

MATURING

For Service To God
and Others

13 Lessons

Prepared by

PAUL E. CANTRELL

2001

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PREFACE

The following study guide has been designed primarily to accomplish two main purposes:

- (1) To provide study material so that one person can help another person, or a small group of persons, to grow towards maturity;
- (2) And to encourage the training of workers to reach out to the lost in our world.

If maturing is to take place, changes will have to take place in our *Thinking, Actions, Lives, Outlook*, and our *Way of looking at ourselves and others*. These lessons have been designed to assist in helping to bring about these changes!

The maturing process usually involves the more mature helping the less mature in the faith. But interestingly enough, the more mature are helped in the process as well. Thus, it is hoped that the more mature in every congregation can be encouraged to become study leaders to help bring about the desired goals stated above.

But there are some important dangers that need to be avoided in this process:

- (1) The study leader needs to avoid taking a "SUPERIOR ATTITUDE" towards the one with whom he studies. Yet, at the same time, realizing that there is guidance obviously desired on the part of the one being studied with.
- (2) Even though life changes may be an obvious need in one's life, neither participant should attempt to dictate to, manipulate or manage the life of the other. He should encourage, exhort, reprove and rebuke, but all in the spirit of brotherly love. Serious questions or problems that may need more mature counsel should be referred to those better equipped to handle such.
- (3) Exalt Christ, Truth, one's relationship to God; not to exalt one's opinions or dictates.

These lessons are independent of each other and can be used in whatever order desired.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THESE STUDIES

HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM THESE LESSONS

- (1) Make a commitment to take the study seriously.
- (2) Be willing to spend the time required to make the changes that the Scriptures are calling for in your life.
- (3) Plan to set aside the time to go through each lesson together with a study leader.
- (4) Make an effort to study and pray some each day if possible, asking for God's wisdom to be gleaned from His Word.
- (5) Make a note of any questions so they can be discussed in your study session.
- (6) Make a diligent effort to begin putting into practice the changes that you are learning about.
- (7) Attempt to spend some time each month with your study leader in visiting, fellowship, and doing good works.
- (8) Try to interest your friends in going through the study in the future.
- (9) Spend time with your study leader talking about those whom you are concerned about and are attempting to interest in studying the Word of God.
- (10) Make a commitment to learn these lessons well enough so you can sit down and be a study leader with another person—as soon as you feel comfortable enough.

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Lesson One

"THE CHALLENGE TO MATURITY"

A little boy at the dinner table was half-heartedly eating his spinach. He stopped and asked his mother, "**Mom, why do I have to eat this yukkie spinach?**" Her answer was, "**Because it is good for you and it has lots of vitamins and minerals. And besides, if you want your Ice Cream, you have to eat your spinach.**" Then, the next question is one we have all wondered about, "**Mom, why are all the good things for you so yukkie and all the bad things for you the things that I like?**"

A part of growing up and becoming an adult is to recognize those things we need to eat that are good for us; avoid those things that are bad for us; and the strength to put into practice that knowledge.

The Christian life is much the same! We become Christians upon our obedience to the gospel. We must learn to put away things that are bad for us; learn to add those things that are good for us; and the strength to put this knowledge into practice (Ephesians 4:21-24). This is simple a definition of what we call maturity.

THE GOAL OF MATURITY

Jesus stated this goal very clearly in Matthew 5:48, "*Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.*" An indirect way of saying the same thing is, "*Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.*"(1 Corinthians 11:1). It is not possible to want to follow Christ without also realizing we are trying to follow a perfect life. In Ephesians 4:13, Paul stated it this way, "*to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.*" Since everyone begins his or her Christian life as a newborn child of God (John 3:3-5; 1 Peter 2:1-2), we have a long ways to go to become perfect or mature in Christ. Thus, maturity is a process that will last throughout one's life upon earth. It is a well-rounded growth that deals with each aspect of one's life.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MATURITY

God never requires anything of His children that is not good for us! Thus, maturity must be good for us—a benefit to us and others around us! It will not only please my Lord and Master, but bring glory to Him as well (Matthew 5:16).

Maturity in Christ is the challenge for us to be the very best we can be. It is a way of saying that the human soul possesses great potential and God is trying to challenge us to that high potential. The human soul is almost unlimited in its possibilities for good. There is potential for great humility, courage, faith, wisdom, holiness, service to God and man.

A negative way of illustrating this is in a man that all of us have heard about. At one time, Hitler was a tiny innocent baby. But what a difference in him when he became an adult. His internal growth was so warped that he brought vast evil upon the human race. How much better it would have been if his growth had been directed by God for untold good!

The maturing process is a major preventive to keep one from backsliding into the world! We are admonished to hold fast the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end (Hebrew 3:14).

In every congregation we have two basic groupings of people:

- (1) Those in need of being made stable, sound, and steadfast in the faith;
- (2) Those who have been developed to this point in their lives.

Unless a diligent effort is made to work with new members, the church will have a large number who will be indifferent, lukewarm, carnally-minded, fearful, sinful, doubtful of beliefs, and weak. If this continues for any length of time, a lot of people will be lost to the Lord's church. Diligent efforts need to be put forth to mature people in Christ! (See chart on next page)

PROVISIONS FOR MATURITY

Thus, not only does each individual have the challenge to mature for service to God and man, but also the church has the responsibility to help bring this about as a whole.

Men struggle for many things in this world. But there is no greater struggle than for maturity in Christ, to grow up and take our place in a mature way, to be reliable, responsible as a disciple of Christ. And maturity will not come without a struggle. It is a struggle from without and from within, but the end result is well worth the struggle.

But this struggle is not to be by myself alone. I am to have helpers. When Jesus ascended back on high, he sent gifts to men. These gifts are listed in Ephesians 4:11 and stated to be for the purpose of maturing God's people. The Lord appointed workers (servants) in the church to see that this great work is done. They were and are: **apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers.** And their purpose for existence in the church is stated as being:

- (1) For the perfecting (Maturing, Completing) of the saints. (To bring the imperfect to perfection).
- (2) For the work of ministry (Servanthood).
- (3) For the edifying (building up) of the body of Christ. (Ephesians 4:12)

If these workers will accomplish their mission, then the outcome will be:

- (1) All will come to the unity of the faith;
- (2) All will come to an advanced knowledge of the Son of God;
- (3) All will come unto a perfect (full-grown) man unto the measure of the fullness of the stature of Christ;
- (4) They will be no longer children tossed to and fro;
- (5) They will be able to speak the truth in love;
- (6) And the whole body will work together to make increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love. (Ephesians 4:13-16)

It is most encouraging to see and be around mature Christians. To see men and women with strong loyalty for truth, intelligent Christian living, lives engaged in good works that brings glory to God, fidelity to the Lord's church—to its assemblies, its work, its good name, its head—and to see unity and brotherly love prevailing, and to see liberal giving of SELF, TIME, TALENTS, and MONEY.

IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

We need to constantly evaluate ourselves as individuals and as a congregation to see if our growth is going properly. Following are some questions to challenge our thinking:

1. **Do I see Christ as my example to follow?**
2. **Do I look at the life and teaching of Christ with the idea of adapting my life to them?**
3. **Do I see myself as walking in Christ's steps in various aspects of my life?**
4. **Do I remind myself daily, "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me?"**
5. **Am I concerned about what Christ would think or do in each situation?**
6. **Do I try to learn Christ's thoughts, attitudes, goals, desires, etc.?**
7. **Do I see myself as an extension of Christ?**
8. **Is my purpose in life the same as Christ's?**

IN EVERY CHURCH WE HAVE:

New Members (1 Pet. 2:1-2)
Weak Brother (Rom. 14:1)
Doubtful of Beliefs (Heb. 3:12)
Sinful (Jas. 5:19)
Fearful (Rev. 21:8)
Carnally-minded (1 Cor. 3:3)
Lukewarm (Rev. 3:15)
Indifferent Brother (Rev. 2:4)
Tares (Matt. 13)

But we also have some who are:

Strong, Sound, Grounded, Teachers, Leaders, Steadfast, and Mature.

There is no greater goal for any man than to come to the FULL STATURE of Christ!

INDICATIONS OF IMMATURITY

Paul gives at least four indications of an immature person in Ephesians 4:14. These can help emphasize our need of maturity.

1. **They act like children.** Two concepts are vividly brought into contrast in these verses by two Greek words: *Teleios* (perfect, mature, full-grown, complete) and *Nepios* (infantile, baby, immature, unlearned, untaught, unenlightened). In some ways the Christian is to be child-like, docile, gentle, mild, teachable, kind, etc. But this is not what is under consideration in verse 14. There are "babes in Christ" because they are new in the faith. But there are also babes that shouldn't be babes! (Hebrews 5:12-14) And the writer of Hebrews rebukes them because they are still babes and haven't matured.
2. **They are tossed to and fro.** This is a nautical term indicating that immaturity is shown by an instability. Their minds are pulled back and forth. They are too easily swayed away from the truth. It could also indicate irresponsibility. Adam and Eve both showed this when faced with their disobedience. Adam blamed the woman and the woman blamed the serpent. The immature blame the hypocrites, the church, the preacher, the elders, or others for his failure to faithfully serve the Lord.
3. **Carried about by every wind of doctrine.** It is like a ship driven by the wind—but more, an ill-wind that carries them in the wrong direction. They go with the prevailing wind or popular teaching. They are gullible and naive, easily misled by smooth talkers. They are really not convinced or convicted by God's truth. They can easily be swayed by the crowd, friends, or family away from the truth. (Matthew 10:37).
4. **By the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting.** Two factors seem to be obvious here: (1) Their lack of knowledge leaves them open to be deceived; (2) Their openness to be deceived by false teachers. The ignorant and inexperienced are at the mercy of false teachers. They are not skilled in the word of truth (Hebrews 5:13). Their lack of interest in deepening their roots in God's truth makes them susceptible to the trickery used by teachers that desire to mislead the uninformed.

INDICATIONS OF MATURITY

In the same location in Ephesians 4:12-16, Paul also gives indications of what maturity is like.

1. **There is a unity and oneness in the faith.** "*Where there is unity, there is maturity. Where there is disunity, there is immaturity.*" Unity shows that growth has taken place, that there is stability in the One Faith (Ephesians 4:4-6).
2. **Prepared unto every good work.** In 2 Timothy 3:17, it indicates that we are "*thoroughly equipped for every good work.*" The Hebrew writer states it this way: "*make you complete in every good work to do His will.*" (13:21).
3. **Able to build self up.** We become less dependent upon others, and we are even able to help those who are still dependent.
4. **Able to speak the truth in love.** Expressing truth lovingly shows maturity. Harshness, with an air of superiority, is not only offensive, but certainly does not reflect mature actions.
5. **Grow up in all things.** Growth is not lop-sided, but balanced. This makes it possible to grow to our full potential in Christ.
6. **Every member doing their part.** Each member functioning for the good of the whole. Each doing what they can to carry out God's plan. They are well-organized, welded together, and functioning as a unit. Such brings about growth of the body.
7. **So we can do the harder things.** Some things are harder to do as a Christian than others. Unless we are maturing, we won't do what we should. Maturity has helped us to bring our lives into conformity to all of God's will.
8. **Make wise decisions.** Hebrews 5:14 states, "*those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.*" Decisions are critical to our spiritual life and growth. We need to make mature, wise decisions.

CONCLUSION

What a challenge we face—to grow up, become a man, be mature, be perfect! Have you begun your walk yet towards perfection? If so, how well are you progressing toward that ultimate goal of being like God?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1. If God knows we cannot be perfect, then why does He give the injunction for us to be perfect? (Matthew 5:48).**

- 2. What are some good reasons for our maturing in Christ?**

- 3. What are the purposes for leaders in the church? (Eph. 4:11-12)**

- 4. Does one Christian have the right to dictate, manipulate, or manage another Christian's life?**

- 5. What are some indications of immaturity? (Eph. 4:14)**

- 6. What are some indications of maturity? (Eph. 4:13-16)**

- 7. Am I willing to be helped to develop towards maturity by the leaders in the church?**

Lesson Two

"THE CHALLENGE OF DISCIPLESHIP TO JESUS"

After Jesus' baptism by John, He underwent special temptations for a period of time. Having successfully overcame each one, He began his public ministry among the Jewish people. His ministry among the people resulted in "disciples" (John 4:1-2) or "followers." But He also shortly called twelve men to full-time discipleship (Matthew 4:17-20; 5:1).

Why use the term "disciple?" It was a good Greek word that identified a person as a pupil of a teacher and one who became a follower in learning and in practice as well. A good illustration of a disciple is a child and its parent. The parent has the opportunity to have the greatest impact upon his or her child while he is in their home. It is reflected in so many ways.

A good definition of a disciple of Jesus would be—***one who has been taught, has accepted the teachings of Jesus, and is making a zealous effort to follow and imitate His teachings and His life.***

The term, "disciple," is only used in the Gospels and Acts to identify followers of Jesus. The term, "Christian," superseded the term "disciple" as is indicated in Acts 11:26.

In the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) Jesus directed his disciples to go into all the world and make disciples of as many people as possible. Discipleship is a dual process:

- (1) ***They must be taught, learn, understand the Gospel message about Jesus*** (Matthew 11:29).
- (2) ***They must become a follower of Him*** (Matthew 4:19-20). To accomplish this, they must be taught to observe all Jesus has commanded.

The entire New Testament has been written to tell us who true disciples of Jesus are and how they ought to live. But, there are some passages that are very specific in pointing out the negative and positive traits of discipleship to Jesus. This lesson will primarily deal with these passages.

THREE "CANNOTS" OF DISCIPLESHIP

To be a true disciple of Jesus must give recognition to the Lordship of Jesus! Jesus is to be "Lord" and "Master" of my life! He makes it very clear that to profess such, but not strive to live up to it is worthless (Matthew 7:21; Luke 6:46). This concept is stated clearly by the Lord in Luke 14:26, 27, 33.

(1)

"If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple." (Luke 14:26)

Our love for Jesus must be so strong that our love for others will be inferior. Jesus is obviously not telling us to hate our earthly family. But he is saying that it should be clear to all, even the closest members of our family, that Jesus is first (Lord) and always will be.

(2)

"And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple." (Luke 14:27)

The cross is a symbol of death. Jesus is telling us that we will have to die if we are really going to follow Him. Romans 6:1-2 talks about our "dying to sin." And in Romans 6:6, it speaks of being "crucified with Jesus" so that the body of sin may be done away with. Sin is selfishness! It is doing what I want, not what God wants me to do! Unless I die to my own selfish desires, I cannot be a disciple of Jesus.

(3)

"So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple." (Luke 14:33).

Whatever that stands in the way of following Jesus must be removed—given up! It is to determine that nothing will hinder my being a follower of Jesus—not my job, my money, my friends, or even my family. If there is ever a choice between these and following Jesus, I must follow Jesus. All that I have and am are in His hands to use.

If the above sounds like "total commitment" to you, then you have understood what the Lord is saying! He is to be Lord of my life.

THREE "POSITIVE MARKS" OF DISCIPLESHIP

The next three concepts of discipleship are given from a positive standpoint. They are all three found in the Gospel of John (8:31-32; 13:34-35; 15:8).

(1)

"If you abide in my word, you are my disciples indeed." (John 8:31)

A disciple is a learner and a follower. A disciple of Jesus is also a learner and a follower. He is telling us that if we will **"hunger and thirst after righteousness"** that we can truly be His disciple. Time and effort must be put forth to learn the Wisdom of God and put it into practice in our lives. Jesus' ability to overcome temptation was made possible by His knowledge of what was right. It was also a recognition of a great truth about man, that he is more than physical! **"Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."** (Matthew 4:4). Our survival spiritually, as well as our relationship to God, depends upon our abiding (continuing) in the Word of God.

(2)

"By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:35)

It not great things that causes the world to sit up and take notice of us, but our great love for one another. Discipleship requires that we love our brethren as well as God(1 John 4:20-21). We are even called upon to love our enemies (Matthew 5:43-48). But it will be quite evident to the world if we do not love our brethren. We live in a world filled with hate, which means that the disciple of Jesus who loves his brother will stand out in such a world. This love is not just a gushy feeling for the moment if everything is fine, but a desire and concern for the well-being of our brethren under all circumstances.

(3)

"By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples." (John 15:8).

Jesus pointed out that the way you know someone is by the fruit they bear (Matthew 7:20). Paul praised the Colossian brethren for their fruitfulness. **"All over the world this gospel is producing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth."** (Colossians 1:6) Not only did the gospel bring them into discipleship to Jesus, but they in turn were teaching others and fruit was still being produced in their midst.

Jesus even gives some principles in John 15 that need to be followed in order to be fruitful:

- (1) We must keep our connection to the vine (Jesus), for without Him we can do nothing. (verses 4, 5).
- (2) We must allow God to prune and cleanse us with His Word. (verses 2-3).
- (3) We must pray to God to help us be fruitful. (verses 7, 16).
- (4) We need to do quality work with people—so they will remain faithful too. (verse 16).

When a farmer tills the soil, clears the briars and weeds, plants the seed, fertilizes it and tends the crop, he depends on God's working through natural law to reward his efforts with fruit. The same principle is true in bearing spiritual fruit. A disciple must till the soil, sow the seed, fertilize, nourish, weed it, etc., and God will give the fruit through his natural spiritual laws. Paul stated it by inspiration this way: **"I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase."** (1 Corinthians 3:6).

THE GREAT POTENTIAL OF DISCIPLESHIP

When one looks at the apostles Jesus chose to do the great work of His kingdom, we are made to stand in awe of the Master Teacher! He truly discipled eleven of these twelve men! From a human standpoint, one could question Jesus' choice of men. What the world would have said would not work, Jesus knew the hearts of those he chose. In about thirty years Paul, by inspiration, indicates that their great task had been accomplished—the gospel was preached into all the world (Colossians 1:23)!

This great potential of disciples of Jesus are still possible today! We have the Master Teacher—so all that is lacking is the great desire on the part of men to become disciples of Jesus. (Matthew 11:28-30). Jesus is calling us as He called the twelve, "*Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.*" (Matthew 4:19). **So, the only thing that hinders our potential as a disciple of Jesus—is ourselves!**

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The challenge to discipleship is to reach our full potential as a disciple of Jesus. Discipleship infers there must be a teacher as well as a learner. We have the Master Teacher. Do we have the willingness of heart to become great disciples of Jesus?

The challenge is so clearly expressed by the inspired apostle Peter when he challenged his readers to: "*but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct...*" (1 Peter 1:15). Paul expressed the challenge so vividly when he said, "*Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.*"

Changing the disciples of Jesus into the image of Christ took place over a period of time. Peter did not become the "rock" and John did not become the "servant" without spending time beholding Jesus (John 1:42; Luke 9:54). John records in his Gospel that they "*beheld his glory*" (John 1:14). Being with Jesus, seeing his attitude and actions, hearing His teaching, and finally experiencing the scene of His great sacrifice and His resurrection and ascension into heaven had its desire effect upon the chosen apostles. But on others as well! Even though we cannot be with Jesus in person, we have the Gospels that reveal to us the things we need to "*behold*" to be a true and great disciple of Jesus.

May our hearts and lives be open to the Master Teacher, so that we may become disciples that He can effectively use to carry out His purposes and plans upon this earth!

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What does the term, "disciple," mean to you? (Matthew 28:18-20)

2. What is a good illustration of what a disciple is?

3. What two things are necessary in making a disciple as found in Matthew 28:18-20?
a) _____
b) _____

4. Name three "cannot"s of discipleship as given by Jesus in Luke 14—and define each one.
a) Luke 14:26 _____

b) Luke 14:27 _____

c) Luke 14:33 _____

5. Am I willing to commit myself to be a true disciple of Jesus by putting these marks of discipleship into my life?
YES _____ NO _____

6. What are three positive marks of discipleship given in the Gospel of John—and what does one need to do to meet them?
a) John 8:31 _____

b) John 13:35 _____

c) John 15:8 _____

7. Am I willing to commit myself to be a true disciple of Jesus by putting these marks of discipleship into my life?
YES _____ NO _____

8. What are four things given in John 15 that will help me to be fruitful as a disciple of Christ?
a) John 15:4-5 _____

b) John 15:2-3 _____

c) John 15:7, 16 _____

d) John 15:16 _____

9. Who are we cooperating with as a fruit-bearer? (1 Corinthians 3:6)

10. What is my potential as a disciple of Christ? (Please think and pray about your possibilities and write down things you would like to do in service to God and others.)

Lesson Three

"THE CHALLENGE OF SERVANTHOOD"

People are given recognition as "great" because they have rendered a service to others. Recognition of the greatness of service was clearly expressed by Jesus when He said, "*....whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant.*" (Matthew 20:26) Albert Schweitzer saw the wisdom of Jesus' statement when he observed, "*I don't know what your destiny may be, but one thing I do know, the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.*" John F. Kennedy realized this great truth of Jesus and adopted as a slogan for his campaign for presidency: "*Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.*"

Being a servant is the KEY to one's happiness, his outlook on life, his priorities, and even his relationships. It is more of a constant attitude than the performance of chores, but deeds will be done when the servant attitude is present. Leadership is best defined in terms of Servanthood.

Personal relationships are made and enhanced where the spirit of a servant is present. It is Voluntary Servanthood that makes one great!

JESUS OUR EXAMPLE

There is no greater example of Servanthood than Jesus! Philippians 2:5-8 makes this very clear!

- (1) Even though He was Deity in every sense of the word, He chose to empty Himself and become a "bondservant" and take on the "likeness of men."
- (2) He chose to humble Himself and become obedient unto death—the death of the cross.
He did not do this for His own benefit, but for the benefit of man—to make our salvation, our redemption possible!

When the mother of James and John made a request of Jesus (she wanted her sons to have positions of honor when Jesus came into His kingdom) He took advantage of the opportunity to teach a great lesson on servanthood. He said, "*..... whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.*"(Matthew 20:27-28).

Jesus drew a sharp contrast between the view of the worldly-minded and those who would be followers of His. The worldly places the emphasis upon the **Position**, but Jesus placed the emphasis upon the **Serving!** The worldly emphasizes the **Power** and **Authority**, but Jesus emphasized the **lowliness of serving**.

Great leadership in the church is not placing emphasis upon **Position, Power, or Authority**, but on the need to find ways of **willingly serving** those about us for their good and their encouragement.

Even though Jesus is the Master Teacher, his disciples were slow in learning the needed lesson on Servanthood! This was illustrated later at the end of His public ministry. It was on the night of his betrayal while they were eating the Passover feast. Luke's Gospel tells about the disciples disputing about who would be in special positions of honor among them (Luke 22:24). Jesus perceived this and walked over and picked up a towel and a washbasin and began to wash the disciple's feet. Peter objected strenuously to Jesus washing his feet. This was a servant's job, not the work of the Christ, the Son of God! But Jesus convinced Peter that He must allow him to do this and that he would understand later. (John 13:1-17). He then drives home the point of His actions. "*Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.*"(verses 12-15). Greatness is not found in titles and positions, but in serving the needs of others. Jesus served them, and they need to learn to serve others.

Another great truth is shown here that has to do with being a true servant. Jesus knew who He was. Serving others did not take away from who He was. So, when we realize who we are—children of the most High God—serving others does not take away from that fact! It only enhances this fact!

ATTITUDES OF A SERVANT

Attitudes can either make or break a servant's actions. Does he serve because he has to or because he wants to? Does he serve grudgingly or willingly? While his actions may be right, his attitude may undermine his efforts as a servant.

What are some attitudes that should characterize a servant of God?

- (1) There should be a willingness to deny himself, his wants, his interests in order to help someone else. Jesus said: "*If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.*" (Matthew 16:24). Paul stated: "*If food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.*" Paul also told the Thessalonians that he had not only been willing to impart the gospel to them, but their own lives also (1 Thessalonians 2:8).
- (2) The true servant attitude is not one of selfishness, selfish ambition or conceit, but "*in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.*" (Philippians 2:3) Instead of being proud and haughty and look down on people, he sees himself as a lowly servant, willing to serve the needs of others.
- (3) Not only does a true servant avoid selfish motives for his actions, but also he will truly be concerned for the welfare of others. "*Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interest of others.*" (Philippians 2:4).
- (4) There needs to also be a true affection for others. "*Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another.*" (Romans 12:10).
- (5) Then, there is the submissive attitude that should characterize the servant of God. "*Submitting to one another in the fear of God.*" (Ephesians 5:21).

These and other passages of Scripture describe the attitude of the true servant of God (1 Corinthians 6:19-20; 9:19-23; 2 Corinthians 4:5; Luke 10:25-37; Romans 15:1-2; Romans 9:1-3, etc.).

PLACES TO SERVE

Serving in the Home. The admonitions to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:22-33 well describe the servant outlook. The wife is to love and respect her husband and be submissive to his leadership in the home. The husband is to be so concerned about his wife that he takes care of her as he would his own self—even as Christ love the church and die for it. Paul also stresses the unselfish concern that husbands and wives should have towards one another. (1 Corinthians 7:3-5). Servanthood is also emphasized concerning parents serving their children. "*And you fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.*" (Ephesians 6:4).

Serving in the Church. All of God's people are referred to as, and are admonished to be, servants of God and others. (Romans 16) But God has placed in the church, for the good of the body, special servants: Evangelists, Shepherds, Teachers, Deacons (Ephesians 4:11-16; 1 Timothy 3:8-13). These take a lead in helping to mature the church to become great servants of God and others.

In a recent short article by Marlin Connelly he pointed out that beneath the surface of the earth is a fantastic, inexhaustible source of energy. This energy is what heats our earth to the proper temperature. Geologists have drilled holes to measure this heat and then to calculate what the temperature would be twenty to thirty miles into the heart of the earth. They estimate it would reach about 2,000 degrees.

The Lord's church has an inexhaustible source of energy to serve others. This energy needs to be used to glorify God and reach out to others. "*Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy, in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.*" (Romans 12:6-8).

Serving in the Community. While the church is to serve one another, we are also to reach out to those outside the church as well. *"Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith."* Whether in school, at work, or in our community activities—we are to be characterized as those willing to be servants. Paul's admonitions to Christian slaves at Colossae illustrate this idea so well: *"Bondservants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eyerservice, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God. And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men."* (3:22-23).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Becoming what God wants us to be is not always easy. Being a servant is not easy at first. Servanthood is an attitude that needs to be learned, practiced and matured in. To do so, we will need to:

- (1) Look to Jesus for our example and motivation. Paul stated in 2 Corinthians 5:14, *"For the love of Christ compels us."* The more we see Jesus and His great love for us, the more compelled we will be to serve as He served.
- (2) Make a real effort to be concerned about others. Get beyond ourselves in our thinking so that we think about others and their interests.
- (3) Seek out specific deeds you can do to serve others and do them without expecting any thanks or reward. Don't require any conditions to be met—but do them unconditionally.
- (4) Look to heaven as our ultimate reward for all our efforts here upon earth. The Hebrew writer calls upon us to: *"look unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."* (12:3)

In the Parable of the Talents it is made quite clear that the ultimate reward of heaven goes to those who have been faithful servants of God (Matthew 25:14-27). *"Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord."* (verse 21) But to the one who was not a faithful servant, it will be said: *"cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."* (verse 30) Our greatest challenge is to reach out to the lost!

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. **What did Jesus say the world's view of greatness was? (Matthew 20:25)**
2. **Why is the spirit of Servanthood so important to making a good leader? (Matthew 20:26)?**
3. **What are some ways that Jesus served while on earth?**
4. **How would you define great leadership?**
5. **How does being a servant make one great?**
6. **Why was it difficult for the disciples to wash one another's feet? (John 13:1-17)**
7. **What effect does "being bought with a price" have on our being servants? (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)**

8. How did Paul identify with people in order to serve them? (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)

9. How do the Priest, Levite, and the Samaritan illustrate Servanthood? (Luke 10:25-37)

10. What is the true spirit of Servanthood?

11. What was it that Paul said constrained him to serve? (2 Corinthians 5:14)

12. In what ways can I improve my service to others:
 - a) In the Home—
 - b) In the Church—
 - c) In the Community—

13. How do you teach children to have a servant spirit?

14. What is the greatest service that can be given to anyone?

Lesson Four

"MATURING BECAUSE OF ASSURANCE OF SALVATION"

It would seem to be obvious that if a person is unsure of his salvation, there is a great likelihood that his maturity as a Christian will be greatly hindered. The purpose of this lesson is to help encourage us to be fully assured of our relationship with God so that our maturing process as a Christian will not be hindered.

"SO GREAT A SALVATION"

The Bible refers to the salvation of man as a "great salvation" (Hebrews 2:3) and follows the thought up with an admonition not to neglect it. The beginning part of discipleship is to come into a reconciled (forgiven) relationship with God (2 Corinthians 5:20; Matthew 28:18-20). But this reconciliation needs to be maintained (Hebrews 3:14, 16-19), because it can be lost through our negligence (Hebrews 2:3); or through an evil heart of unbelief (Hebrews 3:12; or through the deceitfulness of sin (Hebrews 3:13). A person must realize that even though he has been forgiven, he can still be lost (lose his reward) and be punished forever along with the Devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41). Thus, we need to be sure of our salvation at first; but as well, to be sure of our continued saved relationship with God. As we mature in Christ we should become more certain of our saved state.

The apostle John has told us that God has given us His Inspired Revelation to give us that knowledge and assurance. *"These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God."* (1 John 5:13). God does not want us to live with doubts about our relationship with Him (James 1:6), but rather to be assured (to know) that we are saved. This assurance is not to be based upon "emotional feelings" or on what man teaches, but upon what God has said in His Word! His Word has purposely been preserved to this present time to give us this assurance (Matthew 24:35).

How can a person reach out and teach others how to be saved, when he is unsure of his own salvation?

There may be a time in your life that you will question your original salvation from sin. It should be obvious that questioning can be good, but to fail to find a satisfactory solution or answer can be disturbing and magnify doubt.

"WHAT MUST I DO TO BE SAVED?"

God has had His Word written down and preserved for us so that we may "know" that we have eternal life. So, it is necessary to turn to what the Bible says that a person must do to be saved from the penalty of his sins.

1. **One must have a spirit of humility**, so his heart can be *Instructed, pricked, and caused to be turned to God* (John 6:45; Acts 2:37; 3:19; Matthew 18:3-4). God calls people to Himself through the gospel that is preached and believed (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14) Those that come to God *"must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him."* (Hebrews 11:6). Jesus said, *"If you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.....Where I go you cannot come."* (John 8:24, 21)
2. **One must repent!** Repent of what? Our sin & disobedience to God! Repentance is giving recognition to what sin has done with my relationship to God—it has brought about a cleavage—a separation (Isaiah 59:1-2; Ephesians 2:1, 5). And, until that cleavage has been solved, I am lost and without any hope—I am under the sentence of death (Romans 6:23). Thus, God is calling upon all His creatures to come to repentance for He wants no one to be lost (Acts 17:30; 2 Peter 3:9). Repentance is a change of heart about continuing in sin or disobedience to God. Sin is what caused me to be lost, so I need to make a commitment to turn from disobedience to God and turn to obedience to God (Romans 6:1-2, 6, 11, 16-19). I must realize the necessity of obeying the gospel or be lost (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9).
3. **I must confess Christ as Lord and Christ.** (Romans 10:9-10). What I have come to believe and have committed myself to in my heart, I must be willing to openly confess before others (Matthew 10:32-33).

To be afraid or ashamed to openly confess my allegiance to Christ will bar my being confessed before God, the Father, someday.

4. **One must be baptized (Immersed in water).** A death has taken place! It is now time to bury the dead! "*Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.*" (Romans 6:4; Acts 8:36-39). Upon this obedient act of faith, a person is saved (Mark 16:16); forgiven or had his sins remitted (Acts 2:38); or sins washed away (Acts 22:16); or reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:20).

The Old has been made New by the power of God upon our obedience to the Gospel!

As you look over the above, do you have a question about whether you were saved or not? Did you understand what the Lord required of you in order to be saved? Were your motives for being baptized right or wrong? Were you sincere in your efforts to obey God? (Romans 6:16-18). Only you can know the answer for sure! Twelve men were re-baptized by the apostle Paul because they had not been properly taught (Acts 19:1-7). Were you properly taught? If you have doubts in this matter, you need to clear up your doubts so that you can have the assurance God wants us to have.

QUESTIONS SOME MAY HAVE

After a few years of study and growth, you may realize that there was a whole lot you did not know at the time you were supposed to be baptized into Christ. You now feel that you should be baptized again. In most cases this is a natural growth process and does not call for re-baptism. It is a maturing in our understanding of what God has required of me. But I may have understood sufficiently God's simple plan of salvation from sin and do not need to repeat it.

There is generally a time in the life of most new Christians when they have a let down from their joy they had when they first became a child of God. This too is natural and is merely emphasizing the need for my continued study and growth in the Christian life.

But, in some instances one may have fallen away from Christ and wants to come back to being a true follower of Jesus again. He may feel the need to be re-baptized, but such may not be necessary if the original obedience to God was sincere from the heart and correctly done. His need may be to humbly repent and turn back to God, confessing his waywardness and the desire to be re-committed to Christ again (Acts 8:20-23).

MY ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

My assurance of salvation can be based upon evidence from the Word of God. I go to His Word to see what it says I must do, and then I examine my heart and life to see if I have or am doing such. If I haven't or am not, then I need to do something about it. If I have or am doing what I should be doing, then I can know I have been and continue to live in a saved relationship with God.

Salvation is a continuing thing! I am to "*work out my salvation with fear and trembling.*"(Philippians 2:12). I am to "*be even more diligent to make my call and election sure.*"(2 Peter 1:11). I am to be "*faithful unto death*" if I want to receive the crown of life. (Revelation 2:10).

Then, how can I "know" that my eternal salvation is secure?

FROM GOD'S STANDPOINT: God cannot lie, so we can trust fully in His promises. Nothing can cause God to stop loving us (Romans 8:35-36), nor will He allow any power on earth to force us out of His hands (John 10:29).

FROM OUR STANDPOINT: We are assured or kept by our faith and faithfulness (1 Peter 1:5; Revelation 2:10). We are assured by our "*walking in the light*" continually (1 John 1:7). We are assured by our willingness to repent and confess our sins (1 John 1:9-10). Without this faithfulness, we should have grave questions about our eternal salvation. But if we live a submissive and penitent life before God each day, we should have no doubts about our relationship with Him.

THE MANIFESTATIONS OF SALVATION

A true spiritual birth will bring about many changes for the better in one's life. These changes can be seen and appreciated by ourselves and those about us. These changes can also help to give us assurance of our salvation.

There should be a growing love for God's Word. (1 Peter 2:1-3). Jesus said: "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.*"(Matthew 5:6).

There should be a desire for doing right and avoiding wrong. Doing right involves our words, our actions, our thoughts, and our attitudes. We are allowing God to mold us and make us into a mature, spiritually-minded person. (Romans 12:2; 8:1)

There should be a desire to be like Christ. (Romans 8:29) He is our pattern, our example, of how to think and act each day of our lives. Paul challenged us with this in 1 Corinthians 11:1).

There should be a love for other Christians. We have been made one in Christ. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. John tells us that we "*know we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death.*" (1 John 3:14).

There will be a desire to tell others about Christ. If what you have done and experienced is meaningful to you, you cannot help but want to pass it on to others. God's people should always be "*ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear.*" (1 Peter. 3:15).

Growth shows us which direction we are going!

God instructs us to add to our faith: virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love. If these things are becoming a part of our life and abounding, Peter tells us we will neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 1:5-8). Growth is change! For the Christian, it is change for the better!

SATAN'S LIES

But we have another challenge to our assurance of salvation. Satan does not want us to be saved, nor feel assured of our salvation. He tells many lies that are very desirable to be believed in order to keep us from being right with God. To keep our confidence strong we must learn to recognize the difference between his lies and God's truth (John 8:31-32, 44). He would like to convince the saved that they are lost; but he would also like to convince the unsaved that they are saved! Following are some lies that must be rejected.

"Man is basically good, so don't worry about sin."

"I am not really responsible for my sins."

"All God wants is for us to try to be good."

"What we suffer on earth is all the punishment we will receive."

"We can only hope that we are saved—we can never be sure."

"God is such a loving God that He will not condemn anyone to hell."

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

One of the grave mistakes that men make in regards to the Bible is to believe what they want to believe and reject the rest. But it is all God's Word and to be believed and followed.

Being faithful to God as well as trusting in the promises of God is the balance that we need to give us an assurance of salvation. This comes from a realization that our salvation can be lost unless we put forth effort to live the kind of life God requires of us.

Receiving the forgiveness of God day by day not only gives us the motivation to keep on living right (walking in the light), but keeps our assurance strong in the salvation God has promised us. Neither sin nor the Devil can get a foothold in our lives!

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1. What is the end result of discipleship to Jesus? (Matthew 28:19-20)**

- 2. Can a person who has been saved by God be lost? (Hebrews 6:4-6; 2 Peter 2:20-22)**

- 3. If salvation can be lost, is it possible that a person can be assured of his salvation? (1 John 5:13)**

- 4. How can we be assured that we are saved or lost? (1 John 5:13; Romans 1:16)**

- 5. Have you looked carefully at your original obedience to the gospel to be sure that it was what God has commanded?**

- 6. What are some things that may cause you to doubt your salvation?**

- 7. Define: Believe, Repent, Confession, Baptism as they relate to salvation.**

- 8. If a Christian hasn't remained faithful to God, what must he do in order to have his relationship to God restored? (Acts 8:20-23)**

- 9. What assurance does a person have to claims to be a Christian (saved), but doesn't live the life of a Christian? (Matthew 7:21-23)**

- 10. Where does our doubting of our salvation come from:**
____ Doubting God?
____ Doubting that we are living right?

- 11. What is the value of seeing changes for the better in my life as a Christian? (1 Peter 2:1-3)**

- 12. When a Christian sins, how can he be sure his sins are forgiven? (1 John 1:7-10)**

- 13. What will make us fruitful in the knowledge of our Lord? (2 Peter 1:5-8)**

Lesson Five

"MATURING BY A STRONG EMPHASIS ON BASICS"

The new church at Corinth had only been started for about three years and was in need of an inspired letter from the apostle Paul to help straighten out several problems among them, as well as, a means of encouraging them in their maturing process.

One of the problems in the church was over the misuse of the miraculous spiritual gifts given by the laying on of Paul's hands. While the miraculous gifts were needed by the new churches for their spiritual growth, yet, the improper use of such could do harm to the unity and growth of the group. While Paul encouraged them to seek to use these gifts in the church, he also pointed out an attribute more important to the church than the gifts—that was, LOVE. (1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13). These gifts needed to be exercised in love for one another to accomplish the most good.

Paul ended the thirteenth chapter with a strong emphasis upon three basic concepts in which the church needed to mature: faith, hope, and love. These three attributes will continue on long after the miraculous gifts would cease (1 Corinthians 13:8-13).

Faith, Hope, and Love are Basic

While it is obvious that in order to serve God and man we need abilities, opportunities, and gifts (non-miraculous). Yet, if these acts of service are not rendered out of faith, hope, and love—then, they lose their spiritual value and blessing.

STRONG EMPHASIS ON BASICS

When Jesus severely condemned the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23, he pointed out how their religious activities (like giving) was done correctly, but they had overlooked the weightier matters such as justice, mercy, and faith (Matthew 23:23). He called them blind, fools, and hypocrites (Matthew 23:17, 23).

FAITH

The Hebrew writer stressed the necessity of faith by giving a whole chapter to define and illustrate it (Hebrews 11). He also showed its importance by saying that only those who really believe and seek after God can come to God (Hebrews 11:6). The apostles of Jesus must have seen the importance of faith when they requested of Jesus, "**Lord, increase our faith!**"(Luke 17:5).

HOPE

Hope is described as an "**anchor to the soul**"(Hebrews 6:19). We are encouraged not to give up or be moved away from this hope given through the gospel (Colossians 1:23). We are also called upon to rejoice in it (Hebrews 3:6) and hold on to it with diligence and full assurance of faith (Hebrews 6:11). The apostle Paul says that we are saved in this hope (Romans 8:24).

LOVE

Love is described as being so basic that if we do not love our brother, then we certainly cannot truly love God (1 John 4:20-21). When we love our brother, we can know we have passed from death into life (1 John 3:14). This love is not only to be expressed in word, but in deed and in truth (1 John 3:16-18).

Christianity has its basics that are very important in the development of a true disciple of Christ. Every effort needs to be put forth to grow in these areas.

OTHER BASIC ATTRIBUTES

The Lord has purposely given long lists of sinful things that the Christian is to put out of his life. These lists can be found in Galatians 5:19-21; Romans 1:29-32; and 2 Timothy 3:1-7. He didn't stop with what to put out of our lives, but also added lists of attributes that we were to put on in our lives. Again, these are basic things that help to identify us as followers of Christ—such as: **love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control** (Galatians 5:22-23). The Spirit of God helps to bring these things into our lives when we truly yield ourselves to the Lord's Will. A similar list is given in 2 Peter 1:5-7, emphasizing the great importance of adding these things into our character: **faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, love**. These basic attributes not only make us acceptable with God, but makes it possible for God to use us unto fruitfulness (2 Peter 1:8). Growth in these things is an absolute **MUST** for the Christian!

REQUIREMENTS FOR GROWTH

To grow or mature takes time, both physically and spiritually. And this growth will not come unless certain requirements are met. Following are a listing of things that are involved in spiritual growth:

1. **There are things to be put off!** By inspiration, the apostle Peter says that we must be willing to lay aside (put out of our lives) those things that are against the Will of God (1 Peter 2:1). Sins must be dealt with in our lives. We must not continue on in the same old sinful way, but rather die to the way of sin (Romans 6:1-2). God in our lives does not produce sinfulness, but rather righteousness!
2. **There must be a desire for the right food!** Peter says that we must desire the sincere milk of the word so that we can grow (1 Peter 2:2). Jesus reminds us of this spiritual need when he gave an answer to Satan's temptation: "**Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.**" (Matthew 4:4) Jesus also challenges us to "**hunger and thirst after righteousness**" that is revealed in His Word. (Matthew 5:6; Romans 1:16-17). Following are some things the Word of God can do in our lives if we are willing:
 - a) It has the power to save those who believe it (Romans 1:16)
 - b) It can make one free from the penalty of sin (John 8:31-32).
 - c) Through it, one can be begotten unto God (James 1:18).
 - d) Through obedience to it, our souls can be purified by the blood of Jesus (1 Peter 1:22-23).
 - e) It can build us up and give us an inheritance, spiritually (Acts 20:32).
 - f) It can cleanse us and help us to be more fruitful (John 15:4-5).
 - g) It can tell us of all things that pertain unto life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3).

The word of God is always applicable and practical in every age of man. We can never outgrow it nor find a better source of wisdom for directing our lives.

3. **We must place ourselves in the right atmosphere.** Proper spiritual growth requires the proper spiritual atmosphere. God has provided leaders in the church to help with our growth process in a good and desirable atmosphere (Ephesians 4:11-16). It is an atmosphere of spiritual emphasis as we study and worship together (Acts 2:42).

The apostle Paul gives a stark contrast between two different kinds of atmospheres. In seeing them in contrast, it should be obvious which the Christian must choose.

<u>GOOD</u>	<u>BAD</u>
1. Believers	Unbelievers
2. Righteousness	Lawlessness
3. Light	Darkness
4. Christ	Belief
5. Temple of God	Idols

Obviously, having strong Christian associates and friends can contribute to an atmosphere of spiritual growth (1 Corinthians 15:33). Such can be a source of encouragement to one another (Hebrews 3:13).

4. There needs to be a putting into practice what we have been taught. The second part of the great commission is to "*teach them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.*" (Matthew 28:18-20). Not only become a disciple, but an involved disciple.

The very terminology, "Maturing for Service," infers involvement in the local efforts of the Lord's people. In 1 Corinthians 12:14-27, the idea of each member being a part of the local body of Christ is stressed over and over. We are members one of another! We function together in the Lord's work.

Paul exhorts Timothy to reject (refuse) to listen to profane and old wives' tales, but rather "*exercise thyself unto godliness.*" Taylor's translation says, "*spend your time and energy in the exercise of keeping spiritually fit.*" In other words—be involved in the things that pay the desirable dividends of eternal life (1 Timothy 4:8). The Greek word that is translated "exercise" is where we get our word "gymnasium." This is a place for athletes to exercise—develop themselves for the contests. Christians need to exercise, develop themselves for the great work of serving God. Be involved in the activities that bring eternal life to the participants.

IMPORTANT QUESTIONS TO EVALUATE OUR DIRECTION

1. **Do I see Christ as my example to follow?**
2. **Do I study the life and teaching of Christ with the idea of adapting my life to them?**
3. **Do I see myself as walking in Christ's steps in various aspects of my life?**
4. **Do I remind myself daily, "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me?"**
5. **Am I concerned about what Christ would think or do in each situation?**
6. **Do I study really to know Christ—His thoughts, attitudes, goals, desires, etc.?**
7. **Do I see myself as an extension of Christ on earth today?**
8. **Is my purpose in life the same as Christ's? Do I work for the same things He did?**
9. **Do I have feelings of compassion, forgiveness, love and sympathy like Christ did?**
10. **Have I really lost my personal identity and see my identity as "Christ in me?"**

SIGNS OF LACK OF GROWTH

Growth in Children is sometimes so dramatic that we marvel at how fast they are developing. But when we see children that do not seem to be growing, we become alarmed as parents. We expect to see growth and when it does not come, we have a right to be concerned.

Lack of spiritual growth in the children of God can be quite obvious and should be a cause of concern as well. The following are some signs of a lack of growth in the Christian.

1. **When one continues to have a "carnal" outlook or attitude.** (1 Corinthians 3:1-3)
2. **When one will not lay aside the sinful things in his or her life.** (1 Peter 2:1)
3. **When one has no appetite or little appetite for spiritual food.** (1 Peter 2:2; Matthew 5:6)
4. **When one is dull of hearing the Word of God.** (Hebrews 5:11)
5. **When one is not able to take on solid food, but should be able to.** (Hebrews 5:12)
6. **When one should be able to teach others, but is still unskilled in the use of the word of God.** (Hebrews 5:12-13)
7. **When one is unable to discern between good and evil.** (Hebrews 5:14)
8. **When one shows signs of unbelief.** (John 6:60-69)
9. **When one is unfruitful as a Christian.** (John 15:1-5)
10. **The lack of desire to be together with God's people.** (Hebrews 10:24-25)

CONCLUSION

It is important that we grow, mature, as Christians. Let's be sure that we do not fail to grow in those things that are basic to Christianity. Let's be sure that our growth is balanced, not one-sided. Peter's admonition in regards to our growing must not be ignored. He admonished us to be "*diligent*" in our efforts to grow spiritually in Christ Jesus. (2 Peter 1:5).

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why is it so important to mature in "Faith, Hope, and Love?"
 2. Why is "justice, mercy, and faith" weightier matters more so than proper giving of our possessions to God?
 3. Why is "faith" so important?
 4. Why is "hope" so important?
 5. Why is "love" so important?
 6. What are some other basic attributes for the Christian to add to his or her life?
 7. What makes these things basic?
 8. What are the four basic requirements for spiritual growth?
 9. What are some signs of a lack of growth in Christians?
 10. Why is diligence needed on our part to grow spiritually?

Lesson Six

"MATURING THROUGH DEVOTED PRAYER"

Spiritual Maturity does not come out of hypocritical living, but out of a sincere and loving heart (Luke 18:9-14). The Pharisee that Jesus spoke of in this parable was knowledgeable, but a hypocrite—his religion was not sincere. But the Publican was on the right road to spiritual maturity because his prayer reflected the correct spirit man is to have before his God. James spells it out clearly! When we draw nigh to God, it is to be with cleansed hands and purified hearts, it is to be with lament, mourning and weeping. Our spirits are to be humbled in the presence of the Lord (James 4:8-10).

Coming into the august presence of God as our Father is not to be with haughtiness and arrogance, but in great humility of spirit (Matthew 6:9). It is also a recognition that our approach is not on our own merit, but through the merit of our great mediator that goes into the very presence of the Father in our behalf (1 Timothy 2:5; John 14:13-14).

Another great condition of acceptable approach to God in prayer is the necessity of faith (believing) in God and His promises. All doubt needs to be removed—because, not only can God not lie, but He is very capable of doing whatever He promises. One of the reasons why faith is such a challenge is—we do not get everything we ask for all the time!

WHAT IS PRAYER?

The term itself is hard to define in Scripture. This is especially true when you read such verses as Ephesians 6:18, "***Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints.***" Prayer is obviously a special privilege that God has granted unto men so they can express their "wishes," "to make their requests," and "to call for His aid."

There are special terms that are used in the context of prayer such as: supplication (Ephesians 6:18), thanksgiving, requests (Philippians 4:6), and to ask (John 14:13-14). All of these words indicate that man is making known his mind to God. But it is more! It is an expressing of a worshipful attitude towards God (John 4:24).

Sometimes it is easier to define a word by showing what it is not! Proper prayer is not "vain repetition"(Matthew 6:7); it is not to "receive the praise of men"(Matthew 6:5); it is not "worrying" (Philippians 4:6); it is not a "bragging session" (Luke 18:9-12, 14); and it is not a "magic wane"(1 John 3:22; Mark 11:24) since we do not get all we ask for.

WHY PRAY?

People pray for different reasons—some good and others not so good. But we are interested in knowing what God indicates are legitimate reasons for one praying to Him. The following three reasons should be obvious from Scripture.

To express our love to God! The apostle John wrote that "***We love Him because He first loved us.***"(1 John 4:19). Love tends to beget love. Love is to be expressed in word, as well as in deed and truth (1 John 3:18). We show our love for God when we keep His commandments (John 14:15). In our obedience we are expressing our devotion to God. But in prayer, we express our love for Him in word! Our love is express in word when we offer up to God the thanksgivings of our heart for all He has done for us (Philippians 4:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:18). We also express our Love by offering to Him the praise and adoration of our heart for whom He is (Matthew 6:9).

To acknowledge our dependence upon God. Our expressions of love, thanksgiving, praise and adoration all come from a realization of how much God has done for us—which makes us realize how much we depend upon him. Jesus reminds us about even the small things we take for granted when He said, "***He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.***"(Matthew 5:45). James reminds us that "***that every***

good gift and every perfect gift is from above..."(James 1:17). The apostle Paul reminds us in his sermon to the Greek philosophers that "**in Him we live and move and have our being...**"(Acts 17:28). Even in the simple prayer that Jesus taught His disciples to pray emphasizes that dependence, "**Give us this day our daily bread**"(Matthew 6:11). Prayer continually reminds us of our full dependence upon our Creator.

We pray in order to make known our requests to God. These requests are for ourselves. "**Give us this day our daily bread**"(Matthew 6:11). It is a request for God to give us guidance, care, and the help we need to face the day and its temptations successfully (Hebrews 4:16; Matthew 6:13; 2 Peter 2:9). But one of the primary requests that we need to make to God is for His daily forgiveness (1 John 1:7-9; James 5:15-16). God wants us to make our requests known to Him and has given us an assurance that He cares for us and will not leave us (Hebrews 13:5-6; 1 Peter 5:7).

But our requests are not merely for ourselves. The apostle Paul constantly expressed concern for those to whom he was writing mentioning them in his prayers before the throne of God (Ephesians 6:18-19; Philippians 1:4, 9-11). He was primarily concerned about their spiritual well-being. Paul was following the outstanding example of Jesus when He prayed for those who were crucifying Him (Luke 23:34). James reminds us of the tremendous value of fervent prayer for one another and how it will avail before the throne of God (James 5:16).

Also, when we look at the prayer that Jesus taught His disciples, He wanted them to pray for the coming kingdom (church) and its spread upon the earth, "**thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven**"(Matthew 6:10) The spread of the church meant that men and women were yielding their wills to God's Will. The great commission obviously emphasizes the same concerned in preaching the gospel to every creature—that the church can spread over the world (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16). The spread of the church is God's way of making known his great wisdom and His eternal purpose in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 3:10-11). So, God's concern should be our concern—that which we pray about!

HOW OFTEN SHOULD WE PRAY?

Prayer is both a public and private thing. When we assemble together as God's people, it is a time for prayer (1Corinthians 14:13-16). But the Lord indicated also that there was a time for private prayer just between me and my God (Matthew 6:5-6). How often should we engage in such praying? There are no set times in days or time of day that we should pray. But we have been given admonitions in regards to this though:

- "Pray without ceasing"** (1 Thessalonians 5:17)
- "Continuing steadfastly in prayer"** (Romans 12:12)
- "Praying always"** (Ephesians 6:18)
- Persevere in prayer and faint not** (Luke 18:1-8)

The Christian should be characterized as a person of prayer. That it is not a ritual that he does three times a day, but something he feels the need to do three or more times a day. Especially where there is something of great importance, it may be that more time or occasions are desired to plead before the throne of God. Jesus told a story of a widow woman that just kept bringing her petition before a judge that he finally granted her petition. Then, He added, **"And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them?"**(Luke 18:7).

CONDITIONS OF ACCEPTABLE PRAYER

As has already been emphasized, Prayer is not a "Magic Wane." Yes, Jesus said that whatever we ask, we receive (John 14:13-14). But statements like these have to be understood in the light of the many conditions given for acceptable prayer. Following is a listing of many of these conditions.

- It should be addressed to God, our Father** (Matthew 6:9)
- It should be in the name of Christ** (John 14:13-14)
- It should come from a heart with a forgiving spirit** (Matthew 6:12)
- Our prayers should be in harmony with God's will** (I John 5:14)
- Our prayers must be in faith** (James 1:5-8)
- Our prayers need to come from a heart of humility** (James 4:8-10)
- We must strive to abide in Christ as we pray** (John 15:7)

We must practice righteousness as we pray (1 Peter 3:12)
We must be keeping His commandments as we pray (1 John 3:12)
We must pray fervently and earnestly (James 5:16-18)

If a child got everything that he asked for, he would be spoiled rotten. I don't know if Christians would be any different if every thing we asked for was given to us. The Lord knows what is best for us. His gifts are good and for our good. His answers to our prayers is often determined by what is best for us. Not getting everything we ask for often challenges people's faith in God's promises. "*He promised to give me what I asked for*" is pointed out clearly by the one that is tending to doubt. This is the reason that prayer is often referred to as "*a struggle with God.*"

Does God answer our prayers and give us our requests? "**Yes and NO.**" Yes, He does answer our prayers and give us some of our requests. No, He does not give us all of our requests. In fact, many of us looking back may be thankful that God did not grant some of our petitions.

HOW DOES DEVOTED PRAYER BRING ABOUT MATURITY?

We firmly believe that prayer is a part of the maturing process for the Christian! Without devoted prayer, the maturing process is slowed down or levels off at an immature level. What is it about prayer that helps to develop a person spiritually. The following thoughts are given for your evaluation.

It helps to bring discipline into my life. Like Daniel of old, we need to set up special times of prayer and devotion to God and stick with it—no matter what! (Daniel 6:10). The regulated life is one with a purpose and direction and the knowledge of how to get there. The Christian should have all three of these. Prayer becomes a part of seeking God's help to get there.

Prayer helps me to become more unselfish. I not only ask God for my own needs, but I have learned that my prayers need to include others (Philippians 2:3-4; Ephesians 6:18). My expression of thanksgiving in my prayers shows to God that I am maturing in my understanding of expressing gratitude.

Prayer is a constant reminder of how much I depend upon God. Not only for my existence physically, but my spiritual well-being also. It is the child (the immature) that says, "*I can do it all by myself.*" It is the mature person that gives recognition to how much he owes to others about him, as well as to God. But at the same time that I am realizing my dependence upon God and others, I have also realized that I must carry out my responsibilities to the best of my ability, with God's help (Philippians 4:13; Galatians 6:1-5)

CONCLUSION

Communication is a two-way street. God wants to talk with me and tell me all the things that would be good for me. He does that through His inspired Word. Do I listen to what He has to say.

Then, prayer is man's way of expressing his thoughts to God. Should God listen to us, if we refuse to listen to Him?

Prayer is a great privilege that God has granted to His children. We should not take such a privilege for granted!

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1. Why did God hear the prayer of the Publican and not the Pharisee? (Luke 18:9-14)**

- 2. How should we draw nigh to God? (James 4:8-10)**

- 3. What makes it possible for man to approach unto God in prayer? (1 Tim. 2:5; John 14:13-14)**

- 4. Why is prayer such a challenge to our faith?**

- 5. What is prayer?**

- 6. What are some special terms that are identified with prayer? (Eph. 6:18; Phil. 4:6; John 14:13-14)**

- 7. What is not to be involved in prayer?**
 - a) Matt. 6:7—
 - b) Matt. 6:5—
 - c) Phil. 4:6—
 - d) Luke 18:9-12, 14—
 - e) 1 John 3:22

- 8. Give three reasons why we should pray.**

- 9. How often should we pray?**

- 10. What are some conditions of acceptable prayer?**
 - a) Matt. 6:9—
 - b) John 14:13-14—
 - c) Matt. 6:12—
 - d) 1 John 5:14—
 - e) Jas. 1:5-8—
 - f) James 4:8-10—
 - g) John 15:7—
 - h) 1 Pet. 3:12—
 - i) 1 John 3:12—
 - j) James 5:16-18—

- 11. How does prayer help to mature me spiritually?**

Lesson Seven

"MATURING THROUGH TRUE COMMITMENT"

In Psalm 37:1-6 there are three admonitions that are so appropriate for us even today: "***Trust in the Lord, and do good,***" "***Delight thyself also in the Lord,***" "***Commit thy way to the Lord.***" What a definition this is to identify a child of God! When we made our decision to become a Christian, it was a trust, a delight, a committing of ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, not all who profess to be a Christian really fit this definition. There are those who are lukewarm disciples (Revelation 3:15-16), who are materialistically-minded (1 Corinthians 3:4; Romans 8:5-6; Matthew 16:26), who are indifferent to the cross they are to bear (Matthew 16:24), and those who want what Christ offers, but unwilling to really commit themselves to Christ and His Cause.

God is calling upon all who profess the name of Christ: (1) To fully give ourselves in service to King Jesus; (2) To rise above the indifferent and unconcerned to a higher level of living for God; (3) To have a high sense of loyalty without reservations; (4) To give ourselves to Him and be led wherever He leads; and (5) To even be willing to die for Him and His Cause. In the words of the inspired apostle Paul, "***To present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God...***"(Romans 12:1).

A well-known Greek Philosopher, named Socrates, was approached by a would-be disciple. He asked, "What do I have to do to become a learned man like you?" Socrates motioned him to follow and took him to the river. He and the young man waded waist high into the water. Socrates turned and grabbed his head and plunged it under the water. Finally, he let him up gasping for air. He asked the young man, "What did you desire most?" "AIR" was the reply. Socrates then said, "When you desire knowledge as intensely as you wanted air, you'll find a way to get it."

TO WHOM OR WHAT ARE WE COMMITTED?

To ask the question to one who knows the teaching of Scripture is to have an obvious answer—Our commitment is to Jesus Christ. But it is more, it is a commitment to Him as Lord! Peter told the Jews on the day of Pentecost that God had made that same Jesus whom they had crucified "***both Lord and Christ!***"(Acts 2:36) It is not only giving recognition in word that Jesus is Christ and Lord, but in our submission to His Will. Jesus made this very clear during His public ministry—"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven."(Matthew7:21).

It is not a matter of convenience, but a matter of whether we are committed! It is faithful obedience in all circumstances of life. When Jesus began explaining to His disciples and other followers what Christianity was to be like, He never said anything that indicated it was anything short of the giving of one's life for the Lord. The proper action and attitude grows out of one's feelings about the Lordship of Christ. "***Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow.....and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.***"(Philippians 2:9-11). Reverence, worship, and submission should be given to Lord Jesus! Only when a person realizes the position of Jesus as Lord, is he ready to make the kind of commitment to be a faithful disciple of Jesus. The apostle Paul stated that he counted all things as loss in order to gain Christ and the knowledge of Christ as Lord (Philippians 3:7-10) Jesus spelled it out clearly what commitment to Him would require: a denying of self, taking up one's cross, and following Him. It involves a willingness to lose one's life in order to gain it (Matthew 16:24-25).

ENCOURAGING EXAMPLES OF COMMITMENT

The apostles of Jesus were among the first to commit themselves to follow Jesus. They were constantly challenged to have a steadfast commitment. His rebukes of them were to help them to true commitment, such as: "***O ye of little faith***" (Matthew 14:31), "***Why did you doubt?***"(Matthew 14:31), "***do you not yet understand?***"(Mark 8:17), and

"All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night..." (Matthew 26:31). In spite of these things, their commitment grew to the point that they became truly committed to Jesus all the way. They were committed to Jesus as the risen Son of God and only Savior (Acts 2:32; 4:12). They were committed to the Gospel as man's only hope of learning about the salvation in Christ Jesus (Romans 1:16). They were committed to carrying out the great commission to preach this Gospel into all the world (Mark 16:15-16). They were committed even to the extent of giving their lives up to obey their Lord (Acts 5:27-32).

The commitment of the early Christians serves as outstanding examples as well. Both Jew and Gentile had to turn from their former religious beliefs and practices to this new religion of Jesus. Many had to leave behind friends and family to follow Christ. They willingly gave to relieve the distress of their fellow Christians (Acts 2-5). They suffered willingly the loss of jobs, houses, and possessions. They suffered imprisonment and even cruel deaths. (Acts 8:1-3). Those who were scattered abroad just kept on preaching the message of hope to a lost world.

THE DANGERS OF INDIFFERENCE

Newness and new things tend to create excitement! But when the newness wears off—the excitement tends to subside. After a period of 40-50 years the churches began to have problems with indifference. The church at Sardis in the province of Asia was on the verge of death spiritually (Revelation 3:1). In the same area, the church at Ephesus had left their first love (Revelation 2:4). The church at Laodicea thought they had arrived and were said to be lukewarm (Revelation 3:16). False teachers were getting footholds in churches. Why? Were they not taught the truth? Were they not zealously holding on to that truth? Were they not sincerely trying to follow that truth? Or, were they becoming indifferent? Lack of concern is one of the best ways to defeat efforts of the church. Indifference to the programs, activities, classes, assemblies, ministries of the church help to make the church weak, helpless and ineffective—and will eventually destroy it!

It is important that we never forget who we are, to whom we belong, and why we are children of God. We need to keep our excitement and enthusiasm up. We need to make decisions, work and plan together, and see that we are going in the right direction.

HOW DOES ONE LOSE THEIR FIRST LOVE?

The church at Ephesus had lost their first love! Why? Were they not a faithful church of the Lord? Look at what the Lord says about them in Revelation 2:1-7:

"I know your works, your labor, your patience"
"You cannot bear those who are evil"
"You test those who claim to be apostles"
"You have persevered, been patient, and labored for Jesus' name sake and have not become weary"
"You hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans"

But then He says to them, **"I have this against you, that you have left your first love."** His admonition to them was: **"repent and do the first works."** The church was busy and active, but had become negligent of the **"first works."** Maybe they had lost their sense of the need of God's grace in their lives. Maybe they were not as zealous in their service as they were at first. One of the greatest motivations that a Christian has is his sense of dependency upon the grace of God for his being right with God. A concept that should never be forgotten. When forgotten, we tend to depend more on ourselves and see how "good" we are and lose an understanding of why we need God so desperately in our lives.

WHAT ABOUT OUR COMMITMENT TODAY?

Do we have a strong sense of dependency upon God in our lives? Has the grace of God continued to motivate us to zealously serve the Lord in whatever way we can?

Are we committed to attend the assemblies of the saints (Hebrews 10:24-25)? Why is it that some attend and others do not? Why is it that some allow almost anything to interfere with their attending?

What about our prayer life before God? How often do we pray? Do we pray because we have to or because we feel the need and see the value? What about the commitment of those who seldom pray?

What about visiting the sick, shut-ins, etc.? How often do we visit? Have we committed ourselves to reach out to others who need our help and encouragement?

What about our giving? Do we show the same kind of spirit in our giving that the Macedonians did (2 Corinthians 8:1-5)? Why is it that some give liberally and others give very little? Would the reason be commitment to Jesus?

We need to look again at the commitment of the apostles and the early Christians and be determined that we are going to have the same kind of commitment they had. As we look around us today and see this same kind of commitment in our fellow-Christians, why can't we have that same kind of commitment they have?

Several years ago a Florida newspaper carried the story of a young boy that fell under a slow moving train that severed most of his left side (arm, hip, trunk, leg at the hip, and right foot). The doctors didn't think he would survive, but he clung to life with such a ferocity that everyone was amazed. They couldn't give him too much morphine, so the pain was horrible at times. But he was determined to live—and he did!

Just how committed are we to serving Christ fully? How committed are we to trust in Him, delight in Him, and follow Him in all He wants us to do?

CAN OUR COMMITMENT BE DIVIDED?

What did Jesus mean when He said, "*No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.*" (Matthew 6:24) In what sense is trying to serve God and mammon at the same time looked upon as divided loyalty? It should be obvious that these two masters are pulling in two different directions. Thus, we have to make a choice of whom we will be committed unto.

Can we be committed to our parents and our children and to God also? (Matthew 19:29) The answer is an obvious yes, provided that our commitment to God is not put into a secondary position. It is when we place Parents or children, or anything or anyone else before our commitment to God that we lose God's acceptance.

Commitment to God must come from a sincere heart that has been changed and surrendered to God. Jesus said, "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart....*" (Matthew 22:37). But our hearts can be lured away from God and become hardened to His will in our lives (Hebrews 3:12-15) The same writer admonishes us to draw near to God with "*a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.*" (Hebrews 10:22) Peter's admonition for us is to "*sanctify the Lord God in your hearts....*" (1 Peter 3:15). He wants us to give Him first place in our hearts!

CONCLUSION

As we examine our lives, can we truly say that we have committed our ways to the Lord? Have we truly given ourselves to Him in willing obedience in all things?

Serving God may not be convenient at times, but to those who have committed themselves to serve the Lord with their whole heart, it is not a matter of convenience, but surrender!

May God help us to open our eyes and see our need of full commitment to the Cause of serving our Lord Jesus Christ with our whole heart.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are three special admonitions given in Ps. 37:1-6?

2. What is God calling upon all who profess the name of Christ to do?

3. Can one be committed to Christ, but not really willing to obey Him as Lord of His Life?

4. How would you define the difference between a religion of convenience and a religion of commitment?

5. What was the apostle Paul willing to do to gain Christ in his life?

6. Can you show how the apostles were committed to following Christ?

7. Can you show how the early Christians were committed to following Christ?

8. What three churches in Asia illustrate the dangers of indifference?

9. How does one lose his first love?

10. What are some areas that test our commitment to Christ today?

11. What causes divided commitment?

12. Are all Christians committed to following Christ?

13. What causes a person to really be truly committed to Christ?

Lesson Eight

"MATURING THROUGH OVERCOMING SIN"

MATURITY requires that we see what is good. It requires that we see what is bad. And then, requires the strength to choose and do the good!

SIN is obviously the bad! When we choose sin, we show our immaturity! When we deal with sin—choose the good—we show we are maturing. "*But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.*"(Heb. 5:14)

WHAT IS SIN?

From the time that Adam and Eve first sinned in the Garden of Eden, man has had a constant battle to try to overcome sin. What did they do and why are their actions called "sin?"

God had created and placed man in a beautiful garden to dress and to keep it and enjoy all that God has made possible for them. But God gave them a command not to eat the fruit of a certain tree in the garden. He added this warning, "*for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.*"(Genesis 2:17) The Serpent deceived Mother Eve into believing his lie rather than what God had said and ate of the tree and gave also to her husband to eat of it. Through their "unbelief" they "disobeyed" God! This is called "sin."

The apostle John stated that "*sin is lawlessness.*" (1 John 3:4). As the westerner would say, "*Sin is to be an outlaw.*" It is one who does not stay within the framework of law, but does his own thing. John also adds that the person who transgresses (goes beyond God's Law) and does not abide in the doctrine (Law) of Christ does not have God. But those who abide in the doctrine (Law) of Christ have both the Father and the Son (2 John 9).

Sin is not only an act of wrongdoing, but it can also be a failure to act in doing what I should. James 4:17 states, "*Therefore, to whom who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.*" Men often make the distinction between these two things by calling one "the sin of commission" and the other "the sin of omission."

There is another aspect of sin that needs to be looked at carefully—that is, to go against one's conscience. Paul is actually talking about this concept in Romans 14:23 when he states, "*But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.*" This concept is not actually dealing with something that is stated to be a sin, but what a person perceives to be a sin. It is talking about a person doing something without full approval of his conscience. The purpose of this restriction is to help keep one's conscience sensitive. To keep doing something that one's conscience does not approve of will cause his conscience to become seared (1 Timothy 4:2).

SINGLE ACT versus SERVING SIN

The inspired statement made by the apostle Paul is not only true of people who are lost, but of people who are saved: "*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*"(Romans 3:23). If this statement is true of Christians (and it is), then how can we be Christians and still sin?

The inspired apostle John states, "*Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him.....He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning.....Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.*"(1 John 3:6, 8, 9) At first, these statements seem to indicate that a Christian (one truly born of God) cannot sin! Yet, we all know from experience that there is no such person who is sinless! Possibly, the next verse may shed some light on this issue: "*In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest; Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother.*"(1 John 3:10). A distinction is being made between one who may sin and one who practices sin. Also, the tense of the verbs need to be understood in order to get the right grasp of these passages. One who is born of God does not "continue" in the way of sin! The person who

abides in Christ does not continue in the way of sin! The person who continues in the way of sin shows that he is following the devil and not God.

The inspired Paul shows that there is a battle going on in the life of every person between the "flesh" and the "Spirit." Each is vying for the control of the person. If we follow after the "lust of the flesh," then we are in the flesh's control. If we walk in the teachings of the Spirit, we will not fulfill the lust of the flesh (Galatians 5:16-17). The person that is committed to God and His way of life cannot live both a sinful life and a spiritual life. They are in conflict. He must choose one or the other. When one chooses to continue in sin, he has chosen to serve sin and is no longer counted by God as righteous. But when a person obeys from the heart the gospel of Christ, he is not only made free from sin, but has committed himself to be a servant of righteousness (Romans 6:16-18).

Even though no one can live above sin; yet, it is important that we not only make the decision to turn from sinful actions to become obedient to God's will, but to continue each day to live that way. *"But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin."* (1 John 1:7). The emphasis is not on being absolutely sinless, but on the decision and effort to walk in righteousness! If we will do so, we have the promise of continual forgiveness of those sins that we commit all along in our lives. And in verse 9, John tells us that we need to confess our acts of sin and ask for God's continual forgiveness of such acts.

THE NATURE OF SIN

If sin (disobedience) to God did not offer some desirable reward, it is doubtful that men would walk in the way of sin! This is illustrated in the life of Moses. He was faced with a momentous decision in his life—whether to enjoy the riches and treasures of Egypt or to suffer affliction with the people of God. The reward that Egypt offered was referred to as the *"pleasures of sin for a season."* (Hebrews 11:24-27) But Moses looked beyond the fleeting pleasures of sin to a greater reward that God offered to those who commit themselves to obeying Him (Hebrews 11:26).

There is also a deceitful nature about sin. It is helping me to think that I am doing right when I am actually doing wrong. Whether it is self-deception or being deceived by another—it is making an effort to justify that which is sinful as being right or acceptable. (Hebrews 3:12-14). The desirability and enjoyment of sin hardens and encourages one to continue in sin rather than turn to righteousness.

Sin is characterized as *"all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men."* (Romans 1:18). In contrast to *"walking in the light"* sin is looked upon by Scripture as one who is *"walking in darkness"* (1 John 1:5-7) and is in *"the power of darkness."* (Colossians 1:13).

THE CONSEQUENCES OF SIN

Just as righteousness is rewarded by God with a *"hundredfold in this life, and in the age to come, eternal life"* (Mark 10:29-30); so, sin has its rewards (or better stated, its consequences) in this life and in the age to come also. The term that clearly defines the outcome of a life of sin is the word, "death!" *"The wages of sin is death"* (Romans 6:23). Both physical death as well as spiritual death comes as a result of sin. When physical death is defined, it makes it easier to define spiritual death. James says that physical death is a separation of the spirit from the body (James 2:26). So, spiritual death is a separation of man's spirit from God's Spirit (Isaiah 59:1-2; Ephesians 2:1, 5). It is a separation from fellowship with God in this life and after physical death, it is eternal separation from fellowship with God. (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9). This eternal separation is described in various terms, such as: a place of darkness (2 Peter 2:4), a lake of fire (Revelation 20:10), and a place of torment or punishment for ever and ever (Revelation 20:10; Matthew 25:46).

God not only doesn't want man to sin and suffer the consequences of his actions, but He tries to restrain us without taking away our choice. But if we are determined to go our own way, He has no choice but to let us ruin ourselves (Romans 1:24-28). He has sent His Son to live among us and set us an example, and had Him to die to deliver us from the penalty of our sins. He also gave us His inspired, written word, so that we might know the consequences of

our actions to warn us. But God will not force us to serve Him or do right. He allows us to make our choice and reap the consequences of those choices (Galatians 6:7-8).

One of the sad things about sin and its consequences in this life is the enslavement of mankind to sin. Sin enslaves those who will yield to it like: Drink, Drugs, Sexual Immorality, etc. But there is also a greater enslavement concept about sin. Sinful man has no way of getting rid of the penalty of sin in his life. He is in bondage to sin and its results. He is without God and without hope in the world! (Ephesians 2:12). Without the mercy and grace and goodness of God, man will suffer the full consequences of sin here and hereafter. The apostle Paul reminds us: "***For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness....the end of those things is death.***" (Romans 6:20-21)

OVERCOMING SIN

There are two things necessary in order to overcome sin in our lives.

First, there is the need to have all past sins and their penalty remitted, forgiven, cleansed from us. This is accomplished by the death of Jesus on the cross and upon our obedience to the gospel (Romans 5:6-10; 6:16-18). Without this forgiveness, we remain in the hold and enslavement of sin.

Second, there is a need for the Christian to put away the sins of the past (1 Peter 2:1-2). Paul calls it a putting off the "*old man*" and a putting on of the "*new man in Christ*"(Ephesians 4:22-24). This is not something that God does miraculously for us, but that we must make a decision about and do something about in our own lives. But, all the time, God is furnishing the motivation for us to change, the direction to show us what to turn from and unto, and the rewards if we will make diligent effort to make these changes in our lives (2 Peter 1:5, 10).

Overcoming sin in our lives will also require repentance! This is making a decision to die to the way of sin (Romans 6:1-2). It is giving recognition to the fact I have gone against the will of God in my life and I need to quit it. There needs to be a "*godly sorrow*" for these wrong actions and a determination to bear the fruits of repentance (a changed life) (Matthew 3:8).

Overcoming sin will also require a confession of sin! (1 John 1:9). "***If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins.***" Unwillingness to confess sins may indicate a real lack of repentance on our part. Our confession is primarily to God—for it is He against whom we have sinned. But there will be times when we need to confess to another person against whom we have sinned that we are sorry and want their forgiveness. (James 5:16).

Once sins have been forgiven, we should not carry a sense of guilt for them any longer, less we be discouraged and quit serving the Lord. Forgiveness is our basis for keeping on trying to live right and do right. Overcoming sin requires that we accept God's forgiveness!

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1. Why are the actions of Adam and Eve called sin? (Genesis 2:17)**
- 2. How does the apostle John define sin? (1 John 3:4)**
- 3. Define sins of commission and sins of omission.**
- 4. What does one's conscience have to do with sin? (Romans 14:23)**
- 5. How would you explain this statement of Scripture: "*He who sins is of the devil?*" (1 John 3:8)**
- 6. Since all men sin, how do you distinguish between a Christian and a non-Christian?**
- 7. Describe the nature of sin in people's lives.**
- 8. What are the consequences of sin in people lives?**
- 9. What is involved if man is to overcome sin?**
- 10. What is said about the person that keeps on in the way of sin? (1 John 3:6, 8, 9; Hebrews 10:26)**
- 11. Does one need the "power of God" to properly deal with sin in his life? (Philippians 4:13)**
- 12. Where does sin have its origination in our lives? (Matthew 15:18-20; James 1:13-15)**
- 13. What is a powerful tool to overcome sin? (Psalm 119:11)**

Lesson Nine

"MATURING THROUGH A DISCIPLINED LIFE"***STRENGTH***

There are all kinds of strengths! We can have a strong physical body. We can have a strong craving or desire for something. We can have a strong will power. Etc. In this lesson, we want to examine the thought of a strong disciplined life.

I wonder how many people have wanted to quit being selfish, having lustful thoughts, over-eating, smoking, drinking alcohol, etc. When one is convicted by the Word of God that he needs to change from his sinful habits, he is immediately faced with the question—"Am I strong enough, do I have the will power to change?" And again, I wonder how many of us have made a commitment to change and succeed for only a short time or fail quickly.

We are living in an "*instant society*." Considering this lifestyle, control over our sinful habits is also desired in an instant. To talk to someone who has experienced this is quite unusual. These kinds of changes usually takes time and a developing of a strong disciplined life. To advocate discipline in our society is not met with an overwhelming reception. Such takes away from their freedom and carries with it the idea of legalism and harshness. But if a person is to ever have a strong Christian life, it can only come through a strong will power.

DISCIPLINE DEFINED

The Greek word for "discipline," "self-control," or "temperance" is "**Enkrateia**." It carries with it the idea of one who masters, or brings under control, his desires and sensual appetites with God's help. The apostle Paul used this Greek word in 1 Corinthians 9:25 that is literally translated, "**controls himself**." His reference is to athletes who go into strict training for the games. He then makes the spiritual application in his own life how he has had to bring his life into control to the will of God. He uses a strong term in verse 27—"I buffet my body." It carries with it the idea of continual beating until subjection is complete.

It should be obvious that the Christian life is one of continual buffeting of ourselves to bring our wills, our lives, into subjection to God's Will. We, too, are in training just like those athletes were. Our training is in godliness. Our prize is eternal life. We only win the prize—"We become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end."(Hebrews 3:14).

MEEKNESS AND DISCIPLINE

Another term that is closely tied to discipline is meekness. This word, especially in the ancient world, was associated with weakness or cowardliness. But when this term is used to identify two outstanding persons in the Bible, it is obvious that it is far from such. Moses was "**very humble (meek), more than all men who were on the face of the earth.**"(Numbers 12:3). The other person that has been identified as meek was Jesus.

"Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle (meek) and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (Matthew 11:29). It is quite obvious that Jesus was not a weak person, but rather one of great strength and control in his life. When faced with death by evil men, he was in complete control. So, it would seem that the Biblical concept of the word, "meekness," indicates that one has his life in control and handles his situations well. It might be well to point out that meekness (gentleness) is a fruit of the Spirit of God working in our lives (Galatians 5:23) along with "self-control."

THE PURPOSE OF DISCIPLINE

Mr. Webster defines discipline as "*training that corrects, molds, or perfects the mental facilities or moral character.*" To a child, discipline may appear to be punishment—and it is. But the purpose is not just to be punished; rather, it is to bring about correction in the child's life for his good.

To the Christian, discipline involves a denying of one's self and a submitting to the Will of God. We will lose our life in order to gain it. (Matthew 16:24-25). If living my life the way I want to live it would bring eternal life—there would be no reason to change my life. But that is the whole point—it won't! So, I need to lose my life and live it the way Christ wants me to.

Thus, the purpose of discipline is to follow carefully God's truth so that I can be set free from the slavery of sin and its penalty (John 8:31-32). The inspired apostle expressed it clearly in Ephesians 4:22-24—I must put off the old man and put on the new! Discipline has to be involved in the transforming of one's life.

DISCIPLINE AND HOLINESS

While discipline is important to the Christian life and to maturity in Christ, it is not to be confused with a holy life. A person can be disciplined but not necessarily "holy" before God. A good athlete must be a disciplined person, but that does not necessarily make him holy. To succeed in the business world may require a great deal of discipline in one's life, but again such doesn't make him a holy person. Discipline and holiness are not necessarily synonymous! Yet, holiness has to come through a disciplined life.

It is also important to realize that a disciplined life is not a substitute for a holy life. In Luke 12:16-21, the rich man had produced a good crop. It is obvious that the man had to have had good work habits in order to do so well. The purpose of disciplined living in the rich man's life was to gain things for himself. He was condemned by the Lord for not being "***rich toward God.***" (verse 21). Holiness before God was not his goal.

While a disciplined life is not necessarily a holy life; yet, to live a holy life will require discipline on our part. This discipline involves submission to God's righteousness (Romans 10:1-3). Failure to know and submit to God's righteousness leaves us in sin and under its penalty of death. A holy life begins with the cleansing blood of Jesus upon our obedience to the gospel of Christ (Romans 6:16-18). A continued holy life is one that makes the commitment to live righteously and godly before God and man (Titus 2:11-12). If we will continue to walk in the light day by day, we have the assurance of the cleansing blood of Jesus. Our holiness is not found in perfect law-keeping, but in walking in the light and the purifying blood of Jesus. One of the purposes of suffering is to drive our souls to God who has the cleansing agent for our souls.

We believe that discipline in one's life is an aid to holy living. It helps us to maintain a holy lifestyle.

DISCIPLINE OF THE TONGUE

The inspired James tells us not only of the power of the tongue, but of its great evil that it can produce (James 3:1-10). Because of its great potential for evil, it is absolutely necessary that the Christian learn to control his tongue(Proverbs 18:20-21; 26:20-22). James says, "***If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless.***"(James 1:26). Evil use of the tongue (slanderer or a reviler) is in a list of sins that the church is to withdraw from a brother who continues to be guilty of such (1 Corinthians 5:11).

Proper disciplined use of our tongues can both bless God and man (James 3:9). It is to say the right things at the right time (Proverbs 12:14, 18, 25; 25:11). The tongue can also bring good news to a lost and dying world (Romans 10:14-15)

BECOMING A DISCIPLINED PERSON

When Jesus made the following statement, He was not only challenging us to make the decision to follow him, but to stick with it—***No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.***" (Luke 9:62)

This looking back is like Lot's wife—longingly looking back to what she had before. There is a cost to be paid in following Christ. We need to realize this up front. Then, when we make our commitment, we will stick with it.

No one can know the will of God for his life unless he spends time in the word of God. His inspired word can make us complete and furnish us unto every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17). But this completeness (maturity) does not come without a disciplined effort to know and abide in His word (John 8:31-32). But knowledge alone is insufficient. We need to meditate upon this word "**day and night**" so that we can make the proper application of it in our lives (Psalm 1:2). To know and not put it into practice is a way of deceiving ourselves (James 1:22).

Life itself is a growing process. The Christian life is one of growth. If true, solid growth comes over a period of time—then, one must learn to persevere in his efforts to grow. Jesus said this about pray that "**men always ought to pray and not lose heart.**" (Luke 18:1). But growing and maturing in Christ requires that same perseverance—that continually getting up and keep on trying (Proverbs 24:16).

We also have to learn to discipline our minds and hearts because this is where sin has its origin. We are "**drawn away by our own desires and enticed.**" (James 1:14). Jesus warns us that "**out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies.**" (Matthew 15:19). We need to fill our minds and hearts with the right things, not that which is wrong (Philippians 4:8). The Hebrew writer warns us to "**lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.**" (Hebrews 12:1-2).

Involved in a disciplined life are those preventive measures that need to be taken to deal with sin.

God promises us strength to carry out His will in our lives (Philippians 4:13). He also promises us that He will not allow us to be tempted above what we are able to bear (1 Corinthians 10:13). But it should be clear that this does not apply to the one that plunges headlong in the way of sin. We need to anticipate sin and its temptation, as well as its consequences. The wise man says, "**A prudent man foresees evil and hides himself; The simple pass on and are punished.**" (Proverbs 27:12). We need to make the decision to avoid all evidences of evil in our lives (1 Thessalonians 5:22). We should not see how close to sin we can come, but how far away from it that I can be.

God has given to us the desires and passions in our lives for our good and happiness. But these can be misused and wrongly indulged in to our harm and hurt both physically and spiritually. We must let our desires lead us into sinful habits or overt sinful practices. God has given us the need and desire to eat, but excessive use of the desire is called "gluttony." If we are to live a holy disciplined life, we must come to grips with our desires and passions. We need to listen to Paul when he said that he buffeted his body and brought it into control. (1 Corinthians 9:25-27).

Another factor in living a disciplined life is to learn to be content in whatever situation we are in. Paul said that he had "**learned**" to be content in whatever state he was in. (Philippians 4:11). We, too, need to learn this great lesson.

CONCLUSION

Obedience and discipline go hand in hand. God expects us to obey His Word. But our problem as humans is—we can't do it by ourselves. Many of us deceive ourselves by thinking we can do anything we set our minds to do. Paul struggled with this as he stated in 2 Corinthians 2:14-16. He questioned himself by saying, "**who is sufficient for these things?**" And just a few verses later he states, "**our sufficiency is from God.**" Our ability to faithfully serve God comes from His helping us. Thankfully, our victory does not depend upon us along, but also the help of God. With His help, we can win the victory! Therefore, "**if God is for us, who can be against us?**" (Romans 8:31) And "**in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.**" (Romans 8:37).

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why is discipline so important to a correct Christian life?
 2. How would you define discipline or self-control?
 3. How does the apostle Paul describe it in 1 Cor. 9:25-27?
 4. What does discipline and meekness have in common?
 5. What is the purpose of discipline?
 - a) Of a child—
 - b) Of a Christian—
 6. What is the connection between discipline and a holy life?
 7. Can a person be disciplined, but not right with God?
 8. Can a person be right with God, but undisciplined?
 9. Why is it so important to discipline our tongue?
 10. What are the things that help us to live a holy and disciplined life?
 11. Why is obedience important in disciplined living?
 12. Who makes it possible for us to live such a life?

Lesson Ten

"MATURING THROUGH A COOPERATIVE SPIRIT"

The Purpose of these lessons is to mature us in our ability to effectively serve God and others about us. It is also an emphasis upon helping us to find ways to serve, not to see how little we can do to get by and satisfy our consciences. **"As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good to all men, especially to those of the household of faith."** (Galatians 6:10).

Our lessons have a two-fold emphasis:

- 1) **To mature us!** To help us to grow up, to become complete as a Christian, to be perfected as children of God.
- 2) **To Serve.** To learn how to better serve God and man. Learning to reach out to others.

But what does a "Cooperative Spirit" have to do with Maturing for Service? Two young boys were playing football. One felt that the other was not playing according to the rules, so he picked up his football and went home mad. As adults we look upon this as being childish and showing immaturity. But what about us so-called adults—do we exemplify this same non-cooperative spirit? Do we threatened to "take our marbles and go home" just as this little boy did. Do we really show a cooperative spirit towards those we associate with, especially in the church?

MEMBERS ONE OF ANOTHER

When we were baptized into Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13), we came into what is here referred to as "**the body of Christ.**" A human body is made up of many members. They are a part of the same body. Each member operates and serves along with all the other members of the body for the good of the body, as well as, to bless others outside the body (1 Corinthians 12:19-27). That the church should have a cooperative spirit would seem to be obvious from this common sense illustration. Can you imagine each member of your physical body doing his or her own thing and not working together with the body?

TERMS THAT DEPICT A COOPERATIVE SPIRIT

The concept of a body is not the only term that depicts this spirit of cooperation. There are also such terms as: "**children of God,**" and "**family of God**" that gives emphasis to the fact that we are a part of a whole. But there are additional terms that describe the cooperative spirit such as: **Relationship, Fellowship, Warmth, Inviting, Courteous, Kindness, and longsuffering, etc.** All of these depict a body of people who are working together for the good of all.

There are three terms in particular that really requires a cooperative spirit in order to validate the term.

Commitment. We are committed to someone or thing. This word infers that one or more persons are involved. Commitment to what or to whom becomes important. If we are committed to Christ and to one another, we will want to serve both well. If the commitment is not there, whether we cooperate or not is beside the point.

Loyalty. One is not blown about by every wind of doctrine because he has his own convictions of what is truth and has obeyed it and is still obeying it. Jesus warns us that we cannot have two masters (Matthew 6:24) We must have a loyalty to God and His church that is unquestioned (Matthew 6:33). Where this loyalty is found, you will also find a cooperative spirit.

Faithfulness. When we truly believe something to be right, there is no reason to turn from it. We stick with our beliefs as long as they are confirmed by the word of God. This is what is called faithfulness. Where faithfulness is found, you will find a cooperative spirit.

AREAS IN WHICH TO SHOW A COOPERATIVE SPIRIT

It is quite obvious that the Christian has his own individual responsibility that he must shoulder (Galatians 6:4-5). Yet, in the same context, emphasis is also given to stress the reaching out to help others (Galatians 6:1-2, 6, 9-10) and cooperating with others to accomplish good. What are some of the areas in which to manifest a cooperative spirit that is vitally important?

In Our Worship Together. The very activity of worship emphasizes our cooperation together for the good of all (Ephesians 5:19; 1 Corinthians 14:26). What if everyone decided they will not cooperate with the song leader? The answer is obvious—no worship in song! What if every one decided they would not partake of the Lord's Supper when passed? Then, there will be no worship in the Lord's Supper! The same is true of one or more persons—if they do not cooperate in the act, there is no worship on their part.

In Our Bible Study. Without a cooperative spirit of involvement, there is no Bible Study on the part of those who will not cooperate. Jesus said to the one-talent man who would not cooperate—"You are a wicked and slothful (lazy) servant." (Matthew 25:26). Maturing, learning, growing, willingly cooperating with fellow-Christians takes effort!

In Our Great Work. We have the greatest job on earth. But it takes a great cooperative spirit to get it done. We show our cooperative spirit by our liberal giving, our prayers in their behalf, and doing what else we can to encourage their efforts.

In Our Fellowship Together. The term, fellowship, is just another word for togetherness. We do things together. We jointly participate in eating together(Acts 2:44-46), we work together,(1 Corinthians 3:6), and we visit together (James 1:27).

WHY ARE PEOPLE NOT COOPERATIVE?

Is it because of a lack of commitment, loyalty, or faithfulness?(Revelation 2:10) Is it indifference (James 4:17), deadness like Sardis (Revelation 3:1), lack of our first love like Ephesus (Revelation 2:4), lukewarmness like Laodicea (Revelation 3:16), troubles in the church like in the Corinthian church (1 & 2 Corinthians), or being lured away from the truth like the Galatian Christians (Galatians 5:7). These and other things like them can cause a non-cooperative spirit that makes it hard for the church to properly do its work. The thing that is so sad is the self-deception that takes place thinking that they are okay when they are not. Their attitude is, "*I don't need to make any changes.*" "*I don't need to cooperate with the Lord or the church.*"

There are also admonitions in Scripture encouraging the cooperative spirit. The Thessalonian church was urged to give proper recognition to those who were attempting to lead and teach them the way to walk (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13). The Hebrew writer exhorted Christians to follow the teaching and example of those who lead over them in the church (13:7). He adds also for Christians to be submissive to those who watch for their souls (13:17). Without a cooperative spirit, none of these things could be carried out. Also, to be non-cooperative is to be disobedient to God, Himself—for it is His word giving these admonitions. A non-cooperative spirit could be reflecting an immature outlook.

COOPERATION AND ONENESS

"Can two walk together unless they are agreed?" (Amos 3:3) What an obvious answer that can be given to this question! Cooperation does not come from people of a divisive spirit or who are disagreeable. That is the reason why the admonitions to unity and oneness are so vital in the New Testament. "*Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*" (Ephesians 4:3). "*fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.*" (Philippians 2:2) What an appeal for cooperation among brethren—working together, thinking about and being concerned about the same things, determined to do things together, and sharing their love in the process!

COOPERATION IN TRUTH

God wants to be worshiped in "***spirit and in truth.***" (John 4:24). Jesus said that the "***truth can make us free***" as we continue in His words (John 8:31-32). It is not just cooperation, but a cooperation in truth---in that which is right in the sight of God. Paul was greatly disappointed when he heard that the Galatian churches were being turned from obeying or walking in truth (Galatians 5:7). Our souls were originally cleansed or purified when we obeyed the truth (1 Peter 1:22). It is also what brought us all into one body where we could learn to cooperate together as one body (1 Corinthians 12:13). Even though some would not continue in or abide in God's truth, the apostle John was overjoyed that some were still walking in truth (2 John 4) He added in 3 John 4, "***I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.***" What a combination—cooperation in truth!

AN OUTSTANDING EXAMPLE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

God's Word has a way of illustrating great truths and attitudes both positively and negatively. Let's look at an outstanding example that shows both the negative and positive attitudes about a cooperative spirit and a non-cooperative spirit.

The Negative Viewpoint. The God appointed leadership of Moses was continually challenged by different individuals and groups among the Israelite people (Numbers 14, 16, etc.). It got so bad at one time that God opened up the ground and sent the whole non-cooperative group into the pit alive. This action not only showed whom God's duly appointed leader was, but the severe punishment to be received for a non-cooperative spirit.

The Positive viewpoint. Even though the Israelites that came out of Egypt all perished in the wilderness because of their unbelief (and their non-cooperative spirit) (Numbers 13-15), their children were able to go into the promised land. The emphasis had been placed upon their great faith in God that made their victory possible. But, it was also their cooperative spirit (working together) that made it possible. One of the obvious things that you notice in the record is the continued cooperative spirit manifested by the people under Joshua's leadership.

*Leaders can't lead unless the people are willing to follow
Their lead (or to have a cooperative spirit).*

Today, we need to learn well—not only the need to put our full trust in the Word of God, but to show it by a cooperative spirit (working together) to accomplish the great work of God.

CONCLUSION

When we look at the efforts of Jesus to train His disciples, it required three and one-half years of constant teaching, observing, learning, and following examples. Even the early church saw the great value of meeting together daily with one another—learning, growing in love for one another.

Whether we meet one time a week or 3 times, or 5 times—it is not an effort to make laws to bind on God's people, but rather an effort to spend adequate time together to learn and grow sufficiently together. And this can only work where there is a cooperative spirit on the part of God's people. Unity, harmony, oneness, and cooperation to carry out God's truth are the grave responsibility of God's redeemed people.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the purpose of this series of lessons?
2. What does a "cooperative spirit" have to do with Maturing for Service?
3. What had God done for us that places a responsibility to have a cooperative spirit?
4. What are some general terms that depict a cooperative spirit?

5. What is the connection between a cooperative spirit and such terms as: Commitment, Loyalty, and Faithfulness?

6. What are some areas in which to show a cooperative spirit?

7. Why are some people not cooperative in the church?

8. What is the connection between cooperation and oneness?

9. What is the connection between cooperation and truth?

10. What is an outstanding example of both a Negative & Positive cooperative spirit in the O.T.?

11. Why is a cooperative spirit so important in the church?

Lesson Eleven

"MATURING THROUGH DEALING WITH TRIALS"

Everyone, whether a Christian or not, will face the trials and tribulations of life. And many of us have said, "*I've lost my hope, and I don't see how I can go on.*" Have you ever been discouraged, disillusioned, or depressed? Have you ever felt that cruel demoralization when your best friend has let you down? Have you ever felt that you were a failure with no chance of ever succeeding? Has life shortchanged you in talent, looks, or brains? Have you ever felt unloved and uncared for by anyone in the world? Can we answer "yes" to one or more of these situations?

How we face and deal with these trials of life will determine whether we will grow or be discouraged, disillusioned, or even depressed! The inspired James in his letter to Christians indicated that various trials would come, but we were to count it a joy for them to come (1:1-2). His reason for such a statement is then given in the next two verses (3-4). Trials are not without purpose in God's plan or in our lives. In the first place, they are a means of testing to see if our faith in God is real. In the second place, as we endure these trials successfully, our lives are more and more completed, perfected, or matured before God.

The dangers of discouragement are real for the child of God. Moses made a great effort to encourage the people as they faced the task of conquering the land of Canaan with these words, "*Look, the Lord your God has set the land before you; go up and possess it, as the Lord God of your fathers has spoken to you; do not fear or be discouraged.*" (Deuteronomy 1:21). The Hebrew writer made use of the same situation to help warn Christians of the dangers of letting discouragement lead "*to an evil heart of unbelief*" (Hebrews 3:12). Jesus told a parable to illustrate this danger. That even though a person may quickly receive the Gospel message with joy at first, when tribulation or persecution comes, he falls away (Matthew 13:20-21). The dangers of facing trials and tribulations of life are real, but when properly faced and dealt with help to bring on the maturity we need.

WHAT IS DISCOURAGEMENT?

One person suggests that discouragement is primarily self-occupation. The person puts too much emphasis upon himself; sees how every situation affects him personally; and begins to conclude he is inadequate for any situation.

Generally, discouragement is when we are deprived of our confidence, our hope, or our spirit; when we become disheartened, ready to quit, or to give up! If things do not go our way, and we have problems we seemingly cannot solve by ourselves, we tend to become discouraged or even depressed.

Unfortunately, the varying degrees of discouragement can range all the way from disappointment to suicidal feelings. It is not wrong to experience discouragement, but if not dealt with correctly, it can be dangerous physically, emotionally, and even spiritually.

EXAMPLES OF DISCOURAGEMENT

There are three examples of Old Testament saints that became so discouraged that they asked God to take their lives!

Moses was a unique person! He was chosen by God personally to deliver His people from Egyptian bondage. He saw the great signs and wonders performed upon the Egyptian people. He saw the power of God to dry up the Red Sea. He saw how God fed and watered all of those people in the wilderness. Moses had communed with God face to face on the mount and then received the greatest revelation of the holiness of God that any man had received since the fall. Despite all of this, at one point in his life, he asked God to take his life. "*I am not able to bear all these people alone, because the burden is too heavy for me. If You treat me like this, please kill me here and now—if I have found favor in Your sight—and do not let me see my wretchedness!*" (Numbers 11:14-15).

What produced such discouragement in Moses? It came when he began to take upon himself the responsibilities that belonged to God. He felt the burden of all these people and their needs, and had forgotten that this was God's job, not his. He saw himself as inadequate, incapable, and broken under the load and gave in to discouragement.

God helped Moses to overcome his discouragement by giving him 70 men that would help to bear the burdens of the people in judgment. Then, He made it very clear that He would take care of the feeding of the people—it was not Moses' job (Numbers 11:16-18)

We need to be very careful that we do not make the mistake of Moses—failing to discern what is God's job and what is ours. We must assume our responsibilities, but let God take care of His job!

Elijah is the second person that asked God to take his life. God had raised him up to be a prophet in the midst of apostasy and unbelief in the Northern kingdom of Israel. Queen Jezebel had seemingly led the whole nation into idolatry.

Elijah stood alone against the wickedness of this woman. His preaching was deeply resented by her. She sent word to him that he had 24 hours to leave her kingdom or he would die (1 Kings 19:2). He fled immediately into the wilderness, evidently going without food or water all day. When he stopped that evening to rest, discouragement swept over him—which led him to request of God, "***he prayed that he might die, and said, 'It is enough! Now, Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers!"***"

How did God help Elijah to deal with his discouragement? He first had him to eat and sleep to revive his physical strength. He later told him to go back and do the work that he had been given to do. He was to anoint Hazael to be king over Syria; to anoint Jehu king over Israel; and to anoint Elisha as a prophet. He had work to do! This was no time for him to sit around in a cave feeling sorry for himself and thinking that he was the only one left who had not gone into apostasy. A person who is occupied with God and serving him cannot be occupied with himself. Besides, he was not the only one still faithful to God, there were still 7,000 who had not bowed the knee to Baal! (1 Kings 19:18). Our efforts in God's kingdom may be far more fruitful than we realize at times!

Jonah was the third person that asked God to take his life. Jonah had been sent to preach to the great city of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire. His efforts to disobey God, led him into a "whale" of an experience that convinced him to do what God wanted. So, he preached to Nineveh, "***Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.***" (Jonah 3:4). The people's reaction to his preaching was so overwhelming that God spared the city from destruction. Instead of Jonah being elated, he was deflated, discouraged, and angry! His reaction was, "***It is better for me to die than to live.***" (Jonah 4:8).

Again, Jonah's problem was himself. He wasn't concerned for the people, nor God's mercy that was extended to the people of Nineveh. He wanted these wicked people to die because they deserved it. What would he be able to tell his people when he got back home—that his preaching saved the people of Nineveh? That should make him very popular. Jonah could not see the greatness of God's mercy for looking at himself and how he would appear to others.

BASIC CAUSES OF DISCOURAGEMENT

Frustration over not accomplishing what we expected to accomplish. Instead of Queen Jezebel accepting Elijah's preaching and making a change, she did the opposite—she threatened to kill the messenger. Elijah fled far away discouraged.

A sense of Failure or not having my expectations fulfilled. When the Israelites saw the great miracles of God that caused Pharaoh to let them go, they left Egypt in high spirits. But when they came to the Red Sea and saw Pharaoh's army pursuing them, they became very frightened and discouraged (Exodus 14:10-11). It would seem that they expected leaving Egypt and going to their Promised Land would be without hardships.

When circumstances are not as I might choose them to be. Job's terrible tragedy, Israel's hardships in the wilderness, David being pursued by King Saul, or Moses' leadership being challenged by the people are circumstances that were certainly not desirable. What affect did it have on each of these mentioned? The apostle Paul handled his with an attitude of contentment (Philippians 4:11-13).

No hope for conditions to be any better. Many a person has given up when conditions get this bad. In fact, this is usually when people tend to take their own lives. The value God placed on hope is expressed in Proverbs 13:12, "***Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but when the desire comes, it is a tree of life.***" Hope in Christ has sustained many a Christian when he could not see any hope for better circumstances here (Philippians 1:21).

Suffering physically, mentally, or emotionally. Life brings its share of trials, tribulations and even persecutions (2 Timothy 1:8, 12; 3:12). If we do not have the faith and strength to deal with these as they come, we can easily become discouraged or worse.

Battling with sin and temptation. There will never be an end of having to deal with sin and temptation for the Christian—until we die! The struggle can sometimes be hard and long—Just as Jesus was tempted for 40 days and nights in the wilderness. Paul expressed this in Galatians 5:17, "***For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish.***" Unless we build up our strength to face these battles, we can become discouraged and even quit.

These and possibly other causes can bring discouragement into our lives. We need to be aware of this real danger and constantly fortify ourselves for the battle! Discouragement can be one of the Devil's best tools. It can come in the face of good experiences and favorable circumstances. It can de-activate the most active Christian and take the spark and joy and excitement out of the most outgoing persons.

DEALING WITH DISCOURAGEMENT

God has not left us without defense! He has given us much resource in His Word to help us!

God told Elijah and Jonah to do something. In Paul's words, forget the past and press on to the goal set before us (Philippians 3:12-14). Get busy working for the Lord.

Look to and Hold on to God's promises. He offers comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3-4); Assurance that all things will work out for our good (Romans 8:28); We will be more than conquerors (Romans 8:38-39); God cares for us (1 Peter 5:6-7); We shall reap if we faint not (Galatians 6:9); He will never leave us nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5); He will not allow us to be tempted above that we are able to bear (1 Corinthians 10:13); and He promises us a peace that passes all understanding to guard our hearts (Philippians 4:6-7).

Resist Satan's lies. Peter admonishes us to resist him steadfast in the faith (1 Peter 5:9).

Remove any guilt. Don't allow guilt to linger in your heart. Deal with it in God's way—by repentance, confession, and pray! (1 John 1:7-10).

Spend time in study and prayer.

Avoid close association with negative and fearful people. (Numbers 13:31-33). God condemns a fearful spirit (Revelations 21:8).

Avoid making important decisions during times of discouragement. We shall reap if we will not give up (Galatians 6:9).

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Have you ever been discouraged?
 2. Do you think that Jesus was discouraged when many of his disciples turned and walked no more with Him? (John 6:66-68)
 3. How would you define discouragement?
 4. Are there varying degrees of discouragement?
 5. Who were the three persons that became so discouraged that they asked God to take their life?
 6. What was the reason for their discouragement?
 7. Give a listing of some basic causes of discouragement:

 8. What are some suggestions on how to deal with discouragement?

 9. What happens to us when we face up to and deal with the discouraging things of life? (James 1:2-4)

 10. What is the greatest asset that the Christian has to deal with the trials and tribulations of life? (1 John 5:4)
 11. Do you look for opportunities to encourage others about you day by day?
 12. What are some special sources of help you turn to for help to overcome discouragement?

Lesson Twelve

"MATURING THROUGH LEARNING TO BE CONTENT"

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9) was a great victory for Christianity at the time, and also served as a great proof that Christianity was from God. No other explanation can be given to the dramatic change that took place in the life of this energetic and zealous Jew.

But this great conversion would not be without its consequences for Saul. "***But the Lord said to him*** (Ananias), '***Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake.***'"(Acts 9:15-16). And suffer he did! He traveled all over the Northern Mediterranean World preaching the Gospel and suffered all kinds of hardships, persecutions, beatings, and almost death on more than one occasion (2 Corinthians 11:22-28). Was Paul a happy man? Was he content to be doing what he was doing? Was he satisfied to have plenty on one hand and to suffer want on another? Listen to his own words, "***Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.***" (Philippians 4:11-13).

***Contentment is not an automatic when one becomes a Christian; it is a lesson he learns
as he grows in his understanding of the message of Christ!
As one learns to be content, he is showing his maturity status!***

WHAT IS CONTENTMENT?

When John the Baptiser was asked by some soldiers what they should do to show their repentance, he said, "***Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages.***" (Luke 3:14) Is John saying to them, be happy with what wages you have and don't ask for, nor expect, any more the rest of your lives? I am sure we all would say "no" that is not what John had in mind.

Look at Paul's statement in 1 Timothy 6:8, "***And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content.***" Is Paul saying that we should never want or have anymore than just food and clothing?

The Hebrew writer may give some insight to an answer to our question in 13:5-6: "***Let your conduct (manner of life) be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' So we may boldly say: 'The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?'***" Is contentment being satisfied with having just the bare necessities all of my life and not wanting nor striving to have more?

Becoming a Christian oftentimes meant persecution, loss of possessions, having to flee for their lives, loss of work, etc. Under such circumstances, how should the Christian act, what should be his outlook on life, and how should he view the loss of possessions? In what, or in whom does he put his trust—God or possessions? God's promises here are critical for the Christian: "***I will never leave you nor forsake you.***" "***The Lord is my helper.***" Faith and trust in God in such circumstances can help us deal with our physical situations when they are not so good. It would seem that this is the primary thrust of the concept of contentment. Whether we have much or little (Philippians 4:11-13) is not the real issue. It is whether we have godliness and have found that peace and contentment in life. "***Now godliness with contentment is great gain.***" (1 Timothy 6:6). It is realizing that possessing possessions is not the real goal of life, but being right with God and living right is the real purpose for our being! (Luke 12:15) When we realize this, we can find contentment in our lives, period!

In the words of the Psalmists, "***The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.***" (23:1) "***Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil....***" (23:4) "***Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the***

day of my life..." (23:6) Or, in the words of Job, "***The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.***" (1:21) There is that contentment, freedom from worry, an assurance that we are in the hands of a loving God who cares about us. Jesus was trying to get his disciples to understand this in the Sermon on the Mount when he said: "***But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.***" (Matthew 6:33) In other words, don't worry! Put your trust in God's care (Matthew 6:34). The apostle Paul, in discussing giving, reassures God's people of God's care: "***And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work.***" (2 Corinthians 9:8). How long it took the apostle to learn this lesson of contentment because of God's care, we are not told. But that he learned it is a stated fact. Just how long it will take you and I to learn this great truth is what we need to be concerned with!

THE ENEMY OF CONTENTMENT

The obvious enemy of contentment is discontent! After the apostle Paul had just said: "***And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content,***" he turns and deals with those who are not content. He talks about "***those who desire to be rich,***" those who have a "***love of money,***" and those who "***trust in uncertain riches.***" (1 Timothy 6:8,9,10,17). I don't believe that the apostle is forbidding having wealth (v. 17), but he is telling of the grave dangers of an outlook about wealth (v. 10). The desire to be rich becomes an over-riding motive in my life. It is to be rich—no matter what the cost! It is to turn our hearts from the love of God to the love of money. It is to put our trust in possessions rather than in the living God of heaven! Such people cannot find true happiness or true contentment. Their greedy and covetous hearts will plunge them headlong into all kinds of evils, temptations, and sorrows that destroy the soul. (vs. 9-10). And the apostle so appropriately warns Timothy, "***O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness.***" (v. 11). Why pursue these things—because herein is where contentment and happiness can be found. These are the **true riches!**

True Religion, coupled with peace of mind (contentment) is the true Riches!

The Hebrew writer ties in covetousness with the problem of discontent. "***Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have....***" (13:5). The world is concerned with possessing things. But things do not satisfy. If we encourage our children to get jobs that make a lot of money, will they be happy?

Covetousness or greediness can be expressed in four possible ways, at least:

- 1) In the way we go about trying to get gain (wrongfully, or to the neglect of family or our own soul).
- 2) In the way we go about trying to keep it (to hoard for self). To make an idol out of it (Colossians 3:5). Putting possessions first instead of God (Matthew 6:33).
- 3) In our failure to want to share what we have. The Rich Fool laid up treasures for himself upon earth, but was not rich towards God (Luke 12:21).
- 4) In a wrong desire for things we cannot have. "***You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor's.***" (Exodus 20:17) If we covet any of these, we can find no true contentment within!

BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF

DISCONTENT

Adam and Eve were placed in a beautiful garden with everything they needed. But they allowed the serpent to cause discontent and they ate the forbidden fruit (Genesis 3:4-6)

The Fallen Angels evidently became discontent with their position that God had given them and rebelled against their maker (Jude 6).

King Ahab had everything that he needed, but was discontent because someone had a vineyard that he just had to have also (1 Kings 21:1-7). His discontent led to murder.

Ananias and Sapphira showed their discontent by selling a piece of property and then lied about how much they sold it for, so they could keep part of it. They wanted the honor of giving it all, but their love of money got in their way (Acts 5:1-6).

SUGGESTIONS TO HELP CURE DISCONTENT (COVETOUSNESS)

Realize that all things belong to God to start with (Psalm 24:1), and He is only letting us use them for a short time.

Realize that this earth is not our final home (1 Peter 2:11).

Realize that we cannot take anything with us at our death (Job 1:21; 1 Timothy 6:7).

Realize that pursuit of wrong things will cost us our soul (Matthew 16:26).

Realize that we need to seek for the true and lasting treasures (Matthew 6:19-21; Colossians 3:1-2).

Remember that God has promised us the necessities of life (Matthew 6:33).

Be sure that we learn to share what we have been given with others (Ephesians 4:28; 1 John 3:17).

CONCLUSION

Judas Iscariot would seem to be a good example of covetousness! He sold out Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, while Jesus was offering him Eternal Life! This is what discontent (covetousness) can do for us.

Jesus reminds us in Luke 16:13 that we cannot serve two masters. We have to make a choice. And that choice is between Mammon (possessions) and God! If possessions were all that important, then why didn't Jesus have plenty of them? But you remember He said, "**Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.**" (Matthew 8:20).

When we go back to the apostle Paul's statement in Philippians 4:11-13, we should easily seem why he made such a statement. He had learned to be content in all circumstances of life. He had learned what was the more important: "**Godliness with contentment is great gain.**" (1 Timothy 6:8). Things, Possessions, do not bring true happiness, but a right relationship with God can and does bring happiness and contentment.

Another interesting thought about possessions—they are sometimes referred to as "unrighteous mammon" or "filthy lucre." But when we have the right attitude towards these things and use them correctly, they can lay a foundation for our acceptance into that everlasting kingdom (1 Timothy 6:19).

Can we learn to be content in whatever station in life we are in? Paul had learned to be content, and so can we! But we will never learn it if our sights are set on the wrong thing.

Paul's admonition to the Colossian brethren is so appropriate: "**If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.**" (3:1-2).

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How could the apostle Paul say that he was content even though he had and was still suffering much for the cause of Christ?

2. How would you define contentment?

3. Explain what John the Baptizer meant by contentment. (Luke 3:14)

4. Explain what Paul meant by contentment. (1 Timothy 6:8)

5. How does Hebrews 13:5-6 help to explain what contentment is?

6. How does Job illustrate contentment? (Job 1:21)

7. How do the promises of God give us contentment? (Matthew 6:33; 2 Corinthians 9:8)

8. What is the enemy of contentment?

9. What three phrases does the apostle Paul use in 1 Timothy 6 that shows discontent? (8,9,10,17)

10. What are four ways covetousness can be expressed?

11. Give some Biblical examples of discontent.

12. Give some suggestions to help cure discontent.

Lesson Thirteen

"MATURING THROUGH PROPER STEWARDSHIP"

Money in the hands of a dedicated Christian can accomplish much good, but a Christian in the hands of money can lead to eternal ruin! Financial bondage is not what God wants for His people! He has given a great deal of teaching and warnings, both in Old and New Testaments, concerning money and possessions.

PROPER STEWARDSHIP REQUIRES PROPER ATTITUDES

Proper attitude towards money and possessions is very important to having financial freedom. The story that Jesus told of a farmer illustrates how that even a "well-to-do" farmer can be enslaved to his possessions. He was rich in possessions, but not rich toward God (Luke 12:13-21). The apostle Paul made it very clear that the "love of money" leads to all kinds of evil in one's life (1 Timothy 6:10)—especially that he becomes a slave to his possessions. The right attitude towards what has been given into our care is necessary or we will become a slave to them. We are especially warned not to put our trust in "***uncertain riches,***" but to put our trust in the "***living God***" (1 Timothy 6:17).

OWNERSHIP versus MANAGERSHIP

The Bible's emphasis of proper stewardship involves recognition of God's ownership of all things (Psalm 24:1-2; 50:7-11) and our responsibility to properly manage what has been entrusted to us (1 Corinthians 4:2). The concept of stewardship is "*the management of a household; to direct its affairs, to order, regulate or dispense its property and provisions.*" But there is also the concept in God's Word that says we are to give an accounting of our managership (Luke 12:42; 16:2).

If we were to make a list of all the possessions we have at our disposal and then ask the question, "*How productively are we using these for God?*"; we might feel quite guilty if we have not viewed our possessions in this manner! If this is true of us, should we not begin to make some changes in our outlook and how we make use of what we have? The Christian must also remember that God not only is the owner of all we have, but he owns us as well—he bought us! (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

STEWARDSHIP AND THE WORK PRINCIPLE

The expression, "***If a man will not work, neither let him eat,***" (2 Thessalonians 3:10) states very clearly that God expects man to work to earn his living. Also, the apostle Paul's statement in 1 Timothy 5:8 points out that one who will not provide for his own is "***worse than an unbeliever, and has denied the faith.***" Financial bondage comes quickly to such people who do not respect God's arrangement. And.....the danger again to those who do work is the wrong attitude, "*I worked for it and it is mine to use as I please.*"

Work is designed by God for the good of man. This is indicated in the very outset of man's existence. After creating man and woman and placing them in the Garden of Eden, He told them to "***dress and keep it***" (Genesis 2:15). After man sinned, God drove him from the Garden. He also added a curse to man's work—"Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground. For out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return." (Genesis 3:17-19). But basically, work is not a curse but a benefit for man.

***"So I perceived that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his own works, for that is his heritage."* (Ecclesiastes 3:22)**

STEWARDSHIP AND DEBT

One of the things that can quickly bring financial bondage to a family is **DEBT!** Today, credit is so easy to get, one can be in debt far beyond his ability before he knows it. And when one cannot pay his bills, he borrows more and goes deeper into debt—which gives real meaning to what Solomon said about the borrower: "***The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender.***" (Proverbs 22:7). One's bondage can get so bad that he gives up trying—what many call going into bankruptcy.

What should be the Christian's view towards debt? Is it a sin to go into debt? Is this what Paul had in mind when he said: "***Owe no man anything except to love one another.***" (Romans 13:8). Probably a better way to express this is: "***Let no debt remain outstanding...***" If one has bills that he cannot pay on time, is he violating this passage? If he charges when he does not know he has money to pay for it, is he being dishonest? God calls those who do not pay their debts "**wicked.**" (Psalm 37:21). Should we change our purchasing habits? Proper Stewardship requires dealing properly with debts we make.

How desirable or practical is it to become debt free? Most of us will find it hard to be totally out of debt.....especially, if we are buying a house. It may be necessary to go into debt to furnish what we need to make a livelihood—at least, for a while. But hopefully, in time, even these debts can be paid off.

If we really want to experience the joy of being basically debt free, there are certain things that will have to be done.

1. **One must really be willing to do whatever is necessary in order to be free of debt. There may be a need to do some real sacrificing for a period of time.**
2. **It may be wise to make a list of assets and determine which could be wisely sold to pay off debts.**
3. **Refinancing or debt consolidation can be advantageous only if you can get a lower interest rate. If long term debt is created to relieve short term debt and spending habits are not changed, debt may only get deeper—not better!**
4. **Apply any extra income to paying off debt.**
5. **Do not create new debts if at all possible.**
6. **It may be necessary to contact creditors and work out a way to pay off all debts in time.**
7. **It may be wise to seek counsel from those who seem to have worked themselves out of debt. They may have some good advice.**
8. **Be content with what you have. Don't just keep buying and storing up things!**
9. **It would be very wise to work up a budget to serve as a guide to help handle finances better.**

STEWARDSHIP AND GIVING

Since the entire world and everything in it belongs to God, it should be evident that God does not need anything we have. His teaching on giving is for man's good, not His. In the words of Jesus that Paul quotes, "***It is more blessed to give than to receive.***" (Acts 20:35). God's example of giving His Son to die for us shows how He values the grace of giving. He encourages His people to abound in this grace (2 Corinthians 8:7). Learning to give liberally and generously is to be like God (2 Corinthians 9:6-7). This giving will not only include giving each Lord's Day into the church treasury (1 Corinthians 16:1-2), but as well to those in need around us (Ephesians 4:28). When we do our part, God promises to bless us with the ability to even do more (2 Corinthians 9:8-11).

CONCLUSION

Financial bondage is probably one of the worst emotional burdens that one experiences. Because of this, financial freedom is perhaps enjoyed more than most benefits a Christian receives. It is imperative that this lesson not be just an academic study, but a practical guide to life changes.

Good and proper Stewardship brings many blessings into our lives. And one of the most obvious blessings is the maturity we can see in our lives.

On the next page is a budget layout. If you do not have a budget worked up, please begin by using this one. You may have to make some alterations in it, but please feel free to do so.

BUDGET LAYOUT**INCOME FOR YEAR:**

Salary	_____
Interest	_____
Dividends	_____
Notes	_____
Rents	_____
Other	_____
Total	_____

EXPENSES FOR YEAR:

Contribution	_____	_____
All Taxes & Soc. Sec.	_____	_____
Housing:		
Mortgage or Rent	_____	
Insurance	_____	
Taxes on House	_____	
Electricity	_____	
Gas or Oil	_____	
Water & Sewer	_____	
Sanitation	_____	
Telephone	_____	
Maintenance	_____	
Other	_____	
Total	_____	_____

Food:

Groceries	_____
Lunches, Eat out	_____
Total	_____

Transportation:

Payments on Car	_____
Gas & Oil	_____
Insurance	_____
License	_____
Taxes	_____
Maintenance/Repair	_____
Parking	_____
Fares	_____
Other	_____
Total	_____

Insurance:

Life	_____
Medical	_____
Other	_____
Total	_____

Debt:

Credit Cards	_____
Loans & Notes	_____
Other	_____
Total	_____

Entertainment & Recreation:

Eating out	_____
Trips	_____
Babysitters	_____
Activities	_____
Vacation	_____
Other	_____
Total	_____

Clothing Total

Savings Total	_____
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Medical Expenses:

Doctors	_____
Dentists	_____
Drugs	_____
Hospital Deduction	_____
Other	_____
Total	_____

Miscellaneous:

Toiletry/Cosmetics	_____
Beauty/Barber	_____
Laundry/Cleaning	_____
Allowances	_____
Subscriptions	_____
Gifts	_____
Christmas	_____
Special Education	_____
Cash on hand	_____
Charity	_____
Other	_____
Total	_____

Grand Total of Expenses _____

Gross Income	_____
Expenses	_____
Total Left	_____

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1. Why is a proper attitude toward money and possessions so important to the Christian?**
- 2. How does the rich farmer illustrate financial bondage? (Luke 12:13-21)**
- 3. Why is proper management of our possessions so important to the Christian? (1 Corinthians 4:2)**
- 4. What should we do about guilty feelings on how we have mishandled our possessions in the past?**
- 5. What else should we recognize in addition to the fact that God owns everything? (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)**
- 6. Did God intend for Work to be a blessing or a curse for man? (2 Thessalonians 3:10; Genesis 2:15; 3:17-19)**
- 7. Is Debt a sin? (Romans 13:8)**
- 8. What does Solomon say about the one who borrows? (Proverbs 22:7)**
- 9. Is it dishonest to charge something—knowing that you have no money to pay for the item? (Psalm 37:21)**
- 10. Is it possible for a person to become totally debt free?**
- 11. How desirable is such to you?**
- 12. What are some things that will be necessary to do if one becomes relatively debt free?**

- 13. What does giving have to do with being a good Steward of God? (2 Corinthians 8:7)**
- 14. How do you feel a budget would help you to be a good Steward of possessions?**

