherited sin nature. Because of their act of disobedience, the whole human race fell under condemnation. We are born self-centered, and our natural inclination is to live independently of God. For a deeper understanding of sin and how we overcome it, let's look at three aspects of sin.

Three Aspects of Sin:

I. Iniquity

This doesn't refer to an act of sin, but to a condition of sinfulness. **Isaiah 53:6** says, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." Iniquity is our flawed human condition that enslaves every unsaved heart. The scripture above is actually foretelling Jesus Christ, because he took our iniquity upon Himself on the Cross and broke the curse of sin. The apostle Paul wrote, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (**Romans 8:1**). Jesus' sinless, perfect blood atoned and covered our iniquity.

2. Sin

The word "sin" literally implies, "to miss the mark". This refers to our failures to measure up to God's standard. Paul had this concept in mind when he said, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (**Romans 3:23**). Because we are stamped with in-

iquity at birth, it is impossible for us to make the grade...unless we have a Savior. Even when we try our best to please God with good deeds and religious acts, we still fall short. That is why the gospel is so beautiful and powerful. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.”

3. Transgression

This represents an intentional violation of God’s laws. A transgression can be clearly defined as a deliberate act of disobedience. I John 3:4 says, “Everyone who sins breaks the law, in fact, sin is lawlessness.” In other words, a transgression is when we fully comprehend what pleases and displeases God, but willfully act contrary to what we know. However, because of the cross, we again are delivered from the judgment of our transgressions. Concerning the atonement of Jesus Christ, the prophet Isaiah said, “But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed” (**Isaiah 53:5**). Jesus took our transgressions to the cross and extinguished God’s anger against our sin.

Conclusion

Sin separates us from God. **Isaiah 59:2** says, “But your iniquities have separated you from your God; And your sins have hidden His face from you, So that He will not hear.” When we have unconfessed sin in our hearts, our communication lines with God are cut off. But we can repent and find forgiveness because God is faithful! **I John 1:9** says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

Discussion:

- Even though we know God is faithful to forgive our sins, why do we sometimes struggle to confess and repent?



Key Verse:

I Corinthians 10:12-13

Introduction:

Ever since the original sin of Adam and Eve, people have faced temptations. For Adam and Eve, it was the forbidden fruit. Today, there are many forbidden things that Satan can tempt us with. As with Adam and Eve, the purpose of temptation is to lead you to sin, to separate you from God. If you don't learn how to overcome temptation, it's only a matter of time until it catches you off guard.

Temptation can be difficult to resist, especially if it's an area of weakness. Fortunately, God has promised to strengthen us during temptation, to help us overcome. In **1 Corinthians 10: 13**, Paul said, "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it." From this scripture, let's unlock several key points for overcoming temptation.

Key Points to Overcoming Temptation:

I. Jesus Understands your Temptations

Paul said, "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man". In other words, your temptations are no different than what others experience. Sometimes, it feels like you're the only one in the world being tempted, or that no one understands what you're facing. Nothing could be further from the truth. Even Jesus Christ understands your temptations, because He also was tempted in every way. **Hebrews 4:15** says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin." Jesus understands all of our weaknesses; He faced them too. But He also overcame every temptation.

2. You can Trust God

The scripture says, "And God is faithful". That may seem like such a simple statement, but it's packed with power. God is faithful, which means that you can trust Him with everything, your secrets, your hurts, your weaknesses and your doubts. If you don't realize that, then you may falsely feel condemned just for being tempted.

In **1 Corinthians 1:9**, Paul said, “God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.” The basis of God’s faithfulness is His fellowship, His relationship with you.

3. God Knows your Limits

The scripture says, “he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear”. Since Jesus understands your temptations, and He is faithful, He won’t allow you to be overwhelmed in temptation. God knows your limit, your threshold, and the maximum amount of pressure you can handle. God gives us sufficient grace to endure whatever comes our way. In **2 Corinthians 12:7-9**, Paul said, “To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.”

4. There is a Way Out

Paul finishes by saying, “But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.” With every temptation, God has already routed an escape plan. God will never allow you to be trapped into a corner without a way out. This is a sobering, comforting truth. This “way out” is not a program or human technique, but Jesus Christ Himself. In the midst of temptation, you can escape to God and find a dwelling place in His presence. The psalmist said, “He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, “He is my refuge and my fortress; My God, in Him I will trust” (**Psalms 91:1-2**).

Conclusion:

Temptation says, “It’s okay to sin just a little.” But nothing could be further from the truth. In the eyes of God, there are no “small” or “big” sins. Temptation is real. It’s everywhere; and even comes from within. As Christians, let’s be discerning of situations that may tempt us, or cause us to falter in our relationship with God.

Discussion:

- After falling into temptation, some people may use the excuse, “I didn’t have a choice”. What is wrong with this mentality?



Key Verses:

1 Peter 1:6-7, Hebrews 11:1

Introduction:

Faith cannot simply be learned; it must be lived. It is not a mathematic formula. This is why throughout the bible you don't find many definitions of faith. What you find are demonstrations and examples of faith. What you discover is that faith can only truly be seen in a person's life, decisions and trials. The best definition of faith in scripture is found in **Hebrews 11:1**. Here, Paul takes the time to thread some principles, and even then, he follows with illustrations from past Biblical lives.

Faith is not positive thinking. Mental toughness and optimism may reflect human will, but not faith. This is basically a secular notion that if you “believe” enough or have self-determination, you can achieve new heights. This concept of faith has been popularized in music, movies and self-help books. Nonetheless, this is humanism because it crops God out of the picture and the glory goes to man. The Biblical view of faith is that we trust God and abandon all self-reliance. This is not a license to be irresponsible, but rather a belief, a knowing in the heart that God is holding all things together. Let’s look to the Bible to find the key factors of faith.

Three Factors of Faith:

I. Anticipation

Hebrews 11:1 says, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen”. Notice that faith begins with “things hoped for”. In essence, faith starts with dissatisfaction with the ways things are. One doesn’t hope for something he already has. Webster’s dictionary defines “hope” as: to desire with expectation of obtainment; to expect with confidence. Those who are self-satisfied or complacent don’t exercise faith because they are not hoping for anything. Keep in mind; wishing is not the same as hoping. A wish is a passive desire, a want without any expectation.

Proverbs 13:12 says, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, But when the desire comes, it is a tree of life.” In other words, we begin losing hope when our answers or expectations are delayed. This causes a different kind of heart failure, which is a broken heart. However, look at what happens when desire is renewed. Fresh desire plants a tree of life in the heart. Sometimes

all it takes is a word of encouragement, a prayer, a song, or a hug, and your hope is revived.

2. Authenticity

In **2 Timothy 1:5**, Paul wrote “When I call to remembrance the genuine faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also.” When Paul was in prison awaiting his death, he wrote to Timothy and described his faith as “genuine”. In this scripture, Paul indirectly reveals that not all faith is genuine. The fact that Timothy was praised for the right kind of faith, implies the possibility of having the wrong kind. The bible gives examples of faith that doesn’t please God, such as little faith (**Mat 6:30**), dead faith (**James 2:17**), and unconfessed faith (**John 12:42-43**).

God uses various means to grow our faith in Him, such as teaching, relationships, prayer and serving. However, it’s the unexpected circumstances and hardships of life that shape our faith the most. **1 Peter 1:6-7** says, “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

3. Action

There are those who would argue that inner faith alone is sufficient for the Christian life, and that works are not a priority. They use **Ephesians 2:8-10** as their proof text: “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. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” Then there are others who contend just the opposite, that only works qualify us. They use scriptures like **James 2:26**: “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.”

Only two conclusions can be drawn here: **1)** these scriptures contradict each other, **2)** or they mix together to form one principle. Since the scripture never contradicts itself, the principle is that works are the fruit of faith. Works puts feet to your faith. It reveals who you are. It moves faith from being a declaration, to a demonstration. We may not be saved by works, but we are saved for works.

Conclusion:

Hebrews 11:6 says, “But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.” Faith is the oxygen of Christianity. Without it, our sacred truths won’t produce much and the Bible would be shelved in the history section of the library. Faith is what draws men into relationship with God. Faith allows God to be more than a topic of study, but a Father to trust, a Friend to confide in. Unleash your faith and experience God’s best for your life.

Discussion:

- Of the three factors of faith, which one is most difficult to achieve in our daily lives? Explain why.



Key Verses: **Philippians 2:13, Ephesians 2:10**

Introduction:

On the Day of Pentecost, in Acts chapter two, the Holy Spirit (or Holy Ghost) was poured out and believers began to speak with other tongues. These key events fulfilled the prophecy in **Joel 2:28**, “And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, Your old men shall dream dreams, Your young men shall see visions.” The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is not only essential to salvation (**Acts 2:38**), but also the everyday life of the believer. Before we discuss what the Holy Spirit does, let’s first identify who the Holy Spirit is.

The Holy Spirit is God because God is Spirit (**John 4:24**), and God is holy (**Joshua 24:19**). God's innermost nature is holy and spirit. When you receive the Holy Spirit, you receive God's holy essence, His presence living within you. In **Romans 9:9** and **11**, Paul summarizes this point: "But you are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if the Spirit of the God dwells in you. Now if any man does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his. . . . But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also give life to your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwells in you." Biblical references to the Holy Spirit usually describe God in activity, at work in and through man. Let's spend the rest of this lesson exploring the roles of Holy Spirit.

The Roles of the Holy Spirit:

I. The Holy Spirit Communes

The Holy Spirit is not a magic stick or some invisible superhero costume, but God Himself—working and moving in our lives. God is looking for an intimate relationship with you. Jesus advised not to use meaningless repetitions when we pray. Prayer is not just communication (transfer of information), but communion (transfer of heart).

The Christian life should be filled with worship. Maintaining a lifestyle of worship deepens your fellowship with God. It is our language of love. Jesus said, "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (**John 4:24**). Worship is not just songs or music; it is an attitude of bowing down, a heart of submission, a yielding to the Holy Spirit. Our communion God will lead us to recognize His presence, to speak with Him, to hear Him, to sense His assurance and peace.

2. The Holy Spirit Leads

How does the Holy Spirit lead us? The answer is twofold. First, the Spirit leads us externally through the revealed Word of God. The Holy Spirit will never guide you contrary to what's written in the Word of God. The Holy Spirit and written Word are always in harmony, and often the Holy Spirit prompts and guides us through the written Word. The psalmist said, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (**Psalms 119:105**).

Secondly, the Holy Spirit leads us internally through various promptings (**Romans 8:16**). As we grow spiritually, we attune ourselves to hear the voice of God more clearly. In **1 Corinthians 2:14**, Paul said, "But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." Never rely solely on what you feel in your heart. **Jeremiah 17:9** says, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" If you need clarity on an impression or prompting you feel about a relationship, a decision, or something else important, test it against scripture or ask for counsel.

3. The Holy Spirit Empowers

True intimacy with God releases the supernatural. Even your ministry is the overflow of God's Spirit in your life. In other words, power is not always something you administer or enact, but rather it emanates from your life. The bible says that people were healed by Peter's shadow (**Acts 5:15**). It's not that Peter started a "shadow-healing ministry" and invited the sick to come. It was simply Peter's relationship with the Holy Spirit that released the power to heal.

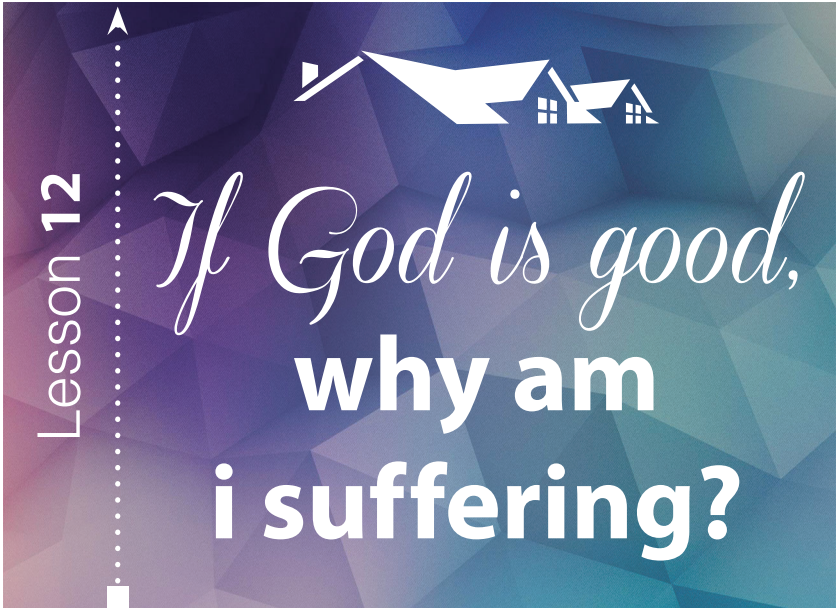
Another example would be when the woman with the issue of blood touched the hem of Jesus' garment (**Luke 8:43-48**). Power was drawn from Jesus without Him even having to pray for healing. As Spirit-filled believers, miracles should become a way of life. Spiritual breakthroughs are possible just by you being present in a situation, not because of you, but because of the Holy Spirit living in you. If we believe this, we can carry this power beyond the church walls.

Conclusion:

Following the lead of the Holy Spirit validates our relationship with God as our Father. In **Romans 8:14**, Paul said, "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God." What an amazing truth. Notice the apostle didn't say, "For as many are Christians..." or "For as many are church goers..." What qualifies us to become the sons of God is whether or not we commune with, follow the lead of, and believe in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Discussion:

- One role of the Holy Spirit is to lead us by hearing His voice. How can we position ourselves to hear God's voice more clearly?



Key Verse:

Romans 8:18

Introduction:

If God is good, why does He allow suffering? It's an old question that stumps a lot of people. Thousands of years ago, a man named Job endured extreme, unfathomable suffering—losing his children, possessions and health. He too wrestled with this question: "I will say to God, 'Do not condemn me; Show me why You contend with me. Does it seem good to You that You should oppress, That You should despise the work of Your hands, And smile on the counsel of the wicked?'" (**Job 10:2-3**).

Life is sometimes frozen by cold realities, painful experiences that seem senseless. Human understanding is frail and finite. We spar with unanswered questions. We desperately want to make sense of our suffering, or the suffering of others. Rarely does one question the suffering of an evil person, such as a serial killer. Most people consider that justice—one getting what one deserves. But when a good person or an innocent person suffers without reason...it doesn't sit well. We question why a drunk driver lived, and the law-abiding driver was killed. We question why a 2-year-old child would have leukemia, or why a faithful believer would die of cancer. No matter how spiritual we are, we can't pretend these questions don't trouble us.

In Times of Suffering, Remember these Three Characteristics of God:

I. God is Good

There is a fundamental problem in the way that most people, even Christians, view God and His character. First, we must understand that humans do not define God. Anytime humans try to define a god, they basically create a god, which is idolatry. God is self-defined. Concerning Himself, God told Moses, "I AM WHO I AM" (Ref. **Exodus 3:14**). Second, not only is God self-defined, His goodness is self-defined. In other words, God defines what is good and not good. We humans don't decide that. At creation, it was God who established what was good. However, because of man's increased knowledge, he arrogantly assumes he knows what is good.

In **Mark 10:18**, Jesus said, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God". God is not good because we think He is or say He is. He is not good because we took a vote.

God is good whether you believe it or not. Because God is always good, whatever He does or approves is good...even when it doesn't make sense. This is usually where we start remembering those tragedies, those harsh realities that clash with our definitions of good. There is no greater level of goodness than God Himself and His approval.

2. God is Sovereign

We must also understand that God is sovereign. Job, the same man who asked "Why me?", answered his own question with a revelation: "...Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know" (**Job 42:3**). Sometimes there are no concrete answers or clear explanations. Still though, we can rest in knowing that God has a plan, no matter how difficult it is to accept. **Romans 8:28** says, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." In this scripture, "all things" isn't just "good things", but includes those "bad things" in life. God uses all things, such as the loss of a job or the death of a loved one, to accomplish His divine purpose.

God is sovereign because He is the Most High God and that there is no higher authority. He is the all-powerful, Almighty God; He is the ruler of heaven and earth; the owner of everything. Nothing surprises God, because He holds the future. When it comes to our suffering, we must remember that God is in control and that His ways are not always understood. Job's response to God's sovereignty was "Naked I came from my mother's womb, And naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; Blessed be the name of the LORD" (**Job 1:21**).

3. God Understands

Finally, remember that no matter what you go through, Jesus understands your suffering. This is what separates Jesus from all other false gods and religious figures. Jesus (God in flesh) can relate to us and has experienced every human emotion, pain and loss you will ever face. **Hebrews 4:15** says, “For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.” **Hebrews 5:7-8** continues, “...in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.”

We all have a desire to be understood. God knows our pain, not merely through information, but through personal experience. This brings a whole new level of closeness between you and God. In **Psalms 51:17**, David said, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart—These, O God, You will not despise.” God doesn’t enjoy your suffering. However, He loves when you call upon Him and abandon all other resources.

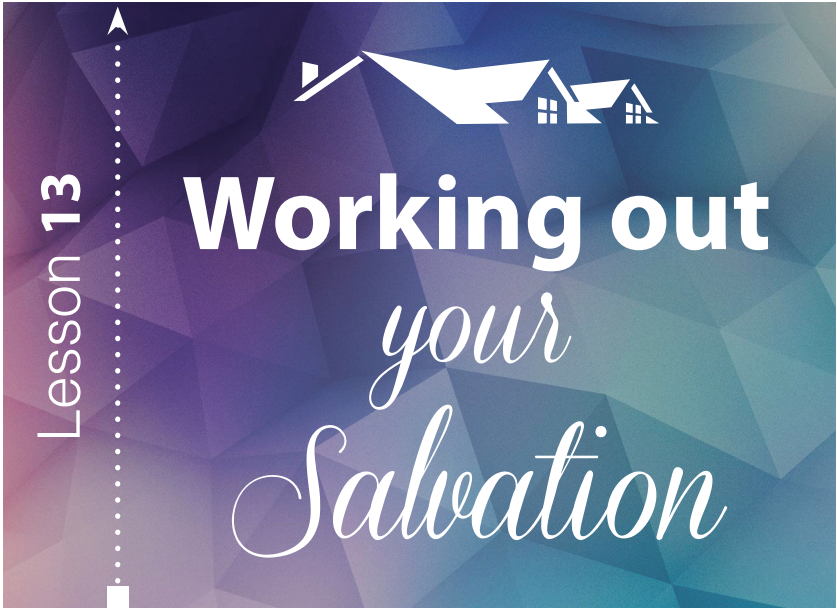
Conclusion:

2 Timothy 3:12 says, “Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.” Until Jesus returns for His church, suffering will be a reality. When you suffer for Christ or in Christ, there are blessings to come. In **Romans 5:3-4**, Paul said, “...we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.” The apostle did not say, “we rejoice be-

cause of our sufferings”, but “we rejoice in our sufferings”. In other words, we can rejoice in the midst of any situation, no matter how painful.

Discussion:

- Of the three characteristics of God mentioned in this lesson, which one might be the hardest to accept and why?



Key Verse: **Philippians 2:12-13**

Introduction:

In **Philippians 2:12-13**, Paul said, “...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.” This scripture creates a problem for those who believe in the “once saved, always saved” doctrine. This unbiblical doctrine says that after baptism or a sinner’s prayer, a person can live any way they want and still inherit eternal life. Let’s review Paul’s words.

- “With fear and trembling” – Paul is not talking about a negative fear, but a reverence, being in awe of God. It is to carefully please God before self, to obey the scriptures, to respect spiritual authority, to be aware of God’s presence.

- “For it is God who works in you” – This reminds us that the ability to “work out your own salvation” is not based on human effort, but on the power of the Holy Spirit. It is God who gives us the power to stay saved.
- “To will and to do for His good pleasure” – When God empowers us He gives us the desire and ability to do what pleases Him. A life that is completely surrendered to the Holy Spirit will receive the willingness to obey His voice.

The apostle Paul makes it clear that through the Holy Spirit’s power, we are responsible for maintaining our salvation. This doesn’t mean that humans earn salvation, but our lifestyle can either promote our salvation, or cause us to backslide. Let’s look at two keys for staying saved.

Two Keys for Staying Saved:

I. Love Jesus Christ with Everything

Staying saved begins with staying in love with Jesus Christ. In **Mark 12:30**, Jesus said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” First of all, notice the phrase “Love the Lord your God”. The word “your” implies that God must become and remain your personal Lord. It’s not enough that God be the God of your church, your parents or your pastor, but He must be your God.

Loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength should be the results of a true encounter with God. Many people are content to live with just the concept of loving God, but they fail to experience it every day. Your love for God should be re-

vealed in the way you live. Your affections, conduct, attitude and thoughts should reflect a life that is fully devoted to Jesus.

2. Obey God's Word with Everything

If a room full of Christians were asked the question, "Do you love God?", it's hard to believe anyone would answer "no". Most, if not all, Christians profess to love God. However, many believers don't understand what it means to love Him. Loving God has very little to do with what you feel or say. In **John 14:15**, Jesus said, "If you love me, you will obey what I command". Obedience is God's love test. It's how God determines if we truly love Him.

The reason Jesus' words can be difficult to digest is because our human nature is to do "what we want, when we want, and how we want". In **John 14:21**, Jesus said, "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him." God's love doesn't demand, but it so compels us that we willingly surrender our hearts and minds to Him.

Obedience is not simply following orders, it's responding to God's word with joy. God is not asking for cold and religious compliance. He's asking for your heart. When you have a true encounter with the love of God, it enables you to accept and obey His word.

Conclusion:

Some are willing to gamble with eternity by thinking that since they are baptized and Spirit-filled, they can live any way they want and still be saved. Don't be deceived. Salvation should not be viewed as a one-time event, but a journey, an ongoing relation-

ship with Jesus Christ. We must not forget that we are saved by grace alone, and not by works. In **Ephesians 2:8**, Paul said, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God”. Salvation is a gift. And like any gift, it must be valued and appreciated.

Discussion:

- How do you think the teaching of “working out your salvation” should affect us in daily life?



Key Verses: **Matthew 22:36-40**

Introduction:

According to Jesus, the second greatest commandment (after loving God) is “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (**Matthew 22:36-40**). Neighbors are not just the people you share a backyard fence with. They are not just the folks you wave at while checking your mailbox. Neighbors are those you face and interact with everyday; co-workers, friends, acquaintances, people you get along with and even those you don’t.

Love is more about attitude than about feelings. Love is a behavior, not just warm feelings. We typically associate love with how we feel, or by how often we say, “I love you.” But it goes deeper than that. **I Corinthians 13:4-7** shows us how love

behaves: “Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. Love does not demand its own way. Love is not irritable, and it keeps no record of when it has been wronged. It is never glad about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.”

Let’s review the eight attributes of love:

- 1. Love is Patient** – It’s enduring and tolerable. Because you love someone, you sometimes have to tolerate difficult circumstances.
- 2. Love is Kind, not Rude** – To put it plainly, be nice to people. No matter how awful your day is, kindness is still a choice.
- 3. Love is not Jealous** – Envy and jealousy cannot co-exist with love. These destructive emotions pollute your joy and steal your peace of mind.
- 4. Love is not Boastful, or Proud** – Love has a way of dissolving your ego. When God’s love gets into your heart, it humbles you.
- 5. Love does not Demand** – Love isn’t demanding or insisting. When you put demands on people in order for you to love them, that isn’t love. Love is unselfish.
- 6. Love is not Irritable** – It’s not easily angered. Touchy and short-fused people struggle with loving others. Don’t let the sun go down on your anger.
- 7. Love Keeps no record of when it has been wronged** – Chances are, you will be offended or hurt by someone. Let it go. With the same grace that has been given to you, freely give. (More to come on this issue).

- 8. Love is never glad about injustice, but rejoices over truth** – In short, when God's love is alive in your heart, you don't get excited about unfairness and wrong doings. You're glad about truth and justice.

Love your Enemies (Read Luke 6:27-28)

When you think about loving your neighbor, it's easy to love people who are likable, friendly and share things in common with you. But let's face it, not everyone surrounding you fits that mold. In fact, certain people have a way of pushing the wrong buttons in us. But God has called us to love our enemies. Here are three simple ways to help you love your enemies or heal broken relationships:

1. Rethink the situation – it's possible that you might have misinterpreted what someone said or did. If so, you can misjudge them and unfairly hold it against them. **Matthew 7:2-3** (NLT) says, "For others will treat you as you treat them. Whatever measure you use in judging others, it will be used to measure how you are judged. And why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own?" Prayerfully analyze the situation. Try to see the other side before forming a final opinion.

2. Release by forgiving – Jesus said, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." (**Luke 6:37**). God requires those who have received forgiveness, to freely forgive others. Instead of using people's guilt or seeking revenge, forgive them. For us to continue benefiting from God's forgiveness, we must show grace to others.

3. Recognize your part – Jesus said, “First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.” **(Matthew 7:5)** Most hurtful situations are the result of two or more people’s actions, not just one. Rarely are we willing to look at our role in the conflict. You have to ask yourself, “How much of this is my fault?” Recognizing your part isn’t just an admission of guilt, its taking responsibility.

Conclusion:

Jesus said, “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” **(John 13:35)**. Everyday we’re faced with situations and personalities that prove if we are His disciples, or just pretending to be. Don’t fester over minor disputes. As soon as someone says or does something that offends you, let it go.

Discussion:

- One of the three ways to love your enemies is to recognize your part. Discuss why this is oftentimes the most difficult thing to do.



Key Verses:

Ecclesiastes 3:1

Introduction:

For many people, life is a daily balancing act between work, family and church. In a world that has so many gadgets to help us better manage our lives, it actually can feel like the reverse is happening. Instead of being on top of things, you feel like you're being squashed, especially around the Holidays when everyone takes it up about three notches. We simply get too busy. We all wish we had an extra four hours in our day, to do everything we want; work to do, kid's soccer practice to attend, meals to make, and errands to run. Let's consider some practical principles about finding balance in life.

How to Find Balance in Life:

I. Be Realistic about Time

In the business world, where deadlines must be met, we have the tendency to think that if something doesn't happen in the time we thought, that somehow we are not doing enough. So what is our solution? We rush. Sometimes rushing is needed, like when you're running late to an appointment, and your kids need to be dropped off at school, etc. But there are people who rush, everywhere—every time.

God never rushes. And he's never in a hurry. In fact, it's against his nature. Check this out; when God created everything, he took six divine days and then rested on the seventh day. God handled his business in six days and took a day off on the seventh day to relax. God took his time. Instead, we try to squeeze everything into one day, and then get frustrated when we don't finish. Rethink your idea of time.

2. Don't Over-Commit

Many of us are guilty of over-committing ourselves. We want to do everything. We struggle with saying “no”. So we put more on our plate than we can actually handle. Your desire to do it all, leaves you bankrupt of time and energy. You can't do it all. Sometimes those involved in ministry feel that because they are doing God's work, God will extend your hours in the day to get it all done. Of course, God helps us, but in the case of Martha, he basically told her, “Hey, you're way too busy doing things. And even though it's good, you should sit down listen to my words” **(Luke 10:38–42)**. Knowing your limitations can be the most liberating thing.

3. Keep God First

Jesus said, “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (**Matt. 6:23**). This is both a principle and a promise. The principle is to honor God first. The promise is that He will supply all your needs. However, sometimes we forget or overlook its day-to-day significance in our lives. When you put God first, he will bless your every endeavor.

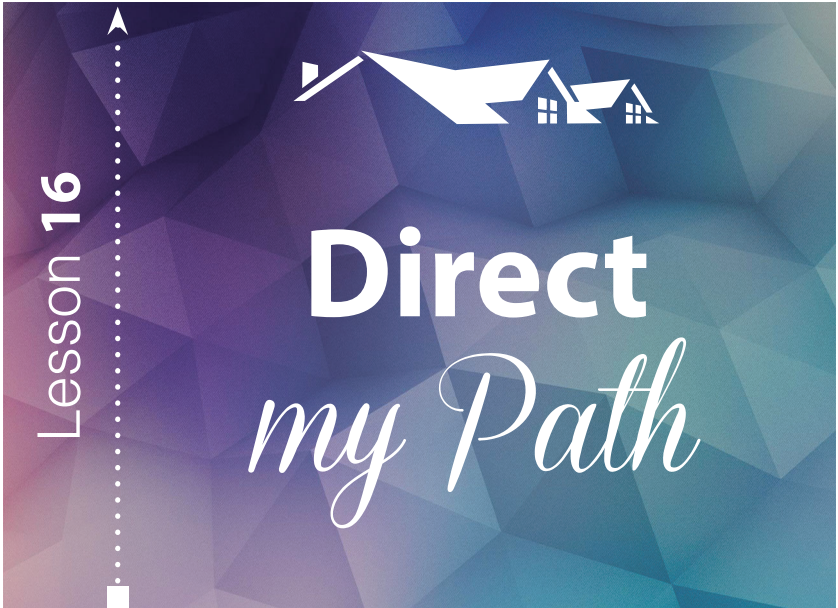
This can be a struggle, especially when you’re managing family and work. But you need find the right balance. People often feel like they have to compromise. However it’s not about compromising, but complimenting. Organize your activities (church, family life, career) so that they compliment one another.

Conclusion

Mark 6:31 says, “Then Jesus said, “Let’s go off by ourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile.” Jesus said this because there were so many people coming and going that He and his apostles didn’t even have time to eat. If you can escape the “rat race” for a day, just get away! People fear taking time off, because they feel things will fall apart if they leave. Go to the park, the beach, the lake or the mountains. Find some balance. Then, you will be more effective in your job or ministry.

Discussion:

- Of the three ways to find balance, which one might be the hardest to do consistently and why?



Key Verses: **Proverbs 3:5-6**

Introduction:

Self-denial isn't easy. It means surrendering your agenda and personal will to God. However, it is for your advantage. Imagine what powerful things can happen when Jesus Christ is enthroned in your life. When He rules, He paves your path and gives you direction.

When Christ is enthroned in your life, you release Him to be your Lord. All of the sudden, the limits are taken off and He's able to move on your behalf. Perhaps this is what King Solomon meant when he said, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths" (**Proverbs**

3:5-6). This is what being his disciple is all about. Let's unpack this verse and see what lessons we can learn about allowing God to direct our paths.

Two Keys that Allow God to Direct your Path:

I. Trust

The main verse says, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding." This is telling you to place yourself completely at the feet of Jesus. Believe in Him totally. Be excessive with your trust. Become like a child who simply trusts his/her parents. Children are entirely dependent upon their mother and father. Follow Jesus the same way.

Dethrone your understanding and what you think you know. Parents with teenagers can relate. Is it frustrating when your son or daughter says, "I know already"? Teenagers think they know everything. But when you grow up, you realize how much you don't know. The same is true with us and God. When we tell God, "I know already", he knows that you don't know. That's why we must not rely on our own understanding, but on His word and wisdom.

2. Acknowledge

The main verse says, "In all your ways acknowledge Him." We often look at this word "acknowledge" and think it just means to recognize or honor someone. But Jesus isn't asking to just be saluted or applauded. The Hebrew word for "acknowledge" in this scripture is "Yada", which means "to know". In other words, God wants us to know Him personally, to have a close relationship with Him.

The word “direct” in this verse means to “make smooth or straight”. This means that God doesn’t just guide our steps; He makes sure that our path is smooth. He straightens our path. He will keep you from falling and protect you from permanent mistakes. This is a pattern for discipleship. Following Jesus means dethroning me, and enthroning Him.

Conclusion

Many Christians are in denial about self-denial. They want God. But they don’t want to let go of control. They want to be their own spiritual boss, listen to their own feelings, and conveniently mix Jesus into their lives. But every time we tell God “this or that is off limits” or “I’ll do what I want anyways”, we dethrone him in our hearts. Are you in denial about self-denial? If so, it’s time to humble yourself and uncrown yourself of your control. Following Jesus begins with saying “no” to self, and “yes” to Him.

Discussion:

- Of the two keys in this lesson, which one requires more effort and why?



Key Verses: **Luke 9:57-62**

Introduction:

When Jesus said, “follow me”, he wasn’t merely talking about where he walked, but how He lived. In other words, do what I do. Shadow me. Pray like me. Act like me. Suffer like me. Following Jesus is a call to imitate His life. It’s more than just wearing a WWJD wristband. It’s bearing the cross and becoming like Him.

The gospel of Luke describes three encounters that Jesus had with three would-be followers. These three aspiring disciples encountered Jesus at the pinnacle of His popularity. If political polls existed, His favorability rate would have soared. But Jesus didn’t want a fan club or cheerleaders, He wanted real followers, real

friends. These three guys represents three types of fans—people who won't totally follow Jesus.

Three Types of Fans:

I. Those who Want to Follow

This guy had grand expectations. He saw an opportunity to jump on the bandwagon. Matthew's version of the story says he was a scribe (**Ref. Matt. 8:19**). Perhaps he saw an intellectual advantage. He and Jesus could brew some coffee and talk about theology and politics. Maybe he saw a financial advantage. He could go on tour with Jesus and get VIP treatment.

Whatever his assumptions were, they came crashing down when Jesus said He had “nowhere to lay His head”. Jesus wasn't speaking literally (he had places to sleep), but figuratively. He wanted to emphasize the cost of following Him. In other words, you cannot be attached to the things of this world. God is asking this generation, are you willing to live without certain comforts? Can you handle rejection and possibly having your heart broken?

2. Those Invited to Follow

Unlike **fan #1**, Jesus personally invited this guy. This is significant because it means that Jesus hand-selected him, despite whatever flaws or issues he might have had. Jesus called him out. But his excuse was a little pathetic. On the surface, it seems reasonable for him to decline Jesus' offer. His story was that his father died and he had to bury him first. If there were a legitimate excuse, this would be it. What kind of loving God wouldn't let a grieving son bury his father? But hold on. There were some obvious holes in his story.

The burial customs of Palestine were to bury the dead on the same day they died. If his father had actually died that day, why would he be wasting time by lollygagging and following crowds? I'm speculating of course. But the real issue with **fan #2** was priority.

I think Jesus got turned off by the word “first”—“Lord, let me first go and bury my father” (emphasis mine). In other words, “Lord, let me focus on what’s important—school, career, family, friends, boyfriend/girlfriend, money—then I’ll give what’s leftover.” This attitude is insulting to God. It demotes Him to playing second-string or riding in the back seat of your life. School, career, friends and so on are all important. Get an education, be a professional, make friends—as long as Jesus is first and foremost in your life. He instructed us in Matthew 6:33 to “seek first the kingdom of God”.

3. Those who Want to Follow, But...

The final fan just went with the flow and borrowed the excuses from fans 1 and 2. Since both chickened out, it made his decision a little easier. If both had said yes to Jesus, he might have gone for it. **Fan #3**, it seems, felt more comfortable with the crowds. Instead of following Jesus, he followed the trend. We tend to be easily motivated by popularity. If something is widely believed or followed, we feel the pressure to conform and be socially accepted.

Based on the first two excuses, the validity of the last excuse is questionable. But for the sake of argument, let's assume the following statement is true: “Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house.” Again the word “first” appears. But if fan #3 was being honest, then it

seems he was afraid to leave the familiar. He felt some separation anxiety. He wasn't comfortable leaving his nest—mom and dad, brothers and sisters, close friends and family.

Conclusion

Imagine if all three of these candidates would have accepted Jesus' calling and followed Him. It could have been "Jesus and the 15 Disciples". We'll never know what could have been. Today we need to ask ourselves, are we fans or followers of Jesus? The answer makes all the difference in the world. Jesus said in **Luke 14:27**: "And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple." Those aren't the most convenient terms and conditions, but they promise a rewarding and fulfilled life.

Discussion:

- Out of the three fans, the second fan probably had the most to lose by not following Jesus. Why do you think that is?



Key Verses:

Proverbs 11:3

Introduction:

Having good character is having integrity. Integrity is the desire to do what's moral or ethical even when it's tough. The topic of integrity is far from popular, perhaps because so many lack it. In business, academia and even religious arenas, integrity and character should be our core.

Although character is an invisible virtue, most of its benefits will eventually materialize. The fruit of your character will ripen, offering a sweet taste to everyone you influence. Character fruits include honesty, humility, unselfishness, morality, love and for-

giveness. There are more fruits, but the underlying theme of them all is that character gives you moral authority and honor.

Maybe you're saying, "That sounds good, but how do I cultivate my character?" Here are a few suggestions:

Ways to Cultivate Character:

1. Follow Jesus' Example

While others base their character on good and moral things, as Christians we must base our character on Christ. In Christ we discover all that is holy, moral, just, righteous and pure. By learning and applying the traits of Christ, our character will grow in beautiful ways. Read the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Study how Jesus behaved.

Observe how He handled hot topics and sticky situations. Pay close attention to how He dealt with people's attitudes and skirmishes. Study His teachings. Read until you get a view of His heart. Consider how He responded to criticism, judgment, dishonesty, deception and cruelty. In other words, get to know Christ, and you'll know character. By drawing from His example, you will understand what good character is.

2. Obtain Godly Wisdom

God's word tells us, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths" (**Proverbs 3:5-6**). The fast lane to poor character is refusing counsel. Those who feel they know everything are sure to be trapped by something.

Man's wisdom is frail and at times misguided, but God's wisdom is potent and life-changing. Should you ever have doubts, don't be afraid to ask for help. Talk to your leader, your mentor, preferably someone more experienced. Cultivating your character involves a process of obtaining godly wisdom for daily decisions. Some of the greatest men and women of character are those who weren't too proud to stop and ask for directions.

Proverbs 20:5 states, "Counsel in the heart of man is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out" (NKJV). We all need to drop our water pots into the depth of godly counsel so that our character will be strengthened. God's wisdom is available. All you have to do is ask.

3. Examine Yourself

Don't be afraid to look at your life in the mirror. The person who refuses to examine himself is not willing to face or deal with reality. We often fear the mirror of introspection because we're afraid of what we might see. If we are to mature in our character, we must be willing to deal with unhealthy attributes and traits.

Simply ignoring an issue doesn't erase it. It is crucial for you to understand that the strength of your in-look determines the power of your outlook. Someone who doesn't recognize personal error, immaturity or mistakes and doesn't try to improve is someone whose character is shallow.

I'm reminded of the time that David cried these words, "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (**Psalms 139:23-24 KJV**). Self-examination isn't for those who presume failure—it's for those

who pursue success. If you aren't already practicing this, begin today. Through prayer, ask God to show you areas in your life that need improvement. Then ask Him to help you fortify your character. Gradually you'll begin to notice a change.

Conclusion

Our closeness to Christ is directly influenced by our character. Sure, we must worship, pray, give and serve. But God is telling us in a clear voice, character is just as important as song and prayer. After all, character traits are what reflect Christ in us. If the world is to see Christ, they are going to see Him through us. Our behaviors, actions, attitudes and conversations should be a mirror reflecting the character of our Lord.

Discussion:

- Of the three ways to cultivate character, which one might be more difficult to apply to our lives?



Key Verses:

Psalms 139:14, 2 Corinthians 5:17

Introduction:

The reason why most people are not happy with themselves is because they don't see their true worth in the eyes of God—they don't live with an awareness of His love and acceptance. If you knew who God created you to be, you wouldn't desire to be anyone else. You have God's unique signature. Anything less is a counterfeit. The reality is, we tend to define ourselves based on the wrong things or believe that we are accidents. But God knew you before you were born and placed His imprint of your life. It's time to expose the false labels we accept and be the people that God created us to be.

Four False Labels:

1. I am Double

This speaks of leading a double life. You're stuck in a contradiction with yourself. You're unable to define the role you should play because you're reading from two different scripts. Social media allows you to be whoever you want to be. The only problem is, who you are online is not who you really are.

James 1:8 teaches that a “double-minded” person is unstable, confused about himself and can't decide who he wants to be. This confusion dissolves when you embrace the person God made you to be. It's better for people to hate who you really are, then to be in love with who they think you are. Who you really are is far more interesting than who you're pretending to be.

2. I am What I Do

Many people define themselves by what they do, such as their career or ministry. If that's you, I would call you a “human doing,” instead of a “human being.” When you meet someone new, usually the first or second question you might ask is, “what do you do for a living?” Your occupation is the easiest way to describe yourself and make conversation. But building your identity solely on your work is a mistake. For instance, what happens if you lose your job or your title?

“Human doings” tend to be insecure and feel they have to earn their self-worth – or in spiritual terms, earn their salvation. **Ephesians 2:8-10** states, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God pre-

pared beforehand that we should walk in them.” According to this passage, we are not saved by works, but for works.

3. I am What I Have

We are a society of status symbols. People want the flashy cars, high-end fashion and coolest gadgets. But allowing your possessions or checking account balance to define you will make you a slave to things. Possessions will possess you. Jesus said, “For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” **(Matthew 16:26).**

Don’t base your identity on assets and possessions. Instead, let the precious blood of Jesus calculate your worth. Jesus bled and died on the cross for you. Your worth is not defined by your net-worth (which can change tomorrow), but on the unchangeable truth of God’s love for you. I’ll be addressing the issue of materialism in a later chapter.

4. I am My Problem

There are many who define themselves by their problems or perceived dysfunctions. I’m reminded of man named Bartimaeus whose sight was healed by Jesus. So often is he labeled “blind Bartimaeus.” But notice what he did when Jesus called him: “So Jesus stood still and commanded him to be called. Then they called the blind man, saying to him, “Be of good cheer. Rise, He is calling you.” And throwing aside his garment, he rose and came to Jesus” **(Mark 10:49-50).**

In biblical times, the sick and poor were stigmatized by their outer garments. Bartimaeus’ garment was his identity. It said to society, “I’m blind” or “I’m dysfunctional.” But when Jesus called

him, He threw off his garment and essentially said “That’s not me anymore. That’s what I thought I was supposed to be.” When Jesus calls your name, every false identity is exposed.

Conclusion

It’s time to peel off every bad label that you’ve wearing and accept as your identity, such as...Failure, Addict, Victim or Loser. Temptations feast on the insecure and falsely identified. But in Jesus Name, you’re going to walk in confidence – knowing how beloved and pleasing you are to God. You were created in His image. Maybe that’s why the enemy hates you so much. Because when he sees you coming, he sees the reflection of God.

Discussion:

- Of the four false labels people accept, which one do you think is most common in our culture?



Key Verses: **Galatians 5:22-23**

Introduction:

Without self-control over our emotions and impulses, we become “like a city whose walls are broken down” (**Proverbs 25:28**). No self-control equals a defenseless heart and mind. And a defenseless heart resorts to heartless defenses. In other words, the more defenseless you are against your emotions and temptations, the crueler you become inside and out. Because of these broken walls, the enemy will raid your mind with jealous, angry or lustful thoughts, and then leave you hypersensitive to correction.

Self-control is not about becoming a control freak – which is a total contradiction. Control freaks are usually the most out of

control. They can't even control their desire for control. Control freaks seek inner peace by trying to control everything and everyone else around them. Controlling external things, they feel "in control" and empowered. Ironically, I don't know one control freak that's actually happier and healthier because of their controlling behavior. It generally has the reverse effect – leaving you less patient and more impulsive.

The opposite of self-control is not necessarily self-indulgence. In many cases, indulgent or impulsive behavior is merely the symptom of deeper issues. Allow me to point out three factors that are linked to untamed emotions.

Three Factors that Lead to Untamed Emotions:

I. Fear

Control doesn't flow from the outside in, but from the inside out. One of my favorite New Testament verses is **2 Timothy 1:7**, which states: "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind." The phrase "sound mind" literally means "self-control" or "self-discipline." We are usually energized by the first two virtues – power and love. Who doesn't want more power? Who would reject more love? We celebrate these qualities. But somehow, the spirit of a sound mind doesn't excite us as much.

Paul presented a contrast to fear by revealing its opposites – power, love and self-control. The opposite of self-control is not merely self-indulgence, but fear. When there's no self-control (or power and love), fear is the driving force of our behavior. Fear creates an urge to distract yourself from your deepest unmet needs by filling those voids with whatever form of pleasure that numbs your reality.

2. Spiritual Deafness

We're reminded of the unfortunate scene at Jesus' arrest in Gethsemane. Peter tried to intervene by cutting a man's ear off. This was no heroic action, but a rash distraction from Jesus' mission. Read for yourself in **John 18:10-11**: "Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant, and cut off his right ear. The servant's name was Malchus. So Jesus said to Peter, 'Put your sword into the sheath. Shall I not drink the cup which My Father has given Me?'" In contrast, the gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus healed and reattached the man's ear.

Peter reacted out of impulse, instead of discernment. His swift aggression, although appearing to be righteous, was an overreaction that wounded someone. Impulsive people tend to speak or act first, before considering the damage they might cause. Feeling justified by their emotions, they hurt the wrong people for the wrong reasons. Impulsive people don't see how their actions impact others. Maybe you're allowing your emotions to justify your actions.

Peter's impulsiveness cut off a man's ear. The spiritual lesson is that impulsiveness cuts off your ability to hear from God and perceive His will. As you lean more and more on your flesh (feelings), you deafen yourself to God's voice. The Bible says, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches..." (**Rev. 2:7**). If you're always inclining towards your flesh, you won't receive the wisdom and direction of the Holy Spirit.

3. Spiritual Blindness

The Bible tells us, "Where there is no prophetic vision the people cast off restraint" (**Proverbs 29:18, ESV**). Another

translation says, “When there’s no vision, the people get out of control.” Evidently, there’s a link between the lack of divine guidance and the lack of self-control. Allow me to paraphrase this verse in my own language: “When you lack direction, you lack discipline.”

Direction produces self-discipline, which then produces healthy decisions. Those with a habit of making bad decisions based on impulse usually have impaired spiritual vision. When you have direction, it motivates you to make the right kind of choices. If your direction (vision) is to finish college and earn your degree, then you’ll make the necessary sacrifices in order to achieve that dream. There may be nights when you can’t hang out with friends because you’re studying for a test or writing a paper.

If your vision is to land a great job or start your own business, then it will require self-discipline to go the extra mile and put in the time. If your direction is to have a healthy and fit lifestyle, then you’ll need self-control when ordering at the restaurant and discipline to exercise regularly. If you’re planning to get married and want to be pure on your wedding day, then it means controlling your urges and resisting temptation while you wait. Your direction helps determine your disciplines.

Conclusion

The English term “self-control” is a bit misleading. This spiritual virtue is not about “self” controlling “self” through mental toughness. It’s about relying on the Holy Spirit to control your desires. God will not violate your free will to make choices. But if you allow Him to, He will enable you “to will and to act according to His good purpose” (**Philippians 2:13**).

Discussion:

- Of the three factors that lead to untamed emotions, which one do you think presents the greatest harm and why?



Key Verses:

I John 1:9

Introduction:

We all fail and give in to temptation—even if it’s just eating chocolate cake when you’re on a diet. Of course, some sins carry bigger consequences than others, but we must recognize our flawed humanity. We also must realize that our shortcomings never surprise God. He knows you better than you know yourself.

Maybe you’re holding on to guilt for something you did in your past, something you can’t seem to shake loose. Maybe you’ve failed your spouse, your children or your coworkers. If

you feel encaged by a past failure or recent sin in your life, you need to know that God is faithful and just to forgive. The key is that you must be sincere and ready to change.

True confession in Christ holds the promise of forgiveness, freeing the heart from guilt and breaking the shackles of shame. One of the most well known Bible verses is **1 John 1:9**: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” This verse offers what I call “sinsurance” – insurance that covers our sins when we seek God’s forgiveness. Through genuine confession, we immediately experience four of God’s promises.

The Four Promises of Confession:

I. Faithfulness

The Bible teaches that God is “faithful” to forgive. In this text, the Greek word for “faithful” is *pistos*, which implies that God is trustworthy and reliable. You can depend on God to forgive. Sometimes we view God through the same lenses we view others or ourselves and so we assume that He’s not always ready to forgive. As humans, we don’t naturally want to forgive when we’re offended or hurt by someone. We say things like: “I’m in the process of forgiving that person.” “I’m on the road to forgiveness.” “I’m not ready to forgive.” Although we ought to forgive quickly, our emotions can get in the way. God is different than us in this regard.

His forgiveness is never a process. He doesn’t hold back His mercy and grace. God never has to get ready to forgive, because Jesus already went to the cross to set us free from sin and condemnation. He is faithful and unwavering, no mat-

ter how dirty your life feels or how many times you've fallen down. God doesn't get tired of forgiving, either. He's not looking down at you saying, "You're wearing me out with your little problems."

2. Justice

1 John 1:9 also tells us that God is "just and will forgive our sins." The Greek word for "just" is *dikaios*, which means judicial approval. This implies that God is judicially righteous in His judgments and decisions. When God forgives or blesses, it's lawful because He's the final authority and cannot contradict Himself. God is just, and through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we're justified as His sons and daughters. As blood-washed believers, we are made just in the eyes of God (even though we may sin and fall short).

According to **Romans 4:35**

"He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification." God is just. He's lawfully correct to forgive us because of the finished work of Jesus on the cross. When we seek His forgiveness and mercy, we are already in a lawful position to ask. You shouldn't hang your head low and live in oppression because of a sin you committed.

The enemy will certainly accuse and condemn you. He will rub your past in your face. He will attack your self-worth and remind you of how bad or messed up you are. But grab a hold of this truth. God is just! He is legally cleared to forgive you and there's nothing the devil or any demon in hell can do about it. You are justified. Or as it's been said, justification by Jesus means it is "just-if-I'd" never sinned.

3. Forgiveness

We read in **Ephesians 1:7**, “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.” As born-again believers, God simply sees the atoning blood of Jesus Christ on our lives and therefore He is faithful, just and prompt in His forgiveness.

Until Jesus returns for His Church and as long as you’re alive on this earth, anytime you seek His forgiveness – you got it. That’s grace in action. When God forgives you, He doesn’t keep record. Look at these startling words from **Hebrews 8:12**, “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” You might want to read that verse again. Does God really forgive and forget? Is that even possible? If we take **Hebrews 8:12** literally, then we must come to that conclusion. When God forgives you, He doesn’t change His mind later.

4. Purification

Last but not least, **1 John 1:9** reveals that if we confess our sins, God will “purify us from all unrighteousness.” Maybe this promise is the grand finale, the crescendo of confession. Not only does God forgive your sins, but He scrubs out the residue of unrighteousness that separates us from Him.

To be righteous is to be in right standing before God, and expresses the idea of a healthy relationship. Confession allows the Holy Spirit to sanctify your life for a closer relationship with God. Many Christians skip this step. We usually seek forgiveness to relieve our conscience (feel better about ourselves), not realizing that God is calling us to purity – a life of practical

inward and outward holiness. God commands us to live holy, separated unto Him (**ref. 1 Peter 1:16**).

The ultimate goal of confession and repentance is to repair our relationship with God and become more like Him. If we dodge the purifying process, we're stopping short and limiting what God can do in us. As God initiates purification in our lives, we, through the power of the Holy Spirit, are to continue the process and take out our own trash. The Bible teaches, "All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure" (**1 John 3:3**).

Conclusion

The more aware you are of God's faithfulness, the more confident you'll be about life. Now of course, there is a danger in taking God's faithfulness and grace for granted. Although God is faithful to forgive, we shouldn't abuse His grace with utter disregard and avid sinning simply because we know He'll forgive us (**ref. Romans 5:20-6:2**). God is faithful, but He's not interested in playing games. While His grace and faithfulness doesn't run out, time does. Don't be a buzzer beater Christian, banking your salvation on a last second prayer of repentance. Habitual sin and its consequences may eject you out of the game.

Discussion:

- Which of the four promises of confession sticks out to you the most and why?



Key Verses: **Psalms 32:3-5**

Introduction:

The English definition of confession is to admit to, or acknowledge something. But as I've explained in the previous lesson, God's definition goes further. He sees confession as a process that leads to lifestyle changes.

King David was transparent about the problems he experienced regarding unconfessed sin. He, of course, was no stranger to falling into temptation and sinning, as I described in an earlier chapter. But what he wrote in **Psalms 32** reveals the dangerous affects of secret sins. Verses **3-5** (NLT) say, "When I refused to confess my sin, my body wasted away, and I groaned all day

long. Day and night your hand of discipline was heavy on me. My strength evaporated like water in the summer heat. Finally, I confessed all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide my guilt. I said to myself, “I will confess my rebellion to the Lord.” And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone.” According to David’s psalm, unconfessed sin produces three types of sickness.

Unconfessed Sin Leads to Three Types of Sickness:

I. Physical Sickness

David said (verse 3), “When I refused to confess my sin, my body wasted away, and I groaned all day long.” David was under such intense stress that it seems he could barely get out of bed. His body throbbed with pain. There is no question that unconfessed sins take a toll on the physical body. The stress of living with a secret will eat away at your mind and affect your health in untold ways.

Our bodies weren’t designed to carry the weight of sin. We were designed to live in the perfection of God’s presence, in a sinless world. Thanks Adam and Eve, that’s all changed. But that’s why Jesus went to the Cross – to take away our sins and give us eternal life. David found physical relief through full confession. I’m not a doctor and can’t give you medical advice. But there’s a possibility that your health’s decline is related to your unconfessed sin – if you, in fact, are living with that issue. David said he “groaned all day long.” He couldn’t escape his conscience. Don’t allow sin to deteriorate your mental and physical health.

God won’t heal what we won’t reveal. The Bible says, “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed” (James 5:6). This is true for

both physical and emotional healing. Experiencing God's healing power starts with total honesty about your condition or situation. The truth won't bless a lie. So, if you're hiding a sin or addiction, step out and experience real victory in Jesus Name.

2. Spiritual Sickness

David said (verse 4), "Day and night your hand of discipline was heavy on me. My strength evaporated like water in the summer heat." These are the words of a man who is spiritually sick, incapable of enjoying the benefits of God's presence. David was living with heaviness in his spirit, because he knew that God wasn't pleased with him.

When you don't confess your sins and repent, you become spiritually dehydrated. Your strength evaporates. The spiritually sick person becomes disillusioned and works extra hard to make his or her Christian life work – to no avail. No matter how hard you try to serve God with unconfessed sin, you will quickly burn-out, become angry or simply give up. You could also become disgruntled with the Church or its leadership and feel abused when corrected or asked to obey spiritual authority.

3. Emotional Sickness

David continued to write (verse 5): "Finally, I confessed all my sins to you and stopped trying to hide my guilt. I said to myself, 'I will confess my rebellion to the Lord.' And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone." For the entire duration of his unconfessed sin, guilt wrapped its tail around David and squeezed the life out of him. He tried to mask his guilt and pretend everything was fine, but realized that he really had nowhere to hide – just like Adam after he ate the fruit.

Many believers are caught in the grip of guilt and struggle with it on a daily basis. Unfortunately, some even believe that guilt is virtuous and leads to a healthy Christian life. This fallacy stems from the notion that the more demeaned we are, the holier we are – which is a total misunderstanding of godly conviction.

Conviction comes as the Holy Spirit exposes the gap between our behavior and God's standard. True conviction should lead to true confession. When conviction stirs our hearts, there is a need to confess, repent and find God's forgiveness. At that exact moment, the issue is settled and forgiven.

Conclusion

Romans 8:1 says, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Guilt was crushed at the cross. Its grip was broken. But to experience that freedom from guilt, to apply the power of the Gospel to your life, you must be ready to confess and repent. If the Holy Spirit has been convicting you, you must take action and exercise the freedom you have in Jesus Christ.

Discussion:

- Of the three types of sickness caused by unconfessed sin, which one is the easy to overlook and why?



Key Verses: **Hebrews 12:15**

Introduction:

Life hurts. On second thought, people hurt. Sure, life in general can be unfair and difficult. But let's face it; most of our disappointments in life come from people who either let us down or deliberately hurt us. And contrary to what we said as kids, words do hurt more than sticks and stones. Since we live in a fallen world populated with flawed humans, the chances of you being offended and hurt by someone is highly probable.

The bible describes bitterness as a "root". If you've ever done some yard work, you know that roots are not easy to remove. But in order to realize your potential and produce spiri-

tual fruit, you must be willing to dig out the roots bitterness. Let's see how bitterness evolves and how to prevent its roots from deepening in your life.

How Bitterness Evolves:

I. Wrong Produces Hurt

Hurts happen when someone intentionally or unintentionally wrongs you. The wrong can be verbal, physical or even psychological in nature. It's safe to say we have all been wronged at one point or another in our lives. No one is exempt because we live in a fallen world populated with flawed people. Wrongs will happen on a daily basis. The nature of the wrong will vary from circumstance to circumstance. The degree of hurt will vary from person to person, based on how severe the wrong was and what provoked it.

It helps to remember that injustice is not only a product of this fallen world, but is often engineered by Satan – the accuser of the brethren (**Rev. 12:10**). But we are reminded in **Isaiah 54:17** that, “No weapon formed against you shall prosper...” Whenever you're wronged, keep that scripture in mind.

2. Hurt Produces Anger

If a hurt isn't treated properly, it will lead to prolonged anger or outrage. Anger isn't necessarily a sin. Sometimes it's the appropriate response. God's grace allows us to be angry for a period of time, but eventually that anger has to convert into something constructive.

Ephesians 4:26 crystalizes this point: “Be angry, and do not sin”: do not let the sun go down on your wrath.” I'll be the

first to admit, this is easier said than done. But when anger festers on, it gives people a license to behave foolishly or retaliate. The bible reminds us that it's not our job to get revenge. **Romans 12:19** states, "Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord."

3. Anger Produces Bitterness

If anger consumes the heart, it will eventually germinate into a root of bitterness. This is when your lifestyle begins to accommodate your hurts. At this point, people generally stop sympathizing with you and expect you to find closure and move on with your life. Friends and family won't come around as often because your personality will have been soured with negativity. Cynicism will begin to taint your perspective of life and even God Himself.

The moment you perceive the other side is winning or you feel threatened, you'll try to manipulate family members and friends by maintaining the status of a victim. You may even attempt to manipulate Scriptures and God's Name in order to rationalize your bitterness or convince neutral parties to join your side. Eventually you'll get to the point where you don't even like yourself. Regardless of who was originally right or wrong, your hatred will invert until you can't stand your own reflection.

Conclusion

If you've been hiding your bitterness, aren't you tired of pretending to be well, when really your heart is sick? Are you fed up with the drama of awkward feelings and tension when you see that person who hurt you? Are you ready to be over

the pain, the anger, the hatred, the resentment? I once saw a quote that read, “Bitterness is letting someone live rent-free in your head”. Well, if that’s the case. It’s time to evict that emotion and change the locks. The key to overcoming bitterness is to forgive and let go. In the next lesson, we’ll go deeper into the topic of forgiveness.

Discussion:

- How does knowing how bitterness evolves help you in preventing it from taking root in your life?



Key Verses: **Matthew 18:23-35**

Introduction:

Forgiveness is an issue that every human faces because we live in a flawed world populated with 7 billion flawed people. One of them is bound to hurt or offend you—once, twice, well... quite a few times as long as you're alive. So it's in your best interest to understand why forgiveness matters so much to God, and what kind of impact it has on our lives.

Most of our material on forgiveness approaches the topic of an emotional stance, not a theological stance. Sure, there are many emotional and psychological reasons to forgive someone, but let's see what forgiveness looks like from God's perspective.

The imagery in Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant paints a picture of a divine reality that often gets whitewashed in this vast topic of forgiveness.

This parable was a response to Peter's question in verse 21, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" It was a fair question. But it was also a little self-serving. Regardless, Jesus blew their minds when he answered, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven". Jesus wasn't saying to forgive 490 times (7×70). The point is that we should forgive an infinite number of times. In other words, stop counting. Here's the plot in four scenes:

Four Scenes from the Unforgiving Servant:

Scene 1

A servant owed a king a large sum of money that couldn't afford to pay. The servant begged for mercy. The king felt compassion and forgive his debt.

Scene 2

The forgiven servant had a fellow servant who owed him a small amount of money. The forgiven servant choked him and demanded the payment. The other servant begged for mercy.

Scene 3

The forgiven servant had no mercy, but threw him into prison until the debt was paid. Ironically, the servant was put in a situation where he could never repay.

Scene 4

The king heard of the forgiven servant's ungrateful refusal to forgive another servant's debt. The king then sentenced the unmerciful servant to be jailed and tortured until he could repay the full amount—the same situation as the other servant.

The message in this parable is abundantly clear: if you don't forgive, you won't be forgiven.

This ruffles our feathers a little. But here's the thing. It really doesn't matter how we feel about it. It's the honest truth. We simply have to wrestle with it until it transforms us. Jesus is not going to make exceptions, no matter how bad we've been hurt or mistreated. Why, you ask? It's a matter of principle, not feelings. The principle is that if Jesus Christ has forgiven us and cleared our debt of sin by being crucified, then He expects us to forgive others.

I can't possibly tell you how many times I've been that ungrateful servant who quickly forgets how forgiven he is. I've been hurt by people (friends and family) on quite a few occasions, but that doesn't alter God's command or expectations of me as a follower of Jesus.

In His model prayer, Jesus prayed, "And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors" (**Matt. 6:12**). Notice the common between the two phrases—meant to imply that this is one truth, not two separate ideas. The first phrase "forgive us our debts" is entirely contingent on the second, "as we forgive our debtors". Yet there is a tendency to gloss over the second part, or obey only when it's convenient or rational.

Conclusion

I don't have a magic formula or wand to make the act of forgiveness any easier. But let us find ourselves at the rugged cross where Jesus was crucified, murdered for our debts, and yet cried out, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do". We simply must forgive because we're forgiven and want to cherish His grace. God's forgiveness is the gift that keeps on forgiving.

Discussion:

- Why do you think it's important for us to see the act of forgiveness as more than just an emotional decision, but a biblical decision?



Key Verses:

John 5:1-9

Introduction:

Through the Holy Spirit, you have the power to make healing choices—shifts—which can radically set you free from emotional bondage or wounds from the past. There's story in John chapter five of a man who lived with a dysfunction for thirty-eight years. That's a really long time to be stuck in one condition. But this story reveals powerful insights for being healed from life's hurts.

Using this miracle story as a backdrop, we can identify three barriers that prevent healing.

Three Barriers to Inner Healing:

I. Disguises

The instinct to hide, or cover your true pains and pitfalls has been a problem since the days of Adam and Eve. It's actually in our nature to disguise our issues with our attitude, behavior and lifestyle.

When Jesus asked the lame man, "Do you want to be made well?" He started naming excuses why he couldn't get better. In fact, he avoided the question all together. Instead of answering, "Yes! Please heal me!" he started talking about things that had nothing to do with his present condition. His situation was apparent to Jesus. What's the point in hiding from someone who already sees the ins and outs of your life? Why cover a problem that God already sees?

When Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, he sewed fig leaves together to disguise his shame. Even today, we have a tendency to cover up our problems. That's why God asked Adam, "Where are you?" Not because God didn't know where he was or what condition he was in. The reality was that Adam needed to face his own failures and pain. He needed to recognize his own need for wholeness.

Oftentimes it's easier to live in denial and cocoon yourself with false beliefs, rather than wrestle with the reality of your situation. But keep this in mind; miracles are never born out of lies. God can untangle your problems, so long as you're willing to admit them.

2. People

The lame man, at the pool of Bethesda, suffered for 38 years. And every day, a friend or neighbor would carry him to the porch where he could lay and wait for the waters to stir. His illness had developed to the point where he could not transport himself. He was immobilized. And that's what hurts can do; they cripple us, and keep us from pursuing our God-given purpose.

This lame man became entirely dependent upon others. His friends had become his nurses, but ironically did not promote change in his life. Their good intentions actually dug a deeper hole for him, making it harder to overcome. I'm not implying that this man's friends were malicious. Again, they had "good intentions". But one must be challenged and empowered, not simply enabled to do the same thing...day after day

Of all the people who carried the lame man, nobody asked him the question that Jesus asked him, "Do you want to be made well?" How do I know that nobody asked him? I don't know sure, but he seemed puzzled by the question. It appears he had never been challenged before. Instead, all he got was pity and a free ride. Sometimes real friends have to butt-in and intrude in order to help you.

3. Familiarity

I wondered why Jesus would ask the infirmed man the question, "Do you want to be made well?" Initially, the question seems a bit patronizing. The man was in obvious distress and incapable of living a normal life. Something was clearly wrong with his situation. He was crippled by some unnamed issues, and visibly had no means of lifting himself up.

After considering Jesus' ice-breaking question, God opened my mind to a reality we seldom confront—familiarity. Looking in from the outside, one would assume this man craved a legitimate healing from his condition. One would imagine that at the first sight of a potential miracle, he would snatch it with anticipation. However, when you live with a particular problem for any substantial amount of time, you begin to accept and adapt to it.

Conclusion

Jesus asked the lame man, “Do you want to be made well?” In other words, how bad do you want it? Are you fed up enough with your condition to change it? Jesus is checking your desire and determination today. If you want to keep living with the perks of pain, keep being comfortably uncomfortable, then this miracle moment is going to pass you by. Jesus said, “Rise, pick up your bed, and walk”. Essentially, pick up whatever is making you comfortable! Pick up the excuses, the fallback, and the scapegoat that keeps you on the porch. Quit waiting around for another person to feel sorry for you.

Discussion:

- What barrier to do think is most difficult to overcome when you need inner healing?



Key Verses: **Psalms 51:17, 2 Corinthians 12:7-10**

Introduction:

Light can only shine through broken vessels. And since we're made of clay, not glass, brokenness is the secret to releasing what God has ignited in you. Of course, there's nothing appealing about a broken vessel. If something breaks in a store, it's pulled off the shelf and thrown away. But in God's store, nothing is useful until it's broken.

Look at the apostle Paul, who once vented about his "thorn in the flesh". There are different views on what exactly Paul's thorn was. Whatever it was, it wasn't pleasant or else Paul

wouldn't have prayed three times for it to depart. It had to be either painful or irritating. What interests me is what came as a result of Paul's thorn.

The Blessings of Brokenness:

I. Humility

Paul stated, "...a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure" (**2 Cor. 12:7**). He understood that his thorn produced humility. When you're gifted or effective, there's always a risk of "being exalted above measure", or becoming arrogant. God will, of course, exalt the humble (**Ref. 1 Peter 5:6**). But Paul's choice of the words, "above measure", denotes an elevated status among other believers. Perfectly broken people are not immune from arrogance, but are certainly better protected.

2. Grace

God's answer to Paul's prayer was, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness..." (**2 Cor. 12:9**). How is it possible for God to use imperfect, broken people? The answer is Grace. All forms of ministry are displays of God's grace working through the weaknesses of a men and women. We serve both from and through God's sufficient grace. His strength, not ours, does all the heavy lifting.

Perfect strength, through grace, manifests in our weakness for God's own purpose and glory. Until we unlock the meaning of grace in our lives, we'll continue to base our success on human efforts instead of God's divine ability to draw men unto

Himself. As recipients of His lavish grace, our delight is that He chooses us, includes us, and ultimately cares for us.

3. Power

Paul's thought continues, "...Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (**2 Cor. 12:9**). Paul did what we rarely do, especially those in public ministry. He boasted in his infirmities. He showed his scars, so to speak. But that vulnerability, that level of honesty gave God an avenue to release His power.

God's power is not channeled through the veins of human power. He doesn't need us to be strong. We must affirm Paul's disposition, "...For when I am weak, then I am strong" (**2 Cor. 12:10**). All power flows from God and is meant for His glory. Whatever talent, anointing, or gift you have, God gave it to you freely by His grace.

Here's the reality. You're going to fail at some point. You're going to come face to face with your flaws. You'll probably mishandle certain situations. And if you sin, you still need to repent. But don't live your life as if every blemish, failure or weaknesses is a sign that you're not qualified for God's mission. Actually, it's a sign you're human.

Conclusion

If you find yourself under constant pressure to polish your image, it's time to stop. Your weaknesses are portals of grace. By accepting your weaknesses, you can better identify with those who feel inadequate. Also, it defuses the urge to outperform others and exaggerate your strengths. On the flip side, human weakness

is not an excuse to do nothing. God's grace is not for us to slack in our service and labor. Don't sit back and think, "God will do it." But get up and say, "God will do it...through me". You're the instrument God wants to use to manifest His love and grace in the world.

Discussion:

- Of the three blessings of brokenness, which one resonates with you the most and why?



Key Verses:

Romans 12:2

Introduction:

More often than not, people struggle with understanding, perceiving, and even accepting God's will. We hear people say, "How do I know what God's will is for my life?" It's an all-too-familiar question. The truth is, many people wrestle with this question and find it difficult to decipher God's will. Hopefully I can help you decode your questions about God's will. Let's briefly consider the three levels of God's will.

Three Levels of God's Will

I. God's Purposeful Will

This level of God's will represents the events and circumstances that God decrees to happen, globally and personally. We generally aren't aware of God's purposeful will until things have already happened. This can be a source of pain or struggle for many people who might question "why" God did or allowed something to happen.

Psalm 33:11 says, "But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations."

2. God's Perfect Will

There are two sides of the coin regarding God's perfect will. The first is the revealed side (facing up). Secondly, there is the concealed side (facing down).

✓ **Revealed**

Romans 12:2 says, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

This side of God's will is obvious and can be easily understood. God's perfect will is simply any decision, action or attitude that pleases Him and falls in-line with His word. God's perfect will is not about trying to be "perfect" or spiritually flawless. It's about testing, proving, praying and desiring to please God.

✓ Concealed

Sometimes God's will isn't clear. This is when we must be tuned into the Holy Ghost—to pray, perceive and hear God's voice regarding an area of our lives. **Ephesians 1:9** says, “And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ”. However, the revealing of his will requires complete trust and faith in God. **Proverbs 3:5-6** says, “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.” The concealed side of God's will is usually related to a specific area of your life, or a particular action God is calling you to do. This is where seeking counsel and advice can be particularly helpful.

3. God's Permissive Will

This aspect of God's will are those things which God neither purposes nor desires, but simply allows you the freedom to decide. As long as you do your best to honor God's perfect will, you're free to pave your own path. Christians tend to worry a lot about what God's will is for their lives. They ask, “Should I, or should I not marry this individual?” “What career should I chose?” “What car should I buy?” Oftentimes we're looking for a heavenly sign, a light to shine on the answer we're looking for. We tend to think that is how God's will works.

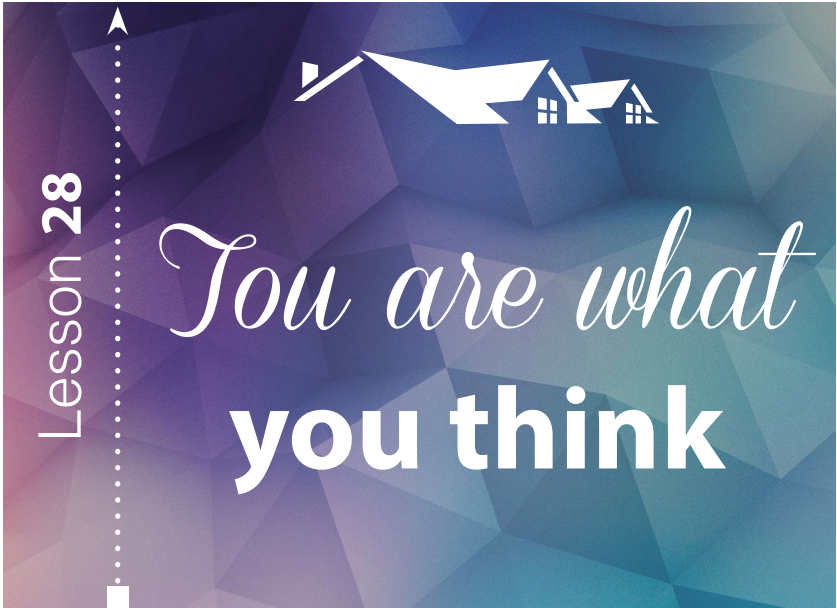
Conclusion

God doesn't want to dictate every decision you make. Although his principles should guide all of our decisions, he doesn't force us into anything. A good parent doesn't force their adult

son or daughter into certain decisions. A son or daughter has to make decisions based on the teachings and living example set by their parents. It's no different with God.

Discussion:

- How can we learn to trust God when His perfect will doesn't make sense?



Key Verses: **Proverbs 23:7 (KJV)**

Introduction:

“Think before you speak!” Remember when your mom used to say that? This usually meant something immature or futile slipped out of your mouth. When you’re young, you sometimes just blab things without giving it much thought. Well, as much as you hated to hear it, mom had a point. How we think and speak can have a colossal impact on our lives. Thoughts and words can either be a stumbling block, or a stepping-stone to greatness.

Standing at the doorstep of their destiny, Moses deployed a group of 12 spies to scope out the land. When they returned, ten of the spies gave a negative report of the land of Canaan. Like

a nasty email virus, their words spread discouragement throughout the camp. Read **Numbers 13:32-33**.

It's interesting that God's people called themselves "grasshoppers". **Proverbs 23:7** says, "For as he thinks in his heart, so is he..." In other words, how you think determines your reality. Joshua and Caleb were two big-thinkers who challenged the status quo. They told the people, "The land we traveled through and explored is a wonderful land! And if the Lord is pleased with us, he will bring us safely into that land and give it to us. It is a rich land flowing with milk and honey." **Numbers 14:7-8**

Three Habits of Big Thinkers

1. Big-Thinkers Size Up the Challenge

The Israelites focused on the size of their enemies, and not the size of their God. When you're in a pinch, it's easy to focus on your challenge...to the point that it corners you. Don't look at the size, but size it up like a boxer who sizes up his opponent. Assess the risks, strategize and prepare. Joshua and Caleb weren't in denial. They understood the challenge, but also knew that God was able.

2. Big-Thinkers Break the Mold

If you're going to be a big-thinker, you have to be willing to break the mold of what you're accustomed to. Basically, you need to get out of your comfort zone. Joshua and Caleb's comfort zone was in the middle of the masses. God said of Caleb, "...he has a different spirit in him..." (**Numbers 14:24**). Be different, not defiant. Think differently and take bold steps. In fact, Caleb's name means "boldness". Only the bold, can break the mold.

3. Big-Thinkers Let God be God

When Joshua and Caleb appealed to the Israelites, they were basically saying, “Wait a minute...who is God here? The armies in Canaan, or Jehovah?” The people were removing God from His place of power by doubting Him. God can only be as powerful in your life, as you let Him. Remember **Ephesians 3:20** that says, “Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us.”

Conclusion

You are what you think. Your dream will be no bigger than you think it can be. No matter how much flour, eggs and water you have, unless you have a big cake in mind, all you'll have are cupcakes. Potential without proper thinking works the same way. Stretch your mind. Sharpen your vision. What God has for you, is greater than anything you've ever experienced.

Discussion:

- Why are we so prone to focus on the negative? How can we reverse that tendency?



Key Verses: **Romans 8:28**

Introduction:

Our key scripture is powerful and brings encouragement to the soul. Allow me to share a little bit of insight with you. No matter what hardship you are going through right now, God is going to see you through it. Often times we get lost in the fog of worry and feel like God has forgotten about our pain and conditions. We feel as though Christ has overlooked our situation. But the reality is, He is closer to you than you realize and his hand is at work in your life.

The Apostle Paul said, “We know that all things work together for good...” Sometimes we stop there. We sometimes

figure that no matter how we live or walk, things will work out good. But that is not the case. Even though we have God's grace, our victory is conditional on two major principles:

Two Principles of Victory:

I. To Those who Love God

Paul first indicates that things will work together for good...to those who love God. Now, I know we all say we love God. And that is great. However, just saying you love him isn't enough. Jesus once remarked, "If you love me, keep my commandments".

No matter what you've been told, know that loving God is a lifestyle, a decision, and a daily walk. Nothing tells God that you love him more than when you obey his word, follow his counsel, and respect his authority. Sound crazy? Not really, when you consider that love is a behavior, not just a gushy feeling. Okay, I could say more, but I will leave it here.

2. To Those who Are Called According to His Purpose

The key here is, "HIS" purpose. Again, Paul is saying that things will work out good for those who are living and walking in his purpose for their lives. Being in the will of God affects how you handle adversity. On the same token, being in His purpose doesn't negate hardship either. However, it gives God the license to act and move on your behalf, because your faith is in him. When you are in his purpose, you make room for him to work in your life.

If you base your life on God's purpose, then you are essentially setting yourself up for divine intervention. **Psalms 37:23** declares "The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, And He delights in his way." The word "good" in this verse implies "righteous" or "devout". If you are aligning yourself with God's word, He will establish your steps and ordain the direction of your life...even through painful circumstances.

Conclusion

Things working out for the good in your life hinges on these two keys. Love God with all your heart, soul and mind. Love him with your lifestyle. Also, align yourself with his purpose. Line up with his will for your life. If you follow these principles, you will soon discover that indeed, all things work together for the good.

Discussion:

- Why is it difficult to accept that even our hurts and frustrations can work together for a greater purpose?



Key Verses: **James 1:19**

Introduction:

Perhaps the most underrated power you have as a human being is the power of listening. Whether in your marriage, friendships, or even at work, listening is of life's most precious abilities. You've heard it before; God gave you two ears and one mouth for a reason. How true that is! If we all spent a little less time talking, and little more time listening, imagine how different things would be? For one, we would get ourselves into less trouble, simply because our mouth can create huge problems.

James 3:1-5 nails it concerning the tongue, "I My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall

receive a stricter judgment. 2 For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. 3 Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. 4 Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. 5 Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles!"

In contrast, look at what these scriptures say about the power of listening:

- **James 1:19** says, "So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath;"
- **Proverbs 1:5** says, "Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance."

Listening a powerful way of learning, understanding and grasping. It's especially important in relationships, mainly marriages. Although men and women hear and calculate things differently, the concept of being "swift to hear, slow to speak" will add invaluable depth to your relationship. Let's look at this in the context of resolving relational conflict.

How to Listen Better:

I. Swift to Hear

We all struggle with listening because we all want to be "heard". Our opinions, thoughts, and points of view mean a great deal to us. After all, we thought of them. But listening is empowering, especially when resolving conflict. When we listen, we're

not only grasping the message, but showing that we care about what the other person is saying. Even if you don't agree, listening before speaking will tame your urge to say or do things that cause more frustration.

2. Slow to Speak

You always have something to say. Even if you're not talkative, you have something to say. In fact, talking is good too. I wouldn't suggest that you stop talking either. Silence can be just as destructive as speaking when it's done in an unhealthy manner. Do you remember what your mom used to say? "Think before you speak." It's simple but true. We get ourselves into trouble when we blurb out things without thinking, especially when trying to resolve a problem with your spouse or friend. How we talk can quickly turn a conversation into an argument.

Conclusion

You will have to determine the best way to be a better listener. Even if you have to start by biting your tongue! Trust me, the little pain you have from your teeth crushing your soft tongue won't come near to the pain you might cause by saying something you shouldn't. But really, it all comes down to choice. You simply have to make a decision. There's no magic formula or spiritual prayer that can change it. However, you can ask God to help you.

Discussion:

- Of the two ways to listen better, which is more difficult to do and why?



Key Verses: **Colossians 3:12**

Introduction:

We live in a world where nearly everyone is trying to increase his or her value. From 12-step programs to financial growth seminars, people are seeking a deeper sense of value. Wealth is typically the most common element used to measure worth. However your net-worth isn't as important as your self-worth. The two are not the same. There are people whose net-worth is bountiful and overflowing, but whose self-worth is bankrupt.

What defines your true value? How do you measure your worth? Think about those questions. Before you answer them

too quickly, process the depth of those questions. These are questions we should all ask ourselves, even as Christians. The great myth is that all Christians recognize and appreciate their value. After all, Christ died for us! But so many of us don't value ourselves, and feel meaningless at times.

Knowing how much you mean to God is key to assessing your self-worth. Look at a few factors that determine your worth:

Factors that Determine your Worth:

I. You are Chosen

Colossians 3:12 (NLT) says, "Since God chose you to be the holy people whom He loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience." You are chosen. Yes, you. Maybe you're thinking that God wouldn't choose you, but He did. He made no mistake. You are not an accident. He planned for you and selected you for a purpose.

2. You are Light

Matthew 5:14 says, "Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid." Without doubt you are God's light. You have the character and the identity to show forth God's glory. Wherever you go, people should see Christ in you. You were made in His image.

3. You are Adopted

Romans 8:15-16 says, "For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of

adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God.” Allow me to humbly submit to you an awesome truth. If you have given your life to Christ, you are His child! You have been adopted into the family of God. Don’t let the word “adoption” frighten you. It means that you have been preferred!

4. You are Loved

John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” The greatest of all these is love. Knowing that Christ loves you so much, adds invaluable worth to your life. You can look in the mirror and say, “God loves me”.

Conclusion

So remember, your net-worth doesn’t equal your self-worth. Build on things that add to your self-worth. Read and pray the scriptures that deal with who you are in Christ. Never let anyone cheapen or depreciate you with unkind words or attitudes. You are who God says you are...bottom line.

Discussion:

- Of the four factors that determine your worth, which one do we tend to question the most, especially during hardship?



Key Verses: **Proverbs 4:7**

Introduction:

Got wisdom? If not, you need it. I'm always amazed at the things we strive for in life—houses, cars, careers, appreciation, etc. No matter where you go, people are always trying to get something. It's in our nature. Then once we get what we want, we move on to wanting something else, usually something bigger and better. It seems that everyone is trying to get stuff. Well, according to the Bible, in all our getting, there's one thing that we should get—wisdom. How interesting...of all the things that God could have encouraged us to get, he tells us to go after wisdom. What is it about wisdom that is so important to God? Why is wisdom something we must pursue?

Webster's dictionary defines wisdom as: "ability to discern; good sense". With wisdom, you have the ability to discern, rightly judge matters and demonstrate good sense. Wisdom can save you money; save you trouble, save you heartache, and save you from embarrassment. Being able to make wise decisions is the most valuable thing you can ever have.

Proverbs chapter two provides us with the benefits of wisdom. Let's review four of them.

Four Benefits of Wisdom:

1. Power

Verse 7 says, "He holds victory in store for the upright, he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless,". Wisdom brings victory because you are keen and knowledgeable about the enemy works. His tricks can't trick you. His lures can't capture you. You're smarter than the enemy, predicting his moves and calculating his ways. David said, "Oh, how I love Your law! I meditate on it all day long. Your commands make me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever with me." (**Ps. 119:97-98**). There's power in wisdom.

2. Protection

Verse 8 says, "for he guards the course of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones." Having wisdom keeps and shields you from dangerous paths. It guards you from making crucial errors and costly mistakes. It protects your reputation and blesses your endeavors. **Psalms 1:1** says, "Blessed is the man Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, Nor stands in the path of sinners, Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;"

3. Purity

Verse 16 says, “It will save you also from the adulteress, from the wayward wife with her seductive words”. Wisdom and good sense will save you from moral failure and sexual destruction. You make better choices about the places you go, the things you watch, the websites you visit and people you associate with. **Proverbs 7:4-5** says, “Say to wisdom, “You are my sister,” And call understanding your nearest kin, That they may keep you from the immoral woman, From the seductress who flatters with her words.”

4. Principled

Verse 20 says, “Thus you will walk in the ways of good men and keep to the paths of the righteous.” Ultimately, wisdom leads to principled living and holiness—the lifestyle that pleases God. You can walk uprightly and in harmony with God’s will. Not to say that you’ll be perfect or flawless, but that you’ll live a life that brings glory and honor to God. **Verse 21** says, “For the upright will dwell in the land, And the blameless will remain in it;” Blameless doesn’t mean flawless. It means that God won’t blame you for how you live.

Conclusion

So maybe you’re thinking, “Great, but how do I actually ‘get’ wisdom?”. I’m glad you asked. **Proverbs 1:7** tells us that “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; Fools despise wisdom and instruction.” The fear of the Lord (reverence and obedience to his word) is the starting point of wisdom. The closer you get to God’s word, the wiser you will become. But most

importantly, you can ask for wisdom. **James 1:5** says, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him.”

Discussion:

- Since the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, how do you think we can grow in fearing the Lord?



Key Verses: **Ephesians 4:26–27**

Introduction:

On any given Sunday, or mid-week service, your worship actually begins before you even enter the temple. Before you step foot into the sanctuary, before you shake one person's hand; worship should already be prepared in your heart. The problem is, often times we wait until we arrive, before we actually start entertaining the thought of praising God. And so, during the worship part of the service, you're barely getting in tune with God's Spirit. Unfortunately, there's also a breed of people who not only come to church unprepared, but negative. Unless their favorite song is sung, they're not into it. Unless they're in the mood, no amount of energy will move them.

I often wonder how God feels. I wonder how he sees things. When someone comes into church, unprepared and uninterested in praising him, I wonder how God responds to that. But when we're prepared with a sacrifice of praise, we're going to praise God with all our hearts...no matter how we feel. We must come into the house of worship, with a determination to glorify God. Let's face it, our flesh resists. Our flesh is weak. If we give it attention, it can rob us of entering into the presence of God.

Let's consider some tips that will help you prepare yourself for worship and for a powerful moment in God's presence.

How to Prepare for Worship in the Temple:

1. Be a Worshipper, Wherever you Are

Don't wait until you're coming to church, to worship God. Ignite, or re-ignite, a life of worship and praise. The more you create moments of worship outside of the walls of your church building, the more receptive you'll be inside. Maybe it's a cliché, but worship really is a lifestyle. Look for times throughout your day to praise God audibly. Not just inner thoughts and meditations, but audible praise. The Bible says, "Make a joyful noise". I don't know about you, but I can't make too much noise in my head.

2. Let go of Grudges, Burdens and Pride

The hardest thing to do is trying to praise God, when your heart is holding a grudge against someone in or even outside of the church. A grudge steals your joy and disables your desire to please God. Grudges are self-pleasing; hence the reason why they are so hard to let go of. It feels good (for a moment) to hold a grudge against someone. It feels empowering. But what a lie

that is! Grudges are destructive and they keep people of praising God. The moment you let that grudge go and forgive, you will immediately notice the difference in your worship.

Also there are burdens. Life's burdens can weigh down your worship and make you feel totally uninterested. That's why the Bible says to "put on the garment of praise, for the spirit of heaviness". As long as you're wearing your burdens, you can't worship effectively. If you "cast your cares upon him", you can clothe yourself with praise and have liberty. Lastly, there's the pride issue. Pride is simply self-worship. It can keep you from entering God's presence because "God resists the proud". So if you're too proud, you won't be able to worship freely, no matter how awesome the service is.

3. Get your Mind on God before Entering the Temple

David said, "I will enter His gates with thanksgiving, into his courts with praise". Even before you get into the sanctuary, have your heart set on magnifying God. David didn't wait until he got to church before he praised God. He came in praising and thanking. Having your mind on God before you enter is crucial. The Bible says to "cast down every imagination that exalts itself above the knowledge of God".

4. Be Punctual and Ready to Worship

I honestly don't understand how someone could show up 20 to 30 minutes late, and have a meaningful worship experience. It's highly unlikely. Showing up early and on time, says you're ready to worship. Punctuality speaks louder than words. It says a

lot about ones mentality and spirit concerning the things of God. It shows if your mind is on God, and if you're ready to worship him, you'll arrive to church on time and ready to enter His presence with rejoicing. Worship creates an atmosphere where God can move and speak powerfully into people's lives.

Conclusion

If you apply these simple principles, you'll discover a level of worship that you've never experienced before. Even the word of God will be more effective in your life. Worship sets the tone. It prepares your heart for hearing the word, the time when God speaks to us. Let's awaken the priority of worship and the value of being prepared. Your attitude when you enter the sanctuary will determine your attitude when you exit.

Discussion:

- Of the four tips for preparing for worship, which one do you think is most important and why?



Key Verses: **Genesis 33:4**

Introduction:

We all know the feeling when tension rises between you and another individual; be it your spouse, friend or co-worker. Nobody likes conflict. Yet conflict is apart of life; it's inevitable. Relational conflict has existed since the days of Adam and Eve. From the first family, we see one brother, Cain, resent and dislike his brother Abel. Many generations later, we see another pair of (twin) brothers, Jacob and Esau, whose feud spanned from birth into adulthood.

Jacob and Esau, whose story is found in the book of Genesis, were twins—but couldn't be any more different. Their father

Isaac favored Esau. And their mother Rebekah favored Jacob. To make a long story short, Jacob deceived his father and stole his brother's birthright—his blessing. This escalated the quarrel between them to a whole new level. As a side note, I believe Isaac and Rebekah were really the ones to blame for this division. Playing favorites and using their children as pawns to gain leverage against each other was a true reflection of their martial state. But that's another writing!

Before I give you some insight concerning restoring fractured relationships, let me throw out a disclaimer: Restoration in relationships is hard work. It takes a lot of grace and humility. Simply following a few steps isn't going to completely solve your conflict. It takes prayer, time, and love to mend any relationship.

Allow me to offer 4 essential steps:

Four Steps to Repairing a Broken Relationship:

I. Shed your Selfishness

Esau was looking for Jacob, and Jacob was terrified because he feared his life. When they met up, Jacob humbled himself.

Genesis 33:3 says, “Then he crossed over before them and bowed himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother.” Okay, this is usually the hardest thing for us to do. Why? For some reason we perceive humility and shedding selfishness as admitting defeat. But in restoring a relationship, it cannot be about who was right or wrong. That will only regress your efforts. Humility defuses the tension. If you're right, but prideful, you're wrong.

2. Forgive and Let Go

Both Jacob and Esau had to forgive each other. Forgiveness is absolutely the most powerful tool in healing and restoring relationships. Forgiveness offers us the chance to release the ownership of our hurts. It is a chance to release the title deed of regret and pain. I like how the Apostle Paul worded the principle of forgiveness, “You must make allowance for each other’s faults and forgive the person who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others.”

3. Embrace the Opportunity

When Esau saw Jacob’s repentant heart, this is what he did. **Genesis 33:4** says, “But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.” Now, your reunion may not be as dramatic, depending on how deep and how long, but embrace the opportunity of reconciliation. If there is good will and merit in the other’s heart, embrace it.

4. Bless One Another

Genesis 33:10-11 says, “And Jacob said, ‘No, please if I have found favor in your sight, then receive my present from my hand inasmuch as I have seen your face as though I had seen the face of God, and you were pleased with me. “Please take my blessing that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me and because I have enough.’ And he urged him, and he took it.” Unlike the gifts that Jacob sent before hand, this gift was after they embraced and forgave. Notice Jacob said, “Take my blessing”. Jacob wanted to solidify his restoration with restitution. He wanted to bless his brother. It’s up to you to decide what this part means for your situation.

Conclusion

God wants us all to live peaceably and in harmony. Although much more can be taught about this subject, I hope today's lesson has helped you. You're only as healthy as your relationships. To put it another way: Your spiritual life will never be healthier than your relationship life. Relationships are the barometer of spiritual maturity, and they take work to build and rebuild if necessary. Don't give up on the process.

Discussion:

- Of the four steps for repairing broken relationships, which one do you think is most difficult to do and why?



Key Verses: **John 13:21-25**

Introduction:

In our key verses, Jesus is having dinner with his disciples, and is about to reveal who his traitor was. Notice the posture of the disciple whom Jesus loved. While the others were spread out around the table, the beloved disciple (John) was leaning on the bosom of Jesus. The bosom is the chest area of the upper body.

There is a level of closeness here that seems to surpass the location of the others. The others can see Jesus. They can hear Jesus. But only one was so close, that he was leaning on his bosom. Leaning on the bosom of Christ represents a powerful prin-

ciple...which means to be close to the heart of God. The bosom is the area closest to the heart, and in some instances, symbolizes the heart itself. This disciple found a way, to be near the heart of the Master. He wasn't just interested in God's miracles or works, but his heart.

David was called "a man after God's own heart." Why? Because above all his endeavors in life, he hungered for God. He loved to worship. This is the basis of radical discipleship—radical relationship with God. Worship takes you closer to God, and places you at his bosom. Let's look at three benefits of being close to God's heart.

Three Benefits of being Close to God's Heart:

I. Unbreakable Peace

In the opening scene, Jesus dropped a bomb when he said, "one of you will betray Me". The air grew thick. Jesus had troubled the disciples with news that was tough to swallow. So much so that worry and confusion broke out in their hearts. The bible says, "the disciples looked at one another, and were perplexed". Emotions simmered like a hot pot of stew. Yet in the middle of this perplexity, the beloved disciple is peacefully resting on the bosom of Christ.

When you're close to God's heart, you receive peace in times of chaos and uncertainty. Why? You become like whoever you're close to. Jesus Christ is peace. So when you're close to him (leaning on his bosom), you have that same peace. We all get caught in storms, but having peace means that the storm doesn't get caught in you. During the most baffling situations and difficult times, you can have peace. That doesn't mean you are numb to reality, but secure in God's loving care for your life.

2. Unrestricted Access

Leaning on the bosom of Christ allows you access that others may not. After Jesus warned them of the traitor, look at what Peter did. “Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask who it was of whom He spoke. Then, leaning back on Jesus’ breast, he said to Him, “Lord, who is it?” Because of the beloved disciple’s position, he had direct access to Christ. Thus, there is nothing that he cannot ask. No other disciple questioned him. Not even Peter would ask the Lord. Instead Peter petitions the disciple.

When you’re leaning on the heart of God, there is nothing you cannot ask. You have unrestricted access. Not because you earned it; but because you’re positioned in worship. Consider King Solomon. It was when he offered a thousand burnt offerings on the altar (worship), that God appeared and said, “Ask! What shall I give you?” That’s the secret power of leaning on God’s bosom. Instead of complaining, whining, begging, and handing him your grocery list, worship Him! In doing so, God gave him a spiritual blank check...to ask whatever he desired.

3. Unshakable Love

God’s love is the greatest lesson we learn through the beloved disciple. At first, it seems a bit excessive and even pious that he would call himself, “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” Didn’t Jesus love all his disciples? Yes. Did Jesus hand out more love to the beloved disciple, than the others? No. However this disciple found a sweet spot, a way to fully rest and abide in God’s love for him.

Resting in God’s love is not easy. I know that sounds strange. But it’s true. We all know that God loves us. However,

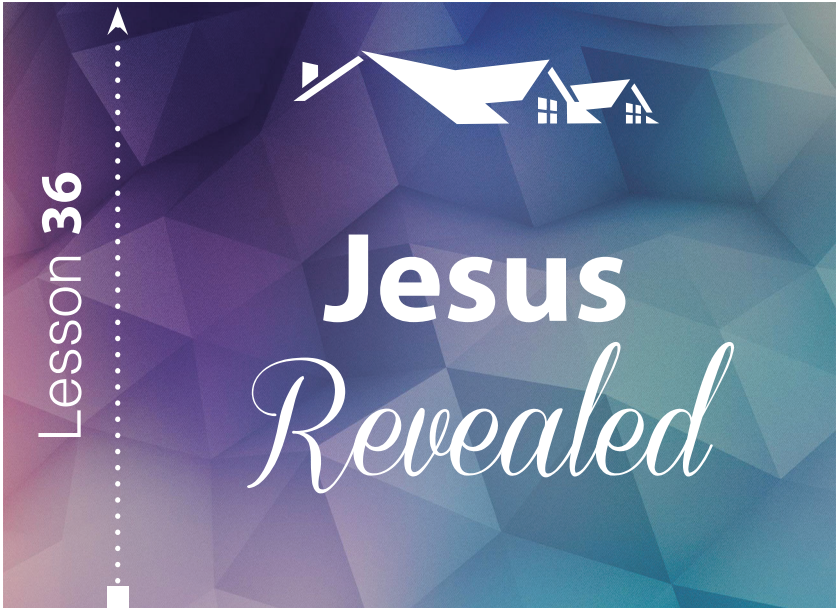
resting and remaining in his love is quite different. So many of us measure our faith by how much we love God, instead of how much he loves us. We base our Christian walks on how well we can love him, instead of how well he loves us. Christianity is not about the depth of my love for God, but the depth of his love for me.

Conclusion

The bosom of Christ is reserved for those who desire a deeper relationship with him. We are not required or obligated to position ourselves in this manner. I've seen Christians live without unbreakable peace and unmerited favor. Still there are those who haven't "rested" in God's unconditional love. However it's not enough to just see or hear Jesus. He wants us to lean on his bosom.

Discussion:

- Of the three benefits, which one matters the most to you and why?



Key Verses: **John 10:30-33**

Introduction:

Jesus. Many people credit Him as being a teacher, a religious leader, or a humanitarian. Others esteem Him as a prophet or just a very spiritual man. More books have written about Him than any other figure in history. More songs have been penned to His honor than any other notable personality. The question is... who is Jesus? Who is this man who claimed to be God?

The bible says that Jesus was miraculously born to a virgin, lived without sin, ministered for roughly three years, was crucified on a cross and then rose again three days later. The miracles

He performed, his death on the cross, his resurrection, his departure to heaven—leads us to believe that this was more than just a man. Jesus Christ wasn't just a philosopher, a prophet, or a secondary role in a deity—He was and is the only God. Let's examine three claims Jesus made about Himself.

Three Claims that Jesus Made:

I. Jesus Claimed to be God

All throughout history, men have claimed to speak for God. However, the list gets much shorter for people who actually declared to be God. Religious figures such as Buddha, Krishna, Muhammad, and Ghandi never claimed to be God. Jesus Christ was clear about His identity and heavenly origins. **John 8:58-59** says, "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!" At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds."

Abraham was and is hailed the founding father of the Jewish people. In Judaism, there is not a more esteemed, more exalted figure than Abraham. So imagine the outrage, the offense taken when Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!" First, utter shock. Insult ensued. Then violence erupted. The statements of Jesus about Himself were not only controversial, but dismantled the entire religious system. Crowds were ready to stone Him not because He claimed to be equal (on the same level) with God, but because He claimed to actually be God.

The scriptures reveal two truths about the deity of Jesus Christ. First, there is one inseparable God with no division of "persons" (**Deut. 6:4; Eph. 4:5-6**). Second, Jesus Christ is the full manifestation of God in flesh. He is God incarnate. The fullness of the Godhead is in Christ. (**Col. 2:9; 2 Cor. 5:19**).

2. Jesus Claimed to be the Only Way

Unlike other religious leaders, Jesus never pointed people to a heavenly path, but rather He asserted that He was “the path”. In **John 14:6**, Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” Such a statement leaves very little room for debate or personal opinion. It forces an individual to either agree or disagree—to believe or reject. There is no middle ground, no grey zones, and no alternate routes to heaven.

The rigidity of Jesus’ claim to be the one and only way creates immediate friction with all other beliefs and enlightenments. Throughout history, philosophers and intellectuals have wrestled with this assertion and have rationalized Jesus’ claim. Today, even certain Christians question the exclusivity of Jesus and adopt Eastern religious beliefs. In other words, Jesus and Buddha or Jesus and Krishna can co-exist in your life. This is absolute heresy.

3. Jesus Claimed to be Sinless

This claim falls in sequence with the previous claims. In John 8:46, Jesus said, “Which of you convicts Me of sin? And if I tell the truth, why do you not believe Me?” Perhaps you’ve heard the old adage, “no one is perfect”. While that is certainly true of all humanity since the original sin of Adam, this doesn’t apply to Jesus Christ. **1 Peter 2:22** says, “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.”

How was it possible for Jesus to be sinless? It’s possible because Jesus was not only the Son of Man (human), but also the Son of God (divine). His mother was flesh. His Father was Spirit. In **John 8:42**, Jesus said “If God were your Father, you would

love Me, for I proceeded forth and came from God; nor have I come of Myself, but He sent Me.”

Conclusion

In conclusion, it's important remember and defend the essential Oneness of God against false doctrine. **I John 5:7** says, “For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one.” This “oneness” is not a triune deity, or equal harmony and authority of persons, but a description of One God. Scripture teaches “For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (**Colossians 2:9**). Jesus is God manifested in the flesh.

Discussion:

- Why is knowing the real identity of Jesus Christ so important to our daily relationship with Him?



Key Verses:

Mark 16:15, Acts 2:38

Introduction:

Baptism has been a hotly debated subject within the last century. While every branch in Christianity has formed their views on the necessity of baptism, the modes and doctrinal positions are as diverse as the colors in a box of crayons. With so many differing viewpoints on baptism, such as whether is it essential for salvation or only symbolic, we need to validate our stance by looking to scripture alone.

The reason why doctrines on baptism are all over the map is because men have relied on sources other than the scripture for truth, such as tradition, culture and historical writings. Instead of letting scripture interpret scripture, they impose their views on scripture. As you'll see, water baptism is more than a ceremony, more than a public display of faith. The apostle Peter said, "And this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (**1 Peter 3:21**). Let's continue our study by answering three questions about water baptism.

Three Questions about Baptism:

I. Why Must We Be Baptized?

Water baptism is enriched with symbolism and Old Testament meaning, all of which set the stage for what Jesus commissioned his disciples to do. This brings us to the question, "why baptize?" The answer is simple, because Jesus commanded us to be baptized. In **Matt 28:19-20**, Jesus said, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Notice the word "name" is singular. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit all have one name – Jesus Christ.

Particularly, it was Peter who stood up on the day of Pentecost and preached "...Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (**Acts 2:38**). Applying this message, in addition to putting your faith in Jesus, implements the Gospel to your life.

2. How Should We Be Baptized?

In addition to the arguments made against the necessity of baptism, there is also debate on “how” to baptize, specifically the formula or mode. Again, scripture speaks for itself. The Bible never suggests that sprinkling or dousing is a form of baptism—only total submersion into water. The Greek word used for baptism in the Bible is “baptizo”, which means to immerse, submerge, to make overwhelmed (i.e. fully wet).

Baptism by full submersion is further proven by its biblical comparison to burial. In **Romans 6:4**, Paul said, “Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.” The deceased are not buried half-way. Neither is dirt sprinkled on their caskets. Most all cultures, both past and present, completely bury their dead. When Jesus was baptized, the scriptures indicate He came “... up out of the water” (**Mark 1:10**). That small detail hints that Jesus was fully submerged into the water.

3. When Should We Be Baptized?

There is not a biblical rule on the age or timeframe when you must be baptized. Some religions, such as Catholicism, practice infant baptism. There is no infant baptism recorded or taught in the New Testament. Therefore, only two things are required for baptism. First, you must believe upon Jesus Christ. **Mark 16:16** says, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” Second, you must repent. Remember what Peter said: “...Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ...” (**Acts 2:38**).

Belief and repentance go hand and hand. Repent means to “turn from sin” and “change one’s mind.” In order to repent we must change our attitude toward God. Peter said to them “repent” and be “baptized.” Then **Acts 2:41** says, “Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.” Those who heard the Gospel and believed did not hesitate to be baptized. When you realize you’re a sinner in need of a Savior, and you have repented, now is the time!

Conclusion

Baptism in the name of Jesus shows that we trust in Jesus alone. It’s a declaration that we believe Jesus is our Lord and personal Savior. When we are baptized, we take on His Name. If you have not been baptized in Jesus Name for the remissions of sins, perhaps it’s time to consider making that step.

Discussion:

- Discuss as a group why you decided to be baptized and how you felt.



Key Verses: **1 Corinthians 1:3-5**

Introduction:

In a world where morals have decayed, finding people with integrity and character may feel like an impossible mission. It seems like every time you open the newspaper or log on to the Internet, there's a new headline of political scandal or corporate corruption. Some suggest that the lack of integrity in society could only be repaired when we discover the values that flow from within. However, it's that mindset that fertilizes immorality in today's culture.

Centuries ago, during the time of the Judges, God's people lived under the delusion that virtue flows from within.

Judges 21:25 says, “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” This was an extreme low-point in Israel’s history, a shameful era of spiritual disorder and irreverence for God. The same picture can be drawn today.

When God is not enthroned as “king” of your life, it gives birth to chaos. When there is no kingly authority that governs your heart and desires, you’ll simply do what feels right at the moment. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ means coming under His lordship—it represents a life that is aligned with the will and desires of God. Is it possible to live a life of godly integrity in such a secular age? The answer is, yes! Let’s look at three keys that unlock integrity.

How to Live with Integrity:

I. Remove Your Old Self

Let’s carefully read **Ephesians 4:20-22**: 20 But you have not so learned Christ, 21 if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: 22 that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts

We must shed our old identity, starve our fleshly impulses and clothe ourselves with the image of Jesus Christ. Notice that the scripture says, “put off your old self”. Sometimes there is an assumption that transforming into the image of Christ is a magical process. However, part of being reshaped into the image of Christ requires intentional, mindful choices in your life. Keeping in mind, also, that it is the Holy Spirit, not ourselves that gives us the power to make these changes.

2. Be Firm in your Faith

Humanity has always struggled with authority. By nature, we resist it. We avoid being accountable to anything, and especially anyone. Today's generation largely rejects the notion that we are governed by a code of absolutes, that sin is real, that we are being watched, that our decisions carry consequences, that there's a God who will judge us. Drawing clear moral lines in a blurry world will always make some feel uncomfortable. This is why the truth can feel offensive at times. When we're forced to make a decision, take a stand, or choose sides, our integrity will be unmasked. This exact scenario came to a hedge when Joshua spoke out against Israel's indifference.

Consider Joshua's words: "But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD" **(Joshua 24:15)**.

Joshua confronted a group of people who were indecisive about their faith and godly heritage. They had allowed outside influences to pollute their relationship with God and taint their unique identity. The key to integrity is to espouse a godly value system that will not bow to the pressures of the age. If we are to maintain integrity, we must be willing to take a stand especially on controversial issues. Webster's dictionary tells us integrity means "an unimpaired condition." In other words, it means to be sound, sure and immovable. That's exactly what Jesus is looking for in His followers.

3. Let Honesty Prevail

Integrity is honesty at all costs. It's having a certain blend of bravery and backbone to tell the truth no matter how difficult. Integrity is being truthful, even when cheating may produce better results. The bible has many examples of good and bad character. One of the bad examples is comes from a man named Ananias.

Acts 5:1-5 says: "But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last."

When the time came for the believers to bring their proceeds to the apostles, Ananias stashed away some for himself. Although Ananias brought a lot of money, the apostle Peter discerned that he wasn't being honest. Next thing you know, Ananias fell over dead! Death seemed like such a harsh punishment for being deceitful. God may not punish with physical death today, but things still die as a result of dishonesty, such as your relationship with God, your compassion towards others, or perhaps your ability to minister. If someone is willing to lie, there's no telling what else he or she will do to cover up the truth.

Conclusion

One good example of integrity comes from King David. Although David wasn't perfect, the psalmist Asaph wrote the fol-

lowing about his qualities: “And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them” (**Psalm 78:72**). Asaph described David as a man with “integrity of heart”, implying that he led with pure motives. Did David make horrible mistakes? Yes he did. However, he at least owned up to his faults. Integrity doesn’t equal sinless perfection. But one with integrity acknowledges his failures and admits when he’s wrong.

Discussion:

- What can we do as individuals do maintain our integrity?



Key Verses:

I Corinthians 3:1-9

Introduction:

Have you ever noticed that ducks fly in a V formation? Gliding through the air, these gentle birds unite to create a symmetric formation—one that appears to be divinely choreographed. These ducks are not performing an air show, but are actually working together in unity, migrating towards their destination. This V shape reduces air resistance—conserving their energy and allowing them to travel further. All the ducks in the flock take turns at the head. As the leading bird tires, it falls to the back and another one takes its place.

We can learn some valuable lessons from the ducks about unity. Each duck recognizes his purpose and understand where he fits into the flock. Without unity, the “V” would probably become an “O”, and the ducks would only fly in circles. The birds must have trust, a common goal, and be willing to forfeit some individuality. This is exactly what the church needs to be a united body of believers.

Three Ways to Build Unity:

I. Focus on Jesus Christ, not the Church

Above all, it is the saving grace of Jesus Christ that unites the church. **Colossians 1:17-18** states, “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church...” Like a body cannot function without a head, the church cannot function without Christ. Anytime Jesus ceases to be the focal point, the church slowly loses its identity and purpose. If the supremacy of Christ is displaced, what you have is a group of religious people who eventually love their rules more than God. This is why Jesus Christ, not the church, is the centerpiece of our faith. The church is the body, the physical representation of Christ to the world.

Zeroing our focus on Jesus Christ and the Gospel, not creeds or churches, will lay a foundation for unity. An example of wrong focus and how it can create division is found in **1 Corinthians 1:10-15**: “I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas”; still another, “I fol-

low Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized into my name.”

Paul pleads with the church to refocus their devotion on Jesus Christ, not on any one leader, pastor or believer. He asks a simple, yet profound question, “Is Christ divided?” In other words, we serve the same God and to ensure our own unity we must concentrate on Him.

2. Focus on Harmony, not Conformity

In reference to the early church, **Acts 2:44** states, “All the believers were together and had everything in common”. This type of unity is characterized by togetherness and commonality. One myth about unity is that in order to achieve it, everyone must talk, walk, look and think exactly alike. This mindset breeds conformity, not unity. That is clearly not God’s design. God enjoys some diversity—otherwise we would all be clones, cookie-cutter personalities. Commonality is about coming into agreement, despite minor differences of opinion.

Philippians 2:2 states, “then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose” In this one statement, Paul reveals four marks of spiritual unity:

1. **Like-minded** – Being like-minded is being in tune with one another, to be one in attitude, not in actual thoughts.
2. **Same love** – Having the same love is demonstrating mutual respect, care and godly compassion towards one another. It means to be impartial with your love.

3. **One spirit** – Being in one spirit is being one-souled, sharing a common passion or desire.
4. **One purpose** – This is where passion is mobilized into something constructive. Self-interests and personal agendas are abandoned for the sake of one cause.

It takes real effort for a group of people with different backgrounds, cultures and ideas to harmonize. Most of all, it takes humility in spirit. Echoing Paul's decree, "Do not be proud". Social class does not exist in God's family. We are equally loved, evenly saved by the grace of God.

3. Focus on Actions, not Words

Sadly, "unity" often becomes a cliché, a fond idea or worse—a stale expression without purpose. Someone might stand in front of a congregation or group and say, "We need more unity!" Yet, this phrase doesn't provide a roadmap, a practical course of action. Unless we attach real actions to the concept of unity, all we're left with is an empty slogan. It's easy to toss around religious buzzwords to fuel emotions. It's challenging, however, to take actual steps.

The apostle Paul revealed some concrete ways to build unity. **Romans 12:9-16** says, "Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony

with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited”

Conclusion

As we wrap up today’s lesson, let’s not forget about those ducks and the beautiful V formation they create. Each bird recognizes that they need each other to survive. The same is true in the body of Christ. Another example of unity is a puzzle. The pieces are shaped so different that no two are alike. A puzzle piece by itself doesn’t form a complete image. But when the puzzle is assembled, it forms one beautiful image. The body of Christ functions in the same manner. We are a blend of unique personalities, gifts and ministries that reflect the image of Jesus Christ.

Discussion:

- What other practices can we do to build unity in the church?



Key Verses: **Luke 9:23-24**

Introduction:

Becoming a follower of Jesus is a personal decision, an act of your will. We have the ability to accept or deny the call. "If" is a powerful word. It is the conjunction of your destiny and purpose. Another powerful word is "desire". Jesus said, "If anyone desires". Having a desire is all you need. God can work with desire. He can take your desire, like clay, and mold something wonderful. He can shape your destiny and form you into His disciple. All He needs is your desire, your passion.

The closest people to Christ were His disciples. They were His followers. And by following Him, they experienced a more intimate relationship. These men had access to the private life

of Jesus. They saw sides of Him that others didn't. Others only saw His miracles and heard His dynamic teachings. They ate with Him. They saw Him sleep like an ordinary man. But beware. The closer you get to Christ's inner circle of followers, the costlier it gets. It requires less of you. John the Baptist said, "He must become greater; I must become less" (**John 3:30**).

Becoming his disciple is a hard walk of self-denial, cross bearing, and following his lead. The good news is that by doing this, you enter a closer fellowship with God. Based on **Luke 9:23-24**, let's investigate and discuss some essential characteristics of following Jesus Christ.

Three Requirements of Following Jesus:

I. Deny Yourself

Everywhere you turn, the focus seems to be on "self." From product ads to life improvement books, everything is aimed at "my" interests, my likes, my satisfaction, and my way. There are some misconceptions about self-denial. Some teach and believe that self-denial is to deny yourself of pleasurable things, fun, modern technology, and rest. Self-denial is not self-dissatisfaction. It's not about abstaining or avoiding everything that is satisfying.

To deny yourself, is really to reject your self-lordship. In other words, it is to reject and decline the god, the boss, the lord within you. It is to surrender your control, authority and superiority to Christ. My best definition of self-denial is to dethrone yourself, and to enthrone Christ in your life. As long as you are enthroned in your life, where you rule, Jesus Christ is dethroned. Self-centeredness uncrowns Christ in your life. When Jesus says to "deny yourself", He's saying to dethrone your lordship. Hand over the reigns. Move out from the driver's seat.

2. Take Up your Cross

What could Jesus possibly mean, when He tells us to “take up your cross daily”? Jesus is saying that to become his disciple, we must sacrifice our lives, to live for Him. This sacrifice isn’t a literal one, but a spiritual one. Being a disciple is about dying to your will, and coming alive to God’s will. The cross is meant for death; and although we aren’t required to die physically, our old nature—our sinful ways must be buried. Paul said in **Galatians 2:20**, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” The Apostle paints a clear portrait of being crucified with Christ. It’s about surrendering your life, and letting Christ live inside of you.

Taking up your cross is about giving your whole life to Christ. It’s about forsaking all to follow Him. Sadly, many people make this the “fine print” of Christian living. It’s too harsh, too unfriendly, too much to swallow. The cross in your life is the bitter-sweet surrender of your personal will and wishes. It is choosing what pleases God, instead of what pleases you. It is doing your best to obey God’s word. It is allowing Christ to shine through your spirit and actions.

3. Follow Jesus

Following Jesus is tough. No matter how easy we try to make it seem. Following Jesus has always been unattractive, counter-cultural and uncomfortable. It’s important that we don’t soften the true message of the gospel and what it means to become a follower of Jesus. What we gain in following Jesus—is Jesus. Following Jesus is not just about following orders, but following in His steps—becoming like Him.

Anything Jesus walked on, we can walk on. As long as He's ahead of us, and we're following Him, His steps can become our steps. If Jesus healed the sick, we are empowered to heal the sick. If Jesus fed the hungry, we are capable of feeding the hungry. Jesus defended the defenseless, forgave the unforgivable, accepted the rejected, blessed the cursed, touched the untouchables, and brought life to the lifeless. Wherever He walked, He made the blind to see and the lame to walk. Lepers were cleansed, deaf ears were opened, the dead were raised, and the gospel was preached. As **Corinthian 11:1** says, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ." When you imitate Jesus, people see less of you, and more of Him.

Conclusion

Being a follower of Christ, a disciple, is probably one of the most undervalued themes in Christianity today. Even though being a disciple should be our main purpose, it's extremely unpopular because the requirements are uncomfortable to the common believer. So many things are calling to us these days. So many distractions seem to stretch us in different directions. Yet, there is a voice that slices through the noise of life and beckons us to come. Jesus Christ is calling us to be His disciple—His follower. This is not simply an invitation, but a heavenly call. The time has come for us to respond to this call and fulfill our mission.

Discussion:

- Of the three requirements of following Jesus, which one is the most difficult to do and why?



Key Verses: **Matthew 6:16-18**

Introduction:

Whenever you talk about fasting, people tend to have different ideas about it. Nearly every world religion has fasting as a part of their rituals. Christian fasting is different in the same way everything else is different from the religious community. We worship, pray to, and fast for a living God who can respond and relate to us personally. According to the Bible, fasting is refraining from food, drink, sleep or other fleshly desires to focus on a period of spiritual growth or influence.

Specifically, fasting is to humbly deny something of the flesh to glorify God, grow a deeper relationship with God, and to

gain spiritual authority. More often than not, fasting involves abstaining from food because it has the most tangible affect on the body. This is the tendency and practice we find in the scriptures, including with our Lord Jesus Christ. With that in mind, let's explore three principles of fasting:

Three Principles of Fasting:

I. Fasting Glorifies God

Fasting itself is an act of sacrifice. When you fast, you forgo the time you spend eating or drinking, and dedicate it to prayer, worship and reading God's word. It's to submit yourself and to dismiss your physical desires in order to allow the Holy Ghost to work in your life. God takes notice any time we sacrifice something in order to please him, or draw closer to him. **Romans 12:1** says, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship."

When you fast, it's also a spiritual act of worship. Fasting adds another layer to your worship and spiritual devotion to God. Worship is often viewed as music or singing. However, worship involves more than lyrics, it involves your lifestyle. Fasting is about pleasing God, and pleasing God is what worship is all about. When talking about the Prophetess Anna, the Bible said, "...She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying" (**Luke 2:37**). Here we see fasting as a form of worship.

2. Fasting Draws you Closer to God

In the Bible, fasting falls under the category of "highly recommended". God never demanded or required anyone to fast.

However, it is the path of those who desire a deeper and closer relationship with Jesus Christ. When you fast, your body experiences physical hunger. It yearns to be filled. This is the hope for your spiritual man—that you would deeply hunger for God, and that His Spirit and Word would fill you. Fasting gives you a physical picture of what your spirit is longing for. **Matthew 5:6** says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

In some cases, fasting was a way to feel closer to God during a particularly difficult time. While fasting, you can communicate feelings of fear, anxiety, distress, or grief to God. When David’s son became ill, “David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground” (**2 Samuel 2:16**). Anytime you’re emotionally hurting, or struggling with a certain issue, fasting can be a mode of healing and recovery.

3. Fasting Brings Greater Power

Isaiah 58:6 says, “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?” The secret power of fasting is that it can give you spiritual authority over bonds of wickedness. Fasting brings greater power when preparing to confront situations or people who are oppressed. There was an occasion where Jesus’ own disciples were not able to deliver a demon-possessed man. When they asked “why”, Jesus said, “This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting” (**Mark 9:29**).

Fasting causes a heightened sense of the presence of God. It also brings freshness to the spirit and allows God to speak

clearly into your life. In other words, your heart picks up on a spiritual frequency that you normally wouldn't hear. We see an example of this in **Acts 13:2-3**, "While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off."

Conclusion

It's important to note that prayer and fasting often go hand in hand. This isn't always the case however. You can pray without fasting, and fast without prayer. It is when these two practices are combined that they produce the best results. Fasting is not about self-punishment or self-rejection. God doesn't receive any glory when we afflict ourselves. Fasting will push your relationship with God forward. So get ready to fast forward!

Discussion:

- Why do you think fasting is often overlooked and not emphasized enough in our relationship with God?



Key Verses: **Leviticus 27:30**

Introduction:

God owns everything. That's a big statement, but a true statement nonetheless. **Psalms 24:1**, "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." Because God owns everything and all blessings come from him, it's our job to be faithful managers of our financial resources. Simply put, money isn't our possession—it's God's possession. We are merely entrusted with the responsibility of managing it.

Giving is a testimony of God's ownership. And "tithing" is the leading standard of giving we find in the Bible. Tithing

is a plan that God Himself created. The word “tithe” actually means “tenth”. Our key verse says, “A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD” (Lev. 27:30). When we tithe, we return to God ten percent of our financial increase. So then, when we withhold the tithe, we actually steal what belongs to God. (Ref. Malachi 3:8) Let’s consider three power principles of tithing.

Three Principles of Tithing:

I. Tithing is a Test of Faith

It takes faith in God to give up some of what He has given us. When you tithe of your increase, you are putting your trust in God to supply your needs. **Proverbs 3:5** says, “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.” Deepening your trust in God is like learning a new language, the more you do it—the more it grows. Tithing shows God that you believe He is able to sustain you, even through financially difficult times. Investing your money into stocks, bonds and real estate can be a wise decision. However, investing into God’s work is the surest bet you can ever take.

Proverbs 3:6 says, “in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.” Tithing offers tribute and acknowledges how great God is. Don’t worry; God isn’t broke, so He doesn’t need our money. However, giving is a tangible testimony that God owns both the material and spiritual things of our lives. Essentially, He desires a trusting acknowledgement that He is “your” God, and that you fully depend on His goodness. Returning your tithe is a physical form of worship, one that actually requires a material sacrifice. Remember this, worship is the greatest motivation for giving.

2. Tithing Supports the Work of God

When you tithe and give to God's work, you become a partner in spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. When the Apostle Paul wrote about his partnership with the Philippian church, he said, "Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only" (**Phil. 4:15**).

Although this church couldn't physically travel with Paul on his missionary trips, their financial gifts made it possible for him to minister. Through their generous giving, they became co-laborers.

Tithing not only helps to spread the Gospel, but it creates a support system for the men and women who dedicate their lives to ministry. In the book of Malachi, we're told that God wants us to bring our tithe into the storehouse (**Ref. Mal 3:10**).

3. Tithing Opens the Windows of Blessing

Malachi 3:10 says, "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse...Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it." Giving your tithe opens the window of heaven over you and your entire household. This is a promise we have from God, that if we bring the tithe, He'll bring us invaluable blessings. God's financial system has a better return than any stock, bond, or investment you can make. He guarantees your success when you give generously to His kingdom.

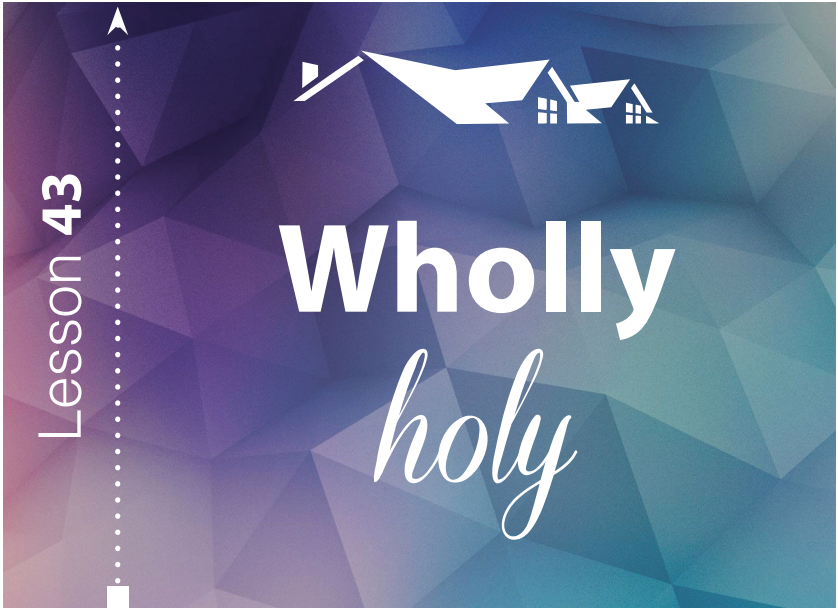
When you learn to tithe, it actually changes the way you view money. Tithing helps you prioritize your finances and guards your heart against greed and the love of money. The Apostle Paul told Timothy, “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (**1 Tim. 6:10**). When you give to God, it helps to bring balance to your spending habits and even helps you to become more content with what you have.

Conclusion

Tithing is not a “get rich quick” program or a manipulation tool. It is God’s system for sustaining the work of His kingdom and blessing your life. It’s a system that has worked for ages and continues to work today. Not only does it provide a basic need, but tithing also opens up a new landscape of opportunity for you. **Proverbs 3:9-10** says, “Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.” Some will say, “I can’t afford to tithe”. However the truth is, “You can’t afford not to”.

Discussion:

- Of the three principles of tithing, which one makes the biggest impression on you, and why?



Key Verses:

I Peter 1:13-16

Introduction:

You may or may not realize it, but the closer you get to God, the more like Him you become. Not that we could ever be equal with God, but as our relationship with him grows, there also grows a desire to please him and become more like him. When you are baptized in water and receive the gift of the Holy Ghost, a holy desire is birthed in your spirit. However, you begin to realize that there is a new inner battle being waged—between your old sin-lead nature and your new Spirit-lead nature. **(Ref. Galatians 5:17)**

Because your Spirit-lead nature hungers for God, a lifestyle of purification begins. This lifestyle is referred to as “holiness”. Living a life of holiness is simply saying and doing what pleases God. **Romans 12:2** says, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” This means we can live and interact with all people, but not to adopt or conform to a secular lifestyle. God desires for us to be holy and distinct. Let’s review three marks on holy living.

Three Marks of a Holy Life:

I. A Distinct Life

Some think that holiness is simply about being different. However, it’s far beyond that. God has called his people to be distinct. To become distinct, we must undergo what the Bible calls “sanctification”. **Leviticus 11:44** says, “For I am the LORD your God: ye shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and ye shall be holy; for I am holy...” The word “sanctify” means to be “separate” or to be “set apart”. God desires that we be set apart for his divine purpose in our lives. It is a process of inner and outer change, where the Holy Ghost and God’s Word begins to separate us from lifestyles that prevent a pure relationship with God.

Being distinct isn’t just about separating from old habits or customs; it’s about recognizing and living in your true significance. **1 Peter 2:9** says, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” Living a holy life means remembering how special you are to God. It means living in a way that reveals

the change in your life—both in your inward and outward reflection. The more you realize how special you are, the more cautious you are about what you do and say.

2. A Disciplined Life

Hebrews 12:14 says, “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.” Holiness doesn’t just come natural. It takes effort and may even make you a little uncomfortable at times. That’s because your old and new natures don’t agree—especially when you try to change something about your lifestyle. However, don’t give up. If God is speaking to you and asking you to change an area in your life, make the effort!

1 Timothy 4:7-8 says, “Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives’ tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come”. Living a holy life requires teaching and guidance. Paul’s advice to “train” means that holiness is a process of learning and becoming who God has called you to be. Have a teachable attitude regarding the principles of holiness in your everyday life.

3. A Devoted Life

2 Corinthians 7:1 says, “Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.” To grow in holiness, we need to purify ourselves of things that pollute the body and spirit. For example, doing drugs, drinking alcohol, smoking, and even certain foods poison the body. Likewise, certain things we watch, read, listen to and even places

we visit can pollute our spirits. Living a holy life means getting rid of impurities in your body and spirit.

Hebrews 12:14 says, “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.” Here’s an interesting fact: Separation leads to the greatest connection. When we strive for holiness, which is separation, we’re able to plug ourselves into God’s presence. Like the scripture says, without holiness no one will see the Lord. In other words, without separation, we cannot fully experience and enjoy God’s presence. Holiness, then, is a personal pursuit of God. When you strive to live holy, you send a message to God that his presence is a priority in your life.

Conclusion

The more of God we desire, the more important our quest for holiness becomes. Perhaps the Apostle Paul said it best, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship” (**Romans 12:1**). Living a holy life is about pleasing God and having an unbroken relationship with Him. As the scripture implies, offering your body—your whole being—is your spiritual act of worship. Don’t let holiness become a forgotten act of worship in your life.

Discussion:

- Of the three marks of a holy life, which one seems most interesting to you, and why?



Key Verses:

Proverbs 12:26; Ecclesiastes 4:9

Introduction:

God desires that we all have positive and enriching friendships. God never meant for us to live distant or lonely lives. He is actually pleased when we build, nurture and enjoy friendships. After God created Adam, He saw that it wasn't healthy for him to be alone. And although his partner became his wife, it still shows God's interest in our relationships and our need for friends. In addition, friendships also play an essential role in our emotional, mental and spiritual wellbeing. That's why it's important to choose the right kind of friend.

If you happen to choose unsafe friends, you could be setting yourself up for friendly fire. **Proverbs 25:19** says, “Confidence in an unfaithful man in time of trouble is like a broken tooth, and a foot out of joint.” In other words, not every friend is actually a “friend”. There are certain qualities that every good friendship should have. Let’s consider four qualities of a healthy friendship.

Four Qualities of a Healthy Friendship:

1. Candor

Proverbs 27:6 says, “Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.” In order for a friendship to be healthy, it must be framed with honesty. Friends should be able to speak candidly with each other, not hiding their true feelings, likes and dislikes, passions, interests and ideas. A friend is someone you can be real with, where you can just be yourself and not be judged. Not only that, but as **Proverb 27:6** alludes, friendships allow space for constructive criticism. Even if a friend’s advice upsets you, that openness and candor builds authenticity.

Without trust and confidence, there is no safety in being honest. **Proverbs 27:** says, “Wound from a friend can be trusted...” Remember that trust is built with time and faithfulness.

2. Consistency

Proverbs 17:17 says, “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.” Constancy and loyalty adds immeasurable value to friendships. Especially during difficult times,

or seasons of great trial, a friend's loyalty can mean the difference between success and failure. One of the best examples of loyalty can be found in the friendship of David and Jonathan. Even while David was running for his life from Jonathan's father, Saul, Jonathan stood by him and defended his innocence. Because of Jonathan's commitment, David's life was preserved. Risking his own reputation, Jonathan shows us the power and blessing of constancy.

Proverbs 18:24b says, "...but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." Faithfulness is the glue that causes friends to stick close. Learn to be dependable.

3. Communication

James 1:19 says, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." Open communication is the lifeline in healthy friendships. If friends don't communicate, they become out of touch with each other's needs and experiences. First of all, be quick to listen. Be an active listener—paying attention not only what your friend is saying with their mouth, but what he or she is saying with their body language. If you spend too much time talking, you might miss some hidden messages. Secondly, be slow to speak; in other words, talk with caution and respect. Choose your words wisely. And thirdly, be slow to anger. Don't let an intense conversation drive you to anger or vulgarity. Always keep your cool.

Romans 12:10 says, "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves." Communicating without respect can lead to insult or recklessness. Always treat your friends with respect and love, especially when communicating.

4. Compassion

Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (**John 15:13**). Compassion is love in action. This is likely the crowning attribute in any true friendship. Although Jesus meant a literal “laying down” of life, this also includes the laying down of your time, finances and energy. Anything you lay down for a friend, expresses the greatest kind of love. Compassion requires sensitivity and willingness. Whether your friend is stranded on the side of the highway, or recently lost his or her job, compassion will cause you to go the extra mile to help them.

Compassion involves doing something for someone else while expecting nothing in return. Real love is selfless. Paul said, “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” (**1 Cor. 13:13**)

Conclusion

Friendship is one of the greatest gifts in life. However, it’s also a gift that often goes unwrapped. **Proverbs 18:24a** says, “A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly.” To have friends, you first must be a friend. Be the kind of friend that you yourself would like to have. If you want a caring friend, take time to care for someone else. If you want a friend who listens to you, become a good listener. Healthy friendships begin with you. You will only get out what you put in.

Discussion:

- Of the four qualities of a healthy friendship, which one in your opinion lacks the most in friendships and why?



Key Verses:

Matthew 28:18-20, Luke 6:27-28

Introduction:

Our greatest commission is to save lost and dying souls. However many Christians cringe when they hear the word “evangelism”. Likely because older evangelism tactics were very impersonal and often required a gregarious personality. But if you truly understand that it’s all about relational connection, you’ll find that it’s the most natural thing you can do. That doesn’t mean it won’t require some effort or practice, but you will definitely find your personal role exciting and rewarding.

Bringing people to Jesus requires a personal connection, an authentic relationship. Because after all, we are often the first impression people have of Jesus Christ, and what living for him is about. Fortunately, Jesus provided us the best method of connecting with people and leading them to salvation. Using the example of Jesus and the Samaritan woman (**Ref. John 4**), let's take a look at six keys to leading people to Christ.

Six Keys to Leading People to Christ:

1. Take your Time

When Jesus witnessed to the Samaritan woman at the well, He started by saying, “Will you give me a drink?” (**John 4:7**). There is sometimes a tendency to rush or force the issue upon people. For instance, you turn every conversation into a Bible study. However, this could possibly push them away. And they may only be listening out of courtesy, not curiosity. Take your time. Invest into their interests, before you expect them to invest into yours. Jesus asked a question that pertained her job—before his.

2. Keep it simple

In our enthusiasm to save a lost soul, we sometimes try too hard, saying things that don't have much value to an unchurched person. For instance, telling someone how anointed your choir is won't mean too much. Keep things simple. Build relationships with people and choose practical ways of introducing Jesus Christ and spiritual topics. Jesus kept his approach simple by focusing on things that the Samaritan understood—such as water from a well.

3. Show compassion

Jesus told the Samaritan woman, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water” (**John 4:10**). It’s important that when reaching out to someone, you be sensitive to his or her needs. Jesus immediately recognized a spiritual thirst in her heart—without her having to confess it. Jesus could read body languages, moods, and personalities with accuracy. And it wasn’t just because he was God. It’s because he was paying attention.

4. Be unselfish

Not only did Jesus utilize his relational skills, but he focused first on her needs, not his. It wasn’t until later on did he mention his search for true worshippers. Creating an evangelistic connection with someone happens we think outside of our bubble of circumstances and needs. It happens when we refuse to live selfishly, and make ourselves available to others. An old Chinese proverb says, “Seek to understand, before seeking to be understood.”

5. Choose your words wisely

Something about Jesus stood out. So much so that the woman said, “Sir, you must be a prophet...” (John 4:19). Interestingly, Jesus never disclosed His identity. Just by the way he talked and listened to her, she was able to tell that Jesus wasn’t an ordinary man. How we communicate builds a bridge between you and your unsaved friends. **Ephesians 4:29** says, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths but only what is

helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”

6. Walk the talk

the greatest factor in leading people to Christ is your lifestyle. How you live and conduct yourself outside the church walls will be your best instrument of evangelism. Although Peter is counseling on how to win your unsaved spouse, his advice is relevant for any relationship. “If any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives” (**1 Peter 3:1-2**). The Gospel must be demonstrated, not just spoken.

Conclusion

We must remember that saving souls is a spiritual battle. Hell will not just surrender without a fight. This is why you need to pray. You’ll never be able to win someone to the Lord unless you fight for him or her on your knees. Prayer and fasting are the ultimate keys to unleashing the power of evangelism. If you want the Holy Ghost to touch and transform someone’s life, spend time praying for them. Christ has a dream that is waiting to be fulfilled. He’s looking for a young person like you to stand in the gap and help somebody make an eternal connection.

Discussion:

- What would you say is the most common excuse for not reaching our unsaved friends and family? And how can we overcome it.



Key Verses: **Matthew 22:37**

Introduction:

Love is not only a noun, but also a verb—an action word. The verb definition of “love” is: *to hold dear, to cherish*. We live in a world where love of self and love of things often trumps love for God. This is what the Apostle Paul called, “perilous times”. **2 Timothy 3:1-5** says, “*But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be **lovers of themselves, lovers of money**, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, **unloving**, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, **lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God**, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!*” Notice four instances where “love” is mentioned:

1. **Lovers of themselves** – the symptoms of “perilous times” all starts with self-love. Trouble begins once your attention and affection turns away from God and towards you.
2. **Lovers of money** – this is greed, the bottomless desire to attain material things and financial wealth as a means of fulfillment.
3. **Unloving** – the more self-centered you become, the less caring and compassionate you are towards others.
4. **Lovers of pleasure** – this self-loathing and self-indulging behavior; basically having no restraint to please and pamper yourself. It means doing whatever feels good at the moment, rather than consider how it might displease God.

On one occasion, a Pharisee tested Jesus with a question, “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”. Jesus replied, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments”. The Pharisees practiced strict allegiance to the Law, but had lost sight of loving God. Loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength (**Mark 12:30** adds “strength”) reveal four expressions of love.

Four Expressions of Love for God:

I. Heart (intelligent love)

The word “heart” refers to the core of your being. **Proverbs 4:23** says, “Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.” Your heart produces your thoughts, words, and actions. **Proverbs 23:7** says, “For as he thinks in his heart, so is he.”

2. Soul (emotional love)

The soul in this sense represents your emotions. In Matthew 26:38 Jesus says, “*My soul is exceedingly sorrowful.*” Loving and worshiping God should engage your emotions.

3. Mind (willing love)

This word that has to do with your intention and will. **Philippians 2:5** says, “*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.*” Verses 6-8 then describe the will and character of Christ.

4. Strength (serving love)

The gospel of Mark includes the word “strength”. This refers to your physical capacities. **Romans 12:1** says, “*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.*” Your body must participate in loving and worshiping God.

Conclusion

All four aspects of love bring perfect balance to your relationship with God. When you love God with your all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, you basically love Him with every fiber of your being. Maybe it seems like too much to ask, but then again, God wouldn’t ask us to do something we couldn’t do.

Discussion:

Of the four expressions of loving God (heart, mind, soul, and strength), which one do you feel is most challenging and why?



Key Verses:

Exodus 20:16, Colossians 3:9-10

Introduction:

Lying is simply being dishonest. According to Webster's dictionary, being *dishonest* is: *characterized by lack of truth, honesty, or trustworthiness*. Sadly, it's a bigger issue than most are willing to admit. Lying is to substitute honesty with deceit or concealment. Some people lie simply to hurt others. But in most cases, the root of dishonesty is usually fear, because people are afraid of the consequences of truth.

In order to avoid lying and to start living a more honest life, we need to look at the key reasons why people lie. For that lesson, let's travel back in time to when Abraham lied to Abimelech. Read **Genesis 20:1-14** to capture the story. First, understand that even the faithful can lie when faced with strenuous circumstances. Abraham is considered the “father of faith”, yet here we find him in a moment of weakness. Just because you're a person of faith, and you walk with the Lord, doesn't mean you won't be tempted to lie. Now, let's examine four reasons why we sometimes lie.

Four Reasons Why We Lie:

I. Pressure

Gen. 20:11 says, “surely the fear of God is not in this place...” Abraham was stuck in a difficult position, so he figured the easiest way to handle it was to tell a half-truth. In our lives, we're put in difficult positions all the time. Your boss might be upset and suddenly a small lie becomes a good option because it saves you some trouble. If your parents are complaining about something you did or didn't do, a tiny fabrication relieves you of responsibility or guilt.

2. Fear

Gen. 20:11 says, “...they will kill me on account of my wife.” Abraham lied about Sarah because he feared the worst. He thought that if he told the whole truth, that Abimelech would kill him on account of her beauty. Sometimes we falsely assume that if we say the truth, we'll become victims of someone's anger or punishment.

3. Overly Cautious

Gen. 20:12 says, “But indeed she is truly my sister. She is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife.” This is something we’re all guilty of. Abraham lied simply by not revealing all the facts. How tempting it is sometimes to just trim and cut out what we don’t want to say, and exaggerate what we do say.

4. Temporary relief

Based on **Gen. 20:13**, we can assume that this wasn’t the first time Abraham and Sarah told this story. They probably used it regularly (Ref. **Gen. 12:14-20**). This sham helped him out a few times before. It’s possible to lie more and more simply because we get away with it. However, eventually every lie will catch up to you.

If you think about it, lying is simply “hiding” from truth. Remember, when you lie, the first person you lie to is none other than yourself. You lie to yourself before you say one word to someone else. If you live truthfully, you’ll never have to worry about lies. The greatest lie is not spoken, but lived. When you’re living a lie, it’s impossible to find peace.

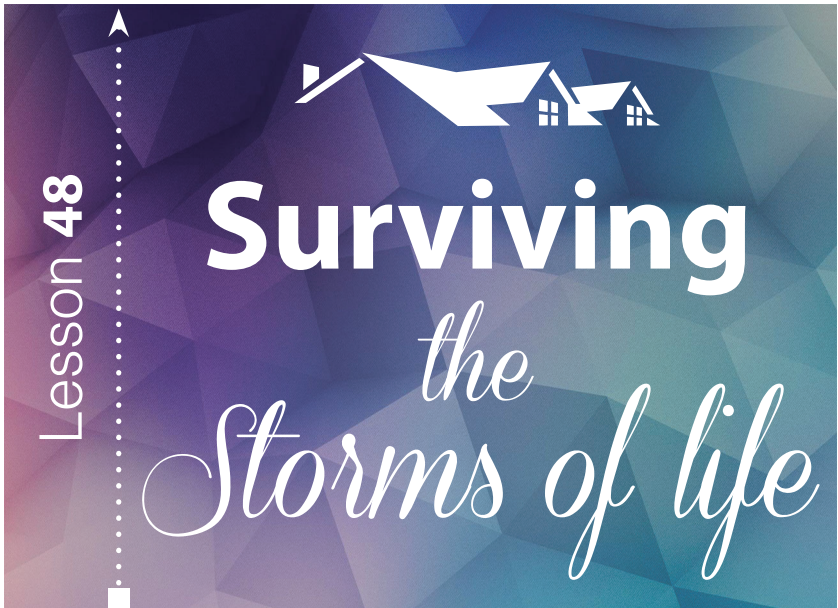
Conclusion

Lying breaks trust with people—it ruins relationships and tears friends apart. How eager are you to trust someone who has lied to you? Chances are, you aren’t too eager. As you may already know, repairing a foundation of mistrust is one of the hardest things to do. If you have lied to people, it’s going to

take time to rebuild that trust. Don't flinch at the temptation to tweak the truth about yourself. It takes a feeble heart to lie, but a brave heart to tell the truth.

Discussion:

- In your opinion, do you think exaggeration is a form of lying? Explain why or why not.



Key Verses:

Acts 28:1-6

Introduction:

The storm that Paul describes in the end of **Acts** chapter **27** and beginning of chapter **28** was one that he would never forget. Just as the ship sailed towards the island of Malta, it ran into a shoal. As the waves crashed against the ship and crumbled it like a sheet of paper, men jumped overboard and swam to shore. The weather was bitterly cold and wet. Soaked and shivering—Paul staggered up the sandy beach and encountered the native islanders. Shockingly, these natives showed the shipwrecked crew unusual kindness and hospitality, so much so that they actually built them a fire.

Today, that bonfire represents the Holy Ghost, which is the Spirit of God. When you build the fire of God's Spirit, He comforts you. In fact, the Holy Ghost is described as "the comforter" (**Ref. John 14:26**). During times of uncertainty and despair, the Spirit helps us to overcome our challenges. In addition, when the Spirit blazes, it warms and thaws the frozen areas of your life. In other words, when you kindle of embers of the Holy Ghost, it changes who you are. Areas in your heart that shiver with worry are warmed. Situations that are hopefully frozen begin to melt.

How to Survive the Storms:

I. Know that the Enemy will Attack

Without notice a viper lunged towards Paul and sunk it's venomous teeth into his hand. Think for a moment how Paul must have felt. He just survived one of the most brutal storms of his life—one that shattered a ship into pieces. Then as he's sitting there by a warm fire, defrosting and thanking God for his life, a deadly snake latches onto his hand! "What more can happen?" Yet even at this delicate moment in his life, Paul triumphed. The enemy severely underestimated Paul's faith. Here's a man still dripping from his miracle, and the enemy was foolish enough to attack him.

One primary principle to note is: *fresh fire draws fresh attacks*. The last thing the enemy wants to see is a soul on fire for God. So whenever he begins to feel the heat from your life, he wages an assault against you, hoping to douse your passion for God and ministry. However, notice how the apostle Paul reacted to the situation. The bible says he, "*shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm*". Unquestionably, the snake's venom should have killed Paul within minutes. Such a deadly bite would

have shut down the body's vital systems one by one—leaving him paralyzed. Despite the bite, God had heavenly anti-venom, a supernatural response to the snake's attack. Likewise when our adversary attacks, God already has a solution!

2. Feed the Fire of the Spirit

When the clouds are at their darkest and rain at its heaviest, God shines a ray of hope. The last thing Paul expected was a warm reception from strangers. However, when God is on your side, even the least likely people will bless you. The first thing they did on the island was build a bonfire. Why build a fire? Two possible reasons would be: **(1)** *the fire comforted them*, and **(2)** *the fire changed them (from cold to warm)*.

The bible says, “*Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire*”. Although he didn't start the fire, he fueled it by feeding it dry sticks. First, you have to take your *fire* personal. Nobody can fan the flames for you. The time has come for you to bundle your *own* sticks. Also, to sustain the Spirits' fire, you must continue to feed it the dry things in your life. Unless every dry attitude, outlook, habit, sin and issue is tossed into the fire, it will become fuel for the enemy. Rummage through your heart and gather a bundle of dry things.

3. Shake Off your Opposition

Paul “*shook off the creature into the fire*”. He didn't wrestle with it, argue or panic, but simply shook it off. That's the attitude and response we should have when the enemy strikes. Instead of arguing and wrestling with the enemy, shake him off. If you have the Holy Ghost, you have the power to shake yourself free from the enemy. Just resist the devil and he will flee

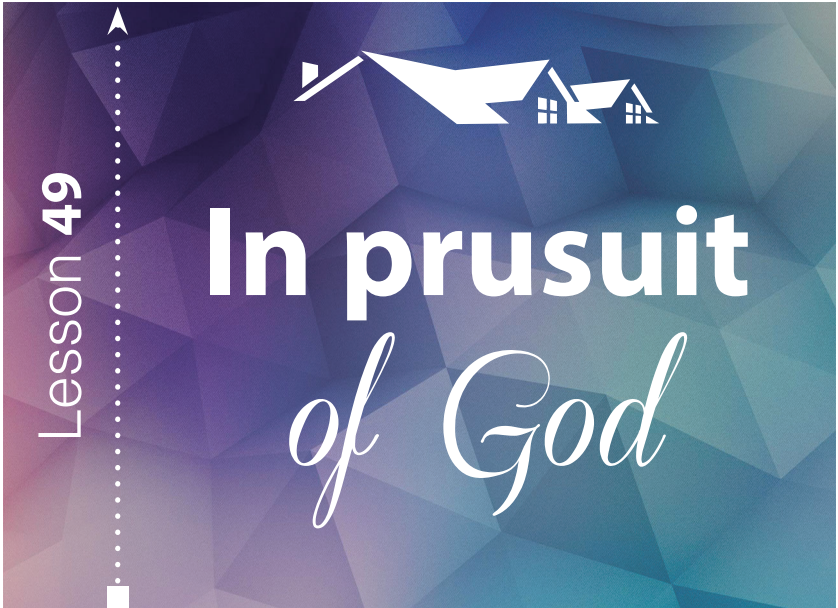
(Ref. James 4:7). Most importantly, Paul threw the snake into the fire. Punish the enemy with the same heat that provoked him. If he attacks you, turn up the heat on your worship, prayer life and devotion.

Conclusion

As stated above, you must bundle your own dry sticks to nourish the Spirits' fire. Nothing is as important as making your relationship with God personal. Instead of depending on someone else's fire, build your own. Develop a deeper one-on-one relationship with God by devoting time for prayer and reading the bible. God longs to be close to you, but He can only come as close as you let him. **James 4:8 says**, "*Draw near to God and He will draw near to you...*" The choice is yours. If you draw near to the Lord, He will respond by drawing near to you.

Discussion:

- What lessons do you think Paul learned from surviving the storm and the shipwreck? How do they apply to your life?



Key Verses: **Acts 10:1-8**

Introduction:

As the early church began grow and stretch beyond the borders of Jerusalem, they would soon discover that Gospel of Jesus Christ wasn't just for the Jews, but for everyone. Up until this point, only the Jews had experienced the outpour of God's Spirit, and it seemed as though the Gospel was exclusive. However, all of that was about to change. Today's lesson reveals how God sent Peter to offer salvation to a man named Cornelius—a man who was pursuing God. Peter's bold decision to reach across the dividing line between Jews and Gentiles paved the way for us to receive salvation today. The word "Gentile" refers to non-Israelite people.

God orchestrated an appointment for two men, Peter and Cornelius (a gentile centurion in the Roman military). Cornelius and Peter's meeting began with two visions. Cornelius' vision involved an angel of the Lord who instructed him to summon Peter for spiritual guidance. The next day, as Peter climbed up to the rooftop to pray, he also had an illustrative vision (**Ref. Acts 10:9-16**), where God showed him that the Gospel wasn't limited to the Jews. Right at that time, Cornelius' servants arrived at the house where he lodged. As Gentiles (non-Jews) the salvation of Cornelius opened the door to all of us. Let's see what lessons we can learn from Cornelius about pursuing God.

Qualities of a God Pursuer:

I. Devout

First, we learn that he was a devout man. Webster's dictionary defines "devout" as: *devoted to religion or to religious duties or exercises; expressing devotion or piety; devoted to a pursuit, belief, or mode of behavior.*

If Cornelius fit the definition of "devout", we can boldly presume that he was a great man with a strong moral compass. Despite his background, race, affiliations, he was devoted to the pursuit of God. One thing about God is that he will not run or hide from a heart that is seeking Him. In fact, He desires to be pursued and sought after. That's why he was so impressed with Cornelius. He was man who could have pursued anything—political position, greater wealth, worldly luxuries. Yet he was in hot pursuit of God.

2. God-fearing

Second, we know that Cornelius was a God-fearing man. That means that he had solemn reverence for God and embraced many aspects of Judaism. In other words, he attempted to place God at the center of all his decisions and lifestyle choices. When you're wildly devoted to pursuing and honoring God, He can't help but take notice. Besides being a devout and God-fearing man, Cornelius really stirred things up when he prayed and gave generously. The angel told him, *"Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God."*

3. Prayerful

Besides being a devout and God-fearing man, Cornelius really stirred things up when he prayed and gave generously. The angel told him, *"Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God."*

When you pray, God listens. It's that simple. Not only that, every prayer you pray, God records. The angel said, *"Your prayers...have come up for a memorial before God."* A memorial is something created to preserve the memory of a person or event, such as a monument or holiday. That's exactly what your prayers do in Heaven. God keeps a fresh register of every small request or large petition you make.

4. Giving

The angel told him, *"...your alms have come up for a memorial before God."* Not only does God record your prayers, but also your giving. The reason giving builds a memorial is because God

receives your offering as though you were giving to him directly. Every time you reach into your wallet or purse to bless someone, God accepts the offering as a gift to Him. As you continue to give, he will remember you and reward you. He is faithful to bless those who bless others.

Conclusion

Cornelius shook Heaven with his persistent prayers and alms. Prayer and giving unleashes the power of God and opens the door to the supernatural. If Cornelius, a man who had not yet been baptized or filled with the Holy Ghost, was able to touch God's heart, how much more those who have? Make a commitment today, to take your prayers and giving to another level. It could be that you're just one prayer or gift away from something incredible in your life.

Discussion:

- Cornelius gave so generously that God's heart was touched. What are some of the biggest reasons why we fail to give? And, how can we become more generous?



Key Verses: **Acts 4:36-37**

Introduction:

One of the hardest things to do is to let go or give up something you really cherish—especially something of great value. Nobody understood this better than the early church. At the tail end of **Acts 4**, the church experienced an upsurge of momentum. All the believers began to sell their houses, land and possessions, and shared the proceeds of their earnings with the church. This wasn't a gimmick or scam; instead it was the Holy Ghost tugging the hearts of people.

Anything you lay down at God's feet—activates his hands. The more people placed their treasures at the apostles' feet, the more it released them to minister. It's amazing how often we

wait for God's hands to move, when we've yet to place anything at his feet. In the thick of this outflow of giving, the writer of Acts mentions one man in particular—Barnabas. He sold his field and brought the entire proceeds to the apostles.

Perhaps Barnabas was mentioned because he gave significantly, or simply because he was the finest example of a man who had everything, but surrendered it all for Christ. Maybe Barnabas had the most to give up. Owning land was a sign of prosperity and class. It's likely that Barnabas loved his property. It was special to him. Oftentimes, land was the only significant inheritance that was passed down. So then, he didn't just sell dirt and soil; he exchanged his earthly heritage for a heavenly heritage.

Barnabas was a Jew born in Cyprus. His birth name was actually Joseph, but was later nicknamed "Barnabas" by the apostles. The name Barnabas means "son of encouragement".

Three Life Lessons from Barnabas:

1. Encourage before you expect courage

Barnabas always encouraged people, before he expected courage or bravery from them. To encourage is to deposit courage and consolation into someone. It is to plant a seed of hope and faith. Be an encourager before you expect courage out of others. Always praise someone's positive side and allow space for them to improve.

2. Empathize before you criticize

Barnabas was able to put himself in someone's shoes, regardless of how tainted their past was. He found unpaved ways

to relate to those he didn't necessarily agree with or understand. Empathy builds a bridge so that when you offer constructive criticism, people feel safe. It allows you to give people a piece of your heart, before you sound off a piece of your mind.

3. Enlist before you insist

Barnabas would never vouch for someone he wasn't willing to mentor himself. Before ever making demands, he counted the cost and was willing to put his own reputation on the line. That's an example of full commitment. Remember, never suggest or insist on something you yourself are not willing to commit to. Barnabas was ready to stick his neck out and take full responsibility for his choices. Before you push your brilliant idea, first ask yourself if you're willing to go the extra mile.

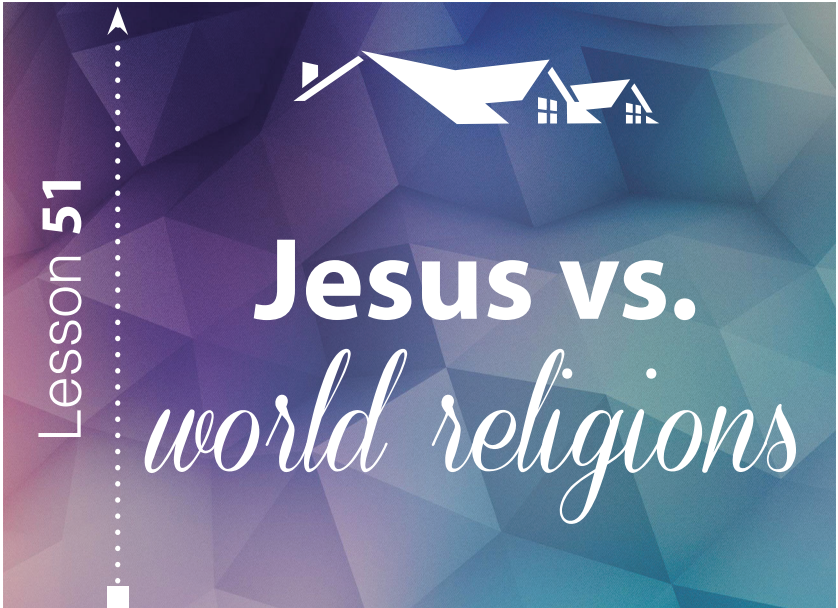
Conclusion

It's no coincidence that Barnabas was used greatly by God. The early sacrifices he made prepared him for his missionary ministry. He learned how to let go, and let God. It's quite possible that God is testing you right now—checking to see how serious you are about Him. But if letting go of little things is too difficult, how can God trust you with assignments that require great sacrifice?

Discussion:

Describe a time when someone encouraged you.

- How did you feel before?
- How did you feel after?
- What did you learn?



Key Verses:

John 14:1-7

Introduction:

People often think that all religions are nearly identical, and share the same moral teachings and principles. They say things like “as long as you believe in something, a form of God, that’s all that matters”. The reality is, most major religions have stark differences and hardly have anything in common. Before we discuss what separates Christianity from all other religions, let’s review the other four major world religions.

Overview of Four Major Religions:

I. Buddhism

Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama (563 B.C.). He was a prince from ancient India who was unhappy with Hinduism. One day while sitting under a fig tree, Gautama claimed to find the answers to life's problems through enlightenment. Later on, he was given the name Buddha (which means, "Enlightened One"). According to Buddha, the main problem in life is suffering, which is caused by lusting for worldly things. Therefore if you abolish desire, you eliminate suffering. Buddhism teaches a lifestyle of moderation that also helps followers achieve they call "Nirvana". Buddha described Nirvana as the ultimate state of being, perfect peace that is free from craving, anger and other afflicting conditions. Buddhism does not have a supreme deity, but its founder "Buddha" maintains an exalted god-like status.

2. Hinduism

Hinduism began around 2000 B.C. and has single founder. It is without doubt the most diverse of all major religions. Although most Hindus are polytheistic (belief in many gods), Hinduism allows for other concepts, including monotheism (belief in one supreme god). The most prevalent in gods are Shiva, Brahma, and Vishnu. Hindus do not have a scared book (i.e. bible, scriptures), however many of their beliefs are written in what's called the Vedas and Upanishads. According to Hinduism, the goal of humanity is to liberate the soul and be immersed into the ultimate reality, called Brahman. Similar to Buddhism's "Nirvana", Brahman is also considered an immanent and transcendent state of being.

3. Judaism

Judaism considers Abraham (2000 B.C.) to be their founding father. Unlike the prior two religions, Judaism worships only one God. In this religion, which set the stage for Christianity, God is viewed as loving and good in His creation. Humans were created in God's own image and were designed to worship Him. The Torah (Old Testament) is the holy scripture of Judaism. The Ten Commandments are the basis for pleasing God and getting along with others. Certain sects of Jews follow the Talmud, a compilation of rabbinical explanations of the Torah. By following God's will and fulfilling His commandments, Jews can achieve salvation. Three main Jewish groups include Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform—all of which still maintain the belief in one God.

4. Islam

Islam was founded by a man named Muhammad (A.D. 570-632) in the Middle East. Islam has some similarities with Judaism and Christianity, particularly monotheism. Differences with Christianity include rejecting the Jesus Christ as God, and also the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Islam does believe Jesus was a great prophet. The central religious text of Islam is the Qur'an, God's will revealed to Muhammad. Islam teaches that life is to be lived in subordination (not relationship) to God. Muslims confess, "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah." Other religious duties include fasting during Ramadan, praying five times a day, and giving alms.

What Separates Christianity from Other Religions?

1. Christianity is not System of Reaching Up, but is God Reaching Down.

All other religions exhort man to reach up to their god and catch him through their own human efforts and duties. The tower of Babel is a tragic example of what happens when men attempt to reach God, usually on their own terms. Christianity is the only belief where God reaches down and comes to man. Most forms of religion (even Judaism) teach that what you do or don't do will earn you salvation or grant you access into a higher state of mind. They basically imply you can become "good enough" for God. In Christianity, we believe that we can never be "good enough", no matter how much good we do, or how much bad we avoid. In **Ephesians 2:8-9** we read, *"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."*

2. Christianity is not a Religious System, but a Relationship with God.

Unlike the other world religions, Christians believe that we were created to have a personal relationship with God. The ultimate separator between God and man is sin. **Romans 3:23** tells us: *"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"*. Because Jesus died on the cross for our sins, that relationship is forever healed for those who give their lives to Him. In support of this truth, **Romans 5:8-10** declares, *"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life."*

No other religion teaches that humans can have a friendship with God, or any other spiritual being. Usually, such as the

case with Islam, humans are mere subordinates who must continually appease God. Under that belief, we certainly cannot know God, or even relate to Him. In **John 15:15**, Jesus said, *“No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you.”* Such a radical concept like this would never be taught by other religions. Jesus Christ invites us into a personal relationship with Him. **James 4:8** says, *“Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.”*

Conclusion

There is simply no match for Jesus Christ and all that He offers. What clearly separates Christ from any other religious figure is that after dying and being buried for three days, He rose from the grave. Nearly every religious or social leader has a tomb where their remains are held. If Jesus Christ had not risen from the dead, Christianity would be a hoax. The apostle Paul said, *“And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith”* (**1 Cor. 15:14**). Jesus was crucified because He claimed to be God. The resurrection therefore is the ultimate proof that Jesus Christ is God in human flesh. This truth dismantles every other religious claim or philosophy. This truth is the most relevant answer to any question you face about life or eternity.

Discussion:

- Discuss what you learned about other religions and how we can share the gospel with people of different religious backgrounds.



Key Verses: **Isaiah 9:6**

Introduction:

Two thousand years ago, a baby was born in a stable in a small town called Bethlehem in Israel, the baby's name was Jesus. Over two thousand years later, people all over the world still celebrate His birth known as Christmas. The Bible foretold the birth of Jesus. Jesus was born of a virgin. He did miracles that no one ever did. He walked on water, he calmed the storm, he fed more than 5000 people with five loaves and two fishes. He healed numerous people of various kinds of sickness. He offered himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world on the cross. He rose from the grave three days after his death and has promised to come back once again.

The rush towards Christmas has officially begun. Actually, it began the day after Thanksgiving, dubbed “Black Friday”. For many Americans, “Tis’ the season” to stand in long lines at the check-out counter, bring out your Christmas décor, and make your rounds at all those lovely parties. During the holidays, let us remember the reason for the season – Jesus Christ. With all the holiday cheer that spreads around, the true meaning can get lost if we’re not intentional about the real Christmas story. We can’t just assume our children know, or that everyone remembers why we celebrate. So when you stand in those long lines or put up decorations, try to remember these simple ways of keeping Christ the center of Christmas.

Four Ways to Keep Jesus the Center of Christmas:

1. Give God a Gift

What could be more valuable than giving our Savior a gift? Obviously you can’t wrap a gift and mail it to him. I doubt he needs any gloves or slippers. But there are a few things we can do that bring pleasure to God. One gift could simply be worship. Decide to worship and praise Him more this season. Spend extra time just thanking him for His birth. After all, it’s “His” birthday party not ours.

2. Read the Christmas story

(Luke 1:5-56; 2:1-20)

Revisit the story you’ve probably heard so many times before. Ask God to show you something new. If you have children, read it to them. Let them know that Christmas isn’t necessarily about *Frosty the Snow Man* and *Santa Claus*.

3. Spread good will and love towards others

Instead of focusing so much on your wish list, focus on what you could give others, especially those less fortunate. Give someone a gift they'll remember. Bring over a turkey or full meal to a needy family. Volunteer your time and pay it forward.

4. Let Jesus be the Star

Much of what American society calls Christmas, is simply commercialized and media-driven fluff. Everything from Santa suit potholders to miniature trees for your dashboard can flood your world with holiday hype. Christ often gets lost in all this. And too much of it will stir your focus away from the true reason for the season.

Conclusion

Jesus Christ is the gift mankind needed the most. Jesus is actually God, in human flesh, who came to this earth because mankind had been separated from Him by their sin. Jesus became a man so that He could reunite mankind with God. Here's the best news...His story is now your story. What a gift! What a treasure! May you and family have a blessed Christmas this year and give to others who are less fortunate than you. The story doesn't end with what you receive. It continues with what you give to others!

Discussion:

- What are some other ways we can celebrate or preserve the real meaning of Christmas?

