

Facing Issues



21ST CENTURY DISCIPLESHIP BOOK 2

21st Century Discipleship

B O O K 2 : F A C I N G I S S U E S

A COURSE FOR NEW BELIEVERS

Developed by the Center for Evangelism and
Discipleship (CED),
a division of Global University-ICI

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Introduction

21st Century Discipleship is for you, the new Christian. You have become a disciple of Jesus Christ and have begun an exciting journey. A disciple is someone who learns, matures, and becomes like his or her teacher—in this case, Jesus. The word *journey* implies forward movement into new territory. You are leaving familiar ground and heading to places you have never been before.

On this journey, your love and appreciation for the Lord will develop. Your understanding of the Bible and ability to put its teaching into practice will grow. Why Christians do what they do—like pray, give, help the needy, serve, preach—will start to make sense. Old habits and bad attitudes that used to drag you down will begin to disappear. You will discover that God has gifted you in specific ways and wants to use you to advance His kingdom. You will face tough challenges in a new way—with God's help. Your relationship with other Christians will become highly valued and a source of incredible joy.

21st Century Discipleship has been prepared to help you on this journey. We cannot walk in your shoes, but we can come alongside to help you. The lessons in this course were written by pastors, missionaries, and other mature Christians who care about what happens to people just like you. Their collective experience and teaching from God's Word, the Bible, make this course invaluable.

Our basic goals for this course are to help you know Christ better; to assist you in growing spiritually; and to encourage you to become everything the Lord wants you to be. Always remember, your life is important to God and many people. God really does have wonderful things in store for you if you will be faithful. Enjoy the journey of discipleship!

How To Use This Course

ABOUT THE LESSONS

21st Century Discipleship is a series of three study guides with 13 lessons/study guide. Each lesson contains the following components:

- Title
- Introduction
- Outline
- List of objectives
- Lesson content
- Conclusion
- Suggested Bible verses to memorize
- Self-Test
- Answers to the self-test
- Information about the author of the lesson

THE SELF-TEST

The self-test is a very helpful way for you to review what you have studied in a lesson. The questions are a combination of True/False, Multiple Choice, and Fill-in the blank. Once you complete the self-test, check your responses with the answers provided. In case you respond to a question incorrectly, the answers to the self-test also indicate where to look in the lesson to find the proper response. For instance, an answer will look like this a (5.3). The letter “a” refers to the correct response to the self-test question. The number 5 refers to the number of the lesson, and the number 3 refers to the lesson objective where the answer is found. It may be helpful for you to review the entire objective if you find you answered a test question incorrectly.

WAYS TO STUDY

There are at least two ways you can study the material in this course: independently or in a group. Let us get acquainted with these two methods.

Independent Study

Helping people study independently is what Global University specializes in. We know that not everybody who studies God's Word has access to a church, pastor, and a wide variety of resource materials. Therefore, we endeavor to provide you with a complete study guide. A qualified Bible teacher has carefully planned and written each lesson so that you may experience intellectual and spiritual growth in the convenience of your home.

Since there are no prearranged class times, individual study requires high motivation and self-discipline. Please be sure to have a Bible handy as well. The Bible is your main textbook; it alone is inspired by God. *21st Century Discipleship* is simply a tool to help you get the most out of your study of God's Word. With an open Bible, the Holy Spirit, and your discipleship course, you are in the classroom of the Holy Spirit. Be diligent and expect great things to happen.

Maximizing Individual Study Time

1. Set aside quiet and regular times for study.
Concentration is easier if you turn your mind to your studies at the same time each day. Pick a time when you are most alert.
2. Pray as you begin each study session. Ask the Lord to help you understand the material and make appropriate applications to your life.
3. Do a quick read through of the lesson, observing the objectives or main points.
4. Look over the lesson objectives a second time.
5. Read the lesson again. This time look up references, follow the exercises, and take any notes

- that may be helpful. Think about what you have learned and how it can be applied to your daily life.
6. Answer the study questions at the end of each lesson. Go back to the lesson if you need to find the answer. Then use the answer key to check your work.
 7. Take your time. No bell will ring to force you to move on to new material.
 8. Make good use of reference tools, such as a concordance and an up-to-date English dictionary, to help you understand words that may be unfamiliar.

Group Study

You can also study *21st Century Discipleship* in a group. This is a very dynamic and helpful way to reinforce the lesson content. It also provides a way to build friendships with other Christians.

Guidelines for Group Study

1. Set aside regular times for study with other believers. You can meet in a home, a church, or almost any place where you will be comfortable and uninterrupted. Plan to begin on time and end at an agreed-upon time.
2. Find someone to serve as a mentor or discussion leader. Usually the pastor of the church you attend can help you find just the right person to serve in this capacity.
3. We suggest that you study a lesson a week. Each person in the study group should carefully read the lesson at home before the meeting. Follow the instructions above for Independent Study.
4. Begin your group study with prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to guide your conversation and help you learn. Then, together discuss each of the objectives in the lesson. You may want to read the objective out loud and then open it up for comments and

questions. Do not be shy about expressing yourself. Your mentor may want to highlight points that he or she feels are especially important.

5. Be careful not to drift off the topic in the lesson during your meeting time. Stay focused.
6. Tactfully avoid letting one person in the group dominate the question and discussion time.
7. A good way to conclude your meeting is to pray for one another, especially for needs that pertain to the lesson topic.

If you have questions or comments, please contact us:

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LESSON 1

Overcoming Anger

The couple shouted at each other, their faces red with anger as they gestured wildly. Their baby daughter was crying, so her older brother held her tightly as they hid behind the sofa in the living room. Next door, the neighbors could hear the screaming and crying, but they did not want to get involved. Finally, the father stormed out of the house and down the street into the twilight. The mother ran to her bedroom, punched a pillow furiously, and then collapsed in tears onto the bed. Slowly the children peeked out from behind the sofa, making sure the battle was over. This was almost a weekly occurrence.

Anger is a very strong emotional reaction or response to a variety of situations. Anger is consuming lives. One may ask, is anger a sin? Is it possible to control anger? This lesson will offer biblical perspectives on understanding anger.

LESSON OUTLINE

The Sides of Anger
 Dealing with Anger
 The Rule of Love
 God's Righteous Anger

LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. *Explain the positive and negative aspects of anger.*
2. *Point out guidelines for dealing with anger.*
3. *Discuss how the rule of love works, even when we are angry.*
4. *Describe aspects of God's righteous anger.*

The Sides of Anger

Objective 1:

Explain the negative and positive aspects of anger.

Anger affects us inwardly and outwardly. There are three components of anger: the emotional (how you feel inside), the cognitive (what you are thinking), and the behavioral (what you do). Certain expressions of anger in thought, word, or deed may indeed be sinful, but the angry feelings themselves may not be. There is even a biological component of anger. We see this in babies. When they do not get their way, they become angry. Babies do not have to learn how to get angry because anger is a natural response to stress and frustration. In adults, the emotion of anger may be part of a God-designed, internal mechanism to help give people the energy and motivation to accomplish difficult or dangerous tasks.

Anger is also a learned response that depends on many factors. For instance, we may mimic the way other people, including our parents, handled their anger. Proverbs 22:24–25 warns, “Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man, do not associate with one easily angered, or you may learn his ways and get yourself ensnared.” Even though not all anger is sin, the Scriptures encourage us in general to refrain from anger. Psalm 37:8 says, “Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil.” Solomon writes, “Anger resides in the lap of fools” (Ecclesiastes 7:9). The writer of Proverbs says, “Anger is cruel and fury overwhelming” (Proverbs 27:4).

The Negative Side of Anger

The expression of anger includes feelings of irritation, hatred, hostility, self-pity, outbursts of temper, frustration, low self-esteem, pessimism, or even verbal and physical aggression. People do not often know how to handle their anger. Get a few hostile people together, and they can create more anger. We see this often in news reports of protests and demonstrations that spiral out of control and result in death and injury.

For some in gangs or terrorist groups, anger and hostility bring a warped sense of honor. But there is no true, godly honor in this. The writer of Hebrews says, “Make every effort to live in peace with all men ... that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many” (12:14–15). Jesus also encouraged us to give up our anger and forgive. Unresolved anger and unforgiveness are not just responses to perceived wrongs but an attitude of pride that will hurt our relationship with God.

Genesis 4:1–16 gives a powerful story about anger. Adam and Eve, the first two human beings, had two sons—one named Cain and the other, Abel. One day the sons made an offering to God. Abel’s sacrifice was pleasing to God, but Cain’s sacrifice fell short and was not pleasing to God. The Bible does not tell us exactly what was wrong with Cain’s sacrifice, but we do know that Cain became angry over the whole affair. In Genesis

4:6–7, God confronts Cain about his anger: “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.” Immediately after this, Cain takes his brother into a field and murders him. The first recorded murder in history happened because of anger.

The Positive Side of Anger

While anger obviously has a negative side, it also has a positive side. Anger can serve as a warning that something is wrong emotionally. Anger may even be a symptom of frustration, fear of failure, unresolved guilt feelings, and physical exhaustion.

To illustrate a positive element of anger, Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 11:29, “Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?” Paul got angry when people were led into sin, especially by false teachers and hypocrites. This kind of anger is often described as a “righteous anger.” Righteous anger is never out of control; it never leads us into sin. In those rare cases when it happens, it causes us to draw close to God because of the immorality we see around us. Anger can thus motivate people to stand against evil and suffering.

Even Jesus expressed anger. In Mark 3:5, “He [Jesus] looked around at them [certain Jews] in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts.” These Jews were bothered that Jesus had healed a man with a shriveled hand on the Sabbath. Mark 11:15–17 records another case where Jesus became angry.

On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, “Is it

not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'"

So if anger is a normal human response, why do so many passages of Scripture tell us that it is wrong? For example, Paul writes in Colossians 3:8, "But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips." Paul also advises, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger" (Ephesians 4:31). In the context of the whole Bible, anger is generally viewed as negative because of its potential to cause people to sin.

Following are scenarios that can create anger problems:

1. A person's work environment or demands can make him or her angry.
2. Driving in rush hour traffic may provoke anger or road rage.
3. Poor physical health can foster anger.
4. The use of alcohol can add to anger.
5. Poor self-esteem can cause anger.
6. The desire for power or control in a relationship can create a bridge to anger.
7. The desire for perfection can lead to anger.
8. Frustration, tension, and nervousness can create situations for volatile anger.
9. Depression can increase anger.

Dealing with Anger

Objective 2:

Point out guidelines for dealing with anger.

It is possible to control our anger. We do not have to let anger destroy our lives and our relationship with God. The Bible is full of practical advice about how to deal with anger. In Ephesians 4:26–27, Paul advises Christians, "'In your anger do not sin': Do not let the sun

go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.”

Our anger should never lead us to sin

Anger that moves us toward sin is not righteous anger. Sometimes in anger, people say or do cruel things. Many times I, Kevin, have gotten angry and done things that the Holy Spirit later convicted me about, and I had to apologize to the people I offended. God made me do that so many times that I finally learned it is easier to be silent when I am angry.

When you feel yourself becoming angry, get away for a while and calm down. Think about other things if possible. But above all, never react out of anger, for it will lead you to sin very quickly.

Do not let the sun go down on anger

Paul also writes, “Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry” (Ephesians 4:26). Be quick to forgive and get over things. If you allow anger to hide in your heart, it will always grow into bitterness. Some of the most difficult problems in ministry come when people are still angry about things that happened years before. It is much healthier emotionally and spiritually to be a person who forgives quickly.

Do not give the devil a foothold

Paul tells us not to give the devil a single foothold in our lives while we are angry. Anger can be a powerful tool that the devil uses against us. We must watch constantly that our lives are free from the control of the devil, and that we are staying close to the Master’s plan. If we avoid sinning, forgive quickly, and refuse to give the devil even a small space in our lives, then we will be able to deal with anger effectively.

Other Practical Ways to Deal with Anger

The longer you are a Christian, the less you will probably enter into foolish and unnecessary conflicts because you are becoming more Christlike in your

attitudes and behavior. Still, no one is exempt from conflict. One may not seek out trouble, yet conflicts come. The good news, though, is that not all conflict is bad. In fact, some conflict actually can be the door to resolving very important issues.

However, it is necessary to know how to deal with anger, especially when facing conflict with other people. Suppressing or burying anger is detrimental because the anger builds up and becomes uncontrollable. Learning to express anger correctly can have great benefits. In fact, anger becomes a positive means for change and growth in a relationship when the anger is controlled by love and an awareness of the other person's rights and worth. Following are six ways to deal with anger.

Talk about your feelings

It is better to talk about your feelings, not the other person's faults. People tend to become violent or angry when they are attacked. Stay away from negative expressions.

Stick to one conflict at a time

The resolution of one problem is difficult enough without pulling in old grievances. When we deal with problems as they arise, we do not carry around unprocessed anger.

Let the other person respond

People who walk out during an argument are dirty fighters! If you are angry with a spouse or friend, you have a right to express it. Conversely, you need to listen to the other side. This brings the possibility for resolution or compromise.

Aim for ventilation, not conquest

The point of showing our loved ones our anger is to vent our feelings, not to make them surrender. Many times it clears the air if the two people involved vent their emotions, getting their anger out, and then go back to loving each other.

Balance criticism with lots of affection

It is easier to get away with some expressions of anger if you balance them with lots of expressions of love. Love still is the greatest virtue.

Confess your anger before God

No matter what causes pent up anger in your life, confess the anger to the Lord. You might say, "I could never let God know how angry I am. He probably would not like it!" God already knows you are angry, but He still wants you to talk to Him about it. The psalmist expresses tough words towards his enemies: "Break the teeth in their mouths, O God; tear out, O Lord, the fangs of the lions! Let them vanish like water that flows away; when they draw the bow, let their arrows be blunted. Like a slug melting away as it moves along, like a stillborn child, may they not see the sun" (Psalm 58:6–8). Although those are harsh words, they show an honest and hurting heart expressed to God. Instead of getting even or taking revenge on his enemies, the psalmist vents his anger to God. Like the psalmist, we can and should come to God with all our feelings. God can take a heart filled with anger and bitterness and change it. By His power we can even learn to love our enemies.

The Rule of Love

Objective 3:

Discuss how the rule of love works, even when we are angry.

In John 13:34–35, Jesus says, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." In John 15:12, Jesus repeats the command, "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you." Even when we are angry, we must continue to love others. This is the most effective way to communicate that we are disciples of Jesus.

Our love must be stronger than our strongest anger. We should love people, especially our brothers and

sisters in Christ, even when we are most angry. But one of the characteristics of God's love within us is that it is slow to anger. So if we truly love people, we will be patient with them.

Colossians 3:14 says, "And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." Love creates unity. Anger creates division. As the children of God, we are called to live in unity and peace. So there is no room for anger that will cause us to divide from one another. We must love, work together, forgive, and make allowances for the faults of others.

No one is perfect, not even you. If you have flaws and want people to overlook them and forgive you, then you should be willing to overlook the flaws in other people. First John 3:14–16 has strong words for Christians who fail to love other children of God.

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him. This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.

Hatred is sin, just as murder is sin. You cannot hate another person and love God. It is impossible to give up your life for someone you hate. Therefore, we must let go of all anger to create true love among God's people.

This law of love is the main guideline for Christians. Romans 13:8 says, "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law." This is the new law that Christians must follow.

If we truly love each other as God intended, then anger would not be a problem. First Peter 4:8 reminds us, "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins." Love leads to forgiveness. If we love each other correctly, then we will have no

problem forgiving each other quickly. And God considers forgiveness to be very important.

James 1:19 tells us, "My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." If we are quick to listen and slow to speak, there will be less reason to become angry. Often, anger comes from failure to listen to the other person. We should always try to see the other person's perspective, and to listen more than speak.

God's Righteous Anger

Objective 4:

Describe aspects of God's righteous anger.

Some people want to think only of God's attribute of love, but the Bible also reveals God's righteous anger. Let us look at some characteristics of God's anger.

God is slow to anger

First, the Bible tells us that God does not get angry quickly. When God expresses anger, it is justified and measured; He is never out of control. Also, God's anger is coupled with love and mercy. Psalm 86:15 says, "But you, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness." Psalm 103:8–9 also tells of the quality of God's anger: "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever." Psalm 145:8 adds, "The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love."

Learning to be slow to anger moves us in the direction of spiritual growth and maturity. It gives us the time and freedom to decide how to solve our problems or how to express anger. Following are biblical passages that encourage us to be slow to anger:

- "Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city" (Proverbs 16:32).

- “Do not be quickly provoked ..., for anger resides in the lap of fools” (Ecclesiastes 7:9).
- “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires” (James 1:19–20).
- “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Proverbs 15:1).
- “A hot-tempered man stirs up dissension, but a patient man calms a quarrel” (Proverbs 15:18).

God gets angry at sin and rebellion

In Exodus 32:9, we read the following: “‘I have seen these people,’ the Lord said to Moses, ‘and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them.’” God’s anger is a reaction to human ungodliness.

Romans 1:18 tells us, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.” Simply put, God gets angry at sin. We should be very grateful that Jesus suffered the wrath of God against sin on the Cross. He took the punishment we deserved.

God’s anger is restrained and restorative

Psalms 78:38 says, “Time after time he restrained his anger and did not stir up his full wrath.” Isaiah writes, “In that day you will say: ‘I will praise you, O Lord. Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me’” (Isaiah 12:1). Even when God expresses His anger, it is measured or limited. The Lord desires to restore and comfort those with whom He is angry. Sin angers God, but when the sinner repents the Lord immediately forgives and comforts the offender. God’s anger is only designed to bring repentance.

Conclusion

Here are practical thoughts to help you overcome anger.

- Acknowledge anger. Be willing to admit that you are angry.
- Control your thoughts. One's thought life is the key ingredient in dealing with one's emotions. Remember Paul's words in Philippians 4:8, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."
- Discern the causes of the anger. Find out what makes you angry.
- Challenge your irrational beliefs. All of us have belief systems or mindsets that assist us in making judgments and evaluating ideas, people, and situations.
- Do not let everything bother you. Learn to laugh at normal failures and those things that irritate you. It will help remove the anger.
- Consider the goals for relationships. No one in a relationship is totally innocent or totally guilty.
- Develop peace of mind. You do great damage to yourself and potentially to others by living in anger. Let God do what you cannot do.

SUGGESTED SCRIPTURES FOR MEMORIZATION

Psalms 37:8

Psalms 78:38

Proverbs 15:1

Proverbs 16:32

Proverbs 27:5–6

Galatians 5:22–23

Ephesians 4:26

Hebrews 12:14–15

SELF-TEST

After studying the lesson, please read each study question carefully and circle the correct response. There is only one correct response for each question.

1. According to the Scripture, how should we deal with anger?
 - a) Let it fester for one month.
 - b) Never deal with it.
 - c) As soon as possible
2. According to psychologists, how we express anger may depend on
 - a) if it is cloudy or sunny outside.
 - b) what the stock market is doing.
 - c) how our parents handled their anger
3. What happens if people do not deal with their anger?
 - a) Anger finally goes away.
 - b) Anger can turn into hostility, bitterness, and violence.
 - c) Anger is transformed into love and peace.
4. According to the lesson, the three components of anger are
 - a) emotional, cognitive, and behavioral.
 - b) bad feelings, good feelings, and no feelings.
 - c) ignoring feelings, accepting feelings, and acting out feelings.
5. What happens to the individual who buries his or her anger inside?
 - a) He or she wins friends and influences people.
 - b) The anger builds up until it becomes uncontrollable.
 - c) He or she may be awarded as "employee of the month."
6. In times of relational conflict, one of the best ways to deal with anger is to
 - a) attack the other person.
 - b) bring up old grievances.
 - c) balance criticism with lots of affection.

7. According to the psalmist, what will God do for us when we bring our anger to Him?
 - a) Make all the problems go away.
 - b) Change our hearts and help us respond in a way that pleases Him.
 - c) Pour His anger on us.
8. Which of these is not one of the tips Paul gives in Ephesians for dealing with anger?
 - a) Do not give the devil a place in your life.
 - b) Do not speak when you are angry.
 - c) Do not stay angry.
9. What does it mean to say that God is slow to anger?
 - a) God has emotions, but they are never out of control.
 - b) God explodes with anger from time to time.
 - c) God is a little slow in understanding what is going on.
10. A true statement about love is that love
 - a) divides, but anger unites.
 - b) is never as strong as anger.
 - c) is the most effective way to show we are Jesus' disciples.

When used for HBMM SERVUS FIDELIS training:

Printout and mail a copy of your self test pages to the regional HBMM National Leadership Team member for your region. Their contact information is located on the "Contact Leadership Team" page on our website: <http://HBMM-National.org>

ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

Note: If you answered a study question incorrectly, you can find the objective it was drawn from by looking at the reference in parenthesis.

1. *c* (1.1)
2. *c* (1.1)
3. *b* (1.1)
4. *a* (1.1)
5. *b* (1.2)
6. *c* (1.2)
7. *b* (1.2)
8. *b* (1.2)
9. *a* (1.4)
10. *c* (1.3)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS OF THIS LESSON

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LESSON 2

Forgiveness

"I hate you, and I will never forgive you," screamed a teenager girl to her mother after an argument. The mother had decided to move to another city, which meant a change of schools, neighbors, friends, and familiar surroundings. Unresolved anger gripped both mother and daughter.

"He raped me and destroyed my life. I can never forgive him!" The woman in the courtroom testified before the jury about that horrible night and its sordid events. She still felt unsafe, insecure, and distrustful of men as the emotional trauma continued.

"I killed a man in a drunken rage. How can I forgive myself? I deserve to die."

A condemned man sat in his prison cell rehearsing his actions that resulted in the death of another man—a husband and father of three children. The accused man's own wife and children want nothing to do with him.

What do these and multitudes of other people around the world have in common? They have been deeply hurt or have hurt others. They feel strong emotions of loss, anger, fear, resentment, shame, and regret. Maybe you, too, have your own experiences of pain and need to forgive someone or to experience forgiveness. Every day we have to make choices about how we will respond to those who hurt us and those who are hurt by us.

Forgiveness begins with God, and it is a cornerstone of our Christian faith. Because of Jesus' death on the Cross, God offers us the gift of complete forgiveness—no matter what we have done. Forgiveness is not easy for most people. For instance, rather than forgive, friends part in anger, marriages end in divorce, children become estranged from their parents, and siblings fight. Feuds even erupt in local church families. People remain angry,

bitter, and unhappy because they refuse to forgive. Unforgiveness can ruin the relationship between people for years and years. Many times, after such a long time, most forget what the point of contention was, but they know that they were hurt and still unforgiveness remains. Thus, what could have been years of growth and happiness in the relationship is squandered and shattered.

The apostle Peter once asked Jesus, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" (Matthew 18:21). The common teaching of that day was forgiveness could be extended up to three times to an offender. Peter must have thought he was being generous by offering to forgive up to seven times. Then, Jesus answered Peter: "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times" (v. 22). Jesus was presenting the idea of forgiving as many times as necessary—without limit.

Christian counselor Dick Dobbins says, "Forgiveness frees the offender from guilt and shame and it delivers you [the forgiver] from anger." It is an act of will that brings wonderful freedom. Forgiveness allows those involved in an offense to go forward and experience God's blessings rather than bitterness and ongoing pain. May you choose to forgive.

LESSON OUTLINE

God's Forgiving Nature

Seeking Forgiveness

Forgiving Others

Forgiving Oneself

Your Responsibility

LESSON OBJECTIVES

When you complete this lesson, you should be able to:

1. *Describe God's forgiving nature.*
2. *Explain how to seek forgiveness.*

3. *Understand the importance of forgiving others.*
4. *Discuss the importance of forgiving yourself.*
5. *Describe your responsibility to those you have wronged.*

God's Forgiving Nature

Objective 1:

Describe God's forgiving nature.

The Woman Caught in Adultery

Once, while Jesus was teaching, some religious leaders presented a woman whom they had caught in the act of adultery. They took the woman to Jesus and asked Him what should be done with her. They reminded Jesus that Moses had said adultery was an offense punishable by death. The leaders' intent was to trap Jesus into saying something they could use against Him. Jesus simply knelt down and wrote in the dirt. After awhile, He raised up and said, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:2–11).¹

Perhaps Jesus was writing on the ground sins these religious leaders had committed against God and the Mosaic Law—the same Law they were now trying to use to condemn the adulterous. After making His statement, Jesus continued writing in the dirt. Then, "those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there" (v. 9).

After the accusers had departed, only the woman remained before Jesus. He asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared.

¹ The passage of John 7:53–8:11 is not found in the earliest manuscripts. However, almost all translations of the New Testament include it due to its inclusion in later manuscripts, wide acceptance, and agreement with the teaching and character of Christ.

‘Go now and leave your life of sin’” (vv. 10–11). Though the sin she had been accused of was grievous, Jesus willingly offered forgiveness. He did not condemn as the Jewish leaders did. Jesus opened the door of grace, and the woman was given the opportunity for a new beginning. The psalmist proclaimed, “You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you” (Psalm 86:5).

The Immoral Woman Who Anointed Jesus

One day a woman boldly entered a house where Jesus was a guest of a Pharisee. She stood behind Jesus with tears streaming down her face, for she had lived an immoral life. Possibly she had engaged in prostitution. She may have heard Jesus speak prior to this encounter and desired to start a new life. Somehow Jesus had touched her heart, and she wanted to express her gratitude (Luke 7:36–37).

As she stood behind Jesus, some of her tears fell on His feet. The woman stooped to wipe them with her hair. In those days, only promiscuous women allowed their hair to hang loose; decent women typically wore a scarf or head covering. After wiping Jesus’ feet, the woman poured fragrant oil on them. Now, the Pharisee thought, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner” (Luke 7:39). The fact is that Jesus knew indeed who and what she was, yet He allowed her to continue. Jesus pointed out that this despised woman had done for Him what His host, a prominent man, had not.

Jesus then shared a parable with this prominent host, named Simon. Jesus said, “Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?” (vv. 41–42). The answer was obvious—the one who was forgiven more would love him more and be more thankful. Jesus continued by saying that Simon had offered Him no water to wash His feet, no kiss of greeting, and no anointing oil for His head. Yet,

this woman had washed Jesus' feet with her tears and hair; had not ceased kissing His feet; and had anointed them with fragrant oil. Jesus said her sins, which were many, were forgiven because she loved much. It seems there was not enough she could do to show how grateful she was for being set free from the burden of sin. Simon, however, though he understood much of God's law, failed to recognize the nature of God—that is, unconditional love.

It is God's nature to forgive. He takes no pleasure in seeing any sinner continue in his or her evil ways. We need to be confident of God's willingness to forgive us, too. The Lord's capacity to forgive is greater than our capacity to sin. Even today, we can picture Jesus eagerly waiting to respond to people who cry out, "Please forgive me!"

Seeking Forgiveness

Objective 2:

Explain how to seek forgiveness.

Many have said, "You do not know what I have done. God could never forgive me!" These words call into question the Lord's ability to do what is His nature to do. We must never forget that Jesus came to earth "to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10).

There are religions around the world that require their adherents to perform extreme acts in order to obtain forgiveness. Washing in unclean water, pouring cow urine over their bodies, reciting prescribed prayers daily, offering repeated confessions, and making journeys for miles on their hands and knees are only a few. By these acts people hope that their god or gods will be impressed and inclined to forgive. However, there is no assurance. As a result, their acts of self-humiliation and repentance are repeated, daily, monthly, and annually.

What is different for the Christian? Do we have to go to Jerusalem and pray at the Wailing Wall? Do we have to make a pilgrimage to some distant place? Do we have

to beat ourselves, dip in filthy water, or say a certain amount of special prayers? No!

Read the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15. It is a story of a young man who demanded his inheritance, left his father's home, and wasted his money in a distant land. He lived a wild life and spent days gratifying his carnal desires. The son eventually became so destitute that he found work on a pig farm. There, he longed to eat the pigs' food. Finally, he decided it would be better to return home, confess his sins to his father, and hopefully be allowed to labor in his father's fields as a servant (Luke 15:18).

There is no question—this young man had sinned greatly. He had treated his father with great disrespect and failed to take care of the possessions his father had given him. Though he was free to spend his inheritance as he wished, he wasted what should have been invested for his own future and that of his future children and grandchildren. He lived for the moment and lost everything. He was even willing to perform perhaps the most disdainful job any Jew could imagine—feeding pigs. Fortunately, he came to realize the futility of staying where he was. His only chance was to repent and return home.

Then something amazing happened: "While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him" (Luke 15:20). Still, the young man said to his father, "I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son" (Luke 15:21). Though the son was willing to be hired as a mere servant, the happy father prepared a feast and restored his son.

Are you harboring sin in your life? Are you wondering if God will forgive and restore you? Whether you have never given your heart to Christ or whether you are a believer who has fallen into sin, there is hope! First John 1:9 states, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." Self-belittling, endless confessions, physical pain, and personal humiliation do not bring

forgiveness of sin. Why wait any longer for freedom and forgiveness. Ask now and be set free! Confess to the Lord, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Psalm 51:4). He will be quick to wrap His arms of love around you and forgive you. Do it now! A simple prayer of "Father, forgive me," is a great place to start. Try it now.

Forgiving Others

Objective 3:

Understand the importance of forgiving others.

General James Edward Oglethorpe, an English general who founded the American colony of Georgia, was talking with the famous preacher John Wesley one day when the General confessed, "I never forgive!" Wesley replied, "Then, sir, I hope that you never sin." Oglethorpe's confession is not one that Christians should mimic. Since we have received God's forgiveness, we must show love and forgiveness to others, no matter how undeserving and unworthy they may seem. When we forgive others, we prove that our faith in Christ is genuine and that our own hearts have been changed.

Stephen, one of the early disciples, was arrested by hostile Jews because he did great wonders and miraculous signs (see Acts 6:8–11). In defense, he described God's miracles and faithfulness and Israel's rebellion. Convicted by the truth of those words, the Jews dragged Stephen out of the city and stoned him. Before he died, Stephen cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60). In asking God to forgive his killers, Stephen wanted his heart to remain free from anger and resentment. He followed the example of Jesus who prayed as He was crucified, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

Can you imagine this? Here were two men, Jesus the Son of God and Stephen. Both of them preached truth,

were a part in healings and other miracles, sought the salvation of men and women, and did God's will. Yet they lost with their lives cruelly. Each was unjustly accused, tried, condemned, and murdered. But each was able to look at the accusers with compassion and forgive them. Can you think of someone or others who have done you wrong? Compare what that transgression was with what Jesus and Stephen endured. How does your heart for forgiveness line up against Stephen's and against Jesus'?

God expects us to be willing to forgive, too. Jesus made the point even clearer when He said, "But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matthew 6:15). In other words, if you continuously refuse to forgive those who hurt you, you will eventually jeopardize your standing in God's kingdom. Is there anyone you need to forgive? Take the time now to forgive those whom the Holy Spirit brings to your mind. Call them or write them today.

Forgiving Oneself

Objective 4:

Discuss the importance forgiving yourself.

A little boy and his younger sister were playing tag. He chased her around a large chair, as both laughed. When the little girl abruptly stopped playing, the boy hurried to his pregnant mother and cried, "Mom, sis is not playing anymore." Rushing to where the child lay, the mother scooped her up just as the little girl drew her last breath. Later, it became clear that the little girl's finger had touched an exposed wire from a nearby lamp, while her body was on a heat register on the floor. This sent volts of electricity through her little body and killed her.

Whose fault was it that the child died? Was it the boy's, the mother's, the girl's?

Was it God's fault? Sadly, the mother would spend years holding herself and God responsible for the death

of her little girl. She would constantly ask herself, "Should I have watched them more closely? How could I not know about the lamp and wire? Why would God allow such a thing to happen?"

Sometimes, forgiving ourselves is the most difficult thing to do. We may think we should have known better, been watching more closely, or done things differently. We blame ourselves and perhaps God for mistakes or events that result in sorrow, pain, and even tragedy. Just as forgiving others is a choice, an act of your will, so is forgiving yourself.

God promises to forgive you. Once you have received God's mercy, you must choose to forgive yourself. The Lord does not want you wallowing in self-pity or regret. God does not wish to see you suffer. He still has a purpose and a plan for your life. So, accept His forgiveness, and stop punishing yourself.

If a painful experience or tragedy occurred that somehow involved you, realize that you are not alone. Others have suffered similar tragedies. It is part of what happens as we live in a fallen world. You cannot change the past or eliminate the consequences of that painful event. It is important, in such cases, that you forgive yourself. Doing so allows you to go on with life rather than become bitter over what cannot be changed. Do not destroy the future God has for you.

Overcome by evil and greed, Judas agreed to betray Jesus to the religious leaders for a sum of money. Later, wishing he had not done so, he hanged himself. It seems Judas could not bring himself to repent before God for his actions, nor could he forgive himself for what he had done. His failure destroyed him. Today, the name *Judas* still connotes betrayal.

The apostle Peter also sinned by denying Jesus repeatedly, yet he eventually went on to become a great leader of the early church. What was the difference? While Judas went out in grief and hanged himself, Peter wept bitterly in disgrace for what he had done. One could not forgive himself, but the other found forgiveness

in Jesus. Peter allowed Jesus' love for him to bring him back into a right relationship with Him. While Judas died a failure, Peter lived to bring great glory to the Lord. Which will you choose? I urge you to forgive yourself! Your life is valuable to God and precious in His sight. Let Him do great things through you.

Your Responsibility

Objective 5:

Describe your responsibility to those you have wronged.

Admitting failure, sins, and shortcomings is one of the most difficult things to do. When a person hurts or wrongs another, the offender may make excuses for what was done. There may even be an attempt to shift the blame elsewhere.

While it is a humbling experience to ask forgiveness, often more is required. When we have wronged someone, not only must we apologize for our actions, we must also be willing to make restitution when necessary. Restitution is not only right and fair but also demonstrates the sincerity of the apology. In Luke 19 is the account of Zacchaeus, a tax collector who had stolen money. Zacchaeus was also short in stature. One day, as Jesus was walking through Jericho, Zacchaeus made an extraordinary effort to see Him. The tax collector had heard so many incredible things about Jesus—His miracles, speeches, and teaching. Now was his chance to get a glimpse of this famous prophet from Nazareth. Zacchaeus raced ahead of Jesus and climbed a tree in order to see Him better. Much to his surprise, Jesus stopped specifically to talk to him and expressed His desire to dine with Zacchaeus. Delighted by Jesus' attention, Zacchaeus later responded,

“Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” Jesus said to him, “Today

salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." (Luke 19:8–10)

Notice that Jesus did not object to Zacchaeus' plan to make restitution. Zacchaeus' actions were evidence of a heart undergoing positive change.

An important lesson to learn from this story is that when a person's heart changes due to repentance, it is proper for him or her to right the wrongs done in the past. This does not mean that God requires restitution *before* He forgives; rather, restitution demonstrates a true change of heart. Due to the circumstances, restitution may not always be easy. In fact, it may not even be possible in some cases, but it is right to attempt to do so—even if the person wronged chooses not to forgive the one making restitution.

Conclusion

It should be the goal of every believer to be like Christ. We are to have the attitude and manner of Christ. We are to preach His Word and sing His praises. Our desire should be to spend eternity with Him and to have our family, friends, and as many others as possible know Him, too.

Forgiveness is a vital aspect of the Christian life. Jesus taught us to pray, saying, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). As we learn to forgive and be forgiven, doors of blessing open wide. We experience God on a deeper level.

SUGGESTED SCRIPTURE TO MEMORIZE

Psalms 86:5

Psalms 103:12

Matthew 6:9–13

Luke 23:34

Colossians 2:13

1 John 1:9

SELF-TEST

After studying the lesson, please read each study question carefully, and circle the correct response. There is only one correct response for each question.

1. *We should be willing to forgive*
 - a) ~~seven~~ times.
 - b) ~~seventy~~ times.
 - c) *an unlimited number of times.*
2. *When I forgive others,*
 - a) *no restitution needs to be made.*
 - b) *it frees them from guilt and shame.*
 - c) *God will erase memories of the event.*
3. *The religious leaders thought the woman caught in adultery*
 - a) *should be grateful they were the ones who caught her.*
 - b) *should be stoned.*
 - c) *ought to marry the man she was caught with.*
4. *In dealing with the adulterous woman, Jesus*
 - a) *offered her forgiveness.*
 - b) *washed His hands of her.*
 - c) *turned her over to the authorities.*
5. *Jesus' purpose in coming to earth was to*
 - a) *condemn every person who had done wrong.*
 - b) *seek and save the lost.*
 - c) *get away from heaven for a while.*
6. *If you want to be forgiven of sins, you must*
 - a) *simply ask Jesus to forgive you.*
 - b) *fast and pray and hope you are forgiven.*
 - c) *assume there is little hope for forgiveness.*
7. *The father of the prodigal son is a picture of God waiting*
 - a) *for just the right time to punish sinners.*
 - b) *anxiously to receive and forgive people.*
 - c) *for the chance to discipline wayward children.*

8. *When tragedy happens, God*
 - a) *does not care.*
 - b) *says we are responsible and should be more careful.*
 - c) *wants us to learn to forgive ourselves if necessary.*
9. *When you fail and wrong others, you must*
 - a) *ask them to forgive you.*
 - b) *hope they think it was someone else and not you.*
 - c) *try to hide the wrong you did.*
10. *You are to forgive*
 - a) *only after the person changes his or her life completely.*
 - b) *only when there is something in it for you.*
 - c) *as you are forgiven.*

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ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

Note: You can check your answers by using the answer guide. The numbers in the parentheses indicate which objective in the lesson to check.

1. *c* (2.1)
2. *b* (2.1)
3. *b* (2.1)
4. *a* (2.1)
5. *b* (2.2)
6. *a* (2.2)
7. *b* (2.2)
8. *c* (2.4)
9. *a* (2.5)
10. *c* (2.3)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS LESSON

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LESSON 3

Building Better Relationships

Most of us understand that not all is well in our society. Hatred and anger spill across the globe. Crime reports fill our newspapers and televisions. Fear, anxiety, and depression are rampant. Spousal, child, drug, and alcohol abuse are destroying millions daily.

We are living in an infected society. The infection is sin with all of its ramifications! Society no longer knows how to get along with itself. Consider this: people spend thousands of hours studying in all fields of education. Some can speak several languages, and others are virtual reservoirs of knowledge. Yet many feel inadequate and unsuccessful in building quality relationships at work and at home. People have been deceived into thinking that education and possessions are all we need to be successful. The end result is an inability to build quality human relationships.

This condition is not limited to non-Christians. Many born-again believers also struggle with building relationships. Most of us have heard of pastors or great spiritual leaders who appear to have it all together in the public but whose home life is in shambles. One of the most important keys for being a successful follower of Christ is to excel in the area of building relationships. In fact, every success and failure we experience can be traced to some relationship. We all need to constantly improve our relational skills. If we do not, we and the people around us will suffer. Following are three important relationships that will be negatively affected by our failure to understand relationships and refusal to improve our relational skills: (1) our relationship with God; (2) our relationship with family members; (3) our relationship with others.

God spoke through the prophet Isaiah to warn and encourage the ancient nation of Israel. In the following

passage, notice that God desires to help His people avoid harmful emotions and unhealthy feelings. The Israelites are a picture of how wounded people often feel about themselves and others. God says,

“Do not be afraid; you will not suffer shame. Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated. You will forget the shame of your youth and remember no more the reproach of your widowhood. For your Maker is your husband—the Lord Almighty is his name—the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth. The Lord will call you back as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit—a wife who married young, only to be rejected,” says your God. (Isaiah 54:4–6)

Shame, humiliation, disgrace, reproach, grief in spirit, and rejection cause us to hide from God, ourselves, and others. It is important to understand that God created us for relationships. Life is all about receiving God's love and giving that love away.

LESSON OUTLINE

Common Emotional Needs
The Effects of Brokenness
Strengthening Friendships
The Marital Relationship

LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. *Identify four basic emotional needs that everyone has.*
2. *Explain how brokenness affects our lives.*
3. *Describe the steps to strengthening our friendships.*
4. *List the steps to enjoying relationship with one's mate.*

Common Emotional Needs

Objective 1:

Identify the four basic emotional needs that everyone has

God does not make junk. Perhaps you have heard that statement before. Jeremiah 29:11 tells us, “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”

When I first read this, I thought that there had to be a mistake. Surely God’s plans for my life could not be a good thing. However, I have discovered that His plan and purpose for my life have always been to bless and not curse me, help not hurt me, prosper and not plunder me. Psalm 139:14–17 affirms,

“I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!”

While God does not make junk, often people devalue themselves. After Adam and Eve sinned, they felt a great sense of fear, insecurity, and guilt. Adam confessed, “I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid” (Genesis 3:10). Then, the first couple used fig leaves to cover their shame! However, in pursuing them (Genesis 3:9), God initiated a plan to restore His creation to right relationship with Him so that He might once again bless humanity.

God designed humans to have four basic emotional needs:

1. **Unconditional love:** This is love that is expressed without expecting anything in return. It is love that gives and does not take. It is love expressed in

word, thought, and deed. It is the kind of love God has for us, and we need from others.

2. *Security*: This is feeling secure and protected—prerequisites that enable us to receive love.
3. *Praise*: Praise from others provides a sense of value and affirmation, the feeling that you are admired and needed.
4. *Purpose*: Purpose is having a reason to be alive, something that gives us hope and a future.

Note that the world offers counterfeit versions of these basic needs. For instance, the counterfeit to love is lustful passion. The counterfeit to security is possessions. The counterfeit to praise is position. The counterfeit to purpose is power.

We all long to receive the blessing that comes from a healthy relationship with God and other human beings. When a person does not receive love and acceptance or if that love and acceptance are withdrawn, the result is rejection. Just because you are a Christian does not mean that you will not be hurt by others. Rejection, if not handled correctly, is one of the deepest wounds a person can experience. It can direct the course of his or her life for years to come.

After Jacob had deceitfully taken Esau's blessing, Esau cried to his father Jacob, "Bless me—me too, my father!" (Genesis 27:34). But it was too late. Jacob had taken the blessing of the firstborn, which rightfully belonged to his older brother. Esau, in his brokenness, decided to kill his brother.

There are many today whose hearts cry out because of the pain of rejection. The book of Proverbs describes a broken or crushed heart: "A man's spirit sustains him in sickness, but a crushed spirit who can bear?" (Proverbs 18:14). "A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones" (Proverbs 17:22). Let us examine brokenness and its relationship to the Christian experience.

The Effects of Brokenness

Objective 2:

Explain how brokenness affects our lives.

All of us have struggled, are presently struggling, or will struggle with brokenness. One false assumption many Christians have is that if they are relying on God and being obedient to Him, then they should have few problems or challenges. Once that assumption is recognized as false, people often feel free to share with each other the struggles and difficulties in their lives.

I remember one person telling me, "I'm trying to be more open, but it's hard. I've just had the hardest year of my life emotionally and financially. I don't know why, but I feel that I can share with my co-workers a lot easier than my church family. I think people at church might shun me. I wonder if it's right to deliberately dump all my burdens on someone else." My guess is that many of us have felt that way at one time or another. Please know that there is life-changing fellowship in an authentic community of believers. You do not have to face brokenness alone. The Bible teaches that true Christian fellowship has the power to revolutionize lives. Masks come off; hearts become vulnerable; lives are shared, accountability is established; and tenderness flows. Christians learn to shoulder each other's burdens. The key is finding a loving church family and getting involved.

It is amazing how many Christians suffer in silence. They do not seem to think it is proper or permissible to tell anyone they are having a problem. What happens? Families that may have attended services and sat in the same church pew for years suddenly disappear because the husband and wife are struggling with marital problems. Instead of opening up and coming for counsel, prayer, and support, they left the church family. They did not feel free to confess that their lives were unraveling. They believed false assumptions that Christians should

not have problems and that, if they did, they had better not talk about it around the church.

I learned that lesson growing up in church. After services, people would sometimes ask, "So, Phil, how are things in school?" I would give the response that I thought was expected. "Fine," I would say, "things are just great." I did not feel I could tell them that I was struggling with doing right while all my friends were doing wrong or that I was dying spiritually. I did not say anything because I felt that a good Christian—especially a pastor's kid—just did not admit to having those kinds of real-life difficulties.

Here is a fact—everybody deals with brokenness. Let me share four reasons why.

1. First, we have a sinful nature. Some people think that their biggest struggle is against some specific sin. They say, "If I could just conquer this sin or overcome that bad habit, then I'd be on top of my game." The Bible teaches us that our problem is not just one bad habit or one sin but the presence of evil or a sinful nature in our lives. As human beings, our natural tendency is to sin, rebel, disobey, and shun God. This creates a great deal of pain and brokenness.
2. Second, contrary to the thinking of modern idealists, human nature is not essentially good. The apostle Paul writes, "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature" (Romans 7:18). That is a serious statement. What it means is that you and I are going to be disappointed with our behavior and attitudes at times as well as face frustration at the failings of others.
3. Third, we will not be okay by just determining to do what is right. Notice the Apostle's words in Romans 7:15: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." Have you ever felt like that? Paul continues, in verse 19, "For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing." Paul freely admits we are so broken that we do not have

the power within ourselves to consistently do right just because we make the determination to do so.

4. Fourth, we are wrong in assuming that God will remove all temptations now that we are Christians. Paul writes in Romans 7:21, "So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me." Brokenness runs so deep that even when we Christians desire to please God, the temptation to do wrong still dangles before us.

Some scholars think Paul is describing his life before becoming a Christian, while others believe he is describing his life as a mature Christian. In either case, the point still is that brokenness is a normal human condition. Left to our own devices, we are desperately imperfect. We may cry like Paul, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24). Paul answers his own questions in the next verse, "Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (v. 25).

Although we are all broken people, the One who suffered and died for our sins reaches out and loves us. Sin is never beautiful, but to Jesus broken people are. He looks past our sin and sees our needs. Broken people are eligible to participate in an authentic biblical community.

Often, however, it is difficult to admit to brokenness because such admission makes us look weak. We fear that others will assume we are not very spiritual. The passion to protect ourselves and to keep our wounds out of sight dominates our thinking. We feel that there may be a lot to lose if we share our struggles with others. We fear losing acceptance in someone else's eyes; losing a ministry position; or losing favor, love, image, popularity, status, influence, or trust.

Even worse, some of us may think that non-Christians better understand our struggles. But sharing our struggles with non-Christians may not be the best approach because it has the potential to discourage them from the faith. God established fellowship with believers for the purpose of building community and helping one another in the faith. The devil gains victory when he keeps us afraid

to share honestly with fellow believers. Sometimes the enemy convinces us that what we are going through is too embarrassing to share and that if we come clean, we will lose friendships and respect. He tries to convince us to stand alone and tempts us with the same things again and again. Then, we feel worse when we give in to sin.

Here are some scenarios. There are many you know who carry the guilt of an abortion but are too ashamed to talk about it. There are those dealing with temper and rage. Perhaps sitting next to you in church is someone who is hooked on pornography but too embarrassed to mention it. Week after week many go home from church activities with their deepest hurts and struggles unresolved and unmentioned. Because of that, they remain locked in a continuous cycle of sin, shame, and pain.

God wants to do miracles in broken people, and He often works within a community of believers, the church, to bring about His healing. The church was God's idea, not people's idea. In authentic Christianity, we are free to admit to our brokenness. We can confess that life's challenges and our experiences have hurt us. We can reach out to Jesus without embarrassment.

A central task of a community of believers is to create a place that is safe enough for each of us to reveal our brokenness. I encourage you to look for caring people in your church and build relationships with them. If you do not have a loving church home, now would be a good time to start looking. Seek a church where God's Word is preached faithfully, where the worship of God is alive and sincere, where people love and help each other, and where there is evidence of God's power at work in the members.

Strengthening Friendships

Objective 3:

Describe the steps to strengthening our friendships.

God made us social creatures with a desire to build relationships with other people. He could have made us

all solitary beings, but He did not. At the core of who we are is the need to relate to others, to establish friendships and family. But in our attempts to build relationships, there are times that we have struggled. Sometimes our relationships even break down because of neglect, unresolved conflict, or simple misunderstandings. Our world is littered with broken relationships: husbands and wives, parents and children, employees and employers, friends, neighbors, and families.

The bottom line as to why relationships break down is that we live in a fallen world. We do something wrong, and others do something wrong. We sin, and others sin. We all make mistakes. We hurt others, whether intentionally or unintentionally, and get hurt. But relationships can be restored!

While steps to restoring relationships include forgiveness, honesty, sensitivity, and humility, the fundamental key to great relationships is humility. The Bible suggests that we are to clothe ourselves with humility (see 1 Peter 5:5). We are not dressed for successful relationships until we have learned humility.

The Bible reveals that God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble. Read carefully the following quotations from Scripture:

- “There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood” (Proverbs 6:16–17).
- “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18).
- “Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice” (Proverbs 13:10).
- “When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom” (Proverbs 11:2).
- “Humility and the fear of the LORD bring wealth and honor and life” (Proverbs 22:4).

So what is humility? Humility does not deny talents or abilities; people who do that are practicing false humility.

Humility, from a Christian perspective, includes loving others. The two great commandments Jesus gave us are to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. When we spend our time loving God and our neighbors, we will not have much time left over to get puffed up.

Since humility in relationships is the key to success, we must discover how it develops and manifests itself in our relationships. Here are vital truths that will enable us to have relationships built on humility.

First, we must ask God for help to root out pride. For some of us, this may not be easy. Our whole relationship with God begins with our admission that we need His help. James writes, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6).

Second, we need to intentionally honor others. Romans 12:10 says, "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves." Philippians 2:3 tells us, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves."

Third, we must acknowledge our responsibility. Galatians 6:5 says, "Each one should carry his own load." We cannot build strong, healthy relationships without accepting responsibility for our thoughts, speech, attitudes, and behavior. We cannot make others do all the work in building relationships. We must swallow our pride and be quick to apologize when we have hurt others. As humility grows in our lives, we will find ourselves being quicker to admit wrong and to halt destructive damage in our relationships. If you are dealing with a broken relationship, humility will break the gridlock. If you cannot say, "I was wrong," or "I'm sorry," or "Please forgive me," you will never have long-lasting, exciting relationships.

Fourth, we need to allow others to be human. Humans make mistakes. Sometimes we hold people to a standard they cannot possibly meet. Too many times we judge others by their actions while we judge ourselves by our intentions. We must make room for people who do not

always meet our high standards. Read Paul's advice: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32). "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love" (Ephesians 4:2). "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:13).

The Marital Relationship

Objective 4:

List the steps to enjoying relationship with one's mate.

The most fulfilling yet challenging relationship is marriage. It can bring the greatest joy or the greatest sorrow. I realize that not everybody reading this lesson is married, but if you are not, you may be some day. This teaching will be good to remember.

All marriages experience some level of conflict and pain. A marriage is a journey of hills and valleys, highs and lows. Just as children go through developmental stages from birth to adulthood, marriages go through similar developmental stages. One day, I overheard my wife Rhonda reading a prayer that went something like this: "Father, God, I pray for wisdom to understand my man, I ask for love to forgive him, and patience for his moods. But Father, do not give me strength today, because if I have strength, I may beat him to death. Amen."

Psychologists have identified five stages couples pass through as they build strong and deeply satisfying marriages (Minirth et al., under "The Passages of Marriage").

1. The first stage is "young love"—the first two years of marriage. This is the time when couples must overcome idealistic notions of marriage and begin to function as a unit.
2. The second stage encompasses years three through ten of marriage. It is a time when a more "realistic love" should take place. This stage is

also one of the most dangerous stages, and many marriages do not survive this period. I will discuss this more in a moment.

3. The third stage encompasses years eleven through twenty-five. It has been called the “comfortable love” phase. This phase is compared to oatmeal—not exciting, but comfortable, warm, and satisfying. Researchers at Denver University discovered that most long-term marriages seem to decrease in satisfaction during the first ten years and then rebound. Eventually, the satisfaction level surpasses the years of young love.
4. The fourth stage is a time of “renewing love” and covers years twenty-six through thirty-five of marriage. It is a time of accepting inevitable losses such as the empty nest and aging parents. However, it is also a time of recommitment and rediscovering each other.
5. The fifth stage is a period of “transcendental love.” This covers years thirty-six to the end of the marriage. According to those who make it this far, it truly is the best stage of marriage. It is a time of achieving the oneness that Jesus talked about when He said, “The two will become one” (Matthew 19:5).

During the second stage of developing *realistic love*, many marriages fall apart. The challenge, then, is to learn how to navigate the occasional turbulent waters of this second stage when there can be great differences, stress, and a temporary drifting apart. How can we survive the second stage of marriage?

First, we must remember that men and women were created for mutual dependency (see Genesis 2:20–23). We are similar but different. And, often it is our differences that attract us to each other. Yet, the same differences that attract can also be a source of attack. Furthermore, our differences may divide us if we are not careful. Is it not interesting that after Adam and Eve sinned, they covered the parts of their bodies that were

the most obviously different from one another? They were ashamed of their nakedness.

In the heat of conflict and differences, we may also be afraid of exposing ourselves. So, we hide behind barriers of silence, anger, accusation, activity, and so on. Like Adam after the fall, we may blame our mate for our own failings. Then, the differences that first attracted us to our mate begin to annoy and divide us.

Since it is true that marriage involves two imperfect, needy people, it is important to understand some specific differences between men and women. For example, men and women are different psychologically. Studies of unborn babies have disclosed that female babies in the womb develop the left hemisphere of the brain faster than male babies. The left hemisphere is where the verbal skills originate.

We are also different sexually. A man's sexual drive can be turned off and on very quickly. A woman's sexual drive, on the other hand, takes more time. Can you think of other big differences between men and women?

Below are five factors in building a better relationship with our mates. First, spouses must assign top priority to their relationship with each other. Ephesians 5:25 tells us, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." In Revelation 2:4-5, Jesus speaks to a local church and declares, "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first." Jesus wanted His followers in that church to repent and do the things they did at first so that their love for Him could be restored. Although Jesus was not referring to marriage here, the principle may still apply to marital couples who need their love restored.

Men need to put their relationship with their spouse at the top of their priority list. One husband tells about going shopping for a blouse for his wife. He said, "I wasn't shopping for a blouse. I was hunting for a blouse! I wanted to track it, shoot it, bag it, throw it in the back

of the truck, and go home.” Men tend to be conquest-oriented. It is often the case that once the courtship phase of a relationship is over and a woman has been *conquered*, a man thinks his job is done and can become neglectful in showing that his wife is still his top priority.

To the married men who are reading this, where would your wife say she is on your priority list? Does she have to compete with your work? Does she have to fight the TV for your attention? Does she feel left out of your day and your dreams? The things you did to captivate your wife’s love in the first place are the things you need to do to keep her love. If you are failing in your relationship with your wife, let her know you are putting her back on top of your priority list. And prove it by doing the things you did at first.

Second, listen to understand, without giving unwanted advice. James 1:19 tells us, “My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.” Proverbs 18:13 also notes, “He who answers before listening—that is his folly and his shame.”

A common complaint I hear in counseling women is that their husbands do not listen to them and do not understand them. Their husbands, on the other hand, are bewildered and say, “But I do listen.” What is happening here? Generally, a wife wants to talk about a problem and share how she is feeling about it. The husband, on the other hand, quickly analyzes the problem and wants to solve it. Here is useful advice for men: the husband must resist the urge to solve any of the wife’s problems unless she specifically asks him. Instead, the man should listen to his wife, validate her, and let her know that he understands how she feels. He probably does not even have to solve the problem. The wife simply wants her best friend—her husband—to understand her and know what she is going through.

Third, be your spouse’s biggest fan. Ephesians 4:29 tells us, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others

up according to their needs." If your friends only knew your spouse by what you said about him or her, what would they think? Unfortunately, many couples complain about their mates instead of compliment them. Your spouse has great attributes that need to be admired. Praising your spouse has little to do with propping up his or her weak ego. Rather, admiration is a God-given way to express and receive love and appreciation.

Conversely, negatives hurt deeply and can be deadly to a relationship. Marriage experts have concluded that constant belittling is one of the most predictable causes for divorce, for negative statements have a greater impact than positive comments. Imagine you give a speech to two hundred people. When it is over, you get 199 positive responses and one negative response. Which one are you likely to dwell on? Similarly, it will probably take your spouse many positive affirmations to recover from one of your destructive criticisms.

So recall the ways you used to compliment and encourage your spouse, and then do those things again. Find ways to express how much you value him or her. Be sensitive to the situations when your spouse needs your admiration most. When you get together with your friends, do not belittle your spouse. Instead, brag on him or her in public.

Fourth, do not assume you will be able to change your mate. Many men and women go into marriage thinking that at some point they will be able to modify the strange personality traits or odd aggravating behaviors of their mates. They are seldom, if ever, successful.

So instead of attempting to alter your husband or wife, seek to understand him or her. It is your job to love your mate; it is God's job to change him or her. Every person is unique. Become an expert on what makes your spouse excel. Success in marriage does not depend as much on finding the right person as it does on being the right person. The apostle Paul advises in Philippians 2:4, "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."

Fifth, do not expect your mate to meet all your needs. The only person who can meet them completely is Jesus. It is unfair to place that burden on anybody else. Seek God diligently; He must be number one. If you do this and treat your mate as God intends, he or she should never feel threatened by your spiritual passion. Furthermore, the deeper your love for God, the better will be your love for your spouse.

Conclusion

Every success and failure in our lives can be traced to a relationship. A relationship with the wrong person can destroy you. I remember hearing a conference speaker say, "When God wants to bless you, He puts a person in your life. When Satan wants to destroy you, he puts a person in your life." We must trust the Holy Spirit to give us discernment regarding all our relationships. So, continually seek to understand the basic emotional needs people have. Discover where brokenness has affected your life, and look to Christ for hope and healing. Continue to develop and strengthen all your friendships. And pay close attention to those closest to you—your spouse, children, and parents.

Reference List

- Minirth, Frank & Mary Alice, Brian & Deborah Newman, and Robert & Susan Hemfelt. "Passages of Marriage: Five Growth Stages." Marriage Missions. http://www.marriagemissions.com/marriage_matters/passages.php (accessed May 2, 2006).

SELF-TEST

After studying the lesson, please read each study question carefully and circle the correct response. There is only one correct response for each question.

1. *Brokenness is a great value*
 - a) *only in heaven.*
 - b) *never.*
 - c) *in our relationship with God and others.*
2. *After Adam and Eve sinned, they felt a great sense of*
 - a) *fear, insecurity, and guilt.*
 - b) *fear, blame, and joy.*
 - c) *worry, anxiety, and fatigue.*
3. *The four basic emotional needs that everyone has are*
 - a) *unconditional love, anger, praise, and purpose.*
 - b) *unconditional love, security, praise, and purpose.*
 - c) *passion, possession, position, and power.*
4. *What is one of the four reasons mentioned as to why people experience brokenness?*
 - a) *People need to experience pain.*
 - b) *People feel broken when abused.*
 - c) *Human nature is sinful.*
5. *The key to great relationships is*
 - a) *strength.*
 - b) *individuality.*
 - c) *humility.*
6. *What are some of the steps to develop relationships built on humility?*
 - a) *Belittle yourself as often as possible.*
 - b) *Ask God for help, allow others to be human, and accept responsibility.*
 - c) *Never look another person in the eyes.*
7. *Every marriage has*
 - a) *mother-in-law problems.*
 - b) *two or more people.*
 - c) *conflict and pain.*

8. *According to the lesson, factors for building a better relationship with your mate are*
 - a) *money and more money.*
 - b) *having a good paying job, a house, car, and no children.*
 - c) *assigning top priority to your relationship, good listening habits, trying not to change your mate, and letting God meet your deepest needs.*
9. *Our societies are infected because of*
 - a) *God.*
 - b) *sin.*
 - c) *politics.*
10. *According to the author, our successes and failures can be traced*
 - a) *to our relationships.*
 - b) *by our genes.*
 - c) *by the angels.*

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Printout and mail a copy of your self test pages to the regional HBMM National Leadership Team member for your region.

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ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

Note: You can check your answers by using the answer guide. The numbers in the parentheses indicate which objective in the lesson to check.

1. *c* (3.2)
2. *a* (3.1)
3. *b* (3.1)
4. *c* (3.2)
5. *c* (3.3)
6. *b* (3.3)
7. *c* (3.4)
8. *c* (3.4)
9. *b* (3.1)
10. *a* (3.4)

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LESSON 4

Perseverance

Perseverance is essential for success in any task. Success in business, sports, politics, education, and science is not necessarily dependent on one's talent or intelligence. Rather, more often, success is a result of perseverance. Successful people simply do not give up, even when everything is working against them.

This principle of perseverance is essential in the Christian life. A Christian must have the mindset that is determined to live for the Lord regardless of circumstances. The great people in the Bible and in church history persevered; many men and women of God have faced impossible tasks and huge difficulties, but God brought about victory because they persevered.

Today, God still desires all Christians to persevere. He does not bring us into His kingdom only to have us quit and fail. God has a plan for every believer, and His desire is to see that plan completed. Paul wrote in Philippians 1:6, "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." However, for the "good work" to be completed, it will require our perseverance.

LESSON OUTLINE

The Definition of Perseverance
Importance of Perseverance
The Motivation for Perseverance
Hindrances to Perseverance
How to Persevere
The Rewards of Perseverance

LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. *Define perseverance.*
2. *Indicate the importance of perseverance.*
3. *Describe the key motivating factor for perseverance.*
4. *State what hinders perseverance.*
5. *Identify God's resources to help us persevere.*
6. *Name rewards for those who persevere.*

The Definition of Perseverance

Objective 1:

Define perseverance.

The word *perseverance* means persisting in, or remaining constant to a purpose, task or belief in spite of obstacles and opposition. It is the ability to endure pain, disappointment, and discomfort without quitting or letting down. Perseverance has the idea of remaining steadfast and faithful even when everything is going against us. Perseverance requires endurance.

The Greek word that is used most often in the Bible for perseverance suggests the meaning bear up under a load. This is what we do when we persevere. We hold steady and remain true although we may be pressed from all sides. Depending upon the version of the Bible, this Greek word is translated with words such as patience, endurance, steadfastness, and perseverance.

Importance of Perseverance

Objective 2:

Indicate the importance of perseverance.

When we decide to follow Christ, our life takes on new meaning. We experience new joy and peace, and we begin a relationship with God through Christ. However, just because we are Christians does not mean that life necessarily becomes easier. Sometimes life becomes more difficult because we have made the decision to follow Christ. For instance, we may face difficulties and challenges that we never experienced before.

Nevertheless, we should not be surprised when these times come. Jesus said in John 16:33, "In this world you will have trouble." Furthermore, when Paul and Barnabas revisited the churches of Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, one of their main messages to the churches was, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God"

(Acts 14:22). Peter wrote in his first epistle, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you" (1 Peter 4:12). The Bible is very clear that since we live in a sin-cursed world, we will face difficult times. During such times it is essential that the Christian persevere.

There are various situations that require Christians to persevere. These situations can either make or break us as Christians. These times will cause those who persevere to grow stronger in their faith, and for those who do not persevere, it can cause their faith to falter or even die. Following are instances when we need to persevere.

Persevere in Difficult Tasks

God calls some Christians to be pastors or missionaries in difficult places. Sometimes, these ministers become discouraged and may want to give up. Nevertheless, in such situations perseverance is needed. Think of the many successful soul-winning churches and ministries worldwide. If you were to study the history of these ministries, you would probably find that they endured great hardship and difficulties. Maybe there was persecution, financial hardship, or other setbacks. Yet, there was a pastor, missionary, or congregation that persevered and hung on to the promises of God, and today we see the result of such perseverance.

Nehemiah felt God directing him to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls of that defeated city. Once he arrived there he saw that the walls of the city in ruins. The task of rebuilding the walls looked overwhelming. Yet, Nehemiah organized the people and materials and started the building project. Shortly after beginning the work, he and the people faced opposition from neighboring enemies. But Nehemiah persevered and turned to God for strength. Because of Nehemiah's persistence and leadership, the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt in 52 days (see Nehemiah 2–6). What had previously looked impossible was accomplished because of perseverance.

Persevere When Suffering

Paul was a mighty man of God. One reason why he is such a great example is that of the suffering he endured for the sake of the Gospel. In one of Paul's letters to the Corinthian church, we get a glimpse of the hardships he confronted,

As servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything. (2 Corinthians 6:4–10)

Paul suffered as well from a condition he referred to as a "thorn in my flesh". There are many interpretations as to what the thorn was. Whether it was a physical ailment or a spiritual struggle we do not know for certain. But we do know that whatever his thorn was, Paul suffered from it. He called it, "a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me" (2 Corinthians 12:7–8). The use of the words "torment" and "pleaded" shows that Paul suffered greatly from this affliction. He felt tormented, and he seriously sought the Lord for his situation to be changed. The thorn was never removed, but Paul persevered.

Paul suffered also because of persecution for preaching the Gospel. In his final letter to Timothy, he writes, "You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions,

sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them” (2 Timothy 3:10–11). As Paul approached the end of his life, he wanted Timothy to remember not only his teaching and way of life, but also the fact that he had endured persecution.

In verse 12, Paul tells Timothy, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” If we live for the Lord, we will face persecution. It may be a mild form of persecution such as being shunned by non-Christians or mocked. Or, it may be more serious forms of persecution such as arrest, beatings, or even martyrdom. The history of the church is full of examples of people who persevered under persecution, some even to the point of death.

Persevere When Life Does Not Make Sense

One of the most difficult times in which we need perseverance is when the events of life do not make sense. We have a tendency to believe that if we live in obedience everything will be fine. Then, when things do not work out as we expected, we become doubtful and may ask ourselves, “Is this what I get for being so dedicated in serving God? Wasn’t God hearing my prayers? Did He really notice my faithfulness? Is it worth pressing on in the Christian life?”

A businessman may faithfully tithe and be generous in his giving to the work of the Lord, but instead of prosperity, he experiences bankruptcy due to events beyond his control. Parents may have dedicated their children to the Lord and raised them in the things of God only to see the children rebel against them and the faith. A sincere Christian husband may sincerely pray for the healing of his wife whom he loves deeply, only to see her eventually die—leaving him alone to raise their children. A missionary couple may have spent years in study and preparation to minister in a foreign field, yet have to resign shortly after arriving on the field because of an accident that leaves them disabled.

These kinds of events happen even to the most sincere and faithful of God's people. And this reality seems to go against everything we hear about God's goodness and power. However, when such things happen, we must exercise perseverance and trust in God's faithfulness, wisdom, and sovereignty or authority.

Deliverance in God's Time

Joseph is a good example of one who persevered even when the events of life did not make sense. Joseph was a godly young man, with great potential. When he was a teenager, his brothers sold him into slavery because of their jealousy of him. As a slave, Joseph was falsely accused of rape and was put into an Egyptian prison. Then he was forgotten by those who promised to seek his release. From all appearances, God had forsaken Joseph. Yet, Joseph persevered in living for God, and God honored Joseph's trust. In the end, when Joseph was prime minister of Egypt, he understood how God had been in control of every event of his life.

God is in control of the events of every believer's life. Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." If we believe that God is working on our behalf, we will persevere even when things do not make sense.

The Need to Persevere

There are two basic reasons to persevere: for success in spiritual warfare and for growth.

Spiritual Warfare

Christians need to persevere because we are in a spiritual battle. Before we came to Christ, we were living as Satan wanted us to; we were dead to spiritual things. However, when we became Christians or children of God, our way of living and our desires changed. Instead of living according to our own ways, we now desire God's way. Yet, Satan tries to pull us back into the old life of sin. This is the spiritual battle taking place.

An example of someone who persevered while in spiritual warfare is Job. One day Satan appeared before God, and God asked him, "'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil'" (Job 1:8). Satan responded that Job was serving God only because God had put a hedge of protection and blessing around Job. Satan argued that if the hedge were removed, Job would curse God. So Job was put to the test. Satan began to afflict Job with the loss of his children, possessions, and eventually his health. All these afflictions were designed by Satan to ruin Job and destroy his faith in God. But through it all, Job persevered!

One notable spiritual battle in the New Testament is that of Satan's temptation of Jesus Christ in the wilderness over a forty-day period (see Luke 4:1–13). Satan's desire was to cause Jesus to sin and ruin God's plan of redemption. Yet, Jesus remained steadfast and was victorious over Satan. When the 40 days were over and Satan realized that he had been defeated, he left Jesus alone for a time.

Throughout His ministry, Jesus faced many other spiritual battles. The supreme test was the one Jesus faced upon the Cross. Hebrews 12:2 states that Jesus "endured the cross." It was on the Cross that Jesus persevered and brought about salvation for all humankind. In the Christian life, we will face many spiritual battles and temptations, but we can also experience the victory of Christ if we persevere.

Growth through Perseverance

The second reason why we need perseverance is that it produces good character and traits in our life. When we become Christians, God begins a refining process in our lives. He molds us into the image of His Son and works to remove the unholy things in our lives. One way God accomplishes this is by allowing us to experience trials.

Paul wrote in Romans 5:3–4, "We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character,

hope.” James also commented on the benefits of perseverance: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2–4).

Trials and sufferings show us what is important. They open our eyes to what is temporal and what is eternal. The hard places we go through make the hope of heaven more real. Paul describes this in Romans 8. In verses 21–23, he presents creation as groaning and in travail, waiting to be delivered from its bondage. Paul states that not only does creation groan, but so do we as we await the adoption of sons and the redemption of our bodies. We received this hope when we were saved and “wait for it patiently” (Romans 8:25). Thus, we persevere.

Some of the most mature Christians you will meet are those who have gone through difficult experiences. Maybe they experienced prolonged sickness, the death of a loved one, financial hardship, a major setback, or grave persecution for their faith. Yet they remained faithful and endured. Moreover, they still have a sweet spirit, godly character, and vibrant faith. These are evidences of God’s working in their lives during the trial and producing Christ-like qualities in them.

So although we may not like suffering and difficulty, we must persevere—for victory and for God to develop His qualities in us. The character traits God wants to develop in us require time. Thus, we must be patient and allow God to complete His work in us.

The Motivation for Perseverance

Objective 3:

Describe the key motivating factor for perseverance.

What causes a Christian to endure persecution for the sake of Christ? What enables Christians to keep on serving God when it appears that God has forsaken them? What

causes a Christian to hold on to the promises of God when there are so many obstacles? What motivates the Christian to persevere? The greatest motivator in perseverance is one's love for God. Our endurance will be based on our depth and sincerity of love for the Lord. The deeper our love for the Lord, the greater will be our perseverance.

We Love the Lord Because He First Loved Us

If we grasp the great love God has for us and understand the price Jesus paid for our salvation, we will respond to God in love and perseverance. Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, had sat as a student at the feet of the Apostle John. For 60 years, Polycarp had a powerful ministry in Asia Minor. In 156 A.D., persecution broke out against the Christians. Polycarp was a target of those who were persecuting the church. At the age of eighty-six, Polycarp was arrested. He was taken before the governor, who pressed him to deny Christ and swear by the divinity of Caesar. Polycarp replied, "Fourscore and six years have I been His servant, and He hath done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" (Martyrdom of Polycarp 9:12–9:13). Polycarp stood fast to his confession of faith in Christ. Because of this, he was sentenced to be burned at the stake.

Love for Christ will motivate us to do whatever He asks of us. The story is told of a young nobleman named Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf who, after graduation from the university at Wittenberg, embarked on a tour of Europe. He went to the art museum at Dusseldorf and saw a painting entitled "Behold the Man". It was a picture of the thorn-crowned Christ gazing at the viewer. Under the painting were the words, "I have done this for you; what have you done for me?" Zinzendorf thought, "I have loved Him for a long time, but I have never actually done anything for Him. From now on I will do whatever He leads me to do." From that point, the young Count Zinzendorf became a great Christian leader, starting the Moravian movement which sent multitudes of missionaries around the world.

First Corinthians 13:7–8 tells us that love "always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails." If we love Christ, this love will inspire us to keep on going no matter what the difficulty. It will motivate us to endure whatever hardship for Him.

Hindrances to Perseverance

Objective 4:

State what hinders perseverance.

As we have seen, all Christians will face difficulties, trials and persecution at some point. Some persevere, while others do not. Let us focus now on factors that hinder our ability to persevere.

Unconfessed Sin

The most obvious reason some Christians do not persevere is that of sin in their lives. Jesus said that we cannot serve two masters, for we will love one and hate the other. Love for Christ motivates us to persevere. If our affections are on pleasures of the flesh and the world instead of on Christ, it will hinder our perseverance. We must live a holy life to persevere.

Attachment to Worldly Things

Another hindrance to perseverance that is closely related to sin is a love for things of the world. Some people will quit serving God if it means a loss of position, possessions, or finances. Paul wrote to Timothy concerning Demas: "Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica" (2 Timothy 4:10). At one time, Demas had been listed as a fellow worker of Paul's (Philemon 24). But Demas gave in to the pull of the world and abandoned the ministry.

Unresolved Discouragement

Another hindrance is unresolved discouragement. Everybody becomes discouraged from time to time. The discouragement may be short-lived, lasting just a few minutes or hours; or it may be more intense, lasting days. When discouragement stretches beyond a few

days, however, one needs to be alert to the more serious problem of depression.

God does not want us to linger in discouragement or despair. As we have previously seen, God will use trials to refine and develop us, but Satan will use trials to discourage us. Discouragement is a tool of Satan. In Psalm 73, an anointed man of God, Asaph, relates how he became discouraged when he saw the prosperity of the wicked. He said that his feet almost slipped as he looked at what seemed to be the easy life of those who ignore God. He felt that his efforts in serving God had been in vain. But when he went into the sanctuary of God, he understood the end of the wicked. He realized that the prosperity the wicked enjoy is only temporary. Being in God's presence helped him to have a new perspective on his situation.

In times of difficulty, it is critical that we guard our minds from things that would bring discouragement, and focus our minds on the promises of God. God's promises will produce hope and enable us to persevere.

How to Persevere

Objective 5:

Identify God's resources to help us persevere.

The Christian's perseverance is different from that of a non-Christian. When non-Christians encounter problems, they persevere because of personal grit and determination. And each person has a limit as to what he or she can handle. As Christians, we have more than just personal determination; we also have heavenly resources that enable us to persevere.

Exercise Faith

To persevere, we need faith. Hebrews 11:1 says, "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." What enables believers to persevere? They have faith that believes God is at work even though the situation is difficult and there is no physical evidence that things will change. Faith is simply putting one's trust in the nature and character

of God. It believes that He is holy and righteous, loving and faithful, and that He is true to His promises. Faith enables us to overcome the world (1 John 5:4).

Hebrews 11 lists several biblical characters who overcame great difficulties because of their faith. It was faith that enabled Noah to persevere 120 years as he built the ark. Faith enabled Abraham, well advanced in years, to persevere while waiting 25 years for the birth of a promised son. Faith enabled Moses to persevere as he led God's people out of Egyptian bondage and into the Promised Land. The chapter concludes by listing unnamed people who saw great victories because of their faith. The same faith also enabled others to persevere although they never saw the fulfillment of what God had promised them. They persevered because they knew God had something better for them.

The Word of God

The Word of God builds our faith and will encourage us. Romans 10:17 says, "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." If we want to persevere, we need to study the Word. We need to know the promises of God. In the wilderness, Jesus persevered and overcame the temptations of Satan by the power of the Word. It is the same Word of God that is able to help us have victory.

The Bible is God's revelation of himself. As we read the Bible, we gain a better understanding of the character and nature of God. The Word shows us that God is good and faithful to His promises. From His Word, we discover that we can trust God to see us through whatever we face.

Christian Fellowship

Having fellowship with the people of God also helps us to persevere. Hebrews 10:25 says, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." This admonition was written to people who were going through difficult times. Later in chapter 10, the writer to the Hebrews

reminds his audience of the sufferings and persecutions they had endured. He writes, “So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised” (Hebrews 10:35–36).

One of the ways we persevere is by drawing strength and encouragement from our brothers and sisters in Christ. This is one of the functions of the church. We draw courage from one another, we hear how God demonstrated his faithfulness and power in others’ lives, we pray together, we help one another—all of which help us to persevere.

The Holy Spirit’s Power

Just before Jesus went to the Cross He promised the disciples that He would not leave them comfortless but would provide for them the Comforter, who is the Holy Spirit. The word *Comforter* in the original means “one called along side of.” The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity who is there to help us, empower us, and comfort us when we are going through trials. As we rely on Him we are able to persevere.

The Rewards of Perseverance

Objective 6:

Name rewards for those who persevere.

Towards the end of his letter to the Corinthians, Paul urged his readers to persevere. He wrote, “Stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58). Here we see that whatever we do for the Lord is of value. This includes the times we persevere. God keeps record of all we do, and the Bible is very clear that there are rewards for those who persevere.

Revelation 2–3 records Jesus’ evaluation of the Seven Churches of Asia Minor. Jesus knew the work of each church. He knew where five of the seven churches fell short. But He also had a promised reward for each of the churches that would overcome or persevere.

Following are several blessings you too can expect for persevering.

Fulfillment of God's promises

The writer of Hebrews encourages us, "You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised" (Hebrews 10:36). The only way to see the fulfillment of God's promises is to remain steadfast in faith.

Blessedness

Another promise for those who persevere is that they will be considered blessed. James writes, "As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered" (James 5:11). The Amplified Bible indicates that to be considered blessed means to be "happy," "enviably fortunate" or "spiritually prosperous." In other words, if you want to be happy, fortunate, and spiritually prosperous, you must demonstrate perseverance.

A Powerful Influence

If we persevere, we will make a big difference in the lives of others. Paul wrote to Timothy, "Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Timothy 4:15–16). Since most of us have people who depend upon us, almost everything we do has an impact, either positively or negatively, on others.

When Paul was in prison writing to the church of Philippi, he said that his imprisonment had been an encouragement to others. He wrote, "Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly" (Philippians 1:14). Because Paul remained steadfast, others found the courage to do so as well.

Reigning with Christ

Most important, if we persevere, we will reign with Christ. Second Timothy 2:11–12 says, "Here is a

trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him." Those who persevered through difficulty and even martyrdom looked beyond to the day when they would see Jesus. The hope and knowledge of seeing Christ and being with Him through all eternity encourages us to persevere. The greatest reward of all will be to see God and hear Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joys of my kingdom."

Conclusion

To be victorious in the Christian life demands perseverance. Satan and life in general will present many occasions that will tempt us to doubt God or give up. In those times, we must remember that God's goal for every Christian is victory. He has provided heavenly resources that enable us to do His will. There will be a day of reward for those who persevere.

Reference

"The Martyrom of Polycarp or Letter of the Smyrnaeans." Apostolic Fathers (Lightfoot). Wesley Center for Applied Theology. Nampa, ID. Accessed July 2, 2007, http://wesley.nnu.edu/biblical_studies/noncanon/fathers/ante-nic/polycarp/polmart.htm

SUGGESTED SCRIPTURE VERSES TO MEMORIZE

Romans 5:3–4
 1 Corinthians 15:58
 1 Timothy 6:11–12
 2 Timothy 2:11–12
 2 Timothy 3:12
 Hebrews 10:36
 Hebrews 12:1–3
 James 1:2–4
 1 Peter 1:5–8

SELF-TEST

After studying the lesson, please read each study question carefully and circle the correct response. There is only one correct response for each question.

1. *To persevere means to*
 - a) *give up.*
 - b) *bear up under a load.*
 - c) *sweat.*
2. *Job experienced trials because*
 - a) *he sinned.*
 - b) *he lacked faith.*
 - c) *Satan attacked Job.*
3. *The purpose of trials is to produce in us*
 - a) *perseverance, godly character, and hope.*
 - b) *more trials.*
 - c) *depression and defeat.*
4. *Everyone who lives a godly life in Christ will*
 - a) *have no problems.*
 - b) *have great wealth in this life.*
 - c) *suffer persecution.*
5. *The greatest motivation for us to persevere is*
 - a) *our love for the Lord.*
 - b) *what others will think of us.*
 - c) *just plain grit and determination.*
6. *Faith is*
 - a) *working up good feeling.*
 - b) *trusting in the person and character of God.*
 - c) *saying the right words and rejecting the reality of anything negative.*
7. *One thing that hinders our ability to persevere is*
 - a) *Christian fellowship.*
 - b) *our love for worldly things.*
 - c) *studying the Word.*
8. *If we want to persevere,*
 - a) *we must have a lot of friends who will help us.*
 - b) *faith is essential.*
 - c) *we must make plans and goals to succeed.*

9. *When we persevere,*
 - a) *others are influenced and strengthened in their walk with the Lord.*
 - b) *Satan attacks us all the more.*
 - c) *we are not guaranteed victory.*
10. *We can successfully live the Christian life*
 - a) *without perseverance.*
 - b) *with no problems.*
 - c) *with God's supernatural resources.*

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Printout and mail a copy of your self test pages to the regional HBMM National Leadership Team member for your region.

Their contact information is located on the "Contact Leadership Team" page on our website: <http://HBMM-National.org>

ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

1. *b* (4.1)
2. *c* (4.2)
3. *a* (4.2)
4. *c* (4.2)
5. *a* (4.3)
6. *b* (4.5)
7. *b* (4.4)
8. *b* (4.5)
9. *a* (4.6)
10. *c* (4.6)

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LESSON 5

Receiving God's Correction

The word *faith* is used in many different ways in the Christian community. We often say that someone has strong faith or that someone has come to faith. In this lesson, we will examine the essential components of faith—what faith is, why it is vital, and how it is to be used. Understanding faith in God can lead to amazing things!

God corrects and disciplines His children as is necessary. For some people, correction brings painful memories of excessive punishment during childhood. Others can barely relate to correction because their parents did so little of it. Still others actually look back with grateful hearts, knowing that their parents and others corrected them with wisdom and love with the goal of producing good character in them.

While it is true that Christians are forgiven of their sins and made righteous in

God's sight the moment they accept Christ as Savior, they will be in need of God's correction. Why? While we strive to be Christlike, none of us can reach sinless perfection on this earth. It is still possible to do wrong after conversion. At times, we may even stubbornly cling to attitudes and behaviors that are detrimental to our loved ones, friends, co-workers, the church, and ourselves.

The need for correction is often easier to see in others than in ourselves. For example, adults generally notice when their children are misbehaving and need correction. We are quick to perceive faults in other adults, too. By the same token, others observe our weaknesses and faults quicker than we recognize them ourselves. So everyone occasionally needs correction.

Susanna Wesley, the mother of John and Charles Wesley, had much experience in the correction of others, inasmuch as she bore and raised nineteen children. John asked his mother to share her beliefs about child rearing. Susanna's response found in *The Journal of John Wesley* states:

In order to form the minds of children, the first thing to be done is to conquer their will and bring them to an obedient temper. To inform the understanding is a work of time and must with children proceed by slow degrees as they are able to bear it: but the subjecting of the will is a thing which must be done at once; and the sooner the better.
(Wesley 1951, 63)

While the subject of this lesson is not specifically the correction of children, the goals for correcting the young are also true for adults. The issues of self-will, human independence, and obedience to God need to be addressed by everyone, regardless of age. God, therefore, involves himself in the ongoing process of correcting His people. In this lesson, we will focus on the teaching on divine discipline as taught in Hebrews 12.

LESSON OUTLINE

The People God Corrects
Recognizing Correction
Confession of Sin
The Motive for Correction
Enduring Correction
Submission in Correction
The Goals of Correction

LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. *Identify who is the focus of God's correction.*
2. *Identify ways God corrects His children.*
3. *Discuss the role of confession.*
4. *Explain what God's love has to do with correction.*
5. *Describe aspects of endurance when undergoing correction.*
6. *Explain the importance of submission to correction.*
7. *Identify three goals God has for those He corrects.*

The People God Corrects

Objective 1:

Identify who is the focus of God's correction.

God assumes the role of a parent as He corrects us. Hebrews 12:5 notes, "And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: 'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you.'" The focus of God's correction is His people, those who have been born again through faith in Jesus Christ. Here are some truths to bear in mind when God focuses His attention on you personally.

- Do not make light of it: Correction should be taken seriously. It helps a person from perpetuating wrong-doing.
- Do not lose heart: God's correction for a Christian does not come from His wrath. Correction is not rejection. Christians should not lose heart when being corrected.
- Do not give up: Even though it may be tempting for a follower of Jesus to give up during correction, God does not want him or her to sulk.

Determination to trust God in the face of human imperfection is needed.

- Do not doubt your salvation: A person being corrected by God may wonder if he or she is still part of God's family. Satan, the accuser of God's people, could take advantage of this vulnerable time in the Christian's life.
- Do not despair: Many people are trying to prove how good they are, and, often, those who are absorbed in self-righteousness become depressed during times of correction. But God corrects us because He cares for His own. He knows that we still have a sinful nature and are prone to sin. However, a significant difference between the Christian and the non-Christian is that the Christian is no longer in bondage to the sinful nature. God uses the aching life lessons to shape and prepare us to bring Him glory.

Recognizing Correction

Objective 2:

Identify ways God corrects His children.

How can we know when God is trying to get our attention and bring needed correction into our lives? What methods does He use to bring discipline? As you can see, we are using the terms correction and discipline interchangeably. While God is not limited to a certain set of methods, the Bible highlights a number of ways God corrects us.

A Rebuke

The writer of the book of Hebrews quotes from Proverbs: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you" (Hebrews 12:5–6). To rebuke means "to bring to light, expose, set forth, convict or convince someone of something, point something out to someone, reprove, correct, punish, discipline" (Gingrich and Danker 1981). A rebuke is a warning to bring about needed change. A

rebuke may come from the Bible, the Holy Spirit, a friend, mate, parent, sibling, or pastor. It can happen while you are in prayer, in church, in conversation with someone, or while you are doing anything else. Rebuke is probably the most common form of correction and, if heeded, can render unnecessary any more serious corrective action on God's part.

Loss of Intimacy and Joy

If we engage in sinful behavior or harbor improper attitudes, our relationship with God will suffer. God is holy, and He hates sin. So when we are sinning, He may appear to be far from us. No wonder that David, after committing adultery with Bathsheba and ordering her husband's murder, found it necessary to pray, "Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice...Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me" (Psalm 51:8, 12).

Unexpected Struggles

God is able to use struggles to slow us down, get us to reflect on our lives, bring repentance, and renew our dependence on Him. Unexpected struggles can include closed doors of opportunity, sickness, loss of favor, financial reverses, opposition, and—in severe cases of rebellion—disaster. To illustrate, when the Old Testament nation of Israel backslid spiritually and turned its back on God, He permitted their enemies to take advantage of them. Read the book of Judges to see examples of this.

God is sovereign; He is in control of all our circumstances. He can grant rich blessings, or He can withhold them.

Confession of Sin

Objective 3:

Discuss the role of confession.

The moment you begin to sense God is correcting you, confess your sin before the Lord. While it may be helpful

to talk to a spiritually mature and trusted believer about your failure, it is most important to acknowledge your sin before the Lord. Do not make excuses. Do not blame others. Do not delay.

You will discover that God is quick to forgive you when you truly are repentant. The Bible says, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8–9). God is merciful and forgives right away! It is sad that some people wait so long before acknowledging their sin.

Bear in mind that though God has forgiven you, you may still suffer the consequences of your sinful actions. For instance, if you are rebuked for telling a series of lies and you confess that to God, God has forgiven you. However, the people who heard your lies may not forgive you—at least not right away. Your dishonesty might have set in motion serious relational, legal, or financial repercussions.

The Motive for Correction

Objective 4:

Explain what God's love has to do with correction.

Hebrews 12:6 says, "The Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." Some people, when corrected, may wonder if they still belong to God. They struggle with God's motive in bringing correction. The following two points relate God's love with our need for correction.

God Corrects in Love

God loves His children. His love for us does not swell or shrink with our victories and failures. His love does not vanish when He corrects us. Christians need to be reminded of God's love when they find themselves being corrected. Consider these verses that connect God's love and goodness with His correction.

- “Blessed is the man whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty” (Job 5:17).
- “Blessed is the man you discipline, O Lord, the man you teach from your law” (Psalm 94:12).
- “The Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in” (Proverbs 3:12).
- “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent” (Revelation 3:19).

God’s Correction Is Never Unfair

Some Christians think that God is treating them unfairly because their correction seems harsher than that of others. But God issues the right amount of correction to bring about change in our lives. He is never abusive with His children.

Think about how steel is manufactured. The workers apply fire to the iron to develop a finished product. In similar manner, God knows what is needed to develop godly character in us. During times of discipline and suffering, we must not rebel against the Lord, for God’s goal is to make us holy.

Neither should we assume that all afflictions are a sure sign of sin and divine discipline. Often they are not. We live in a fallen world, where pain and wickedness exist. Christians are not exempt from the effects of evil in the world. Occasionally bad things do happen to good people. When the believer is in the midst of prolonged struggle and there is no accompanying conviction of sin, the affliction is simply part of living in a fallen world. Yet, God uses even this kind of suffering.

Joseph in the Old Testament is an example of a righteous person loved by God; yet he struggled with painful, unjust hardship. When his jealous brothers sold him into slavery at age seventeen, Joseph went from enjoying enormous favor by his father to suffering the indignity of slavery in Egypt. His feet were shackled, and his neck was put in irons (Psalm 105:18). Although Joseph’s brothers were despicable, still God let Joseph experience this trial. Joseph found God in his pain,

and he bore up under his struggles as God shaped and polished his character. Joseph developed into a leader of impeccable integrity and moral strength.

Even Jesus Christ suffered greatly, though He was innocent of sin. God used unjust suffering to make Jesus Christ, the author of our salvation, perfect or complete through suffering (see Hebrews 2:10). Now Jesus, though sinless, can relate to us because He personally experienced the full effect of humanity's evil and suffering. He feels great compassion for us when we endure pain. What a great Savior we have! If the sinless Son of God suffered in this world, do not be surprised if His followers suffer also.

Enduring Correction

Objective 5:

Describe aspects of endurance when undergoing correction.

Hebrews 12:7–8 instructs, “Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons.” To benefit from correction requires proper response on our part. We must accept what God is doing in our lives and endure the discipline. Refusing correction will only invite difficult circumstances to increase in severity and/or duration. In fact, repeat lessons may be more difficult than the original correction intended by God. Here are some aspects of endurance that we should remember.

- **Humility:** We are to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God (see 1 Peter 5:6). Arguing with God or denying our need for correction will not take away the struggle. Confession of our sin will be more beneficial.
- **Prayer:** We should be prayerful during times of correction. God knows what He wants to accomplish

in each person's life. We should pray that God makes clear the lesson He is trying to teach us.

- **Patience:** People do not change quickly. We can be slow to comprehend what the Lord wants us to learn. His discipline can last weeks or even months at a time.
- **Faith:** God is actively concerned about the ultimate goal of our lives—holiness. God assures us that He is working all things together for our good (see Romans 8:28). A time of correction is no excuse to throw away your faith. Express your trust in Him daily, and speak and act as though you believe what you say.

Submission in Correction

Objective 6:

Explain the importance of submission to correction.

Submission to God is a choice of the will. Hebrews 12:9 says, "Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live!" To submit means to yield to the authority of another. For instance, a parent at times discovers that a child does not eagerly submit to his or her admonitions and discipline. The son or daughter may conform begrudgingly on the outside, but if the heart is still rebellious, real change has not occurred. It is only when acceptance of the authority of the parent and surrender to his or her requirements occurs that positive transformation takes place in the child's life. A loving parent may seem stern during the time of correction but demonstrate great tenderness and compassion afterward. A maturing child comes to appreciate the faithful correction of a parent.

God deserves our utmost respect and submission because His ways are best. As a general rule, humans are completely out of alignment with God. Notice what

the Lord says in Isaiah 55:9, "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." Two things stand out in this verse—God's ways and God's thoughts. We cannot begin to imagine all the things God knows and contemplates. His thoughts far exceed ours. Also, God's holy and perfect ways stand in complete contrast to humanity's sinful and imperfect ways. Our sad, troubled world is full of corruption and violence because humans' ways diverge from God's.

There comes a point in every person's life when he or she must choose to submit to God. This is a normal part of the conversion process. However, there will be numerous crisis points in the Christian life when further submission is required. Submitting to God may not be comfortable at first, and it may not bring applause from the crowds. But submission is necessary for transformation.

Correction from God will continue at every stage of life. Growing older is not an exemption from correction. Neither does having a recognized public ministry provide immunity from divine discipline. God will deal with sin, no matter who commits it. At no time should anyone assume that he or she has arrived at perfection. If anything, the longer we serve the Lord, the more we understand our vulnerabilities.

Let us further consider the role of the church in the process of God's discipline. The church was designed and brought into being by God. Jesus Christ is the head of the church; He bled and died for it. The Bible describes the church as Christ's body and His bride. He loves it, is vitally connected to it, and works through it.

One role of the church is to be a family in which believers can worship the Lord together, grow, and develop gifts. Because church members are to be accountable to each other, the church has spiritual leaders who guide, teach, and correct. The apostle Paul writes, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently" (Galatians 6:1). A believer who has fallen into sin and who acknowledges

that to the church leaders should not fear a negative response. Those leaders will work with him or her to overcome the improper activities or attitudes. It is liberating to get secret sin into the open. Only then can the sin be dealt with.

A Christian who has enjoyed certain public opportunities of ministry and who falls into sin will be required by church leaders to withdraw from ministry until repentance is demonstrated and trust is restored. The believer should submit to the discipline and remember that no one in the church is punishing him or her. Christ uses the leaders of His body to help fallen members find restoration.

The Goals of Correction

Objective 7:

Identify three goals God has for those He corrects.

God's correction is for the benefit of those He corrects. In no way does He want to cause irreparable damage to our lives. Unfortunately, correction seldom, if ever, feels comfortable. Some may even blame Satan for the correction that comes from God. But followers of Jesus must not rely on their feelings during correction. The results of correction will prove right over time. Consider three goals God has in mind when He corrects His children.

Holiness

"Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness" (Hebrews 12:10). What is holiness? Some people think it is a list of things you should not do. While certainly there are worldly activities that Christians must avoid, holiness is not so much a matter of what a person does not do but how a person reflects the character of Jesus through daily living.

We know from reading the New Testament that Jesus Christ was blameless of transgression. In fact, He is the only person to live on earth who avoided contamination through

sin. He was separate from sin and set apart unto God. This is the essence of holiness as it will be reflected in our lives.

Righteousness

"No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:11). In one sense, all our righteousness or goodness comes as a result of faith in Jesus. All experiences with God begin and end through personal faith in Jesus Christ. We cannot do what is right without Him. "No one will be declared righteous...by observing the law" (Romans 3:20). At the time of conversion, God the Father imputes Christ's righteousness to us. That means God thinks of us as having the righteousness of His Son Jesus. Notice what the apostle Paul writes: "It is because of him [God] that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption" (1 Corinthians 1:30).

However, during our earthly existence we are trained through divine discipline to do what is right. As we walk with the Lord, we learn the folly of sin and the joy of obedience. We are encouraged by the Lord to pursue righteousness.

Peace

Many things in the Christian life produce peace. One of them is God's forgiveness. Only a Christian can know the wonderful experience of a clear conscience. The presence of God in our lives produces peace, too. He keeps our hearts at rest in spite of trouble. Our hope of heaven and our anticipation of Christ's return yield peace. Hebrews 12:11 also tells us that divine correction produces peace in the long run.

Conclusion

A German fable tells of a baron who stretched wires from the towers of his castle on the Rhine River in an effort to create a huge Aeolian (wind) harp. At first it seemed as if the effort was without success. Soon after, a

great storm caused the wind to vibrate the wires, which filled the air with beautiful tones. The Aeolian harp needed the storm to make its music. In some ways, the Christian who learns from God's correction will find his or her life yielding music like that Aeolian harp.

Here are final thoughts to keep in mind regarding divine discipline:

- Choose to trust Jesus Christ for correction in your life.
- Make yourself accountable to authorities in your life.
- Seek advice from godly sources of counsel.
- Be willing to admit where you are wrong.
- Ask for God's help to learn from your struggles, mistakes, and sin.
- Purpose to change with Jesus as your helper.

References

- Gingrich, F. Wilbur, and Frederick W. Danker. 1981. *An index to the revised Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich Greek Lexicon*. 2nd ed. Edited by John R. Alsop. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Wesley, John. 1951. *The Journal of John Wesley*. Grand Rapids: Moody.

SUGGESTED SCRIPTURE VERSES TO MEMORIZE

Job 5:17

Psalm 68:28

Psalm 94:12

Proverbs 3:12

Isaiah 40:31

Hebrews 12:10–11

Revelation 3:19

SELF-TEST

After completing the lesson, please answer the following questions by circling the correct response. Only one answer is correct for each question.

1. *Why does God correct people?*
 - a) *People normally seek and ask for correction.*
 - b) *God's people still fall into sin and need His help to overcome their shortcomings.*
 - c) *God wants to show His wrath against Christians.*
2. *What is the relationship between born-again Christians and the sinful nature?*
 - a) *Born-again Christians are no longer in bondage to the sinful nature.*
 - b) *The sinful nature no longer exists in a born-again Christian.*
 - c) *The sinful nature makes it impossible for a Christian to obey God.*
3. *Which three ways mentioned in the lesson does God use to correct us?*
 - a) *Failure, fear, and persecution*
 - b) *Rebuke, loss of intimacy and joy, and unexpected struggles*
 - c) *Love, joy, and peace*
4. *God's motive for bringing correction is*
 - a) *that He wants Christians to become humanly perfect.*
 - b) *His love.*
 - c) *that God wants Christians to know He does not forget their sinfulness.*
5. *Which statement below is correct?*
 - a) *People who are raised in Christian homes need less correction.*
 - b) *Not all people are corrected by God.*
 - c) *Every Christian is corrected fairly by God.*

6. Which statement below is true?
 - a) God does not mind when a Christian decides to give up.
 - b) God wants Christians to endure times of divine correction.
 - c) God knows people will sin, so He does not take it too seriously.
7. Which answer below best describes submission?
 - a) Submission to God is a choice of the will.
 - b) Submission to God is always easy.
 - c) Submission to God is discovered through much learning.
8. By accepting God's correction, a Christian can expect to gain
 - a) no more problems.
 - b) immediate happiness.
 - c) forgiveness and help.
9. When does God's ongoing correction on earth cease?
 - a) It will stop when we become perfect.
 - b) It will continue at every stage of life.
 - c) It ceases when we start going to church regularly.
10. What is one goal of divine correction to God's people?
 - a) To help us share in God's holiness
 - b) For Christians to achieve sinless perfection while they are alive on earth
 - c) To make wayward Christians suffer for their sins

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ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

1. *b* (5.1)
2. *a* (5.1)
3. *b* (5.2)
4. *b* (5.4)
5. *c* (5.6)
6. *b* (5.5)
7. *a* (5.6)
8. *c* (5.3)
9. *b* (5.6)
10. *a* (5.7)

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LESSON 6

How to Handle Failure

I remember playing outdoor games during my childhood with the other boys in our neighborhood. We had a rule that superseded all other rules; it was called “the do-over rule.” We used it whenever the outcome of a game did not go quite as well as we had hoped. Today, when I play golf, a similar thing occurs. Sometimes my golf partner would ask, “May I use a mulligan?” A mulligan gives a player a second chance to take a shot.

Most of us have yearned for a do-over or mulligan. Some of you reading this may have belittled yourselves or are even blaming others for your failures. Maybe your hurts stem from having a parent who was never home, a teacher who did not care, a spouse who was unfaithful, a drug dealer who got you hooked, a drinking buddy who did not know when to stop. The list could go on. But regardless of these past and present occurrences, God does offer a second chance. Restarting does not erase the past, but it requires that we deal with the past and move forward. Restarting is about renewing one’s life.

LESSON OUTLINE

Failure Defined
Common Reasons for Failure
A New Start
Key Principles

LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. *Explain what failure is and is not.*
2. *Identify five common reasons for failure.*
3. *Describe how to make a fresh start.*
4. *State key principles to remember when serving God.*

Failure Defined

Objective 1:

Explain what failure is and is not.

One writer made the following observation:

To laugh is to risk appearing the fool.
To weep is to risk appearing sentimental.
To love is to risk not being loved in return.
To live is to risk dying.
To hope is to risk despair.
To try at all is to risk failure.

But risk we must, because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing. The person who risks nothing does nothing, has nothing, is nothing. ("Ministry in daily life")

Failure is not determined entirely by the original mistakes we make. Failure is determined by how well or how poorly we respond to our mistakes. Let us look at a few examples. Being a teenage or unwed parent does not make one a "failure." That parent still has the

chance to do right by loving and raising the child in a godly home. Getting hooked on drugs or alcohol does not automatically classify a person as a “loser.” That person still has the opportunity to get help or treatment. A divorce also does not make one a “reject.” The divorcee still has the ability to live a full and productive life as a single person.

Knowing How to Handle Failure

Successful people know how to handle failure. Those who have made significant impact in life have known how to deal with major mistakes and disappointments. To illustrate, Albert Einstein struggled with math as a youngster, but he eventually formulated the famous equation $e=mc^2$. Isaac Newton felt the blow of an apple on his head before articulating the theory of gravity. Michael Jordan failed at making his high school basketball team before becoming a star in college and the NBA. Each of these men worked past their failures and achieved great accomplishments. They demonstrated that it is our response to failure and pain that determines our destiny.

The Struggle of Rebounding

Why is it that we have a hard time rebounding from failure? Here are three biblical reasons why we may struggle and not recover from our mistakes:

- The regularity of a sin. Our sinful nature is a strong force at work within us. We cannot beat it without supernatural help. A classic excuse is, “I just cannot seem to stop!”
- The reproach of our sin. We feel terrible after doing something we know we should not do. A typical statement is, “What I did was so bad. How can I ever start over?” At times like this we need to experience God’s forgiveness and cleansing.
- The result of our sin. Our blunders and mistakes can bring significant pain into other people’s

lives. We must trust that God can restore broken relationships and heal the hurt in our life and in the lives of those we wronged.

Do you feel God has placed you on the shelf because of something you have said or done? God still loves you and still wants you to serve and obey Him. You serve the God who gives second chances, a do-over, a mulligan. Notice what Lamentations 3:22–23 says, “Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”

The Case of Peter

If anyone ever needed a second chance, it was Peter. This inner-circle friend of Jesus denied Him three times the night Jesus was arrested. Peter had promised that he would never forsake Christ, but when the pressure was on, he acted as though he never knew Him. He was weak when he should have been strong. He was a man of broken promises. But was that the end of the story? No. Jesus still had plans for Peter and restored him. Later, after Jesus returned to heaven, Peter boldly proclaimed Jesus as the Son of God. He was willing to go to jail for his faith, and he did. The anointing of God was so powerful on his life that people brought their sick to Jerusalem so that, at the very least, Peter’s shadow might fall on them (see Acts 5:15).

God says to His people in Isaiah 43:18, “‘Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.’” This is great advice for all of us. It is time to stop dwelling on the past, as though nothing good can happen in the future. Failure does not have to be final. Embrace this perspective: we are never down; we are either up or getting up.

Common Reasons for Failure

Objective 2:

Identify five common reasons for failure.

While there are many reasons for failure, here are five of the most common ones:

Not Planning Ahead

God is a planner. He sets things in motion based on His infinite foresight and wisdom. We also need to plan ahead. Remember, Noah began building the ark long before it started to rain. The old saying—that if you fail to plan then you are planning to fail—holds true. Proverbs 27:12 reminds us of the same truth, “A sensible man watches for problems ahead and prepares to meet them” (The Living Bible). If you and I do not have a plan for our lives, somebody else will. If we are unwilling to make decisions, somebody will make decisions for us.

Over-Confidence

Remember the lesson of the whale—just when you get to the top and start to blow, you get harpooned! Proverbs 16:18 says, “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.” Paul also wrote, “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!” (1 Corinthians 10:12).

Sometimes we act as though we have “arrived” when deep down we know we are far from it. Part of our problem is the fear of looking like a fool, of being humiliated. An article in a Chicago newspaper reported that the most frequently shoplifted item in America’s drugstores is Preparation H, a cream for people suffering with hemorrhoids. Apparently, many are too embarrassed to admit they have that physical problem, so they prefer to steal the cream rather than face humiliation at the checkout line. This is pride.

Fear

The fear of failure can also cause failure. When we worry about what others will think of us if we fail, we may not even attempt to do something challenging. Proverbs 29:25 says, "Fear of man will prove to be a snare." One way I have encouraged myself to try new things is to tell myself that I am allowed to make one mistake a week—as long as it is not the same mistake over and over! I will discuss more about this toward the end of the lesson.

Giving Up Too Soon

Often, victory is nearby, but we give up too soon. The prophet Daniel tells of a time when he prayed for days and days without getting an answer to his petition. Then one day, in a vision, he saw a mighty angel who told him, "Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them" (Daniel 10:12). Although God had heard Daniel's prayer and had dispatched an angel immediately, the angel was delayed twenty-one days due to a great spiritual battle. What would have happened if Daniel had stopped praying on the tenth day, or the fifteenth day or the twentieth day?

Ignoring God's Advice

The Bible is the owner's manual for human beings. It contains operating instructions and guidelines for work, home, finances, relationships, and health. It has the best advice in the world. When we consistently and stubbornly fail to follow God's directions, we will suffer negative consequences. Proverbs 14:12 says, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death." We may try hard to be a success, but we sabotage our own efforts by not doing things God's way. Remember what James wrote, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all" (James 1:5).

A New Start

Objective 3:

Describe how to make a fresh start.

Read the following Autobiography in Five Short Chapters, by Portia Nelson.

I

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk
I fall in.
I am lost ... I am helpless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes me forever to find a way out.

II

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place
but, it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

III

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I still fall in ... it's a habit.
my eyes are open
I know where I am.
It is my fault.
I get out immediately.

IV

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

V

I walk down another street.

Successful people know how to turn every failure into a learning experience. Regardless of the failures you may have had in your life, here are three necessary steps to take to begin again.

Step 1—Stop making excuses

As we have already learned, much failure—though not all—is due to poor choices. Almost every problem can be traced to one of four things:

1. Something we did in the past.
2. Something we are doing now.
3. Something we allow to be done.
4. Something we are neglecting to do.

We begin the process of recovering from failure when we are honest and accept responsibility for the problems we have created. We must stop making excuses for our failure. We must stop blaming other people. We must stop seeing ourselves as the victim of our circumstances. Proverbs 28:13 says, “He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.”

Step 2—Evaluate Your Experiences

The apostle Paul asked in Galatians 3:4, “Have you suffered so much for nothing?” In this case, Paul was referring to the cost the Galatians had paid to convert from paganism to faith in Christ. Sadly, they were on the verge of being led astray by false doctrine and legalism. Paul hoped that they would be mindful of their past, the price they had paid in becoming Christians, and the need to allow nothing to derail them.

Our past mistakes probably produced suffering of some kind—emotional, physical, financial, relational, etc. It is not enough to remember all the things that have happened in our lives; we must also seek to learn from our experiences. We must avoid falling into the same traps. John Maxwell observes, “Experience is not the best teacher; it is

evaluated experience that teaches us." Therefore, failure actually can be our friend if we learn from it.

So, how do we go about learning from our mistakes? We must ask ourselves three simple questions. The first question is "What have I learned?" It might be helpful to jot down in a journal lessons you have learned from recent failures. List things to do and not to do if you are ever in situations where you failed again. Note the consequences of certain choices you have made. Keep that record handy and refer to it often.

The second question is "What are my assets?" Think about what you have going for you. Do you still have good health? Do you enjoy freedom? Are you mentally sound? Do you have good friends who care about you and will not lead you into dangerous or foolish situations? Do you have the Lord? Do you have a loving church family? Do you have skills, talents, and abilities that make you stand out? The list is probably longer than you think. Even if you think you have completely ruined your life, you really have not. You can start over and build on the assets you have.

The third question is "Who can help me?" In making a fresh start, you need people on your side—good friends, accountability partners, spiritual leaders, a support group. They will offer you encouragement, support, prayer, and guidance. For instance, consider talking to one of the pastors at your church. Do not be afraid to approach pastors; they are there for you! Whomever you go to, be honest about your need to start again. Talking to someone trustworthy helps to diffuse any shame you might be feeling. However, be careful not to discuss your problems or past failures with ungodly people or anyone incapable of helping you.

Step 3—Act in faith

Changing in any area of your life will require faith—the affirmative confidence in God's promises that compels us to take positive action. Jesus said, "According to your faith will it be done to you"

(Matthew 9:29). Jesus' statement is simple but powerful; it means we get out of life what we trust God for.

Read Acts 3:1–5.

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. Now a man crippled from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, “Look at us!” So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them.

This crippled man had asked for something and anticipated getting help, but he got more than he expected—God completely healed him. Paul, in Ephesians 3:20, describes God as One “who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.”

So how does one start acting in faith? First, do not be a negative person. If you are depressed, discouraged, and distressed, it may be because you are mulling over depressing, discouraging, and distressing thoughts. The way you think often determines the way you feel. The way you feel often determines the way you act. So, if you want to change your actions, change the way you think.

Second, remember that Christ gives us the victory. Nothing can separate us from His love. Filled with the Holy Spirit, we can resist the devil successfully. We can overcome any problem as God equips us with wisdom, love, joy, and spiritual power.

Third, learn God's promises and claim them confidently! Of course, you will have to read the Bible to learn them. I suggest that you keep a record of Scripture verses that contain God's promises for peace, healing, financial well-being, marriage, guidance, and so on.

Fourth, make a conscious decision every day to depend on God. By now, you have probably discovered that some of your mistakes and failures were a direct result

of depending on your abilities instead of on God's. Some people never seem to learn that they need the Lord. They stumble, fall, and say, "I guess I just have to try harder!" This seldom works. Insanity has been described as doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. The truth is that if we keep doing the same things, then we will keep getting the same result. So depend on God to help move you in the right direction.

Key Principles

Objective 4:

State key principles to remember when serving God.

If you are a committed Christian and maturing spiritually, it is likely you will not repeat many of your mistakes. However, no man or woman is immune from the possibility of future failure.

Maybe you have been told that Christians should experience only success, and that if you do not, there must be either sin or a lack of faith in your life. The truth is that while God is still in control of all things, life is full of surprises. Not everything you try—even for God—will always produce major accomplishments. Occasionally you may find yourself very disappointed with the outcomes of your efforts. Hence, there are a few important principles to embrace.

Do Not Be Afraid of Failure

The first principle is this—do not be afraid of failure. Sadly, some people do not attempt to do great things for God or even try new things because they fear failure. Maybe they have been disappointed too many times before or have been ridiculed by others. But often things seem impossible because we have never tried to do them.

The root cause for fear of failure is faulty perception; we feel that failure threatens our security and significance. But God has provided a way for us to overcome fear of failure. The apostle Paul writes, "For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering

for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:21 NLT). When we trust in Jesus Christ, we trade our failure for His perfection. God promises to give us strength to face temptation. However, if we sin, we must not hide it or delay dealing with it. Instead, we must go quickly to the Lord and seek forgiveness (1 John 1:9).

For those who fear failure in their endeavors to succeed in life or serve God, remember that the central purpose in the Christian life is not chalking up accomplishments or achieving certain goals; it is faithfully maintaining a dynamic relationship with the Lord and obeying Him. While it is not wrong to be successful, our worth in God's eyes is not dependent on how much we do. We do not have to prove anything to God or others.

Failure Is an Event, Never a Person

Your failing does not make you a failure. All individuals are going to make some mistakes if they are moving forward. The alternative is to stand still and refuse to take any risks. In one sense, failure is the price paid for progress. Studies have shown that the average entrepreneur fails three or four times before he or she is able to establish a successful business. While growing up on a farm, I remember one farmer saying, "Failure is good; it fertilizes everything."

Trust God's Promise to Prevail

You are not alone. God wants you to achieve His purposes for your life. The apostle Paul boasts of this promise: "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). When you have failed, you will find that God is willing to start again wherever you are. No matter what your failures, Jesus still longs to be your friend and supporter. The Savior who died for you still loves you.

Reference

"Ministry in daily life." 2004. InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. <http://www.ivmdl.org/quotables> (accessed July 11, 2007).

SELF-TEST

After studying the lesson, please read each study question carefully and circle the correct response. There is only one correct response for each question.

1. *According to the lesson, successful people know how to handle*
 - a) *money.*
 - b) *failure.*
 - c) *a job.*
2. *We give up in our Christian walk because*
 - a) *life is hard for everybody.*
 - b) *we do not get any breaks in life.*
 - c) *of the regularity of a sin, reproach of our sin, and result of our sin.*
3. *If you fail to plan, then you are planning to*
 - a) *trust God.*
 - b) *let the Spirit guide you.*
 - c) *fail.*
4. *According to John Maxwell, the best teacher is*
 - a) *evaluated experience.*
 - b) *failure.*
 - c) *experience alone.*
5. *We get a fresh start by making excuses.*
 - a) *True*
 - b) *False*
6. *According to the lesson, why is important to evaluate our experiences in dealing with failure?*
 - a) *Self-evaluation helps us not to make the same mistakes.*
 - b) *It gives us something to do.*
 - c) *We will feel worse about our mistakes.*
7. *Why should we seek people to help us after we have failed?*
 - a) *We are incapable of thinking correctly when disconnected from others.*
 - b) *They can offer us encouragement, support, prayer, and guidance.*
 - c) *Seeking outside help is not necessary.*

8. *If you are depressed, discouraged, and distressed, it may be because you are*
 - a) *not saved.*
 - b) *not praying enough.*
 - c) *thinking such thoughts.*
9. *The root cause for fear of failure is a faulty*
 - a) *perception.*
 - b) *home life.*
 - c) *Bible study program.*
10. *A true statement about failure is that*
 - a) *a good Christian never fails.*
 - b) *failing does not necessarily make a person a failure.*
 - c) *God gets frustrated when we fail.*

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ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

Note: You can check your answers by using the answer guide. The numbers in the parentheses indicate which objective in the lesson to check.

1. *b* (6.1)
2. *c* (6.1)
3. *c* (6.2)
4. *a* (6.2)
5. *b* (6.3)
6. *a* (6.3)
7. *b* (6.3)
8. *c* (6.3)
9. *a* (6.4)
10. *b* (6.4)

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LESSON 7

The Gifts of the Spirit

Operating in spiritual gifts is one of the great joys of a Spirit-filled and Spirit-led life. On the Day of Pentecost, the early disciples discovered what it meant to be filled with the Spirit (Acts 2:1–4). As they obeyed the Lord's specific direction, understood the connection of Scripture to the Spirit, and realized that God's glory had been revealed to them, they went about sharing the good news and leaving evidence of God's presence. That evidence was most often the result of spiritual gifts in operation. Spirit baptism opened up the receivers to the full range of spiritual gifts. After the Day of Pentecost, there was a higher incidence of gifts in use than in days gone by.

It is the same today—to experience the full range of spiritual gifts, we need to be baptized in the Holy Spirit. We are all called to share the good news; God still puts the evidence of the good news in people's lives.

Fortunately, we have the benefit of learning from the experiences of the early church. Whereas the book of Acts shows us several of the gifts of the Spirit in operation, 1 Corinthians gives us the most comprehensive teaching on them. Most of what we learn will come from these two books of the New Testament. Therefore, I strongly recommend becoming familiar with them. Be assured that God wants to manifest His presence and power through you. Knowing this, the apostle Paul exhorts us to “follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy” (1 Corinthians 14:1). The simplest way to go about this is to pray for that desire to be fulfilled by your growing in the knowledge of the Word of God and becoming sensitive to the Spirit's leading.

LESSON OUTLINE

What Are Spiritual Gifts?
The Need for Order
Dysfunction and Spiritual Gifts

LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. *Explain what spiritual gifts are.*
2. *State guidelines for using spiritual gifts.*
3. *Identify dysfunction in using spiritual gifts.*

What Are Spiritual Gifts?

Objective 1:

Explain what spiritual gifts are.

The ability to explain spiritual gifts, formally or informally, begins by learning what they are and experiencing them firsthand. These gifts were never meant for mere study, but for active participation. The more familiar a person becomes with spiritual gifts, by way of knowledge and involvement, the more capable he or she is of helping others encounter the Holy Spirit.

First Corinthians 12:7–11 lists nine different gifts or manifestations of the Holy Spirit. These are word of wisdom, word of knowledge, faith, gifts of healings, working of miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, tongues, and the interpretation of tongues. Each gift comes by way of revelation from the Spirit and aims to edify the body of Christ and/or affect unbelievers in some good way (1 Corinthians 12:7). The following definitions will introduce you to spiritual gifts, broken down into three categories: gifts of explanation, gifts of demonstration, and gifts of intimation.

Gifts of Explanation

These gifts explain some purpose of the Holy Spirit's presence in an individual or group of people. These verbal manifestations of the Spirit follow a simple process with which you ought to become acquainted. First, the Spirit determines the one through whom a gift will be shared (1 Corinthians 12:11). Second, He gives the gift to that person (1 Corinthians 12:7). In this case, the gift is an explanation of some purpose of God's presence among those gathered. Third, the person shares what he or she believes to be from the Spirit (Acts 21:4, 10–11). Fourth, those gathered evaluate what the person shares (1 Corinthians 14:29). This is an important part of the process since not everyone who claims to speak for God actually does so and not every message spoken in God's name is from God (see Matthew 7:22–23). If a word is acknowledged to be from the Spirit, it should be received. If it is acknowledged that the word is not from the Spirit, it should be dismissed (1 Thessalonians 5:19–22). I will explain this later.

Word of Knowledge

A word of knowledge is not necessarily a single "word." More often it means a "message" from the Holy Spirit. But it is not a message that comes by way of academic learning. It is received spontaneously by revelation from God. Thus, a word of knowledge is imparted knowledge from the Holy Spirit that testifies to God's presence in a given situation.

What God wishes to do in a person's heart through this knowledge is to leave an undeniable mark of His existence or presence. Acts 27 is a good example of word of knowledge. Paul warned the centurion about what was coming, but the centurion chose not to listen to him (vv. 9–11). After the storm (vv. 13–20), Paul reassured all on board that God was still present and that He could be trusted (vv. 21–44). After everyone was safely on land, it became apparent that what Paul had said was true. Hebrews 11:6 says, "Anyone who comes to him [God] must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek

him.” The word of knowledge is one way God seeks to help people believe that He exists and is present.

Word of Wisdom

Like the word of knowledge, the word of wisdom is most often a “message” and not just a single word. The difference between the two lies in the purpose. A word of wisdom is inspired guidance from the Holy Spirit to help solve a difficult problem. One example is found in Acts 4:1–27, where Peter and John give account of their role in healing the crippled beggar. Verses 8–12 and 18–22 highlight the wisdom by which Peter and John spoke. The rulers and elders were astonished (v. 13) and consequently let the disciples go.

Another instance of word of wisdom is in Acts 6, where the disciples faced an internal church problem. How should they resolve a conflict between two groups of people (v. 1)? The apostles met together (v. 2) and sought the Lord. God rewarded their seeking. Verses 3–7 record the plan, tell how it was received, and make it clear that the solution was from God.

Prophecy

There is so much said about prophecy in the Bible that it is difficult to do it justice in this lesson. First Corinthians 14 gives the most comprehensive teaching on prophecy in the New Testament. As a spiritual gift, prophecy is the Holy Spirit’s timely disclosure of the declarative or predictive Word of God or mind of God to confirm the will of God. Acts 2:12–41 gives a vivid description of the gift of prophecy. This is the account of what happened immediately after the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Day of Pentecost. Peter became God’s prophetic mouthpiece to the confused crowd (v. 14). The prophecy (vv. 17–36) declared to the people what had just transpired by the Holy Spirit. In no way should we think this message of Peter’s was rehearsed. It was spontaneous. Peter had no way of knowing what would take place after, but God did. The prophetic word left thousands of people “cut to the heart” and repentant (vv. 37–41).

In Acts 9:1–18, the gift of prophecy is at work again. In this instance, it was not spoken to thousands of people, but to one person. Saul was on his way to persecute Christians when Christ spoke to him (vv. 3–9). As Saul was blinded and left to wonder about what would happen next, God spoke to a disciple named Ananias to go minister to Saul. The content of God's message to Ananias for Saul was a personal prophetic word, and Ananias delivered it courageously (vv. 10–18).

Message in Tongues

In 1 Corinthians 12–14, Paul devotes a great deal of thought to tongues and interpretation. Speaking in tongues is defined as the enablement from the Holy Spirit to speak a message from God in an unknown language. It seems almost unimaginable that we could speak a different language without having learned it first and that the language would be a word from God. Yet, this is a means by which the Spirit manifests himself.

In 2000, I was ministering in Madagascar at a pastor's seminar. During the seminar, a Malagasy woman gave a message in tongues. The tongue she spoke in was English, my native language. Normally, she did not speak English! Yet, I was able to understand what she herself did not. After the interpretation was given in Malagasy, I asked a missionary if the interpretation conveyed the message spoken in tongues. He said it did. It was awesome to observe that work of the Spirit.

The Interpretation of Tongues

This gift functions alongside the message in tongues. Interpretation is the Holy Spirit's given understanding of a message in tongues to edify the church. Paul is emphatic that when there are messages in tongues in gatherings of believers; there must also be the interpretation of those messages in tongues for the edification of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 14:5, 9–18, 26–28).

Gifts of Demonstration

These gifts demonstrate or show characteristics of the Spirit's power. They are visible manifestations of His ability to transform chronic or terminal conditions as well as circumstances beyond human control.

Gifts of Healings

This manifestation of the Spirit provides healing from bodily sickness, deformity and malfunctions apart from medical, natural, or other forms of healing. Acts 3 provides the first account of the power of the Spirit in the early church transforming a physical condition. As it is with the gifts of explanation, the Spirit determines the one through whom the gift will be shared (verse 4). Secondly, He gives the gift to that person (v. 6). Then, the person shares what he or she believes to be from the Spirit (vv. 6–7). Acts 9:12–18 also shows this gift in operation following the same manner. The ability from the Holy Spirit to heal may come by God specifically telling a person what to do, as in the case of Ananias and Saul. It may come as God slows us down to see what we were previously indifferent to, as in the case of Peter and the cripple. Or it may come in the form of prayer (see Acts 28:7–10). Whatever method the Spirit uses to release healing, He does so to cultivate our awareness of His sufficiency in us to minister. Remember, spiritual gifts flow out of the Spirit-filled believer (John 7:37–39).

The Working of Miracles

The working of miracles is the most demonstrative of spiritual gifts. Working of miracles is the ability from the Holy Spirit to work miraculous deeds for the benefit of others. They are unique, out-of-the-ordinary, often unexplainable, and sometimes misunderstood. Acts 5:15–16 refers to people laying out the sick so that as Peter passed by, at least his shadow would fall on them for healing. Acts 9:36–42 records the story of Peter raising Dorcas from the dead. Acts 19:11–12 tells that God did incredible miracles of healing through Paul.

It is not the divine intervention of God through a willing servant that is unique. The Old Testament and the Gospels are full of people's lives being changed by God's miraculous power. (See 2 Kings 2:4–6; Mark 1–8.) The peculiar feature is how God brings the miracle about. While the working of miracles does follow the determining, giving, and sharing process described earlier, the means by which the miracle is effected does not seem to have a recurring pattern. Thus, the worker of miracles needs an ardent faith and sensitive ear to hear the leading of the Spirit.

Gifts of Intimation

The gifts of intimation disclose the Spirit's direction on an underlying level. These gifts are unseen but very real spiritual manifestations of the Spirit. First Corinthians 2:6–16 describes the connection between God and the man who has the mind of Christ. This connection is not primarily intellectual; it is spiritual. Keep in mind that "spiritual" does not mean irrational. It means something more than what humans are capable of receiving on the natural level. As born-again believers indwelt by the Spirit, we are capable of receiving spiritual communication and impartations from God.

Faith

The faith mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:9 is an infusion of confidence from the Holy Spirit to help people face, persevere in, or overcome trying circumstances. This infusion would qualify as an internal witness of the Spirit's work, even though an individual may not recognize it as such.

To illustrate, we read in Acts chapter three that the apostle Peter healed a crippled beggar. In this case, Peter did not have to pray, fast, or wait on God. Full of God-infused faith, he simply commanded the cripple to rise and walk. God healed the man, and moments later the man went walking, jumping, and praising God into the temple courts. Here we see the gift of faith and the gift of healing operating together.

Discerning of Spirits

Discerning of spirits is revelation from the Spirit to impartially and accurately judge a person's words or actions so as to protect the church from demonic or human deception. For instance, this gift helps the church determine when a so-called "prophetic word" or a purported interpretation to a message in tongues really is not caused by the operation of the Holy Spirit.

The Need for Order

Objective 2:

State guidelines for using spiritual gifts.

Doing Things Decently

It is essential to discuss the need for a procedure that encourages the orderly flow of spiritual gifts in services. Paul closed out his teaching on the gifts by saying that "everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way" (1 Corinthians 14:40). Therefore, when a person feels the Spirit's leading to share a gift in a service, if he or she does not know how to go about it, he or she may do something entirely inappropriate. Each church has the responsibility to establish some format so that people know how to proceed. The pastor who wants to build mature Christians not only encourages people to desire spiritual gifts, but also disciplines those who operate in them, so that there will be a free and orderly expression of gifts. Following are five simple principles that will help you present spiritual gifts in a fitting way.

1. In a public church service, recognize that the "shepherd" bears the responsibility for the "flock" (Acts 20:28–30). Some people will simply speak forth a gift whenever they feel so moved. Though this is an accepted practice in some churches, it is not recommended, for it creates an environment where anyone could say anything at anytime. A very wise course of action would be to wait for appropriate junctures in the service or meeting

when an utterance can be given. You may want to inform the pastor of what you believe to be God's leading prior to presenting the gift publicly. In smaller group meetings, it is also wise to wait for an appropriate moment or juncture before sharing or attempting to operate in a gift.

2. Whenever possible, wait to be acknowledged by the leader. This is courteous and communicates respect for everyone present (Acts 13:14–15).
3. As you sense the Spirit preparing to move through you, do not assume that the impulse, however strong it may be, to act or speak means you have lost control of your body or tongue (see 1 Corinthians 14:32). You do not become a marionette or puppet that simply reacts to the inputs of a divine puppeteer. You are still in control of your body and mind. There is no need to behave in an unnatural and bizarre manner.
4. Be willing to accept that just as you feel led to share a gift, there are others who are being led to carefully evaluate what you say (1 Corinthians 14:29). Discernment is also a spiritual gift (1 Corinthians 12:10) that God gives for safeguarding the body of Christ.
5. Do not try to convince those who are present that God is speaking through you. Let them decide (1 Thessalonians 5:19–21). Some people, eager to convince themselves or others that God is speaking through them, will use this common form of address, "Thus says the Lord." At times, this is appropriate. But it also can be a manipulative tool. Take care as to how you articulate your gift. Those who consistently operate in spiritual gifts know that speaking in God's name is an awesome responsibility. We do not want to take His name in vain. Therefore, I recommend that you address others in one of the following ways:
 - "I believe the Lord wants me to share . . ."

- “Please carefully consider what I am about to say . . .”
- “I feel the Lord is saying . . .”

Following this basic procedure will help develop godly believers in their giftedness. It also provides a means of measuring levels of dysfunction.

Dysfunction and Spiritual Gifts

Objective 3:

Identify dysfunction in using spiritual gifts.

Sources of Dysfunction

If the aim of spiritual gifts is to minister to people for their well-being, then dysfunction would be something that works against godly spiritual edification and church unity. The New Testament reveals three threats to the edification and unity of the body that come from within. We will identify each threat and look at how to deal with it.

First is the person who is gifted but ignorant of the responsibilities that accompany spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:1). This person, like the Corinthians, loves God and is sincere in his or her faith, but is not maturing in Christ (1 Corinthians 3:1–3). He or she makes regrettable mistakes that hurt others and is short on love in the presentation of gifts (1 Corinthians 13:4–5). The majority of 1 Corinthians highlights several problems that lead back to the importance of staying connected to Christ. In doing so, believers grow.

Second, we have a problem that is more serious in its influence, especially over those who struggle with submitting to God's ordained authority (Hebrews 13:7, 17). Revelation 2:20–23 talks about a woman, Jezebel, who refers to herself as a prophetess. She has a self-appointed title, is deaf to God's voice, and influences believers. She is also not accountable to any church for what she does. This is tragic. Today, those who exhibit these same characteristics claim to be accountable only

to God. Though they appear to be spiritual, they are defiant to any who question their position or function.

Third is the most destructive means to church unity and edification. In Matthew 7:15–23, Jesus says that false prophets are wolves in sheep's clothing. The false prophet is an artist at deceit; he or she seeks to mislead people for personal and financial gain (Acts 20:30; 2 Peter 2:1–3). False prophets are exceptionally capable of taking advantage of believers who are naïve, weak, or who have not submitted themselves to ongoing discipleship (Hebrews 5:11–14).

So how do we confront the dysfunctions that come from within the body? The Word of God gives simple and authoritative direction for facing each threat. Paul indicated that the Corinthians needed to be corrected in the early stages of their immaturity. First Corinthians 13:11 captures the essence of the problem: "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child." Today, immature persons still need to be taught to grow up in Christ, or they will run the risk of becoming self-serving in their ministry to others. If people receive correction at this level, they can change (2 Timothy 3:16). If not, they run the risk of eventually becoming a Jezebel or false prophet.

The original Jezebel was the wicked wife of King Ahab (1 Kings 21:5); she represents all who reject submission to God and godly leadership. Jezebels (men or women) put up a front of submission toward God, but spiritually, they seethe with pride. Both Jesus and Paul warn Christians not to tolerate the presence of a Jezebel. Jezebels need to be disciplined (Matthew 18:15–17) by the pastor and leaders. If a Jezebel rejects godly discipline, he or she will continue in self-deception, perpetuating lies under a veneer of truth. Thus, a Jezebel must not be allowed to minister.

The false prophet is not even to be tolerated. He or she is to be expelled (1 Corinthians 5:12–13; Galatians 1:6–9). False prophets look like "sheep" and know the habits and language of sheep. This is their means of

deception. Confronting a false prophet can be intimidating since they put up a bold front (Proverbs 21:29). But godly discernment with wise counsel will prevail. Once a false prophet is exposed, it is likely he or she will leave.

Conclusion

Spiritual gifts are exactly that, gifts from the Holy Spirit that we bring to others and others bring to us. Knowing that God reveals His heart in the giving of gifts explains why we are told to “eagerly desire” them. Unfortunately, some will reject God’s gifts, and some will even deny they exist. But do not let this unsettle you. There is no limit to the number of gifts God would give through you to minister to others. And He would develop in you the particular characteristics of the gifts most often manifested through you. God wants you to excel. So becoming acquainted with the procedure for the presentation of gifts is not just a means of encouraging edification and unity, it also serves a secondary purpose. As churches communicate their procedure, in verbal and written form, it discourages Jezebels and false prophets from asserting themselves. May God richly bless your desire for spiritual gifts and your learning how to operate in them.

SUGGESTED SCRIPTURES TO MEMORIZE

John 15:16

Acts 9:17–18

1 Corinthians 1:7–8

1 Corinthians 12:1, 7, 11

1 Corinthians 13:11

1 Corinthians 14: 40

2 Timothy 1:7

SELF-TEST

After studying the lesson, please read each question carefully and circle the correct response. There is only one correct answer for each question.

1. Which statement is true?
 - a) Acts shows us the spiritual gifts, and 1 Corinthians teaches us about them.
 - b) Acts teaches us about the gifts, and 1 Corinthians shows us them.
 - c) Acts and 1 Corinthians only deal with certain gifts.
2. The three categories of spiritual gifts are
 - a) gifts of illumination, demonstration, and transformation.
 - b) gifts of explanation, presentation, and illumination.
 - c) gifts of explanation, demonstration, and intimation.
3. Which words describe the process of the verbal gifts?
 - a) Give, bless, and receive, judge
 - b) Determine, give, share, evaluate
 - c) Manifest, work, listen, weigh
4. The gifts of demonstration
 - a) teach people how to act.
 - b) are visible expressions of God's ability to change terminal conditions.
 - c) showcase the natural talent of Christians.
5. Enablement from the Holy Spirit to speak a message from God in an unknown language is the definition of
 - a) interpretation.
 - b) wisdom.
 - c) tongues.
6. It is important to be careful in articulating a gift so you
 - a) can convince others that God is speaking through you.
 - b) will show off your talents.
 - c) do not take God's name in vain.

7. *It is necessary to have a procedure for the operation of spiritual gifts so that*
 - a) *we can keep track of how many gifts are manifested.*
 - b) *the pastor can feel important.*
 - c) *people will know how to proceed.*
8. *The types of dysfunction that work against edification and unity arise from*
 - a) *poor Bible study habits.*
 - b) *within the church.*
 - c) *cults.*
9. *The secondary purpose of having a procedure for spiritual gifts is to*
 - a) *discourage Jezebels and false prophets from asserting themselves.*
 - b) *determine who rejects or denies spiritual gifts.*
 - c) *decide where a gift should fit in the service.*
10. *The message of word of knowledge*
 - a) *is always just a single word.*
 - b) *is only given to intelligent people.*
 - c) *testifies to God's presence in a given situation.*

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ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

Note: You can check your answers by using the answer guide. The numbers in the parentheses indicate which objective in the lesson to check.

1. a (7.1)
2. c (7.1)
3. b (7.1)
4. b (7.1)
5. c (7.1)
6. c (7.2)
7. c (7.2)
8. b (7.3)
9. a (7.3)
10. c (7.1)

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LESSON 8

Your Money

The Scripture is filled with many references centered on possessions and their place in the life of God's people. It is clear that, from the beginning, God's desire was to place earth and its resources under the care and management of humankind. Notice God's instruction to the first humans: "God blessed them [Adam and Eve] and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, and over every living creature that moves on the ground'" (Genesis 1:28).

Sadly, people have abused and continue to abuse this significant assignment and privilege, and the results are often devastating. In the area of material things, people take on unnecessary debt to acquire more. Wealth is squandered foolishly. Little is saved because few have established priorities in finances. As a result, people can become selfish; worry and fear weigh heavily on hearts; family relationships break down; and even God's kingdom suffers. When believers fail to act responsibly with their finances, an opportunity is created for unbelievers to equate Christianity with hypocrisy.

When people give their lives to Jesus Christ, their way of living must change. Some changes will be instantaneous while others will be gradual. However, our behavior and our thinking should conform to what God declares in His Word: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2).

The way new Christians think about and deal with their wealth and possessions is based on long-established patterns of behavior. These patterns may or may not be appropriate. Before we were saved, our lives probably centered on our abilities, instincts, and clever schemes to succeed. We may have handled material

things poorly and demonstrated greed, selfishness, and the desire for gratification.

Human nature resists change and does not easily submit to the will of God. However, as followers of Christ, we can count on God's help. As we submit to Christ as the Lord, we no longer have to live selfishly. We are now free to do what pleases God. The Bible is filled with references that show us how God wants us to manage our money and possessions.

LESSON OUTLINE

Divine Principles in Managing Money

Vital Areas of Stewardship

Faith, Sacrifice, and Waiting

Worship and Stewardship

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- 1. Identify divine principles upon which the Christian view of money and possessions is based.*
- 2. Discuss two key areas of stewardship.*
- 3. Describe how faith, sacrifice, and waiting are part of God's plan.*
- 4. Explain why continuous, sincere worship of God is important for good financial stewardship.*

Divine Principles in Managing Money

Objective 1:

Identify divine principles upon which the Christian view of money and possessions is based.

God's Generosity

From the beginning, God revealed himself as a giver of blessings. Of all the planets, God chose ours to be transformed by His power and turned into a life-sustaining habitat. God's glory is seen so vibrantly in creation that the apostle Paul writes, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen" (Romans 1:20). Jesus also taught that His Father in heaven "causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). Every person owes his or her existence to God, the great Giver.

The Principle of Being a Blessing

God wants you to enjoy His divine favor and bless you in all areas of your life. However, as believers we are not only the recipients of God's blessings, we are also called to be a blessing to others. Jesus instructed His disciples, "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8). A key indicator of spiritual maturity in a believer is the joyous desire to give. Because blessing others by giving is so different from the world's way of thinking, every Christian must be empowered by the Holy Spirit to give as God does. Have you prayed today for a fresh filling of the Spirit's power?

The Principle of Divine Ownership

To use correctly the resources placed at our disposal, we need to understand the biblical principle of divine ownership. This principle teaches that God is the true owner of everything we have. Notice what the following verses have to say about His ownership:

- “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it” (Psalm 24:1).
- “The heavens are yours, and yours also the earth; you founded the world and all that is in it” (Psalm 89:11).
- “‘The silver is mine and the gold is mine,’ declares the Lord Almighty” (Haggai 2:8).

In former times, a steward was somebody entrusted with the responsibility of managing the possessions of another. As Christians, we are stewards of God’s possessions; He entrusts us with time, wealth, income, talents, abilities, and even people. We do not really own anything. When this life is over, we will leave everything behind. Therefore, it is vital that we recognize our limitations and acknowledge God’s ownership over all things on earth and beyond.

The Principle of the Goodness of God

In Genesis, the word *good* is used at least seven times to describe how wonderful God’s creation was (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). The principle of the goodness of God recognizes that God is good, generous, and willing to give good things to His children.

It is hard for some people to accept this biblical principle because they have endured much suffering and pain. Their anguish may have stemmed from an illness, the death of someone close, financial setbacks, disappointment, family problems, injustice, poor decisions, or any number of things. However, the realities of living in a fallen world do not diminish God’s love or goodness. Notice how the psalmist describes the goodness of the Lord:

- “How great is your goodness, which you have stored up for those who fear you, which you bestow in the sight of men on those who take refuge in you” (Psalm 31:19).
- “They will celebrate your abundant goodness and joyfully sing of your righteousness” (Psalm 145:7).

We need to have faith that God has many amazing things prepared for those who love Him. The secret of experiencing this goodness is found in experiencing God; therefore, knowing God should be the highest pursuit of our lives. Jesus put it this way, "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33). This verse teaches that the material needs of life are important, and God has promised to supply them as we seek His kingdom.

Vital Areas of Stewardship

Objective 2:

Discuss two key areas of stewardship.

Giving of Your Time

One important aspect of creation, often ignored by many, is the day of rest or the Sabbath. The Scripture shows that God worked for six days and then rested on the seventh. God instituted this pattern for humanity and, when giving the law to Moses, God made keeping the Sabbath one of the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 20:8–11). Furthermore, when Jesus came to dwell on earth, He revealed himself as the "Lord of the Sabbath" (Matthew 12:8). He used the Sabbath to perform many miracles, but this angered Jewish leaders because they did not recognize who He was.

The Jewish Sabbath was celebrated on the seventh day of the week. People were to work six days and rest on the seventh. For Christians, the first day of the week, Sunday, is our Sabbath, a special time we dedicate to honoring God. This change from the seventh to the first day of the week occurred soon after the formation of the church. The belief that Jesus Christ arose from the dead on the first day of the week urged early Christians to recognize that day as significant.

Giving God a day out of our week is very important. It allows us to spend time in communion with God and other believers (see Acts 20:7). It permits us to study

the Bible in depth and gives us an opportunity to give back to God the firstfruits of our labor. 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.” You may not be a farmer, but if you have a job and earn income, a portion of that can be dedicated to God as your firstfruits. In essence, it is giving back to the Lord a share of your time and labor.

Giving the Lord a Tithe

The apostle Paul offers important instructions about giving. He writes, “Now about the collection for God’s people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made” (1 Corinthians 16:1–2).

We learn from this passage that the early Christians gave on a regular basis in proportion to their income. In this way, everybody could participate—the poor, the wealthy, and everyone in between. Nobody had to be embarrassed if his or her level of giving was lower than that of others as long as all were giving proportionately. It was simple; the more you earned, the more you contributed.

When we come together on the first day of the week to worship, we should be prepared to give, too. Giving is a regular part of the worship experience. Just as Paul instructed the Corinthians, our giving should also be in proportion to our income or prosperity. So, the more God has blessed you with, the more you should be willing to give to God.

If you are familiar with the Bible, you know that a divinely-ordained system of proportionate giving has existed for a long time. This system of giving is called tithing, and it refers to the giving of one-tenth of our income. If you have never heard of this before, this

section of the lesson will introduce you to the biblical principle of tithing.

Where do we find support for tithing in the Bible? The book of Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, records God's instruction on tithing: "'Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. 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'" (Malachi 3:10).

Here God tells us that the tithe belongs to Him, and His people should not withhold it or part of it for themselves. To withhold God's tithe is to rob God of what is rightfully His. Note that God promises to bless His people so abundantly because they have tithed that they will not have lack. Can you believe God will bless and multiply the 90 percent of your income left after you tithe? Millions of tithing believers around the world have experienced firsthand the miraculous provisions of God.

So, how does tithing work? It is actually quite simple. When we receive our income, the first thing we do with it is to separate one tenth and lay it aside. We do not spend it on groceries, bills, movies, or any other such thing. The tithe is dedicated to God. When we gather for service and fellowship with other believers at our local church, we present the tithe in the offering basket as a spiritual act of worship. We joyfully give it as unto the Lord. The church, then, receives the tithes and uses them wisely for furthering the cause of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Tithing is God's way of financing the work of the local church and its many ministries. It is a simple fact that if all believers tithed, local churches and other support ministries would never suffer for lack of funding. Our tithing shows that we acknowledge God as the owner of all our possessions. This obedience helps to break the bondage of selfishness and greed. It also shows that we recognize it takes money to support pastors and missionaries, buy buildings, purchase Bibles, and run programs to assist the saints. At first, tithing may seem

impossible, but once you see how faithful God is to keep His Word, you will actually consider it a privilege and joy to give. Many believers give much more than a tithe. Remember that none of us can out-give God.

Faith, Sacrifice, and Waiting

Objective 3:

Describe how faith, sacrifice, and waiting are part of God's plan.

The Principle of Faith

As we walk with God, He introduces us to a new realm—His kingdom. Before experiencing salvation, we were wrapped up in this world and its system of beliefs. After salvation, we start to realize that another way of living exists, requiring us to live not based on our abilities and achievements, but on faith.

Faith begins with the conviction that there are two worlds, one that is seen and one that is not seen. Hebrews 11:1 explains it this way: "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." The physical world we live in is experienced through the five senses. The spiritual world is also very real, but it is experienced through faith.

If we want to know the blessings of God in every area of our lives, the spiritual unseen world cannot be ignored. It must have the highest priority. Therefore, we must learn to use our faith. Paul declares, "We live by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). Faith is what enables us to receive God's promised blessings. Hebrews 11:2 says of faith, "This is what the ancients were commended for." There is no greater privilege than having the approval or favor of God on our lives.

Faith will develop in our lives as we mature as believers. However, the key prerequisite is to humble ourselves and learn God's Word. Paul writes in Romans 10:17, "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." If at any time we have a need,

we should look to God by faith, believe His Word, and trust that He will provide for that need.

The Principle of Sacrifice

A life of faith leads to the important subject of sacrifice. Hebrews 11 illustrates how sacrifice accompanies faith in God. Notice what it says about Abel: "By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead" (Hebrews 11:4).

Abel and his brother Cain approached God to worship (Genesis 4). Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the soil that he had harvested. Abel offered some of the firstborn of his flock. The Bible says God accepted the offering of Abel but rejected Cain's. We are not exactly sure what was defective with Cain's offering, but this we do know—Abel's offering cost him irreplaceable members of the flock. Abel may have loved those lambs and valued them highly, but he wanted to bring a meaningful offering to God. He wanted to demonstrate that he valued God more than his flock. Abel realized that there were two worlds and that God would bless a sacrificial offering given from the firstborn of his flock.

We can learn from Abel. When giving to God—no matter what it is that we are giving—let us not be afraid to give Him our best and even give sacrificially. Let our giving begin with our very lives. Paul says in Romans 12:1, "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." Jesus also spoke of sacrifice saying, "Anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:38). The pathway to God's richest blessing is found in living a life of sacrifice.

The Principle of Waiting

It is normal for any person, the follower of Christ included, to want to enjoy a certain level of prosperity in his or her life. Let no one deceive you into thinking that

God is against prosperity. It is not “money” itself that is a root of all evil but rather “the love of money” (1 Timothy 6:10). Jesus promised us life to its fullest (John 10:10). The harvest of divine blessing that we want in our lives requires patience. Let us call this the principle of waiting.

Paul speaks of this in Galatians 6:9: “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” Being faithful in our living and in our giving is like placing seed in the ground and waiting for it to eventually produce a harvest. The apostle Paul uses this analogy in discussing giving in 2 Corinthians 9:6–10. Let us read what it says:

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whosoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work...Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.

Let me highlight the vital lessons Paul is teaching:

- How much we sow will determine how much we reap.
- Giving is to be done with a cheerful heart, not out of guilt or through force.
- Reaping a harvest means experiencing the favor of God. We will be blessed in every area of our life, not just finances.
- Our harvest will be enough for us to live and enough to sow or invest into a future harvest.

The time spent in waiting on God to bring about a harvest is not wasted time. During the periods of waiting for the harvest, God often does remarkable things in our

lives and teaches us great spiritual lessons. Always bear in mind that our success and prosperity are really not the most important things to God. Making us into the image of His Son is God's highest priority. That is what the Lord will always be focusing on in His dealings with us.

Read 2 Peter 1:5–7. In this passage, we find a list of the Christlike characteristics that God desires to see in our lives. Notice Peter says the first thing that must be added to our faith is not a harvest of material blessings but goodness (moral excellence, virtue). From there, other character qualities are added such as knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love. Peter also says, "If you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:8).

So begin to sow! After you have sown, do not lose patience while you wait for the harvest. It will come. And, allow God to do His perfect work in you during those times of waiting.

Worship and Stewardship

Objective 4:

Explain why continuous, sincere worship of God is important for good financial stewardship.

The Example of Noah

Communion with and worship of God were a natural part of human life before the Fall. When humankind willfully sinned, that communion with God was broken, and many of His blessings were lost. A curse fell on the world. People no longer naturally desired the spiritual above the material. They were now attracted and drawn to the natural world, evil deeds, and seeking ways to escape the curse of the fall. They began to seek substitutes for the worship of the one true God.

When God eventually decided to destroy the sinful world by a flood, He also chose to preserve a unique

person who worshipped God by living righteously and blameless in his generation. Genesis 6:8 says, "Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord." This favor led to a covenant relationship between God and Noah. In this relationship, Noah and his family were assured that they would survive God's judgment (Genesis 6:18–22).

After the flood, Noah built an altar and worshipped the Lord with a sacrifice. This act of worship acknowledged God as Creator and Owner of everything. It was also an expression of thanks for the miracle of preservation. A great covenant promise was given by God to Noah in Genesis 8:22, "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease." This promise is still being fulfilled to this day.

The Principle of Worship

As believers, we are also in a covenant relationship with God that includes many wonderful blessings of grace for our lives. We have been saved from judgment. God cares for us. He supplies our needs. He has a place prepared for us once this life is over. We have a wonderful eternity to look forward to. Our number one response should be worship. When we worship, our focus is on God and not on material things. Paul tells us in Colossians 3:1–2, "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things."

As long as we are on this planet, God longs to have a relationship with us. He does not want merely a surface relationship, but one that is filled with communion and fellowship. The more we know Him, the greater our love for Him will be and the more eager we will be to worship Him.

There is probably no greater example of this in the Bible than the relationship Abraham had with God. It was so intimate that James says, "He was called God's friend" (James 2:23). God established a special covenant with Abraham and his descendents and made

incredible promises to him. Abraham learned that God was giving him and his descendants the land of Canaan. He discovered that the whole world would be blessed through his offspring. God always supplied all his needs, even miraculously providing in his old age a son and legitimate heir. Abraham's response included building altars of worship in the places where he traveled.

Aim to be a friend and worshipper of God. Instead of being concerned about your own worth or your money and possessions, focus on the worth of God. When we worship God, we offer Him our service (see Hebrews 13:15–16), our substance (Philippians 4:16–18), our praise, and ourselves (Romans 12:1). Worship is not something we do out of religious duty. It is spontaneous and sincere.

The benefit of worshipping God will spill over into every area of our lives. The Lord provides for our needs and opens doors for us that we could never open ourselves and that no one can shut. This does not mean money is going to drop out of heaven into your lap or that you should quit your job or cease providing for your family. No, God will allow you to find good jobs, earn sufficient income, and advance throughout life. The favor of the Lord adds zest to living and enables us to become the best we can be at whatever we are doing for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31).

SUGGESTED SCRIPTURES TO MEMORIZE

Psalm 24:1

Psalm 31:19

Malachi 3:10

Matthew 10:8, 38

Romans 12:1–2

1 Corinthians 10:31

2 Corinthians 9:6–10

Colossians 3:1–2

SELF-TEST

After studying the lesson, please read each question carefully and circle the correct response. There is only one correct answer for each question.

1. *Some negative effects of mismanaging our finances are*
 - a) *unnecessary debt, lost wealth, worry, and divorce.*
 - b) *accumulating material things, purchasing a home or car.*
 - c) *giving to those in need and contributing to worthy causes.*
2. *Which of the following identifies divine principles for using our money properly?*
 - a) *The principles of love, hope, and servanthood*
 - b) *The principles of divine ownership, God's goodness, and being a blessing*
 - c) *The principles of church attendance, maturity, and prayer*
3. *A steward is someone who*
 - a) *works in a kitchen as a cook.*
 - b) *cares for the possessions of another.*
 - c) *has to be very generous.*
4. *Why should we give God at least one day a week?*
 - a) *We can use that day to take trips, relax, and visit with family and friends.*
 - b) *We can use that time off to do work at home and watch Christian television.*
 - c) *We can use that day to worship at a local church, meet other believers, and tithe.*
5. *Tithing means giving back to God*
 - a) *5 percent of our income.*
 - b) *10 percent of our income.*
 - c) *15 percent of our income.*
6. *When we tithe, God promises to*
 - a) *open the windows of heaven and pour an overflowing blessing.*
 - b) *make us happy, wealthy, and wise.*
 - c) *give us everything we ever wanted.*

7. *Why is faith necessary in our being good stewards of what God entrusts to us?*
 - a) *Faith helps us to make bold financial investments.*
 - b) *Faith prepares us to buy things even when we do not have the money.*
 - c) *Faith enables us to believe for God's promised blessings.*
8. *The principle of sacrifice teaches us that*
 - a) *we have to give more than the average person.*
 - b) *the spiritual world is very real.*
 - c) *sacrificial living accompanies faith in God.*
9. *As mentioned in the lesson, one reason for having to wait to receive a harvest on our giving is that*
 - a) *God often does amazing things in our lives while we wait.*
 - b) *God is slow in blessing His children.*
 - c) *life is challenging and requires us to be patient.*
10. *Why is the principle of worship important?*
 - a) *When we worship, our focus is on God not on material things.*
 - b) *When we worship, we learn to sing well.*
 - c) *When we worship, our minds and bodies relax.*

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ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

Note: You can check your answers by using the answer guide. The numbers in the parentheses indicate which objective in the lesson to check.

1. a (8.1)
2. b (8.1)
3. b (8.1)
4. c (8.2)
5. b (8.2)
6. a (8.2)
7. c (8.3)
8. c (8.3)
9. a (8.3)
10. a (8.4)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS LESSON

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LESSON 9

Why Does God Permit Suffering?

Why does God allow suffering? It is hard at times to comprehend why God would allow people to suffer intense pain and very difficult circumstances. Some suffering is brought about by natural causes—tornadoes, fires, earthquakes, etc. Philosophers call this natural evil. Other suffering is the result of the actions of people who use their freedom to commit sinful, destructive, and cruel acts. Philosophers call this moral evil.

While we will never understand all the reasons why God permits suffering, the Scriptures do provide some consistent answers to the hard questions of life. In fact, the more we can learn about this subject now, perhaps while things are going well, the better we will face trial and hardship and the better equipped we will be to give answers to those who wonder why they suffer.

Job's life is an example of riches to rags. The first two chapters of the book of Job describe what happened to him. But the subsequent thirty-five chapters deal with what was happening inside of him. We are introduced to Job as a successful man. He enjoyed good health, children, and wealth. Yet God allows Job to suffer. God permits Satan to take away everything Job had. His good health is shattered; his workers murdered; his animals stolen or killed; and his sons and daughters perished. In the midst of this calamity, Job's reaction is honorable. "Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship" (Job 1:20). Job's reaction to suffering is a great model for us. He realizes that the things of this world are temporary. His children and possessions belonged to God. Job understood that, as humans, we come into this world with nothing, and we leave with nothing.

Moreover, instead of cursing God for his suffering, Job asks rhetorically, "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" (Job 2:10). In the midst of all his loss, Job does not sin with his words. While he expresses great anguish and even wishes to die (read Job 3), he never abandons his faith or curses God. Later, God comforts Job and restores him to good health and greater prosperity than before.

Nobody wants to suffer, but the truth is that there are some lessons that can only be learned through suffering.

LESSON OUTLINE

- Suffering Produces Fruit
- The Product of Good Character
- Suffering at the Hands of Satan
- Suffering Rebukes Our Sin
- Suffering Unites Believers with Christ
- Suffering Teaches Dependence on God
- Suffering Equips Us for Ministry

LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. *Explain how suffering aids in the development of the fruit of the Spirit.*
2. *Explain how suffering produces good character.*
3. *Identify tactics Satan uses against God's people.*
4. *Explain why God uses suffering to discipline disobedient Christians.*
5. *Describe how suffering unites us with Christ.*
6. *Explain how suffering increases our dependence on Christ.*
7. *Point out how suffering equips Christians for ministry.*

Suffering Produces Fruit

Objective 1:

Explain how suffering aids in the development of the fruit of the Spirit.

Producing Fruit

God insists on fruit in our lives, and He has many different ways of producing it. Some of these ways include the effect of the Word of God on our lives, the outcome of prayer, and even suffering. None of us looks forward to adversity, but if God allows it in our lives, it is meant to produce good fruit. God longs to see fruit in our lives. Jesus said, "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples" (John 15:8). Dr. Norman Vincent Peale said,

The only people who do not have problems are those in the cemeteries, and some of them really have problems. If you have problems, it simply means you are alive and the more problems you have the more alive you are. If you don't have man-sized problems you should get on your knees and ask God to "trust" you with a few.

While suffering can produce good fruit, it also has the potential to produce bad fruit. How we respond to suffering is our choice. We can either become bitter or better, grateful or hateful. Let us discuss some good fruit that suffering produces.

Patience out of Suffering

Patience is a characteristic that seems lacking in many people these days, yet it is an essential feature of Christian maturity. As we face trials and learn to wait on God, patience and perseverance develop. Luke 8:15 says, "But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop."

A story is told about a young Christian who went to an older believer for prayer. The young man wanted more patience. The elderly man prayed that the Lord would send the man tribulation all throughout the day. When the confused younger man asked why he was praying for tribulation and not patience, the older man replied, "It's through tribulation that we learn patience."

Thus, we must allow God to work in us until His job is finished! James 1:2–4 advises, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

Joy in Suffering

Joy is a product of suffering. Some of the greatest joy you will ever experience will be in the lessons you learned through adversity. After suffering, you will have a testimony for the rest of your life. Jesus told us tough times would come: "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). We can find joy in knowing that God will bring us through, so there is no need to worry.

The Product of Good Character

Objective 2:

Explain how suffering produces good character.

Suffering produces a character of moral excellence and strength. Our character is revealed by how we react to suffering and adversity. Let us look back at Job. The Bible describes him as blameless and upright, one who feared God and hated evil (Job 1:1). This was before he faced any misfortune. His true character was not seen until after calamity struck. Notice what the Bible says following Job's hardship, "In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrong-doing" (Job 1:22). When you

seek God while suffering, He will enable you to react well and build much fruit in your life.

Are you a person of good character? Character has been described as what you are when no one is looking. Allow me to touch on three areas of character that have the potential of developing when we suffer.

Suffering Toughens the Weak

First, suffering helps you to become stronger. A vacationer watched with curiosity as a lumberjack occasionally jabbed his sharp hook into a log, separating it from the others that were floating down a mountain stream. When asked why he did this, the worker replied, "These may all look alike to you, but a few of them are quite different. The ones I let pass are from trees that grew in a valley where they were always protected from the storms. Their grain is coarse. The ones I've hooked and kept apart from the rest came from high up on the mountains. From the time they were small, they were beaten by strong winds. This toughens the trees and gives them a beautiful grain. We save them for choice work. They are too good to make into plain lumber." This story is a great example of how suffering produces strength.

First Peter 4:12–13 reads, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed." When will Jesus' glory be revealed? Certainly it will happen with the splendor of His second coming, but

His glory is also revealed when He sends deliverance our way. Moreover, Jesus' glory is revealed as we reflect His character, as we are molded into the people God wants us to be.

Correction through Suffering

Second, suffering helps to correct faults. We all have defects and blemishes in our lives—some small and some rather large ones. Often we are blind to our own

imperfections or willing to tolerate them. Jesus told us, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). The Greek word for "perfect" is *teleios*, which can be translated as "complete." God desires to see us "complete," not lacking in any moral and spiritual virtue.

Suffering has a way of steadily working out our imperfections. Just as a potter callously kneads clay to remove the air bubbles that damage the pot in the furnace, so the Holy Spirit works on us. It may be painful, but it is worth it in the end. Our lack of patience is sorely tested through suffering when things are simply out of our control. Our tendency towards materialism and riches is often touched through suffering as well. God works on us just as he worked on all of our heroes in the Bible. He tests every area of our lives through suffering, and this suffering builds great strength.

Stability through Suffering

Third, suffering steadies our fluctuations. Most of us struggle with vacillation. We are hot then cold, up then down, in then out. When we become believers, we might think that our lives will be steady and solid. But soon we fall off track. Great leaders and persons in the Bible also struggled with consistency. For instance, when Timothy needed encouragement, Paul reminded him to "fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands" (2 Timothy 1:6). On the other hand, an entire church at Corinth was given to extremes of spiritual highs until they were abusing spiritual gifts. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul reprimanded them for their over zealousness. Suffering has a wonderful way of protecting us from the extremes.

All of us are subject to spiritual weakness, but we can be assured that God will strengthen us. If we continually measure our human strength against the job we have been called to do, we will become discouraged. However, God sends trials at just the right time and in just the right measure to exercise our faith and increase our strength. He never sends a trial to destroy, only to build our character. We tend to look forward to relief from suffering, but learning what our Father wants us to gain is much

more important. In Luke 22:31–32, Jesus says to Peter, “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” Our suffering equips us to help others.

Suffering at the Hands of Satan

Objective 3:

Identify tactics Satan uses against God's people.

A Real Enemy

First Peter 5:8–9 reads, “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.” So how does one suffer at the hands of Satan? Three common tactics of the enemy that cause us harm are discouragement, deception, and distraction.

Discouragement

Can you identify with the following situation? Say you are having a rough time. Things are not going well at work. You have been battling sickness. Someone you love is struggling. After many weeks of hardship, you feel weak and vulnerable. Invariably some callous, unthinking individual says something negative, unfair, or hurtful to you.

Satan knows that if he can get us discouraged, he can render us ineffective. Elijah the prophet was discouraged and spoke of quitting his ministry after the attack of Jezebel. Jonah the prophet was also discouraged and resentful; he spoke of dying after his ministry at Nineveh. These are only two of the many leaders in the Bible who faced discouragement.

As a Christian, you must also recognize discouragement as one of Satan's fiery darts. Do not let it live in your spirit and develop into anger or bitterness.

Pray about it. Talk to a trusted Christian friend or pastor. And stand firmly against the enemy.

Deception

Satan is the master deceiver. He has brought more suffering into the church through deception than through any other means. The primary way Satan deceives is through distorting the truth, and especially the truth of Scripture. The apostle Peter warned us against this trickery. In 2 Peter 3:16, he writes, "Ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction."

Satan speaks the Word of God in half-truths. In Matthew 4, Satan himself came to Jesus and told Him half-truths on divine provision, divine protection, and divine position. But Jesus resisted him with the truth of God's Word. Today, false prophets still believe half-truths. They are trying to turn stones into bread, advocate levitation, and even gain power and authority through these counterfeit measures. But the only way to know the difference between God's whole truth and Satan's half-truths is by being a student of the Word of God.

Distraction

If Satan cannot bring suffering into your life through discouragement or deception, then he will try to attack the strategic center of your life—your mind. The mind is where the decisions of life and eternity are made. The mind is an armory where we forge the weapons for our victory or our destruction. Satan does not have to fill your mind with evil thoughts all day to win; all he needs to do is distract you.

He seeks to cause confusion, weariness, fear, busyness, or anything that will shut out the voice of God. Nevertheless, our greatest stance of spiritual power is to be led by the Holy Spirit and not by the flesh. We must have the mind of Christ in all we do. Paul advised the Christians in Rome, "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" (Romans 12:2).

We do not have to suffer at the hands of Satan for long. Yes, he will continue to attack, but the sooner we recognize his efforts, the sooner we can engage in countermeasures. So, be sober and vigilant and stand against the tricks of the devil.

Suffering Rebukes Our Sin

Objective 4:

Explain why God uses suffering to discipline disobedient Christians.

Sin Gets God's Attention

There is no quicker route to suffering than to habitually engage in sinful behavior. Sin itself carries its own set of natural and unavoidable consequences. If you lie, you may be exposed as dishonest and untrustworthy. If you steal, you may go to jail. If you gossip, you may find yourself with few genuine friends. Moreover, in the life of a believer, sin will always elicit a response from God.

God loves us too much to ignore the sin in our lives. Count on it—if you practice sin, God will attempt to correct you just as a good parent corrects his or her disobedient child. God's correction or discipline entails varying degrees of suffering.

The Price of Salvation

When Christians rebel and sin, they sometimes think that those who warn them are overreacting. They make excuses for their behavior and pretend that their sin is minor or inconsequential. They even assume God will just wink at their shortcomings. But God will not excuse sin! Christ paid an incredible price for our salvation. God has a huge investment in our lives. He will do whatever it takes to get our attention and turn us back to Him. He will even allow pain into our lives now so that we will not miss the future blessings.

The writer of Hebrews says, “In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood” (Hebrews 12:4). Our struggle against personal sin is minimal compared to the price Christ paid to save us. At first, we may think that God’s discipline in our lives is an overreaction, yet Psalm 103:10 tells us, “He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.” God is never as severe with us as we actually deserve. He is a gracious God, who only desires the best for us.

The Father Acts in Our Best Interest

It is important to understand what family we belong to. When we were without Christ in our lives, our father was the devil. Now, since we are Christians, God is our heavenly Father. The apostle John writes, “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (1 John 3:1). Everyone knows that a parent has the right to speak to and discipline his or her child. Parents can tell you that when it comes to children and discipline, there are two common temperaments: strong-willed children and compliant children. Strong-willed children tend to resist discipline, so parents work extra hard to train them. Compliant children need little discipline. In fact, a little discipline goes a long way for them.

We see these basic reactions among believers under God’s discipline. While both temperaments of people require the Lord’s correction from time to time, some fight it while others embrace it. Hebrews 12:5–6 says, “Do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.” God disciplines us because He loves us.

A Lesson from the Prodigal

The devil comes to kill, steal, and destroy, but Christ comes to give, restore, and build. Read the parable of the prodigal son (see Luke 15:11–32). This father’s heart remained faithful to his wayward son. He welcomed him

home, restored him to sonship, and celebrated his return. The father in this story represents God.

Unlike the prodigal's father, some self-righteous Christians fail to appreciate the grace of God involved in restoring a wayward follower of Christ. Rather than celebrate the triumph of God's love, these self-righteous Christians secretly wish they could impose their own brand of discipline on the believers who return to the family of God. But Christ desires us to love unconditionally and accept into His family the believers who have strayed.

Suffering Unites Believers with Christ

Objective 5:

Describe how suffering unites us with Christ.

Suffering Is Unavoidable

Some people assume that Christians should be exempt from most suffering. Shouldn't being a follower of Christ protect us from the worst difficulties and hardships? What about the hedge of protection we often hear about? Shouldn't that keep us from all pain and sorrow?

According to Peter, Christians are not exempt from suffering. First Peter 4:12–13 records, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed." The apostle Paul also wrote, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (Philippians 3:10).

Both of these great men of God expected suffering in the Christian life. This does not mean that there are never temporal blessings to enjoy or that no divine protection is available. As Christians, we believe that we are under the watchful eye of God. No blessing or suffering comes into our lives without God's permission.

The Fellowship of Suffering

The apostle Peter says that we “participate in the sufferings of Christ” (1 Peter 4:13). Paul speaks of wanting to know the “fellowship of sharing in his [Jesus’] sufferings” (Philippians 3:10). To fellowship means to share the same experience of another. Rather than avoiding suffering on life’s journey, we should expect it, and even welcome it. Why? When we endure pain, assuming we are not suffering because of sin, we experience a special unity with Christ. As hard as this may seem, Paul understood that it would only benefit him to suffer. Our suffering allows us to associate, in some small degree, with Christ’s ultimate suffering.

Why Jesus Suffered

Throughout eternity past, it was God’s plan to allow His Son to suffer for our sins and thereby purchase our salvation. The prophet Isaiah wrote, “Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him [Jesus] and cause him to suffer” (Isaiah 53:10). This is strange to our human minds; we cannot fathom why any father would desire to have his son endure such pain.

God’s ways often seem foolish to the unbelieving human mind. His ways are higher and wiser than ours. Thus, it pleased God to wound His Son because of the end result it would produce. Even earthly fathers will permit their children to suffer some pain if it will bring about a greater good. If a child falls and severely breaks his arm, he probably will cry and fear anyone touching his arm lest it hurt more. However, the father in love will permit a doctor to reset the arm bones, although the procedure may be excruciatingly painful. If surgery is necessary to correct the damage, the father will also permit that even though it requires more suffering. The greater good justifies him in doing so.

When John the Baptist first acknowledged Jesus in public, he announced, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). Jesus repeatedly told the disciples that He came to earth to suffer and die. In Luke 24, we find two of Jesus’ disciples on the road

to Emmaus on that first Easter. Jesus had been crucified days earlier, and these disciples were sorrowful and confused by the news that Jesus had been seen alive. Jesus rebuked them, "Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" (Luke 24:26).

It was essential to the plan of God that Jesus suffer. The writer of Hebrews tells us, "In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering" (Hebrews 2:10). Jesus was already in a state of sinless perfection. The work of Calvary did not make Him perfect in regard to sin. The Greek word translated *perfect* means "to finish or to fulfill." Calvary's cross was the culmination of Jesus' earthly mission. Without it He could not have finished or fulfilled God's will. Thus, Jesus cried out on the Cross, "It is finished" (John 19:30).

Jesus also learned obedience through suffering. As a man, He had to learn to obey God; He had to make choices. We even see Him struggling in the Garden of Gethsemane just before His arrest and trial. "He fell with his face to the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will'" (Matthew 26:39). God the Father could have delivered Jesus from death (Hebrews 5:7), but even our wonderful Savior, fully divine and fully human, had to endure suffering.

God has a plan for your life, too. He wants us to be conformed to the image of his Son. For that to happen, we must participate in the sufferings of Christ.

Proper Attitude Is Important

Suffering is not easy. Consider the children of Israel who spent forty years in the wilderness prior to entering the Promised Land. Moses reminded them, "Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands" (Deuteronomy 8:2). We can trust that the same God to test us. He will also bring us through our suffering.

Suffering Teaches Dependence on God

Objective 6:

Explain how suffering increases our dependence on Christ.

The Problem of Self-Reliance

The apostle Paul learned a valuable lesson through his intense suffering. He states in 2 Corinthians 1:9, "In our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead." The natural tendency for all of us is to become self-reliant. We forget God. But God knows exactly what we need. He knows what it will take to keep us solely dependent on Him, and that may include periods of suffering.

There will be times when it feels that God is far away from you. You may wonder if He has forgotten about you. King David experienced this and wrote about it in Psalm 22. Jesus also experienced this sense of abandonment. While hanging on the Cross, Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46).

We serve the God who promised never to leave us (Hebrews 13:5). A.W. Tozer said, "For each of us the time is coming when we shall have nothing but God. Health and wealth and friends and hiding places will be swept away, and we shall have only God. To the man of pseudo faith that is a terrifying thought, but to real faith it is one of the most comforting thoughts the heart can entertain."

What do you do when it seems that God is missing from your life? You keep praying and worshipping. You continue to study His Word. You quote Scripture. You persist in living for Him. You call to remembrance the stories of deliverance you read in the Bible and have heard from the lips of your fellow Christians. You recall the good things God has done in your life. You never stop confessing your confidence and faith in the Lord. Eventually, the fog will lift.

We Are Witnesses

Through our adversity the world finds out what we are made of. Unbelievers observing us will ask if we really depend upon God or if Christianity is just another empty religion. They will wonder if our faith is strong enough to get us through. Suffering, in this sense, requires or forces us to depend upon God like never before. While in suffering, we must hold to the truth that God is still with us. A great verse to memorize is Isaiah 46:4: "Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you." Holding to such promises will give you the strength to be an effective witness even while you are suffering.

Suffering Equips Us for Ministry

Objective 7:

Point out how suffering equips Christians for ministry.

Good and Bad Experiences

God knows how all experiences interrelate, and He is able to move all things toward His final end. Therefore, we can look at every situation as ultimately part of a greater good. Romans 8:28 notes, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." No experience is a wasted experience in the grand scheme of God. He uses everything, whether good or bad, for our benefit and for the benefit of others.

Moses' Example

Look at the life of Moses. He started out as the son of Hebrew slaves and was nearly killed. But later, thanks to divine providence, Moses was adopted by the daughter of Pharaoh. For forty years he lived in luxury, enjoying the best of Egypt. He became acquainted with the language and customs of the Egyptians.

Then, one day everything changed. While trying to aid a Hebrew being abused, Moses took the life of an Egyptian. This brought the wrath of Pharaoh upon him. Moses was forced to flee from Egypt and dwell in the Midian desert for forty years. There, he married the daughter of a nomad and ended up tending his sheep. No doubt, this was a humbling and painful experience. It was also necessary if Moses was going to become the great leader God wanted him to be. Thus, some lessons can be learned only through suffering. Samuel Rutherford said, "When I am in the cellar of affliction, I look for the Lord's choicest wines."

Compassion Ministry

Suffering gives us a unique compassion for others. Some churches offer recovery groups such as sexual abuse recovery, divorce recovery, grief recovery, and chemical abuse recovery.

Many of the workers in these groups are people who themselves have struggled with these difficulties. These ministries are borne out of a heart of compassion.

The Ability to Encourage

Suffering not only teaches compassion but also gives us valuable insight to encourage others who are suffering. Having suffered, we can tell people how God brought us through; we can testify to God's unfailing love and care. We can let others know they are not alone in their suffering and that they can bear up under a lot more pressure than they realize.

Conclusion

Whether or not you are bearing up under suffering at the present time, these simple biblical truths are able to transform your attitude and outlook on life. You do not have to be ashamed of or even fear suffering. Do not let anyone despise you or question your commitment to Christ if you find yourself bearing up under painful circumstances. God is at work in your life. His grace is always sufficient for you no matter what you are facing.

Scripture Verses to Memorize

Romans 8:28

Romans 12:2

Hebrews 13:5

1 Peter 4:12–13

1 John 3:1

SELF-TEST

After studying the lesson, please read each study question carefully and circle the correct response. There is only one correct response for each question.

1. *Job's reaction to suffering is a good model for us because*
 - a) *he never showed his sorrow and always presented a happy face to others.*
 - b) *despite his suffering, he chose to worship God.*
 - c) *he listened to his friends who gave him great advice.*
2. *God permits us to suffer at times to produce good fruit in the long run, but sometimes we react incorrectly and allow bad fruit to develop.*
 - a) *True*
 - b) *False*
3. *God allows us to go through trials in order to*
 - a) *build our character.*
 - b) *destroy us.*
 - c) *prove that He is divine.*
4. *Why is it good to understand the ways Satan causes us to suffer?*
 - a) *We can run away from all situations where it appears that Satan is at work.*
 - b) *It is not good to know the ways of Satan, for it might cause us to stumble.*
 - c) *When we are aware of the tactics of the enemy, we can stand strong against him.*
5. *When we practice sin, we bring suffering upon ourselves. This suffering serves as a warning so will not continue to make the same mistakes.*
 - a) *True*
 - b) *False*

6. *Why should we want to know the fellowship of sharing in Christ's sufferings?*
 - a) *It automatically makes us holier than others.*
 - b) *It creates a special unity with the Lord achievable in no other way.*
 - c) *It will cause people to look up to us with more respect.*
7. *It is a cruel God who would willfully allow His children to suffer.*
 - a) *True*
 - b) *False*
8. *When God seems distant during our times of suffering,*
 - a) *we must remember that God is still nearby; He will never forsake us.*
 - b) *it is an indication of our sin.*
 - c) *this means that we are not as special to Christ as we originally thought.*
9. *One of the greatest things we gain from suffering is*
 - a) *compassion for others who suffer.*
 - b) *insight leading to an ability to encourage others who suffer.*
 - c) *both a) and b).*
10. *Which of the following statements is true?*
 - a) *Suffering comes only as a result of one's own sin.*
 - b) *God's correction entails various degrees of suffering.*
 - c) *God's grace is not sufficient to carry us through all suffering.*

When used for HBMM SERVUS FIDELIS training:

Printout and mail a copy of your self test pages to the regional HBMM National Leadership Team member for your region. Their contact information is located on the "Contact Leadership Team" page on our website: <http://HBMM-National.org>

ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

Note: You can check your answers by using the answer guide. The numbers in the parentheses indicate which objective in the lesson to check.

1. *b* (9.1)
2. *a* (9.1)
3. *a* (9.2)
4. *c* (9.3)
5. *a* (9.4)
6. *b* (9.5)
7. *b* (9.5)
8. *a* (9.6)
9. *c* (9.7)
10. *b* (9.4)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS LESSON

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LESSON 10

How to Discover God's Will

One of the most important keys for a successful Christian life is learning to know God's will. His will includes a long-term plan as well as specific details about decisions we make, places we go, the person we marry, jobs we take, talents we use, skills we develop, ministries we do, and many other aspects of life. God wants His children to understand His will and to be joyful in fulfilling it. Failure to discern or carry out God's mandate can mean great disappointment because His will is always the best for us.

People have many interesting ideas on how to determine what is best for their lives. Many today still believe in some undefined force called "luck" to lead and guide them. If they feel lucky, they might buy a lottery ticket. They base decisions on so-called "lucky feelings." Others go to fortunetellers or psychics. Large numbers of people are hooked on horoscopes. Others who do not believe in God, luck, or horoscopes say, "I believe in myself. I make my own plans. Nobody is guiding my life!"

According to the Bible, God does not want His children to be disoriented spiritually. He wants us to have clear direction. In Ephesians 5:17, we read, "Do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is." As a Christian, you must have confidence that God has a plan for your life—one that is very exciting and fulfilling. God says through Jeremiah, "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future'" (Jeremiah 29:11). It is thrilling to discover your God-given destiny.

LESSON OUTLINE

The New Birth and God's Will
 Prayer and God's Will
 Godliness and God's Will
 The Role of Scripture in Determining God's Will
 The Holy Spirit and Christians
 God's Use of Circumstances and People

LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. *Explain why being born again is vital to discovering God's will.*
2. *Explain why prayer is essential to knowing God's will.*
3. *State the relationship between godliness and knowing God's will.*
4. *Show how studying Scripture aids in determining God's will.*
5. *Explain the role of the Holy Spirit in leading Christians.*
6. *Discuss how God uses circumstances to direct the lives of His people.*

The New Birth and God's Will

Objective 1:

Explain why being born again is vital to discovering God's will.

Before we can expect God to guide our lives, we must willingly surrender to Him. The Lord does not promise guidance and direction to those who will not commit to Him. Consider the unsaved; they are described in Scripture as being in darkness, lost, and without God. The unsaved person lives as though in a fog. Have you

ever been in a fog so thick that you could not tell where you were going? You could not see landmarks. You might have felt disoriented and unsure about whether you were moving in the right direction. Traveling in dense fog can be very dangerous. In the same way, the unsaved person runs the risk of not only being in dangerous situations but of missing the good that God has for him or her.

Only true Christians can be assured of constant divine guidance. The apostle Paul wrote, “Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God” (Romans 8:14). The relationship between being born again and knowing God’s will can be likened to the relationship between getting on the right airplane and arriving at the correct destination. If you board the right airplane—even though it may fly high above the clouds with no land in sight—you do not have to worry about navigation. You can rest assured that the pilot knows where he is going. In the same way, once you are safely in God’s family through faith in Christ, He will be constantly on duty to guide your life and reveal His will.

So, being born again is the first step in finding God’s will. If you are backslidden or have never surrendered your life to Christ, ask Christ to come into your heart today, forgive your sins, and be your Lord and Savior. At the end of this book, you will find a simple prayer that can serve as your guide in asking Jesus into your life.

Prayer and God’s Will

Objective 2:

Explain why prayer is essential to knowing God’s will.

Prayer is also a very important part of the process of receiving divine guidance. Philippians 4:6 says, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” Christians need to talk to God about all that is on their hearts. That means we should request guidance and understanding of God’s will. James writes, “If any

of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5).

But, sadly, pray is the last thing some people want to do. Prayer should never be a last resort; rather, it should be a regular part of our lives. Prayer draws us closer to the Lord and strengthens us. It releases the blessing and the anointing of God. As we pray, we find ourselves exercising faith. It has been said that daily prayer is the gymnasium of the soul (Zwemer 1923).

Still, two cautions need to be pointed out. First, when you pray, do not automatically assume that God is going to show you all at once everything you need to know and do for the next thirty years. God does not work that way. He certainly does know the future completely, but His guidance comes to us in measured quantities. In the same way that He supplies our "daily bread," He also gives us guidance bit by bit, as we need it. Why? God in His wisdom wants us to come to Him often, not just in emergencies or after great stretches of time in which we ignore Him.

Second, when you pray, be open and willing to accept God's will. Sometimes we go to God, and instead of asking Him to show us His will, we end up telling Him what we want Him to do. This is not truly being yielded to Him. For example, a young lady might be praying for God to guide her to the man she should marry. She prays, "Dear Lord, you know who the man is that I should marry. You've prepared him for me and guided his life. I'm willing, Lord, to accept whoever you have for me, but don't let him be too short, and please don't let him want to be a missionary, and I would appreciate it if he wasn't lacking in money." Do you see the problem with this kind of request? What if God has for this young lady a wonderful man who is 5 feet 2 inches tall and who has little financial resource, but a burning passion to reach the lost in India?

The story is told of a preacher of the gospel who received an invitation from two churches to serve as pastor. One church was in Edinburgh, Scotland, and the other was in Glasgow, Scotland. The preacher prayed,

“Lord, show me which one of these two churches you want me to go to, but please let it be Glasgow.” That man already had his mind made up. When we pray in faith, trusting the Lord for guidance, He will give it to us. It is up to us to follow through on God’s will.

Godliness and God’s Will

Objective 3:

State the relationship between godliness and knowing God’s will.

The apostle Paul reveals an important key to knowing God’s will. He writes,

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. 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. (Romans 12:1–2)

The key to knowing God’s will is godliness. Godliness refers to being God-centered. It carries with it the idea of living in a way that pleases God. As Christians, we are called to love God with all our hearts. This love is demonstrated daily by a life of obedience to the Lord’s commands. Jesus said, “If you love me, you will obey what I command” (John 14:15).

Paul compares living a godly life to the Old Testament concept of offering sacrifice. In obedience to the Law of Moses, the ancient Israelites slaughtered animals and presented them to God as sacrifices. As the blood of sacrificial animals was shed for their sins, repentant Israelites could be assured of God’s forgiveness. These sacrifices were a type or symbol of the final sacrifice Jesus would make on the Cross for our sins. No more

animals need to be offered now. He paid the price for our complete forgiveness.

Godliness implies that we offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices. How do we do this? Our lives are to be holy and pleasing to God. We cannot live as we did before knowing the Lord. The transformation must start with our minds and be reflected in our attitudes and behaviors.

A person cannot genuinely expect to receive guidance from God unless he or she is born again, praying, and—with God's help—being transformed into a godly person. This does not mean that one must be perfect to hear from God. No one on earth is faultless; we will make mistakes. However, when we fail as Christians, we go to God as soon as the Holy Spirit convicts us of our wrong. We confess our sin. John writes, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8–9). The godly, prayerful follower of Christ can rest assured that he or she is on God's "radar screen." God has such an individual in sight and knows how best to lead him or her. Being in God's will is worth any sacrifice or challenge that comes with living a godly life.

The Role of Scripture in Determining God's Will

Objective 4:

*Show how studying Scripture
aids in determining God's will.*

Some people think the Bible ought to reveal what color socks to wear, what kind of car to buy, or whether to take a vacation in Miami or Moscow. They may even open the Bible randomly and put their finger on a verse and read it, thinking that God will speak to them that way.

Please understand this—the Bible is a book of principles. If you come to God's Word to find out whether to buy a blue chair or a green chair, or to discover whether to ride the train to work or drive your car, you

will probably be very disappointed. But if you come to God's Word to learn the great principles of Christian living, you will be richly rewarded. These principles serve as the foundation for understanding God's will. They throw tremendous light on the decisions we need to make. David wrote, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path" (Psalm 119:105).

What are examples of these great principles? One principle is to always put God first. Jesus said, "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33). What we are talking about here are priorities. In the Christian life, the most important duty is to put God first. Nothing else will work unless He is first.

Think about what or whom you are putting first in your life. Is it God? Is it your job, hobbies, friends, money, or something else? God is not against your experiencing joy in all these other things, but He does not want to compete with anything. He must be first! A lot of questions, or even confusion about God's will, evaporate when you keep your priorities right. C. S. Lewis taught that if we put first things first, we will get second things thrown in. However, if we put second things first, we will end up losing both first and second things (1970, 280).

Another very important principle is discipleship. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). We are called to follow, serve, and obey our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Disciples keep their eyes focused on Jesus. He must be the center of the picture.

In a Berlin art gallery is a famous painting by Adolf Menzel (1815–1905). What makes the painting unique is that it is partially finished. The artist intended to show Frederick the Great speaking with some of his advisors. He painted the advisors and background but left a place in the center of the canvas to paint the king, outlined in charcoal. However, the artist died before he finished the painting, and Frederick was never in the picture.

Is Jesus truly in the picture of your life? Is He your focus? When death comes, the most important question

will not be how much money you accumulated, or even how many friends you have in the world. The most important question asked will be if you faithfully loved and served your Master.

So, how do you learn the great principles of the Bible? You need to spend time reading and studying it. You listen carefully when God's Word is being preached. It takes time and effort, but the rewards are certainly worth it.

The Holy Spirit and Christians

Objective 5:

Explain the role of the Holy Spirit in leading Christians.

There are many verses in the Bible that reveal how much the Holy Spirit does for us. Here are two examples. Romans 8:14 says, "Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God." Jesus says, "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13).

What is the significance of this? True Christians have an internal guidance system in the person of the Holy Spirit. For many centuries, boats and ships relied on external methods of guidance. Sailors would look at the stars, and they would follow the shoreline when possible. Then, compasses were invented. Later, sailors began to use radio, sonar, and radar to help them navigate. These were all external forms of guidance. Then in the 1950s, a new means of guidance was implemented. It did not require stars, land, radio waves, or anything external to function. This new "internal guidance system" was based on gyros. As a result, one nuclear-powered submarine was able to leave Hawaii, travel to the North Pole under the ice, and then cruise on to England—using its internal guidance system, and all the while submerged. Think of the Holy Spirit as the internal, living, all-knowing, all-powerful personal navigator guiding your life.

Let us be specific now. What does it mean to have the Spirit guide us? Does He always speak audibly to us? Too

many people go around claiming, “The Lord said...” or “The Lord told me...” when in fact the Lord said nothing specifically to them at all. Do not ever get into the habit of talking that way. It borders on blasphemy. Occasionally, the Spirit speaks audibly, but this is not the usual method.

What does the Spirit reveal to us? Does He tell us what brand of deodorant or toothpaste to buy? That is doubtful. Early in the Christian life, most of us realize that the Lord gives quite a bit of liberty in the ordinary routine matters of daily life. People who want the Lord to tell them how to comb their hair or what color socks to put on need to mature spiritually. God has given us brains to figure out those mundane activities. We do not have to be afraid that somehow we are going to sin by not asking the Lord what brand of toothpaste to use.

Here are four things to keep in mind about the Spirit's guidance.

- Normally, the Holy Spirit's guidance comes as a steady impression that does not leave us. It is more than just a passing whim or feeling. The call of God to full-time ministry often comes that way. The Spirit continues to cause someone to think about that call day and night; it does not leave.
- The Holy Spirit's impressions on our heart and mind will often guide us away from a dangerous course of action.
- The Holy Spirit's communication will guide us to a place where He can use us. In Acts 8, Philip is led by the Spirit to witness to an Ethiopian eunuch about Christ. As a result, the Ethiopian traveler is won to Christ and baptized.
- The Holy Spirit will give us peace and confirm to us when we are on track doing God's will. If we get off track, the Spirit will be quick to show us that, too.

Ask the Lord to lead you by His Spirit daily, and expect His help. As a safeguard, carefully compare any impression that you think may be from the Spirit with the principles already revealed in the Bible. If the impression

is really from the Spirit, it will always conform to God's revealed will in Scripture.

God's Use of Circumstances and People

Objective 6:

Describe how God uses circumstances to direct the lives of His people.

God's Use of Circumstances

Circumstances are the events that happen around us and to us. In Acts 19, Paul arrives in Ephesus. He is greatly used by the Lord there, but he also faces tremendous opposition. However, Paul understands that it is God's will for him to stay in Ephesus and not flee. How? Circumstances. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 16:8–9, "But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me." Paul did not necessarily hear a voice from heaven saying, "Remain in Ephesus." He saw by the way God was moving and saving souls in the city and the need to disciple new converts that it was not yet time for him to leave.

Think of circumstances as God's traffic lights. What are traffic lights for? If you are driving, they tell you when to go and when to stop. Many accidents occur when people in their cars do not pay attention to the traffic lights. In the Christian life, God will often use circumstances to guide us.

Here is an example. Let us say that you feel it is time to relocate to another area. You would like a change in scenery. You want to do something for the Lord in another city or maybe even another country. However, there are some circumstances that hinder you from making that move: no job or housing in the new location; your mate is dead-set against it; and you do not have complete peace. So, you pray diligently, "Lord, show me if this move is your will." You patiently wait for God to give you guidance. In the end, you see that the circumstances do not change. No job opens up. Your

mate is not in agreement with you. You have no lead on a place to live. And you still do not have peace about it. These circumstances are very good indicators that God does not approve of your relocating.

It is foolish to charge ahead and do something when God has tried to show you through circumstances that you should not attempt it. In Proverbs 22:3, we read, "A prudent man sees danger and takes refuge, but the simple keep going and suffer for it."

You may ask, "But can't the devil sometimes try to hinder us and destroy our faith by placing obstacles in our way? How do I know if the circumstances are one of God's red lights or one of the enemy's obstacles?" It is true that Satan often seeks to hinder us, especially when we are eager to do God's will. The Bible makes it clear that our enemy is like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). Paul wrote that we should put on the whole armor of God so we can take our stand against the devil's schemes (Ephesians 6:11). That is why we must maintain a close walk with God and be spiritually strong.

But keep this mind—the devil is not all-knowing like God. Satan and his network of demons, though ruthless and fierce, are finite beings with limitations. The enemy is not aware of all the intricacies of God's wonderful plan for our lives and cannot know simultaneously how the Spirit is leading every child of God throughout the world. The apostle Paul writes, "For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God" (1 Corinthians 2:11–12). All the enemy can do is harass us, attempt to confuse us as we seek to discern God's will, and hinder us with obstacles after God has given clear direction.

To dispel confusion, review what many godly Christians have learned over the centuries:

- Recognize that God is not the author of confusion;
- Stay in God's Word;
- Keep praying to God for clarity of thought;

- Claim God's promises for guidance;
- Share your concerns with mature believers who care about your spiritual well-being and can give you guidance;
- Persevere until the uncertainty lifts;
- Do not make any rash decisions.

Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done'" (Matthew 21:21). Jesus said this because He knew that challenges would arise and that the devil would throw up obstacles to keep us from doing God's will. The Lord wanted us to know that we had authority to tear down anything the enemy would put in our way.

There will be indicators of caution throughout life as we are led by God. Aren't you glad that you are not alone, trying to navigate the road ahead? Take time today to consider if God might be showing you something important through circumstances. It might be helpful now to make a list of circumstances that you need to evaluate.

God's Use of People

How do you feel about taking advice? Some people do not like to do it for fear someone is going to tell them what they do not want to hear—like the truth. Others are afraid to receive advice for fear that they are going to be led astray. Other people are embarrassed to ask advice or counsel because they think it will make them look foolish. This is probably one of the worst reasons not to seek advice. It is not a sign of weakness or ignorance to seek advice. In fact, the Bible reveals that it is a wise thing to do.

Consider these two verses:

- "The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice." (Proverbs 12:15)
- "For waging war you need guidance, and for victory many advisers." (Proverbs 24:6)

No matter who you are—rich or poor, educated or uneducated—whenever you are making a major decision about the will of God that will affect your life and that of others, you should seek the input, advice, and counsel of godly people. By talking it over, you allow God to intervene and speak into your life.

The key is talking to the right people—individuals who truly love God, who are full of the Spirit, demonstrate the fruit of godliness, serve the Lord faithfully, who want God's very best for your life, and who are known for wisdom. If you ask an unspiritual or foolish person for advice, you are liable to get bad counsel. A Danish proverb says, "He who builds according to every man's advice will have a crooked house." In your Bible-believing church, there are likely several people that would be happy to listen to you and offer their insights to help you; your pastors and elders, deacons, teachers, and other leaders are prime choices.

Conclusion

Knowing and doing God's will does not have to be a fearful, mystical experience filled with uncertainty. It is God's desire to give us direction and guidance. The most fulfilled people are those who know God's will and do it. David Livingstone, the famous Scottish missionary and explorer of Africa, spent many years in remote corners of that continent. He was often sick and faced innumerable hardships. Once, he was attacked and mauled by a lion, leaving one of his arms virtually useless. Although he lost friends and loved ones, he declared, "I had rather be in the heart of Africa in the will of God than on the throne of England out of the will of God" (Trivette, under "Stay in this Field").

If you are seeking direction from God about His will for your life, remember the following:

1. The process starts with being saved and earnestly desiring to know God's will.
2. You need to pray and ask God to show you His will.

3. You should endeavor to maintain a godly life with God's help.
4. Go to the Word of God for guidance, and be led by its principles.
5. Trust the Holy Spirit to lead and guide you.
6. Pay attention to what God may be doing in your life through circumstances.
7. Seek godly people for guidance.

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- Lewis, C. S. 1970. *God is the Dock—Essays on Theology and Ethics*. The Trustees of the Estate of C. S. Lewis.
- Trivette, Ken. Stay in this Field. <http://www.sermonsearch.com/content.aspx?id=15759> (accessed Aug. 2, 2007).
- Zwemer, Samuel M. 1923. *Call to Prayer*. New York: Marshall Bros.

SUGGESTED SCRIPTURES TO MEMORIZE

- Psalm 119:105
 Proverbs 12:15
 Proverbs 22:3
 Jeremiah 29:11
 Romans 8:14
 Romans 12:1–2
 Ephesians 5:17
 James 1:5

SELF-TEST

After studying the lesson, please read each study question carefully and circle the correct response. There is one correct response for each question.

1. *How can we be sure God wants us to know His will?*
 - a) *It makes sense.*
 - b) *The Bible tells us so.*
 - c) *All religions of the world emphasize the importance of knowing God's will.*
2. *What is the fundamental requirement for receiving guidance from God?*
 - a) *You must be born again.*
 - b) *You must be baptized.*
 - c) *You must go to church every Sunday.*
3. *How does prayer help in discerning the will of God?*
 - a) *Through prayer, you express your need for guidance and have faith that God will answer your request.*
 - b) *Through prayer, you experience peace and feel better.*
 - c) *Prayer is the only way to gain God's favor.*
4. *God will not reveal everything about His future plans for us all at once because*
 - a) *God likes to see His children struggle before He offers guidance.*
 - b) *He does not know the complete future, only parts of it.*
 - c) *God expects us to come to Him often and depend on Him.*
5. *Which response indicates a correct attitude when praying about God's will?*
 - a) *"God, I want to know your will, but please show me a few other options."*
 - b) *"God, I want to know your will and obey, no matter what it is."*
 - c) *"God, I want to know your will as long as it does not interfere with my plans."*

6. *Godliness is key to coming to know God's will because a godly person*
 - a) *never makes mistakes or sins.*
 - b) *demonstrates that his or her life is a living sacrifice unto God.*
 - c) *knows he or she is superior to most others.*
7. *The value of the Scripture is that it*
 - a) *serves as the foundation for understanding God's will.*
 - b) *is burdensome and irrelevant.*
 - c) *shows us what color and style of clothes to wear each day.*
8. *In the lesson, the Holy Spirit is compared to*
 - a) *a meteorologist.*
 - b) *a salesman who tries to convince you to buy his product.*
 - c) *an internal, all-powerful personal navigator.*
9. *When seeking God's will, turning to fellow Christians for advice is a*
 - a) *sure sign that you do not really trust God.*
 - b) *sign of weakness and immaturity.*
 - c) *chance to let God intervene and speak into your life.*
10. *What characteristics should you look for in someone who might offer you counsel?*
 - a) *He or she should have at least an advanced degree in counseling, three years of clinical experience, and serve on staff of a large church or private counseling center.*
 - b) *He or she should love God, be full of the Spirit, demonstrate the fruit of godliness, serve the Lord faithfully, want God's best for your life, and have wisdom.*
 - c) *He or she should be at least sixty-five years of age, a baptized church member, sing in the choir, teach a Sunday School class, and enjoy listening to other people's problems.*

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ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

Note: You can check your answers by using the answer guide. The numbers in the parentheses indicate which objective in the lesson to check.

1. *b* (10.1)
2. *a* (10.1)
3. *a* (10.2)
4. *c* (10.2)
5. *b* (10.2)
6. *b* (10.3)
7. *a* (10.4)
8. *c* (10.5)
9. *c* (10.6)
10. *b* (10.6)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS LESSON

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LESSON 11

Understanding Spiritual Authority

In this lesson, we will study what is known in many evangelical churches as “spiritual authority.” Some churches do a good job of dealing with spiritual authority, but others do not. In churches where the topic is not taught or discussed, some sincere followers of Christ remain ignorant of the biblical teaching on this important subject. These followers may then develop habits and attitudes that are detrimental to their own spiritual development and to the church family.

LESSON OUTLINE

Types of Authority
 Spiritual Authority Defined
 Submitting to Spiritual Authority
 Rebellion against Spiritual Authority
 Supporting the Local Church

LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. *Identify the different kinds of authority that exist.*
2. *Define spiritual authority.*
3. *Explain what it means to submit to spiritual authority.*
4. *Discuss the nature of rebellion against spiritual authority.*
5. *Identify ways to support and help your church and its spiritual leaders.*

Types of Authority

Objective 1:

Identify the different kinds of authority that exist.

Authority is real. Each one of us submits to various kinds of authority on a daily basis. Let us identify five different kinds of authority that we are all familiar with. First is God's authority. Though God gave human beings free will and permits us a great deal of latitude in choosing the path we will follow, God is still the ultimate authority. He also holds people accountable for their thoughts, words, decisions, and actions. For example, as Christians we are called to submit unconditionally to Christ's divine authority. Jesus, just before returning to heaven, said to His disciples, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18).

Second, there is expert authority. A university professor who has spent many years researching and studying may be an expert or an authority on a subject. A famous soccer player or gymnast may be considered an authority in his or her chosen field of sports. A person may start out washing dishes in a restaurant, become a waiter, move up to cook, and finally be promoted to a managerial role. He or she knows the business on all levels. A wise person will learn from those with expertise.

Third, authority can be acquired through coercion, tyranny, abuse, and manipulation. The history books are filled with the examples of tyrants and dictators who rose to power through unscrupulous methods and ruled harshly and unfairly over their people. Christians who must live in countries where leaders abuse authority often suffer because of the ungodly behavior of those in power. The apostle Peter writes, "But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God" (1 Peter 2:20). Before you go on, read 1 Peter 3:13–17 also.

Fourth, there is delegated authority. For example, a storeowner may delegate to a certain employee the task of supervising the newest workers hired. A pastor of a church may ask one of the members to head up an outreach ministry or a children's program. As believers, we may receive this kind of authority from time to time or be required to submit to it.

Fifth, there is entrusted authority. Examples of this kind of authority would include police and elected officials. Societies entrust them with authority to protect citizens, enforce the laws of the land, and seek the best interests of the population. Such authority may not be perfect, but according to the New Testament, Christians are commanded to submit to civil authorities so long as they are not being asked to violate God's higher moral law. Before you go on, read Romans 13:1–7; 1 Peter 2:13–17.

Spiritual Authority Defined

Objective 2:

Define spiritual authority.

In the Christian context, spiritual authority refers to the God-established offices or positions of authority within the church, the body of Christ. In Ephesians 4:11–13, Paul writes, “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

The five offices or roles mentioned above—apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher—are sometimes referred to as the five-fold ministry offices. Most Christians best relate to the office of pastor and teacher. If you are a Christian, you probably have gotten to know a pastor or Bible teacher. In fact, many biblical scholars say that the Greek of the Ephesians 4:11 indicates that these two offices are actually one combined office—the pastor/teacher. Every local church needs at least one leader who fulfills this role. The Bible is very clear about the qualifications and responsibilities of the pastor/teacher. The New Testament also refers to the pastor/teacher as “elder” and “overseer.” Please take time now to read 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and 1 Peter 5:1–4.

Notice that those who hold the office of pastor/teacher have a specific function. Their express purpose is to prepare God’s people for service and help them mature in the faith. This does not mean they are God’s favorites—simply that they are called, divinely equipped, and given responsibility to teach and preach, care for and lead their fellow believers. The authority these leaders possess to do that job is delegated by Christ himself. It is not conferred upon them by humans. However, there is no doubt that, within the local church

context, it takes time for believers to get to know and trust their pastors and teachers.

While many countries function well as democracies, giving their citizens many rights and privileges, the church, both universal and local, is not really a democracy. This may come as a shock to you! This is not to say that individual Christians cannot voice their opinions or endeavor to bring about positive change in their local assemblies. Indeed, it is good when they do. Nor does this imply that only pastors hear from God. God speaks to the hearts of all truly committed believers. Nor does it mean that only pastors and teachers can have an active ministry. The truth is that all believers should be active, serving God, using their talents, abilities, and resources.

When we say that the church is not a democracy, we mean that it is ultimately led by God who guides and uses its spiritual leaders to promote His agenda. The church's spiritual leaders, in turn, serve and work with believers to advance God's purpose and plan. It is vital to understand that the spiritual direction a local church takes is dependent upon the vision and plans God reveals to its pastor and the leadership team. They pray about and discuss the plans thoroughly to make sure they are accurately discerning God's voice; then they implement them.

Also, spiritual leaders like the pastor/teacher are entrusted by God with the responsibility of fearlessly preaching the Word of God, correcting any false teaching, rebuking when necessary, and helping those who have fallen and need restoration. Take time now to read 2 Timothy 4:1–5.

Submitting to Spiritual Authority

Objective 3:

Explain what it means to submit to spiritual authority.

Hebrews 13:17 commands believers: "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you."

What does it mean for a Christian to submit to spiritual authority? Sometimes it is helpful to define something by pointing out what it does not mean. For instance, submission to spiritual authority does not mean that the believer becomes a slave, mindlessly obeying the commands of those in authority. No pastor/teacher or any other church leader should ever require that. If they do, it is a sure sign that they have become unbalanced and are not demonstrating true godly attitudes about their leadership.

Submission does not mean you unconditionally accept everything you are told, either. Every believer has the right and responsibility to evaluate what he or she is told, using the Bible as his or her standard. Under no circumstance should you participate in behavior that is contrary to the moral guidelines given in God's revealed Word—no matter who tells you to do it.

True submission, first of all, is an attitude of the heart. It speaks of humility. A submissive person understands that he or she still depends on God and others. A submissive person recognizes that God has established leaders who have helpful insights and godly wisdom to share. Believers do well to understand that they need to be connected to God and other Christians, including their leaders, to reach their full potential.

Submission is also behavioral. A submissive person shows proper respect for those in authority, bearing in mind their role (or office) and calling from God, giving due consideration to advice, correction, suggestions, and requests. In the body of Christ, compliance with spiritual authority is not to be forced or coerced. Believers respond to their leaders in joyful cooperation.

Though most Christians are grateful for and respectful of those in leadership, certain people find it difficult to accept this teaching on spiritual authority. Here are some common reasons for their reluctance:

First, some individuals do not submit willingly to any authority. Perhaps they were rebels as children and teenagers, and they have carried over into adult life attitudes and behaviors that are unscriptural, unhealthy,

and harmful to all good relationships. Such people first need to submit to God and ask Him to change their hearts.

Second, some people have been hurt by unscrupulous church leaders, and now they are suspicious of anyone who exercises authority in the body of Christ. Though the majority of born-again, Spirit-filled church leaders really do love God, desire to serve Christ, and want the best for His church, pastors and other spiritual leaders are still human and fallible. Sometimes they err. At times a small number commit serious sin and bring unspeakable pain to Christians and dishonor to God. They may misuse their position of influence to advance selfish interests. They may err doctrinally and become unbalanced, promoting unscriptural practices or teaching. They may become power hungry, attempt to suppress all criticism, and rule over their congregations like an oppressive king over his subjects. Some form of Christian counseling would be recommended for people hurt by abusive church leaders. Counseling can help heal these wounds and eliminate bitterness and resentment. Those who have been hurt need compassion, understanding, and help in finding a loving church and pastor with whom to associate.

Third, some people disagree strongly with their church leaders on certain issues and assume it is acceptable to resist them on all issues. For instance, they may say to their pastor, "You have authority as long as I agree with you. When I disagree, your spiritual authority is forfeited." These parishioners need to be shown the fallacy of such a position. The Bible does not teach that everybody in the church is always going to agree on all issues. It does teach that believers must love each other, promote peace, forgive, and seek to build the unity of the body of Christ.

Fourth, some people resent the success or recognition certain church leaders have acquired. This is jealousy, and it is condemned as sinful in God's Word. The apostle Paul notes, "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and ... jealousy" (Galatians 5:19-20).

Fifth, some people reject the spiritual authority in their church because of their leader's age, race, educational

background, or other personal matters. This, too, is unscriptural behavior. Galatians 3:26–28 says, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Sixth, some individuals are simply angry at God. They blame God for the painful things they experienced. They may even blame God for the consequences of the foolish choices they made in life. Though such individuals often find their way into the local church and begin recovery, it may be difficult at times for them to appreciate and trust the spiritual authority invested in the pastors and teachers.

Seventh, it is unfortunate but true that some Christians become unduly proud. They think they are more spiritual, righteous, or wise than their spiritual leaders. Certainly, it is possible and desirable for all believers to have great depth of spirituality, to be knowledgeable of the Bible, to live exemplary, godly lives, and to possess wisdom. However, true humility keeps Christians from flaunting their achievements in the face of others or putting others down. People who become unduly proud and criticize spiritual leaders for perceived weakness are not walking in love and are forgetting that God chooses whom He will for leadership. Moreover, everyone, including church leaders, is a work in progress.

Eighth, some individuals in church are not really born again. Though they act like believers at times, they often demonstrate worldly attitudes and behaviors, including disrespect for and disregard of spiritual leaders.

Rebellion against Spiritual Authority

Objective 4:

Discuss the nature of rebellion against spiritual authority.

Our sinful world is full of rebellion. Jails and prisons are full of men and women who decided they were not subject to the laws of the land or God. Most never expect to be caught breaking the law. They imagined they were smarter

than everybody else. However, the Bible warns, “You may be sure that your sin will find you out” (Numbers 32:23). No one can rebel against God or society forever. People who live in rebellion against God and humankind go from one disastrous situation to the next. Ultimately, they must still answer to God when this life is over. Romans 14:10 promises that “we will all stand before God’s judgment seat.”

Sadly, even in the church rebellion can occur, and it takes many forms. A believer who is not careful to stay close to God through prayer, Bible study, worship, and fellowship with other believers may get entangled in sinful and worldly activities. A Christian may begin to harbor unforgiveness toward someone and develop a bitter spirit. A follower of Christ may allow disillusionment or disappointment in life, within the church, or with a church leader to foster a negative attitude against that pastor. A Christian may even foolishly engage in senseless gossip or malicious criticism of God’s people and leaders. Unchecked, this will produce pain in the local church and the life of its leaders, thus hampering their effectiveness.

In the Old Testament is the story of Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. The miracle-filled story does not end there. God used Moses for forty years to lead the Israelites as they prepared to enter the Promised Land. He was not only a prophet, but also their shepherd or pastor. Many times the people lost patience, engaged in sinful behavior, and lashed out at Moses and his brother Aaron with unjustified criticism and murmuring. Notice the response Moses gave on one occasion when the Israelites became angry and criticized everything Moses and Aaron were doing. Moses told the people, “Who are we, that you should grumble against us? ... You are not grumbling against us, but against the Lord” (Exodus 16:7–8).

When a believer willfully and stubbornly rebels against the spiritual authority God has placed in the church, it is an act of rebellion against God. This is a strong statement that is supported in Scripture. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and

whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me'" (John 13:20). Likewise, whoever rejects anyone Jesus sends, not only rejects the messenger but also rejects Jesus. This is not a good position to be in for one who claims to be a Christian. Ongoing rebellion against spiritual authority is equivalent to rebellion against God.

This does not suggest, however, that pastors and other spiritual leaders have the right to do and say anything they want. They, too, are accountable to God and others who are over them in the Lord. James says, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1). God holds spiritual leaders to a higher standard of accountability.

However, no Christian should ever want to find himself or herself in the position of fighting against one of God's chosen leaders. It is clear from Scripture that those who fight against their leaders actually fall into the devil's trap. The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, a spiritual leader of the church in Ephesus, saying,

And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will. (2 Timothy 2:24–26)

Supporting the Local Church

Objective 5:

Identify ways to support and help your church and its spiritual leaders.

There are several ways for Christians to support their local church. First, Christians must be faithful to attend church services and participate in the life of the church.

Hebrews 10:24–25 tell us, “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Some people underestimate the value of being present when God’s people meet. Joining together with others encourages us and heartens the spiritual leaders who have prayed and prepared many hours to minister to us. We also need to do more than merely show up and sit like robots. We can be friendly, participate in the worship, and encourage the preacher with “Amen” when he or she makes a good point in the message.

Second, we must pray. Certain things, even good things, may seem more important or exciting than prayer. Some people love to play a musical instrument. Others live for evangelism. Still others thrive on helping the needy. Certain people even enjoy doing physical labor as service to the Lord. However, let us never forget that it is the duty of every Christian to pray. Colossians 4:2 says, “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.” In particular, we must pray for our spiritual leaders. You may find this hard to accept, but spiritual leaders face temptations and spiritual conflicts just as the rest of us do. The devil knows that if he can topple spiritual leaders or discourage them enough to quit, it will have a domino effect on the rest of the church. You can be a tremendous help by praying fervently for your pastors and their families.

Third, as Christians, we must get to know our pastors and Bible teachers. In Ephesians 4, we learn that pastors and teachers are some of Christ’s gifts to the church. Jesus did not leave us buildings or money or technology. The Lord gave us people, called and equipped to love and bless His church. The more we know our leaders, the more we will likely come to trust them.

Fourth, we must hold our spiritual leaders in high esteem. Notice what Paul writes in 1 Timothy 5:17: “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.” God has seen fit to call our spiritual leaders

to the office they hold in the church. In secular society, it is not uncommon for unsaved people to act with belligerence or hostility toward leadership of any kind. Such disrespect might be toward their employer, the police, a city official, or national leadership. While such behavior may go on in secular society, there is no place for it in the Lord's church.

Fifth, Christians should help share ministry responsibilities. The Lord never intended for the whole ministry of the church to be carried solely by the pastor or a handful of people. It has been said all too often that ninety percent of the work in the church is done by ten percent of the church members. Sadly, this has caused the burnout of many outstanding workers. If every believer will participate in helping, serving, and giving, no one will be overburdened. Therefore, be willing to serve in your local church. "The Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does" (Ephesians 6:8). A great joy will be yours also as you discover and use your gifts.

In conclusion, this lesson is a challenging one because it introduces biblical concepts that may be unfamiliar to many people who have recently come to know Christ as Lord and Savior. However, the lesson is of great relevance to every believer. May you be the kind of Christian that is a joy to lead, and may God open doors for you to great things in His kingdom.

SUGGESTED SCRIPTURE VERSES TO MEMORIZE

Exodus 16:8

Matthew 28:18

John 13:20

Ephesians 4:11–13

1 Timothy 5:17

2 Timothy 2:24–26

2 Timothy 4:2

Hebrews 10:24–25

Hebrews 13:17

James 3:1

SELF-TEST

After studying the lesson, please read each study question carefully, and circle the correct response. There is only one correct response for each question.

1. *To have expert authority means*
 - a) *you can use influence or power any way you desire as long as you do not hurt anybody else.*
 - b) *someone delegated it to you to make sure you can help others.*
 - c) *people recognize that you acquired great knowledge and/or skills in a certain area.*
2. *Spiritual authority in this lesson refers to the authority*
 - a) *delegated by God to pastors and others called to lead in local churches.*
 - b) *that Christians have to tell others the Good News about Jesus.*
 - c) *that angels have as God's messengers.*
3. *Ephesians 4:11–13 talks about the gifts Christ has given to the church. These gifts include apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers.*
 - a) *True*
 - b) *False*
4. *The local church should be recognized as a democratic system.*
 - a) *True*
 - b) *False*
5. *Pastors receive authority from the Lord to implement divinely-inspired direction for the church, preach God's Word, correct false teaching, and help believers.*
 - a) *True*
 - b) *False*
6. *According to this lesson, submission to spiritual authority means*
 - a) *obeying everything a pastor tells you even when it does not make sense or agree with the Bible.*
 - b) *showing proper respect for those over you in the Lord.*
 - c) *taking a pilgrimage to a holy shrine and kissing the hand of a religious leader.*

7. Among the reasons why some people find it difficult to respect spiritual authority, which response below is not one of the reasons covered in the lesson?
 - a) Some people have been hurt by unscrupulous church leaders.
 - b) Some people resist submitting to any kind of authority.
 - c) Some think it is acceptable to resist spiritual leaders on all issues just because they disagree on certain issues.
 - d) Some people believe submitting to pastors and other church leaders makes these leaders' work too easy.
8. What does the story of Moses facing the angry Israelites teach us about grumbling against spiritual authority?
 - a) Grumbling against God's servants is necessary and meets with God's approval.
 - b) Grumbling against God's servants is equivalent to grumbling against God.
 - c) Grumbling against God's servants is a form of protest that Jesus encouraged.
 - d) Grumbling is simply natural human behavior that God accepts.
9. Which response below is not mentioned in the lesson as a way to support your church?
 - a) Attend services and participate in the life of the church.
 - b) Help shoulder the responsibility in church.
 - c) Hold your spiritual leaders in high esteem.
 - d) Send anonymous letters to your spiritual leaders, telling them what they are doing wrong.
10. The subject of spiritual authority has very little relevance to the average Christian.
 - a) True
 - b) False

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ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

Note: You can check your answers by using the answer guide. The numbers in the parentheses indicate which objective in the lesson to check.

1. c (11.1)
2. a (11.2)
3. a (11.2)
4. b (11.2)
5. a (11.2)
6. b (11.3)
7. d (11.3)
8. b (11.4)
9. d (11.5)
10. b (11.5)

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Joe Szabo, a career missionary, is married and has three children. Currently he works at Global University's Center for Evangelism and Discipleship. He was a church planter and Bible teacher in Spain from 1991–2004. Prior to his missionary work, Joe pastored in the United States.

LESSON 12

Finding Your Place in Ministry

Few things are as rewarding as responding to the needs of others. Paul quotes the words of Jesus as a standard for sharing our lives with others: ““It is more blessed to give than to receive”” (Acts 20:34–35). An important step toward joyful Christian living is giving your life in service to others. Sharing your life in ministry spiritually strengthens you and those served.

Biblical Christianity is based upon two great commandments. First, Christians are told to love the Lord God with all our heart, soul, and mind (Matthew 22:37). A second commandment flows naturally from the first commandment: ““Love your neighbor as yourself”” (Matthew 22:39). A Christian’s love for God finds full expression through loving and serving others. The Bible is very clear on this point. Believers manifest genuine love for God when they actively minister to others. Saying to God, “I love you,” is good, but loving God requires more than words.

Think about John’s words: “Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:18). John was concerned that Christians would be all talk and no action. How easy to talk about how much we love one another! While it is important to tell people they are loved, words are seldom enough. Transforming ministry demands love in action.

John was amazed by Jesus’ sacrificial death for us. He realized that Jesus’ sacrifice made God’s love tangible and visible. Likewise, John believed Christians should demonstrate love in a sacrificial and active manner. According to John, active expressions of Christian love are foundational for effective Christian ministry (1 John 3:17).

This lesson is designed to help you develop attitudes and tools necessary for ministering with love to a hurting

world. As you study this lesson, ask God to help you express your personal ministry to others. Remember this basic truth as you study and pray: Christian love is the foundation of all effective ministries (1 Corinthians 13). Therefore, invite the Holy Spirit to fill your heart with love. Then shall a natural flow of ministry be possible.

LESSON OUTLINE

The Believer's Responsibility
 Uniqueness in Ministry
 The Ministry of Servanthood
 Loyalty to the Local Church
 Discovering God's Will in Ministry
 God in the Local Church
 A New Level of Service

LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. *Describe the ministry responsibilities of believers in the local church.*
2. *Give a biblical explanation for personal uniqueness in ministry.*
3. *Explain the mix of a good servant.*
4. *Demonstrate ownership and loyalty within the local church.*
5. *Describe the process of discovering God's will in ministry.*
6. *Discuss God's role in local church ministry.*
7. *Show the steps in preparing for a new level of service within the local church.*

The Believer's Responsibility

Objective 1:

Describe the ministry responsibilities of believers in the local church.

People often think the term ministry applies to a special group of people, including church leaders, pastors, teachers, and evangelists. However, the New Testament teaches something very different. The word *ministry* is used to translate the Greek term *diakonia*. *Diakonia* refers to a compassionate love and response to those in need. In the first century church, this word generally included all ministry areas of the church. Thus, Christian service conducted by anyone in the church was viewed as ministry. Today, such a view of ministry should encourage all believers to seek meaningful ministry within the local church.

First Corinthians 12 provides a firm understanding of ministry in the local church. This chapter also reveals important information on the expression of ministry through certain gifts.

- There is a diversity of ministering gifts in the church, and the Holy Spirit is in charge of their manifestations (vv. 4–5).
- Although ministering gifts have a variety of expressions, “God works all of them in all men.” This opens up special giftings to everyone (vv. 6–7).
- A wonderful variety of gifts is mentioned. God empowers their manifestations through any individual He selects (vv. 4–11).
- Like our human bodies, the body of Christ (the church) has many different kinds of members (vv. 12–14). God values the variety of personalities and giftings in His church.
- We must never think that because we do not have a ministry like someone else, we are not important (vv. 14–17).

- God uniquely arranges gifts and ministry given to individuals (vv. 18–19).
- God uses a variety of people and gifts for balance and wholeness in the body of Christ (vv. 21–26).
- All of us should desire to help others through gifts or ministries God imparts to us (vv. 27–31).

Paul viewed a life of ministry as the spiritual birthright of every believer. He understood that ministry involves more than great teaching and preaching. Ministry was also practical, touching every area of human experience. Paul recognized a wide range of ministry efforts within various situations (Romans 12:4–13).

Uniqueness in Ministry

Objective 2:

*Give a biblical explanation
for personal uniqueness in ministry.*

The word *unique* means “one of a kind.” You are one of a kind! There is no one else like you. For example, no one else has fingerprints or footprints that match yours. Your personality is also different from that of everyone else. Personality is the most distinct thing about you. How you relate to others and how you communicate with others are features of your personality. Your general attitude toward life is another important aspect of personality.

God’s choice to make us unique is an expression of His desire for variety. Creation has many expressions of God’s desire for variety. The lavish colors in birds or the variety of exotic fish in the sea are examples of uniqueness. God gave majestic mountains one kind of beauty and rolling plains another kind of beauty. Examples of God’s variety in creation are almost limitless.

Just as God celebrates uniqueness in creation, He also wants variety in His church. Have you noticed how people express love for God in different ways? Think about this example: An elderly woman often purchases a box of food. Because she has little money, buying this food is a

sacrifice. She places the box of food at the door of a needy family and walks away. The needy family never knows the source of their blessing. Secretly giving food to those in need is this woman's unique way of ministering to others.

Uniqueness is reflected in the attitudes and actions of our lives. When we minister to others, our uniqueness shines. Consider this example: A man often takes a large box of apples to a busy street corner. As people walk by, he holds out an apple in one hand and a gospel tract in his other hand. Usually, people graciously take both the apple and the gospel tract.

We are also unique in our experiences. God often uses the unique experiences of each believer as a means of ministry to others. God may, for example, use the past difficulties of your life to help others during hard times. Like Paul, we can offer our experiences to others as a means of comfort. Paul's darkest experiences were used to bring hope to others. Note what he says in the following passage:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, ... who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. (2 Corinthians 1:3–5)

Never feel you have little to offer God. Your uniqueness and experiences are two ways that you may minister to others.

The Ministry of Servanthood

Objective 3:

Explain the mix of a good servant.

An important question that every follower of Jesus must ask is, "How may I best serve Christ in my local church?" This is a vital question that is close to the heart of God. God already knows how you may best serve His

church. He also knows that your desire to serve Him leads to Christian service. Your prayerful consideration of Christian service allows God to speak to you about specific ministries.

Prayerfully considering ministry goals also helps you think clearly about your personal “gift mix” for ministry. The phrase gift mix applies to the combination of potential ministry abilities. These ministry abilities are often viewed as talents, skills, and spiritual gifts. Following are definitions for these abilities:

- Talents are natural abilities that a person may have from birth. Some individuals, for example, may have the natural talent of singing or public speaking. Natural talents are often strengthened through study and practice.
- Skills are abilities largely acquired through instruction and training—both formal and informal, and through life experience. Administrative and accounting skills are good examples of learned skills.
- Spiritual gifts are special abilities that come to the individual through the power of the Holy Spirit. We find listings of spiritual gifts in Romans 12:6–8 and 1 Corinthians 12:7–11.

The most important step in exercising ministry ability is asking God to make you a servant to the church. The servant attitude will open many doors of opportunity to minister through your special abilities (1 Peter 4:7–11). You must also study the Scriptures to understand how God uses the unique talents, skills, and gifts of His servants.

Jesus called us to serve others. He taught that ministry begins with the attitude of servanthood. The excellence of our gifts or abilities is not the primary issue in effective ministry. How pointless to use one’s years of service as the ultimate standard of ministry! Rather, Jesus taught that servanthood is the standard of great ministry (Matthew 20:25–28).

Peter also understood that any gift or ability finds its highest expression through servanthood. Consider his words:

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 4:10–11)

Bill Bright was the founder and president of Campus Crusade for Christ. Even after Bill's death, this ministry remains one of the largest in the world. Bill Bright had deep respect for Christian and secular leaders all over the world. He was a man of great ability, who carried out ministry with a humble servant-like attitude. Bright noted four servant qualities that demonstrate passionate and effective ministry.

- *Sacrifice*: Sacrifice always puts others first no matter what personal comforts the believer must release.
- *Humility*: Being humble means surrendering our own rights to minister to others. Like Jesus, we look at sincere humility as a serious issue in kingdom ministry.
- *Encouragement*: Jesus constantly taught and encouraged His disciples through His careful training and thoughtful words. Scripture teaches us to encourage one another (Romans 12:8; Hebrews 10:25).
- *Giving*: A giving servant sees the needs of a person whom others overlook. Giving to others is a ministry of great joy that seeks no repayment (Bright 2004, 104–107).

Ministering to those struggling was Jesus' passion. His life is a pattern for us to follow in ministry. Reaching our local communities for Christ depends upon ministry abilities that reflect the spirit of Jesus. There is simply no other way to accomplish ministry tasks.

Loyalty to the Local Church

Objective 4:

Demonstrate ownership and loyalty within the local church.

Ownership is at the heart of passionate ministry. We know that the church belongs to God. He has paid the price of owning the church through Jesus' sacrificial death (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). God has, however, given the church the responsibility of caring for itself. Paul had this caring ownership in mind when he said, "So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (Romans 12:5). Paul wanted believers in the local churches to have a deep sense of responsibility toward one another. The backbone of ownership is our enduring responsibility toward our fellow servants.

How important that we learn to love and care for one another! Believers who care for one another will stick together in tough times. Too often, Christians break off relationships when there is stress or difficulty. Surely, owning something that is not broken is easy, but repairing broken things takes time and sometimes money.

Our reasoning can become flawed during times of difficulty within the church. Often we think that another church will be better, but there are no perfect churches. It will be only a matter of time before something goes wrong in the new church. Also, the influence of our ministry is lost every time we make such a change out of frustration. Long seasons of prayer and self-examination should be conducted before giving up and moving on. We must be careful not to give up ownership too quickly when things go wrong.

Ownership is reflected through qualities like loyalty and persistence. When times get difficult, we must care for one another even more. Gary Collins, a Christian psychologist, writes "Caring can be difficult, challenging, time consuming, and often inconvenient. But caring is therapeutic for both the one who cares and the one cared for." He further states that caring for each other in troubled times brings a sense of satisfaction and deep joy (Collins 1980, 18).

Jesus paid the ultimate price for God's ownership of the church. Believers honor God when they, too, pay a price for a healthy local church. Patience, forgiveness, and love reflect a deep concern for the church. Remember, ownership means that you take full responsibility of caring for something that belongs to you. Successful ministry shouts out this powerful message: "We belong to one another; therefore, we care for one another!"

Discovering God's Will in Ministry

Objective 5:

Describe the process of discovering God's will in ministry.

Ministry within the local church is an exciting challenge. Finding your place in ministry within the local church is a true adventure in faith—an adventure that requires vital work on your part. As we desire God's guidance in this important area of personal ministry, it is well to remember the words of Jesus: "'Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened'" (Matthew 7:7–8).

Although we commonly connect the above verse to prayer, it is also a powerful statement about moving forward in God's plan. According to Jesus, we need a determined attitude toward prayer and life. The verbs ask, seek, and knock represent an increasing intensity in our approach to prayer and life. Asking is passive. Seeking is one step beyond asking; seeking implies that we are looking for something. Determined seekers knock on doors to get the answer.

The prayerful process of asking, seeking, and knocking helps you discover the right ministry at the right time. This focused process of spiritual discovery will aid you throughout your life. Believers will always have seasons of getting new direction from God. There will also be times of redirection in ministry. Like an airplane in flight, we

often are required to make mid-course corrections to keep our God-given ministries on target.

Your attitude of prayerful determination can be applied to various steps in discovering God's will for ministry. Always include the following steps in discovering your personal ministry to the church.

- *Consulting Others:* Godly individuals can help us define our strengths for church ministry. Proverbs 11:14 states, "Many advisers make victory sure." Such advisers include your pastor, a godly elder, or a trusted and mature friend.
- *Searching Scripture:* God's word is a lamp to our feet and light to our path (Psalm 119:105). The psalmist was likely referring to a small oil lamp that provided limited light. He had light for the next step only. Do not become overly anxious when your ministry opportunities seem limited. Faithfully study Scripture, and take ministry one step at a time.
- *Interpreting Experiences:* Expect your experiences to play a strategic role in shaping your ministry. Think about how God used both good and bad experiences to guide Joseph's life (Genesis 37–48). God often uses circumstances to help us discern and accomplish His will in ministry.
- *Utilizing Prayer:* The book of Proverbs shares great wisdom: "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" (Proverbs 3:5–6). It is not unreasonable to pray about your ministry in the local church on a daily basis. Few things are more important than discovering God's ministry plan for your life.

As you seek God's ministry plan for your life, David's words will be encouraging: "You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand" (Psalm 16:11).

Do you know the joy of ministering and living exactly in the way God created you to live? God's will is that you find great

joy in your service to His church. Great joy and peace are God's gifts when you walk by faith and live in obedience to His will.

God in the Local Church

Objective 6:

Discuss God's role in local church ministry.

Our role in ministry requires obedience to God's plan. God's role in ministry is to impart to us strength and ability to carry out His plan. Every kind of ministry requires God's power. Memorize these words from Paul, who prayed that we would know and understand "the riches of his [God's] glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 1:18–20).

Paul's prayer refers to God's manifestation of power through Christ's resurrection. He wanted us to understand that God's power brings vitality into daily living. Paul also teaches that Jesus now rules our lives with ultimate authority. He is the supreme head of the church (Ephesians 4:15) and offers the fullness of His powerful life to everyone ministering within the church.

I started preaching at a young age. When I was sixteen years old, I was asked to preach a series of meetings. How well I remember the first night of those meetings! I had carefully prepared an outline on the outstanding conversion of the apostle Paul (Acts 9). I studied hard and sought God's blessings upon my effort.

Delivering the sermon that evening was more difficult than I imagined. There seemed to be no life in my preaching, and I got little response from the congregation. After preaching the sermon, I was deeply discouraged. I wondered if I was really called to a preaching and teaching ministry.

The next morning, I earnestly sought God in prayer, asking for His anointing on my ministry. My words were, "Lord, I will preach for you all the days of my life if you will bless my sermon tonight. I cannot do this without you." I feared another failure without God's help.

That night, a miracle occurred. A great sense of God's presence overwhelmed me as I began to preach. Words with authority flowed easily from my mouth. It was as though God had taken over my mouth. I knew then that God had powerfully answered my prayer for anointing. Still, after forty years of ministry, I remember the significance of that powerful night. It was the moment when God's call to ministry and His empowerment for ministry came together.

While your call to ministry may not be preaching, you too need empowerment for ministry. The favor and blessing of God must bless every kind of ministry within the church.

A New Level of Service

Objective 7:

Show the steps in preparing for a new level of service within the local church.

God desires that you discover new levels of ministry to both believers and nonbelievers. A new level of ministry means two things: that your present ministry is raised to a new level of spiritual quality and that you are capable of accepting a new role of ministry. This new role often includes more responsibility in serving others.

Achieving a new level in ministry, however, does not mean that you become more important in the eyes of others. Ministry is never about personal agendas or how others view your service for God. Ministry is always about unselfishly serving God by serving others. New levels of service come when you have faithfully prepared for future ministry. Do not assume your ministry will always be the same; be open to any new direction God creates.

Conclusion

Preparing for ministry in a new direction benefits your present ministry for God. Prayerfully consider these steps to your next level of ministry:

- Continually study and memorize the Scriptures. God's Word is our primary tool in ministry to others.
- Read and study books that can help prepare you for a life of service.
- Faithfully develop a devotional life that includes prayer, the study of Scripture, and personal examination.
- Acknowledge your weaknesses, and allow God's Spirit to help you overcome personal obstacles.
- Learn flexibility and patience. God seldom works out our life plan according to our blueprints or timetable.
- Develop the important qualities of loyalty to others and faithfulness to your local church.
- Make your ministry accountable to others. Flying "solo" in God's work does not succeed. Making yourself accountable to other members of your ministry team helps insure successful ministry.
- Foster creativity in your approach to ministry. You are unique. God wishes to use your special gifts, talents, and skills.

Discovering new pathways in ministry is both a challenge and a responsibility, but seeking fresh approaches for serving others will keep ministry exciting. So, prepare yourself in the moment, and the future will bring opportunities never imagined.

Reference List

- Bright, Bill. 2004. *Discover the Real Jesus*. Wheaton: Tyndale.
- Collins, Gary. 1980. *The Joy of Caring*. Waco, TX: Word Book.

SUGGESTED SCRIPTURE VERSES TO MEMORIZE

- Proverbs 3:5–6
- Matthew 20:25–28
- Matthew 22:37–40
- Romans 12:5
- Romans 12:4–8
- 2 Corinthians 1:3–5
- Ephesians 1:18–20
- 1 John 3:18

SELF-TEST

After studying the lesson, please read each study question carefully and circle the correct response. There is only one correct response for each question.

1. *Loving God is*
 - a) *not that important.*
 - b) *passive in nature.*
 - c) *vital as a motivation to serve others.*
2. *The Bible teaches that we should love*
 - a) *only with our words.*
 - b) *only when we receive love in return.*
 - c) *through our words and deeds.*
3. *Our uniqueness*
 - a) *only creates more problems in ministry.*
 - b) *is to be celebrated and used for ministry.*
 - c) *is an error in design.*
4. *The ministry mix of a true servant includes*
 - a) *one or more of your gifts, skills, and talents.*
 - b) *only things you read from a book.*
 - c) *only gifts and talents that other people recognize in you.*
5. *Whether we talk about gifts, skills, or talents, we know our abilities*
 - a) *should be hidden away and never used.*
 - b) *are used only at our leisure.*
 - c) *are a means to serve God by serving others.*
6. *How does the Holy Spirit assist us in finding a place of ministry?*
 - a) *He helps us feel good when we are successful.*
 - b) *He empowers us for effective servant ministry to others.*
 - c) *He empowers us only in the areas of our personal ministry interest.*

7. *What does the Bible teach about personal ministry within the church?*
 - a) *Local church ministry is only for a few chosen people.*
 - b) *Local church ministry is possible only after extensive education.*
 - c) *Local church ministry provides a point of service for all believers.*
8. *Ownership in the local church*
 - a) *means you develop a deep sense of responsibility for the ministries of the church.*
 - b) *is a concern for only leaders in the church.*
 - c) *is nothing you need to worry about until someone says you are needed.*
9. *Ministry and service in the local church are largely the result of*
 - a) *sincere and persistent prayer by anyone desiring ministry.*
 - b) *deciding what you want for ministry.*
 - c) *someone telling you how and where to minister.*
10. *We reach new levels of ministerial calling and effectiveness by*
 - a) *getting at least six years of training after conversion.*
 - b) *studying Scripture, developing a strong devotional life, and continuing in prayer.*
 - c) *relying only on what we feel is right for us.*

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ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

Note: If you answer a study question incorrectly, you can find the objective it was drawn from by looking at the references in parentheses.

1. *c* (12.1)
2. *c* (12.1)
3. *b* (12.2)
4. *a* (12.3)
5. *c* (12.3)
6. *b* (12.6)
7. *c* (12.5)
8. *a* (12.4)
9. *a* (12.5)
10. *b* (12.7)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS LESSON

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LESSON 13

Striving for Excellence

Are you willing to be more than you presently are? Are you eager to excel? Is striving for perfection a living reality for you? Excellence for a Christian should be more than a distant dream. It should be our daily aim and lifelong pursuit. In the closing greeting of a letter to the Corinthians, Paul urged the church of Corinth to “aim for perfection” (2 Corinthians 13:11). Paul’s instruction is extended to us today. The Lord is calling us to be the very best at whatever we do, whenever and wherever we do it.

Author Zig Ziglar writes,

Success means doing the best we can with what we have. Success is in the doing, not in the getting; in the trying, not in the triumph. Success is a personal standard, reaching for the highest that is in us, becoming all that we can be. If we do our best, we are a success. Success is the maximum utilization of the ability that you have.

One of my favorite examples of success is Sir Winston Churchill. He had to overcome tremendous obstacles. Nonetheless, early in his life Churchill decided to excel. He wanted a life, not just an existence. He wanted to make his mark so that he could walk in the paths of greatness (Mansfield 1995, 125). To merely exist was no better than death. Churchill believed that one can either reflect on history or create history.

LESSON OUTLINE

Excellence Versus Mediocrity

Rebekah's Excellence

Integrity and Excellence

Planning for Excellence

LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. *Explain the difference between excellence and mediocrity.*
2. *Explain how Rebekah demonstrated excellence.*
3. *Show the relationship between integrity and excellence.*
4. *Show why planning is vital for excellence.*

Excellence Versus Mediocrity

Objective 1:

Explain the difference between excellence and mediocrity.

Excellence is going beyond the expected, the normal. Mediocrity, however, is doing the minimum—performing neither badly nor well, doing only what is expected and no more, caring nothing for improvement. Following are biblical examples of excellence and mediocrity.

In the book of Revelation, the church of Philadelphia was excellent. The church at Laodicea was mediocre and lukewarm. Abraham was excellent; Lot was mediocre. Samuel was excellent; Eli was mediocre. Daniel was excellent; Balaam was mediocre. Then, of course, is Jesus, the embodiment of excellence.

In illustrating excellence, Jesus said, “If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles” (Matthew 5:41). In those days, the law allowed a Roman

soldier to draft someone to carry his pack for him for one mile. The pack was heavy, the roads were rough, and the soldiers were often cruel. The job was always an imposition. But Jesus' response, even to such cruelty, was to give more and do more.

In contrast, Jim Conway writes that some people feel "a weakening of the need to be a great man ... Never mind hitting home runs. Let's just get through the ball game without getting beamed" (Maxwell 1999, 34). Conway's position here is one of mediocrity.

Mediocrity is never good enough for children of God. Never! God did not call you to be an average, run-of-the-mill Christian. He called you to change your world, to make things better. As saints, we must discipline ourselves to work harder, dream bigger, and excel. This is the language of excellence.

Rebekah's Excellence

Objective 2:

Explain how Rebekah demonstrated excellence.

Genesis 24 is a great chapter. Here, we find the very old Abraham in search of a spouse for his son, Isaac. Abraham's wife Sarah apparently had only recently died. Maybe these two things, old age and grief, coincided to make Abraham aware that he had failed to make arrangements for a bride for his son. Isaac is nearly forty years old by now. In those days and in that land, it was the responsibility of the father to look after such matters. Abraham does not attend to this important task himself. He entrusts the assignment to his chief household servant.

The servant immediately organizes a caravan of porters and camels. Each animal is loaded with supplies for the journey as well as with valuable gifts for the new bride. "Then the servant took ten of his master's camels and left, taking with him all kinds of good things from his master" (Genesis 24:10). Understandably, the servant prays:

"O LORD, God of my master Abraham, give me success today, and show kindness to my master Abraham. See, I am standing beside this spring, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. May it be that when I say to a girl, 'Please let down your jar that I may have a drink,' and she says, 'Drink, and I'll water your camels too'—let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac. By this I will know that you have shown kindness to my master." (vv. 12–14)

There is no way of telling just how many wells were in that land. Nor are we told if the servant stopped only once or if he had to visit numerous wells. We are also not aware of how many girls may have told him to water his own camels when he asked for assistance. But, finally, a beautiful young lady named Rebekah comes to draw water. It is evening, and she is tired. She fills her own water pot and is about to leave when the servant steps forward and asks,

"Please give me a little water from your jar."
 'Drink, my lord,' she said, and quickly lowered the jar to her hands and gave him a drink. After she had given him a drink, she said, 'I'll draw water for your camels too, until they have finished drinking.' So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough, ran back to the well to draw more water, and drew enough for all his camels." (Genesis 24:17–20)

As a result of Rebekah's kindness, "The man bowed down and worshiped the Lord, saying, 'Praise be to the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not abandoned his kindness and faithfulness to my master. As for me, the LORD has led me on the journey'" (v. 26). His prayer had been answered. Rebekah would become Isaac's bride! This account teaches us powerful truths about excellence.

Excellence in Little Things

The test proposed by Abraham's servant involved drawing water. On the surface, it was no big deal. No

doubt, Rebekah went to the well and drew water nearly every day. But this one day, she took a menial task and raised it up a notch. Booker T. Washington once said, "Excellence is to do a common thing in an uncommon way." Peters and Austin (1985) wrote that in business excellence is decided by the way a secretary answers the phone, by the way the clerk handles your package, by the way some people—who may seem unimportant in the whole scheme of the company—treat you as a customer. Peters implies that excellence in small things creates excellence for the whole company.

If you are diligent with the way you spend your minutes at work, your supervisor will more than likely trust you with greater responsibility. If you are honest with your pennies, nickels and dimes, you will never steal fives, tens, and twenties.

During a recent visit to London, England, I was surprised by the large number of Rolls-Royce cars on the streets. People in my part of the world do not drive such vehicles. So when I got back home to the United States, I researched the price of such luxury cars. I found a 2006 Rolls-Royce Phantom with a retail price of \$328,750. The payments would be \$5,355 a month. What makes the car so expensive? Several things:

- It takes over 800 man-hours to make the body of a Phantom VI.
- The Rolls-Royce radiator grille is made entirely by hand and eye; no measuring instruments are used.
- Every Rolls-Royce engine is completely hand built. It takes one person one day to make a Rolls-Royce radiator, and then five hours are spent polishing it.

The makers of the Rolls-Royce give fanatical attention to the "little" things. As a result, 60 percent of all Rolls-Royce cars ever built are still on the road today. Without attention given to the little things, the big things eventually cease to matter.

Excellence Demands Effort and Sacrifice

Now let us return to the example of Rebekah. Surely, other ladies were at the well drawing water for their own needs, so Rebekah probably had to wait her turn. Do you remember how eager she was to help? Excellence demands effort and sacrifice; it does not come easily. Abraham's servant asked Rebekah for "a little water" (v. 17). She could have gotten by with giving only that, a little. However, Rebekah was not content just to do something. She was committed to excellence. She gave more than was asked of her. Then, as soon as she agreed and began to serve, a spiritual principle kicked in. She received more than she had expected.

Nobody excels by accident. One has to desire excellence enough to make the necessary sacrifices. A story is told of ancient Greek sculptors who used to tear the fingernails off their thumbs to detect with their flesh even a minute rough spot on their works. If any flaw could be discovered even by this exaggerated process, the marble was not smooth enough.

More valuable than the works of these sculptors was Paul's personal sacrifice for the cause of Christ. He lists a number of the things he endured for Jesus:

Great endurance; troubles, hardships and distresses; beatings, imprisonments and riots; hard work, sleepless nights and hunger. . . . Through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything. (2 Corinthians 6:4–10)

Consider, also, the price Moses paid to be Israel's great deliverer. Look at Job, Noah, Peter, and the men and women of Hebrews 11—the great Hall of Fame of Faith. What would these people have accomplished if they had not made personal sacrifices?

Integrity and Excellence

Objective 3:

Show the relationship between integrity and excellence.

What Is Integrity

The word *integrity* derives from a Latin term meaning “whole” or “complete.” Having integrity means that we have no areas in our lives that are lacking in moral soundness, that our hearts are not divided. Integrity is demonstrated by doing the right thing even when no one is looking.

We learn integrity from the Bible, for the Bible is the handbook for integrity. God's Word is forever settled in heaven. People of all cultures can find the same truths because the Bible is consistently consistent. The manifestation of integrity in our lives comes from knowing God's expectations of us as His people, from self-discipline, from deep trust in God's faithfulness, from the work of God's Spirit in our lives, and from a decision to be relentlessly honest in all situations.

Personal Integrity

A person of integrity does not have a Sunday face that is directly opposite his or her weekday face, carrying on the work of the Lord on one hand and the work of the devil on the other. Integrity speaks of a singleness of purpose, will, and heart. Proverbs 10:9 says, “The man of integrity walks securely, but he who takes crooked paths will be found out.” One of the benefits of walking in integrity is confidence.

The late Babe Zaharias was known as a person of integrity. Zaharias was a champion amateur golfer in the 1932 Olympics and later became a professional golfer. On one occasion she penalized herself two strokes when she accidentally played the wrong ball. “Why did you do it?” asked a friend. “No one saw you. No one would have known the difference.” “I would have known,” replied Babe Zaharias. Babe demonstrated integrity. She was true both in public and in private (Cohen 1998, 11).

Personal integrity also includes adherence to a set of values, which incorporates honesty and freedom from deception. It means doing the right thing at the right time for the right reasons.

Leonard Roberts, named Retailer of the Year by Brandweek magazine says, "You cannot fake it. You must stand up for what is right regardless. You cannot maintain your integrity 90 percent and be a leader. It's got to be 100 percent" (Cohen 1998, ¶8). Written on a poster entitled *The Courage of Integrity* are the words, "The highest courage is to dare to be yourself in the face of adversity. Choosing right over wrong, ethics over convenience, and truth over popularity . . . these are the choices that measure your life. Travel the path of integrity without looking back, for there is never a wrong time to do the right thing."

Are you a person of integrity? If you are serious about moving to excellence, then regularly ask yourself these questions:

- Have I been completely honest today?
- Have I met my financial obligations?
- Have I acted in an appropriate way toward members of the opposite sex?
- Have both my private and public life been above reproach?
- Have I fulfilled my commitments without compromise and with a willing spirit?
- Have I met with the Lord today?
- Have I indulged in unwholesome thoughts or sexual images, or fostered uncharitable feelings toward others?
- Have I conducted a motive check recently?
- Have I spent sufficient time with my family or friends?
- Have I harbored unconfessed sin or unforgiven hurts?

Planning for Excellence

Objective 4:

Show why planning is vital for excellence.

So excellence comes by design, not by accident. And planning is your roadmap to excellence. Following are some tips for personal planning.

Set Goals

Some people are goal oriented. Goals can certainly serve to motivate us. Researcher George Barna notes the following about Christians in the United States: "While three out of five Christian adults claim to have a deep commitment to the Christian faith, they are not involved in any intentional effort to grow spiritually" (Hammett, under "Discipleship Models"). Only four out of ten church members claim to have set personal spiritual goals for themselves. Only two out of ten believers who are serious about their spiritual development have defined any specific spiritual goals. On top of that, the majority of believers who have life goals generally have no clue on how to reach them (Hammett, under "Discipleship Models").

Ask yourself, what do you hope to attain for Christ during your lifetime? Where do you hope to be in the Lord five years from now? Ten years? How do you plan on reaching those goals? What tools will it take? What changes, if any, will you have to make in your daily routine? Write your thoughts. A University of California, Los Angeles, study showed that while only 5 percent of people ever write down their goals, those who did achieved 80 percent of their goals.

Setting goals is necessary to achieving excellence. Jesus, the most excellent of all examples, had very specific goals: to go to Jerusalem, to die on the Cross for the world's sins, and to be resurrected to life. Jesus came to save the lost. And He accomplished this goal excellently.

Maybe you are considering a career in the ministry. As worthy as that goal is, one does not automatically attain the goal. Rather it is wise to break the process down into bite-size chunks. One must commit to getting good grades in school, commit to serving the Lord, set aside time for daily spiritual disciplines, and be active in outreach and ministry. Each of these steps can be further broken down into manageable bits. Then, you can mark each step off the list of goals as you complete it.

Determine to Grow

Are you acquainted with the medical term achondroplasia? It is the most common form of dwarfism. Achondroplasia affects about one in every 25,000 children. Men who are affected grow to an average height of 4 feet 3 inches while females grow to an average of 4 feet. The average height for an adult male in the United States is 5 feet 9 inches while the average female is 5 feet 5 inches (National Center for Health Statistics). These figures can vary from one culture to the next.

Just as God created our physical bodies to grow, He expects our spiritual lives to grow as well. As a pastor, it has been my joy to know people who have experienced spiritual growth up into their seventies, eighties, and nineties. The apostle Paul encourages such growth. In Ephesians 4:13, he urges the church to “become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” Second Peter 3:18 adds that we are to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” Here, the word *grow* actually suggests “keep on growing.” It is a command, requiring full obedience.

Several years ago I created as Spiritual Growth Chart, which defines the various stages of Christian growth. See where you are on this chart.

Spiritual Growth Chart

<u>New Convert</u>	<u>A Babe in Christ</u>	<u>Growth Begins to Take Form</u>	<u>Mature in Faith</u>	<u>Discipler</u>
<p>Buys a Bible</p> <p>Begins to Pray</p> <p>No Spiritual roots</p> <p>Takes money to church</p> <p>Develops an appetite</p> <p>Has not yet heard of the Holy Spirit</p> <p>Thinks fruit is an apple</p> <p>Begins to attend church</p> <p>Faith is born</p> <p>Repents</p> <p>Confesses sin</p> <p>Forms new habits</p> <p>Friends begin to notice a difference</p> <p>Baptized in water</p>	<p>Has a Bible</p> <p>Prays in times of crisis</p> <p>Roots start</p> <p>Gives offering</p> <p>"Milk" diet</p> <p>Has heard of the Spirit</p> <p>Fruit</p> <p>Attends church if convenient</p> <p>Faith is small</p> <p>Double minded</p> <p>Weak conscience</p> <p>Tossed by every wind of doctrine</p> <p>Easily offended</p> <p>Prone to falling</p>	<p>Reads Bible</p> <p>Prays daily</p> <p>Roots take hold</p> <p>Begins to tithe</p> <p>Starts to feed self</p> <p>Filled with the Spirit</p> <p>Starts to bear fruit</p> <p>Faithful to church</p> <p>Faith has substance</p> <p>Knows right from wrong</p> <p>Establishes new friends</p>	<p>Knows the Bible</p> <p>Prayer warrior</p> <p>Roots are down</p> <p>Tithes and offerings</p> <p>Eats "solid food"</p> <p>Prays in the Spirit</p> <p>Mature fruit</p> <p>Loves church</p> <p>Faith is strong</p> <p>Talks easily about matters of faith</p> <p>Good reputation</p> <p>Fruit of the Spirit</p> <p>Exhibits personal holiness</p> <p>Slow to take offense</p> <p>Thankful</p>	<p>Teaches the Bible</p> <p>Sought out for prayer</p> <p>Roots are strong</p> <p>Sacrifices financially</p> <p>Able to feed others</p> <p>Walks in the Spirit</p> <p>30,60,100-fold fruit</p> <p>Influencer</p> <p>Faith is bold</p> <p>Serves</p> <p>Knows spiritual gift</p> <p>Spiritual warfare</p> <p>Seeks to know Christ better</p> <p>Stable</p>

As you can see, growth in Christ is progressive, and excellence is intentional. Read Hebrews 5:12–14,

Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

The writer of Hebrews was pointing out a fault in the lives of his readers. He was exposing their lack of spiritual development and was holding them responsible for this deficiency.

Surely, the Lord knows right where we are and where we ought to be in Him. Determine that you will never stop growing.

Find a Mentor

A mentor is a trustworthy counselor or guide. Timothy's mentor was Paul. Elisha had Elijah. The twelve disciples had Jesus. Solomon had David. Today, we also need somebody who is older in the Lord to help guide us and hold us accountable. Everybody needs a coach. Everybody needs a model. A godly mentor can fill both needs. Proverbs 1:7 says, "Fools despise wisdom and discipline." "But many advisers make victory sure" (Proverbs 11:14).

See As God Sees

Let us go back to the time when Jesus called Peter to be His disciple. Jesus said, "'You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas' (which, when translated, is Peter)" (John 1:42). We find here five of the most hope-filled words in all literature: "You are . . . You will be." Peter was intensely human; he was impetuous, fickle, bold, and loyal. He could be wonderful in his goodness or terrible in his badness. Nonetheless, Jesus affirmed him. Those who knew Peter must have doubted that he would ever be

anything different than what he had always been. They may have seen no room for the growth Jesus predicted.

But one day everything changed. Jesus asked Peter, “‘Who do you say I am?’ Simon Peter replied, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.’ Jesus replied, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it’” (Matthew 16:15–18).

Not long after this, at Pentecost, Peter stood firm and preached the gospel to a potentially antagonistic crowd. Three thousand people were converted. Thus, Peter went from being a spiritual dwarf to a spiritual giant because Jesus had seen him for not only what he was, but for what he could become. Obviously, there was more to Peter than he had ever dreamed about. The same holds true for you!

Judges 6 shares a similar account. Israel was being bullied by the people of Midian. To make matters worse, Midian had an army that was too large to count. The situation appeared hopeless. Judges 6:6 records, “Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the Lord for help.” As Israel cried, God in heaven heard. How did He answer? He called on a simple, ordinary man named Gideon. But when the angel of the Lord approached Gideon, the angel saluted him and said, “‘The Lord is with you, mighty warrior’” (v. 12).

Gideon had been hiding at that very moment. He was trying to keep what little grain Israel had left from being stolen by the enemy. Gideon’s reply to the angel showed his insecurity. He declared that he was of the smallest tribe in all of Israel and the least in his family. Instead of seeing himself as God saw him—a mighty warrior—Gideon stressed his shortcomings and inadequacies. But the angel did not give up. He said that Gideon would be a great deliverer for Israel, and by his hand the enemy would be destroyed. The angel was right. With the help of the Lord, Gideon defeated the army of Midian in one night.

When Gideon saw himself as God saw him, he became a different person. He became a mighty warrior!

Gideon is an excellent example of how God can use the least among us. And for that, Gideon is listed in Hebrews 11 as a member of the hall of fame of faith.

When the Christian gets God's perspective, his or her daily living becomes a succession of victories. God creates a climate of excellence. So, see yourself as God sees you—living victoriously, becoming like Christ, doing faithful service, loving those around you, winning other to Jesus, and achieving goals.

Conclusion

A story is told of three women who lived on a Louisiana bayou. Every day they complained, "We've got it so bad living here on this here old smelly bayou. There ain't no opportunities. Others are living in the city when they have unlimited opportunities. Us? We ain't got nothing." Then, one day, a lady from down the road came to visit the three woe-begotten souls. After listening to their sad laments, she told them, "Nonsense! You want opportunity? You've got opportunity! You live on the bayou. The bayou leads to the river. The river leads to the gulf. The gulf leads to the ocean. You can go anywhere you want from right here where you are!"

Opportunity is present. You can go anywhere you want from right here. Why not leave the maddening throng behind and go for excellence?

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SELF-TEST

After studying the lesson, please read each study question carefully and circle the correct response. There is only one correct response for each question.

1. *Mediocrity is*
 - a) *doing the best you can always.*
 - b) *doing nothing at all.*
 - c) *caring little for improvement.*
2. *Excellence is*
 - a) *doing enough to get by.*
 - b) *going above and beyond the expected.*
 - c) *not even trying because you know you will fail.*
3. *In Genesis 24, Rebekah showed very little initiative when she met Abraham's servant.*
 - a) *True*
 - b) *False*
4. *Scriptural examples of excellence include all of the following except*
 - a) *Gideon.*
 - b) *Lot.*
 - c) *Apostle Paul.*
5. *Excellence demands sacrifice.*
 - a) *True*
 - b) *False*
6. *Integrity comes from a root word that means*
 - a) *good.*
 - b) *divided.*
 - c) *intact.*
7. *Proverbs 10:9 says, "The man of integrity walks ____."*
 - a) *securely*
 - b) *happily*
 - c) *proudly*
8. *Planning is important because it*
 - a) *helps one develop mental powers.*
 - b) *so often impresses others.*
 - c) *is a roadmap to success.*

9. *Most Christians set life goals.*
a) *True*
b) *False*
10. *Two characteristics of a discipler are he or she _____.*
a) *seeks to know Christ better; is sought out for prayer*
b) *prays in times of crisis; is easily offended*
c) *buys a Bible; forms new habits.*

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ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

Note: If you answer a study question incorrectly, you can find the objective it was drawn from by looking at the references in parentheses.

1. c (13.1)
2. b (13.1)
3. b (13.2)
4. b (13.2)
5. a (13.2)
6. c (13.3)
7. a (13.3)
8. c (13.4)
9. b (13.4)
10. a (13.4)

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