

TEACHER EDITION



THE
CHOICE
IS YOURS

LIFE HAPPENS
Walking with God is a decision.

TERRIE CHAPPELL

Exclusive license for Aaron King Transaction: 1223348

Copyright © 2012 by Striving Together Publications. All Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version.

First published in 2012 by Striving Together Publications, a ministry of Lancaster Baptist Church, Lancaster, CA 93535. Striving Together Publications is committed to providing tried, trusted, and proven books that will further equip local churches to carry out the Great Commission. Your comments and suggestions are valued.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without written permission of the publisher, except for brief quotations in printed reviews.

Striving Together Publications
4020 E. Lancaster Blvd.
Lancaster, CA 93535
800.201.7748

Cover design by Andrew Jones
Layout by Craig Parker
Edited by Monica Bass
Special thanks to our proofreaders.

ISBN 978-1-59894-188-3

Printed in the United States of America

TABLE OF CONTENTS

How to Use This Curriculum	v
Lesson One —Excellent Choices	1
Lesson Two —Choose To Be Real.	15
Lesson Three —Choose to Live by Faith.	39
Lesson Four —Choose to Listen to God	63
Lesson Five —Choose to Talk to God	83
Lesson Six —Choose to Let Go.	105
Lesson Seven —Choose to Press On	121
Lesson Eight —Choose to Be Joyful.	139
Lesson Nine —Choose to Be Strong	161
Lesson Ten —Choose to Succeed	181
Lesson Eleven —Choose to Serve.	201
Lesson Twelve —Choose to Speak Wisely	227
Lesson Thirteen —Choose to Be Filled with the Spirit	251

HOW TO USE THIS CURRICULUM

Take a moment to familiarize yourself with the features of this *Striving Together* Sunday school curriculum:

Schedule

The lessons contained in this curriculum are undated, allowing you to begin and end the teaching series at any time. There are thirteen lessons that may be taught weekly any time of the year.

Student Edition Books

Companion books are available through *Striving Together Publications*. These contain:

- The outlines with blanks that students may fill in during the lessons

- Various Scripture quotations that are used throughout each lesson
- The introductory lesson overviews
- Study questions for review throughout the week
- A suggested memory verse for each lesson

These books are excellent tools for the members of a class. We suggest ordering enough books for each member of the class, plus additional copies for new members who enroll in the class throughout the teaching series. Giving class members a study book encourages faithfulness to the class, provides students with a devotional tool for use throughout the week, and allows them to review what they learned previously.

Text

The verses from which the lessons are taken are included at the beginning of each lesson. These are provided so that you may read them through several times in prayerful preparation for your time in class. Many teachers choose to memorize their key verses. During the class hour, we suggest that you use your own Bible for Scripture reading and encourage your class members to do so as well.

Overview and Lesson Aim

The overview and theme sections are provided so that you may be aware of the overall emphasis of each lesson, especially as they relate to the other lessons in the curriculum. These brief statements provide a snapshot of where each lesson will take the students.

Lesson Goals

Bible teaching has a higher goal than the delivery of information. That goal is a life changed. Students want to know what they are to do with what they are given from God's Word. As you prepare for and teach each lesson, emphasize how those listening may apply its truths throughout the week.

Teaching Outline

The abbreviated outline enables you to view the entire lesson at a glance to see how the content fits together. Teaching with an organized outline increases the students' ability to understand and remember the lesson content.

LESSON ONE

excellent choices

Key Verses

PHILIPPIANS 1:9–11

9 *And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment;*

10 *That ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ;*

11 *Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.*

Overview

All of us routinely make choices that have a great impact on our own lives and on the lives of others. These choices actually determine our fulfillment in the Christian life and the future of our lives. The best planning begins with the end in mind. So if you desire a vibrant relationship with the Lord and a future of joy and fulfillment, plan for it today by making excellent choices.

Lesson Aim

When we choose obedience to the Word of God and make conscious choices to daily submit our lives to the direction of the Holy Spirit, we are shaping a future for ourselves of unparalleled blessings.

Lesson Goals

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should:

1. Recognize that today's choices determine tomorrow's destination
2. Know the two infallible guides God has given us to direct our choices
3. Commit to allow their choices to be guided by God's Word and the Holy Spirit

Teaching Outline

- I. The Power of Accumulated Choices
- II. The Guides to Excellent Choices
 - A. God's Word
 - B. The Holy Spirit
- III. The Future of Today's Choices
 - A. A fruitful walk with God
 - B. The blessings of God's promises

LESSON ONE

excellent choices

Text

PHILIPPIANS 1:9–11

- 9 *And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment;*
- 10 *That ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ;*
- 11 *Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.*

Introduction

We live in a culture that caters to our choices. Think about it: Starbucks boasts a slogan, “Create your own drink.” For years, Burger King has encouraged, “Have it your way.” Baskin Robbins offers 31 different flavors of ice cream for

us to choose from. We like our options, and we enjoy the opportunity to choose our preferences.

The opportunity to choose is one of the special features God created within us. He made us with a free will, and He gives us the freedom to make our own choices.

Illustration

Sometimes when we are faced with a choice, we struggle with indecision. In one of the *I Love Lucy* episodes, Lucy and Ricky go out to dinner with Fred and Ethel. Lucy, who had already placed her order, changed her mind after each of the others ordered! The waiter was so frustrated with her that he quit his job!

TEACHING TIP

If your meeting location equipment allows you to display a video clip, look up this I Love Lucy episode online (titled “Lucy Changes Her Mind”), and display a few minutes of it for the class. (On my counter, the best short clip to display is from about 7:14–9:08.)

Some choices we make are simple—like which flavor of ice cream to select at Baskin Robbins or what color of shoes we will wear. Other choices, however, are life-changing—like how we will respond to adversity or what importance we will give our walk with God. Choices such as these are the topic of this lesson series.

All of us routinely make choices that have a great impact on our own lives and on the lives of others. These choices actually determine our fulfillment in the Christian life and our usefulness for Christ.

I. The Power of Accumulated Choices

Have you ever attempted to do something that you really didn't know how to do? And have you ever had opposite results than what you hoped for?

TEACHING TIP

Describe a failed attempt in which you tackled a project without proper equipment or training. Describe how each wrong step you made brought you to the final disastrous results.

Illustration

For example, my story along these lines is when I attempted to wallpaper a room in our new home. Wallpaper was popular at the time, and I found a print that I thought would be beautiful in our bedroom. It was patterned with delicate vines and laced with country blue and mauve flowers and finished with a silky sheen.

I had never wallpapered before, but I didn't let this deter me. Surely it couldn't be *that* difficult. I had watched someone do it once, and she made it look easy. This would be a cinch!

Choosing where in the room to begin was my first decision. I knew the paper needed to hang straight, so I figured the best place to start would be in one of the corners. I was sure that the corners would be perfectly square and straight. (If you have ever wallpapered a room, you know that was a definite misconception!)

I measured my first piece, cut it, and soaked it in warm water to activate the glue. Carefully, using the corner as my guide, I fixed it to the wall. I measured and cut the next piece

and hung it. Then I began the next. I was beginning to feel pretty professional at this.

As I reached the end of the first wall, though, I faced a problem. The edge of the wallpaper was not straight with the corner. I stepped back to look from the other end of the room. Sure enough—the paper was definitely crooked.

This is when I learned the importance of a plumb line. It is also when I discovered that wallpaper is far harder to remove than it is to put up! Over the next several hours, I learned that removing wallpaper can rip off part of the drywall behind it, that patching walls is tedious and time-consuming, and that purchasing another roll of wallpaper for one that was needlessly wasted is frustrating.

The crooked wallpaper, torn walls, extra expense, and hours of additional work were nothing like what I had in mind when I started the project. But I really had no one to blame but myself! After all, the result was simply a series of my own choices. I chose to not seek advice but to learn as I worked. I chose to work without a plumb line. I chose to believe that things were as they were not (i.e., the corners of my bedroom being straight). The end result was the accumulated effect of my choices.

Just as each ignorant or foolish choice in a project leads to an undesired outcome, so each choice in our lives leads us in a direction. In the end, our lives will reflect the series of choices we make. Many ladies go through life without pausing to consider where each decision they make is leading them. Years down the road, when they find themselves in a place where they don't want to be—spiritually, emotionally, or relationally—they often blame “bad luck.” But the truth is, each choice they made through the years brought them to where they are today.

Unless we make conscious decisions to choose wisely, we will base our choices simply on what looks best to us at

the moment. As a result, our lives will end in a disheveled disarray—not at all the picture we had in mind when we started.

On the other hand, if we daily make well thought out choices, the accumulated result will be beauty and symmetry.

Through this lesson series, we will explore together the power of our choices. At the same time, we will examine twelve choices that directly affect our walk with God and every other aspect of our lives.

Before we move further, however, let's consider how to recognize and select the most excellent choices.

II. The Guides to Excellent Choices

Have you ever felt so bombarded with choices that you didn't have the clarity to even think? We constantly have multiple sources of influence pulling for our attention. And sometimes, they even conflict with one another!

TEACHING TIP

Share with your class a scenario in which you got lost because you had been given the wrong directions.

Navigating through life is challenging. There are so many options and so many sources who claim to have the answers. But thankfully, God has given us two infallible guides to direct us in the most important choices of our lives.

A. God's Word

Popular psychology and human reasoning tell us to map our lives by what feels good. They encourage us to

“just follow your heart.” The problem is, our hearts are not reliable.

JEREMIAH 17:9

9 The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?

When we follow our hearts, we may feel good about our choices at the moment, but we usually find ourselves on a road that leads to an unwanted destination. Our hearts are fickle, unstable, and untrustworthy.

God has given us a much better guide in His Word. His Word never changes, and its dependability has been proven through the centuries. When we map our lives by choosing to obey the direction of God’s Word, we will not only be spared the harm of our own ways, but we will be happy. We will enjoy the journey! As we learn to apply God’s wisdom and the truths from His Word, we enjoy the richest blessings of God along the way.

PROVERBS 3:17–18

17 Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.

18 She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy is every one that retaineth her.

The choices God asks us to make are to our benefit—for both today and for our future.

In these lessons, we will examine twelve areas of choice—choices that we all make regularly. If we were to consider these areas through our own reasoning, we would come to very different conclusions—ones that would be both self-serving and self-destructive.

The Scriptures we will look at through this study, however, contain the very promises and directions of

God for our lives. As we get to know God’s Word and grow in our understanding of His principles, we develop a spiritual discernment for our choices.

PHILIPPIANS 1:9–10

9 *And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment;*

10 *That ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ.*

B. The Holy Spirit

Just hours before Jesus was crucified, He promised to give His disciples an amazing gift—the Holy Spirit.

JOHN 16:7

7 *Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.*

When you trusted Jesus as your Saviour, God Himself—the third Person of the Trinity—took up residence within your spirit.

EPHESIANS 1:13

13 *In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise,*

One of the Holy Spirit’s many ministries is that of guiding us through His Word into paths of truth.

JOHN 14:26

26 *But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.*

*Exclusive license for Aaron King Transaction: 1223348

Isn't it amazing how God has designed these two guides to work in perfect symmetry in our lives? The Holy Spirit actually inspired every word of the Bible. Second Peter 1:21 tells us, "*For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.*"

Thus, the indwelling Spirit of God takes the very words which He inspired and, as our personal Teacher, explains their truths to us. Not only that, but as we learn to recognize His voice, we will sense His promptings within us to obey and follow the choices He has directed us to make. For instance, I can learn through the pages of Scripture the importance of using kind, encouraging, and edifying words. But in the pressure of daily living, I sometimes forget. Many times, however, as I have opened my mouth to say something I would later regret, the Holy Spirit has gently reminded and warned me to not say it. On other occasions, He has prompted me to give encouraging or uplifting words to another lady—sometimes when no one but God knew that she desperately needed encouragement in that moment.

TEACHING TIP

Share an example from your life of when you have been prompted by the Holy Spirit either to hold your tongue or to offer encouragement. You could share either a positive example of your obedience or a negative example of disobedience and regret.

The best part of it all is that the Holy Spirit becomes our divine companion and friend. Through the very process of listening to and following Him in right choices, our relationship with Him grows and strengthens.

Exclusive license for Aaron King Transaction: 1223348

God was good to give us these two guides—His Word and His Spirit. These guides will never contradict one another. In perfect union, they teach us and lead us to make choices that shape our lives for good.

III. The Future of Today's Choices

If you were to plan the perfect day, what would it include? A good hair day? Obedient children? A date with your husband? A shopping spree? A clean house (that stays clean for more than five minutes!)? Lunch with a close friend?

Perhaps you've noticed that the perfect day rarely happens.

So often our best laid plans get distorted and even changed. We can plan—and we should. But many days it seems that life is out of our control. Circumstances bigger than us can thwart our carefully ordered schedules. Decisions made by people higher than us supersede our agendas.

Sometimes we believe that the future is determined by the unfolding circumstances of our lives. We think our tomorrows are dictated by the outcomes of the relationships and agendas of those around us. The future, however, is not shaped by others as we often assume. Although many circumstances are out of our control, our future is not determined by our circumstances. It is determined by the choices we make today. Each of our tomorrows is directly affected by today's choices.

A. A fruitful walk with God

When we choose obedience to the Word of God and make conscious choices to daily guide our thoughts, words, and actions by God's truth, we are shaping a future for

ourselves of unparalleled blessings. Our most significant blessings come in the form of a relationship—a walk with God. Making excellent choices of truth develops the most satisfying and sustaining relationship possible.

B. The blessings of God's promises

Another blessing is that through making godly choices, we are tying ourselves to the unbreakable promises of God. No force on earth can wrestle from our future the promises God has made to those who will choose to honor Him. Throughout these lessons, you will discover many of these promises, and you'll see how they are tied to the choices you make.

The best planning begins with the end in mind. So if you desire a vibrant relationship with the Lord and a future of joy and fulfillment, plan for it today by making excellent choices.

Conclusion

Please don't miss this truth: If you want a strong walk with God and if you want to claim the incredible promises of God, the journey starts today. The quality of your walk with God and the landscape of your future are determined by the choices you make right now.

I pray that even before we continue to the twelve areas of choice addressed in this study, you will determine that you want to allow your choices to be guided by God's Word and the Holy Spirit. We all make many choices daily. We might as well determine to make good ones!

The outcomes we desire are determined as we choose excellence today. The choice is ours.

Study Questions

1. Why are the individual choices we make so important?
Individual choices are important because our lives reflect the sum total of our choices.
2. What two guides has God given us to help us make excellent choices?
God has given us His Word and the Holy Spirit.
3. Why should we be cautious about the advice to “just follow your heart”?
Jeremiah 17:9 warns us that our heart is deceitful. When we follow our hearts, we may feel good about our choices at the moment, but we may find ourselves at an unwanted destination.
4. What tool does the Holy Spirit use to teach and guide us?
The Holy Spirit uses the words which He inspired—the Bible—to teach and guide us.
5. As you look back over the past several years, can you identify a choice you made previously that has had a significant influence in your life today?
Answers will vary.
6. On a scale of 1–10, how would you rate your current walk with God? In what ways would you like to see it improve through the course of this study?
Answers will vary.

7. A great future starts with the right choices today. What choices do you need to make this week that will be steps in the right direction of a strong walk with God in the future?

Answers will vary.

8. The lessons in this study outline key areas of choice for women and the Scriptures that relate. Would you be willing to determine from the beginning that you want your choices to be guided by God's Word and the Holy Spirit? If so, write out a prayer to the Lord to solidify that decision:

Answers will vary.

Memory Verse

PHILIPPIANS 1:10

10 That ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ.

choose to be real

Key Verses

JOSHUA 24:14–15, 23–27

14 *Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the LORD.*

15 *And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.*

23 *Now therefore put away, said he, the strange gods which are among you, and incline your heart unto the LORD God of Israel.*

24 *And the people said unto Joshua, The LORD our God will we serve, and his voice will we obey.*

25 *So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and set them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem.*

26 *And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God, and took a great stone, and set it up there under an oak, that was by the sanctuary of the LORD.*

27 *And Joshua said unto all the people, Behold, this stone shall be a witness unto us; for it hath heard all the words of the LORD which he spake unto us: it shall be therefore a witness unto you, lest ye deny your God.*

Overview

The choice of authenticity is foundational for every other choice in the following lessons. If we want to cultivate lives that reach deeper than the external disciplines or visible evidences of Christianity, then at the core of our decisions must be hearts that are authentically hungry for God.

Lesson Aim

Christian authenticity is a treasure. In this lesson, we will understand its characteristics and outline how we choose it. God's Word encourages us to refuse to settle for half-hearted service or surface success. We must determine to genuinely walk with God, and ask Him to, by His grace, work His likeness into our lives.

Lesson Goals

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should:

1. Understand the foundation of authenticity for Christian living
2. Have a biblical picture of the characteristics of real Christianity
3. Choose to settle for nothing less than an abiding relationship with Christ and genuine Christian growth

Teaching Outline

- I. The Label of a Real Christian
 - A. The importance of authenticity
 - B. A clarification of authenticity
- II. Marks of a Real Christian
 - A. Righteous living
 - B. Heart for souls

- C. Abiding walk
- D. Loving spirit

III. How to Be a Real Christian

- A. Make a choice.
- B. Make a commitment.
- C. Make a commemorative memorial.

LESSON TWO

choose to be real

Text

JOSHUA 24:14–15, 23–27

14 *Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the LORD.*

15 *And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.*

23 *Now therefore put away, said he, the strange gods which are among you, and incline your heart unto the LORD God of Israel.*

24 *And the people said unto Joshua, The LORD our God will we serve, and his voice will we obey.*

25 *So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and set them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem.*

26 *And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God, and took a great stone, and set it up there under an oak, that was by the sanctuary of the LORD.*

27 *And Joshua said unto all the people, Behold, this stone shall be a witness unto us; for it hath heard all the words of the LORD which he spake unto us: it shall be therefore a witness unto you, lest ye deny your God.*

Introduction

In some places in the Orient, there are markets especially known for their good deals and “knock offs.” They sell imitation name brand clothing and accessories that at first glance look authentic, but on closer inspection are of lower quality than the real deal.

It seems that for everything of value, there is a fake substitute. We have fake leather, fake fur, fake jewels, and even fake eyelashes. Of course they are never labeled “fake.” Instead, they are called “faux” or “imitation.” Some advertisements boast of items “decorated with imitation palm leaves” or “made with simulated alligator hide.” My favorite is “real synthetic fur.” (I’d hate to use *fake* synthetic fur!)

People, too, often pretend to be something they are not. There are many Christian women who profess to follow Christ and even engage in ministry at church, but their actions are only for the praise of others. Other women claim to be Christians but never spend time in Bible reading or prayer. They do not have hearts that sincerely worship and love God. Their surface profession and actions advertise something different than they really are.

Illustration

A church member was asked to fill in as a substitute teacher for a young Sunday school class in her church. As she began her lesson, she asked, “Why do you think people call me a Christian?”

After a pause, one little boy raised his hand timidly and suggested, “Because they don’t know you?”

I know that I will never be perfect this side of Heaven, but I want my heart for God to be genuine. I want who I am on the outside to be a true reflection of what God has done in my heart on the inside.

I. The Label of a Real Christian

People label Christians all the time. Have you ever met an unsaved person who had a caring Christian neighbor? Sometimes they will say of their neighbor, “She’s a real Christian.”

We’ve probably all heard the opposite type of statements as well: “That sure wasn’t a Christian thing to do!” “I thought she was a Christian.” “What kind of Christian is that?”

I never want to settle for labels such as these. I’d rather have a label like “unfeigned faith,” such as Paul gave Timothy.

2 TIMOTHY 1:5

5 When I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice; and I am persuaded that in thee also.

The world is full of non-authentic Christians—people who claim the name of Christ but who don’t live like Him and don’t seek His work of growth in their hearts and lives. We need something so much deeper than “lip service” for the Lord. We need to truly walk in His grace.

Exclusive license for Aaron King, Publisher, 1223348

A. *The importance of authenticity*

The choice of authenticity is foundational for every other choice we will study in these lessons. If we want to cultivate lives that reach deeper than the external disciplines or visible evidences of Christianity, then at the core of our decisions must be hearts that are authentically hungry for God.

Is your walk with the Lord real, or are you settling for a cheap substitute?

B. *A clarification of authenticity*

Ladies sometimes confuse “being real” with not caring about appearances or transformation. On a few occasions, I’ve seen a lady lose her temper and shortly thereafter say, “Well, that’s just the way I am. It’s the real me.” It’s almost as if “being real” is an excuse for being *wrong*! She is implying that holding onto a grudge or struggle is okay as long as you don’t try to hide it.

God does not call us to the kind of realism that unblushingly reveals our flaws while at the same time resists change or growth. Instead, He wants us to ask Him to do a genuine work of grace in our hearts that results in true Christian growth and maturity. He wants us to refuse to settle for mere outer conformity and allow Him to actually change us into His likeness.

II. Marks of a Real Christian

Even a very nice cubic zirconium can be made to look like a diamond to an untrained buyer. Yet, jewelers know what to look for to determine if a jewel is genuine. One simple test for diamonds is that a true diamond can cut glass. The reality

of diamonds is seen in the marks that they make. So it is with true Christianity—it is shown in the marks that we make.

Before we look at how to be real, let's briefly examine some of the marks of real Christians. When we talk about being authentic, to what are we referring? What does a real Christian look like?

A. Righteous living

As persecution toward the early church in Jerusalem grew, so did the generosity of the early Christians. Acts 4:34–35 records the voluntary giving of all the members of the church toward those who were in need.

ACTS 4:34–35

*34 Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold,
35 And laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need.*

One particular couple in the church wanted the recognition and praise of selling their land and giving to the poor. They didn't, however, want the sacrifice. Their solution? They sold the land and gave a portion of the money, pretending that this was the complete sum.

Acts 5 records their story and the severity with which God dealt with this early hypocrisy in the church.

ACTS 5:1–10

*1 But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession,
2 And kept back part of the price, his wife also being privy to it, and brought a certain part, and laid it at the apostles' feet.*

3 *But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land?*

4 *Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God.*

5 *And Ananias hearing these words fell down, and gave up the ghost: and great fear came on all them that heard these things.*

6 *And the young men arose, wound him up, and carried him out, and buried him.*

7 *And it was about the space of three hours after, when his wife, not knowing what was done, came in.*

8 *And Peter answered unto her, Tell me whether ye sold the land for so much? And she said, Yea, for so much.*

9 *Then Peter said unto her, How is it that ye have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? behold, the feet of them which have buried thy husband are at the door, and shall carry thee out.*

10 *Then fell she down straightway at his feet, and yielded up the ghost: and the young men came in, and found her dead, and, carrying her forth, buried her by her husband.*

No one was forcing Ananias and Sapphira to sell their land or to give the profit from the sale to the church. They would not have been sinning to keep *all* of the money. Their sin was in pretending to be something they were not.

A Christian lady may be a zealous church worker, a conscientious parent, a faithful giver, and a talented leader. But none of these actions matter if she does not reflect a genuine heart before God.

One indicator of our genuineness toward the Lord is our obedience to Him.

1 SAMUEL 15:22

22 *And Samuel said, Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.*

God is not pleased or honored when we fill our schedules with visible service for Him while ignoring obedience to Him in the private areas of our lives—time in His Word and prayer, loving and serving our families, and with humility and grace serving others in unseen areas.

Also, when our hearts are right with God, we will take our sin as seriously as God does. Our natural tendency is to be content as long as our sin is not *exposed*. But an authentic Christian woman who desires to live righteously is only content when her sin is *confessed* to God. Authentic Christians don't trivialize or excuse sin. They simply confess it to the Lord and then rejoice—not in their self-righteousness—but in His abundant forgiveness.

1 JOHN 1:8–9

8 *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.*

9 *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

There is no higher compliment to a Christian lady than to call her a “righteous person.” When we practice righteous living—even in the unseen areas of our lives—we demonstrate a level of authenticity that reaches deeper than a showy exterior.

Many can boast of their achievements or subtly direct others to notice their sacrifices, but holiness before

God is a mark of genuineness. As D.L. Moody said, “A holy life will make the deepest impression. Lighthouses blow no horns; they just shine.”

B. Heart for souls

Authentic Christians care for that which is important to God—the souls of others. We must make Christ’s last command our first priority.

MARK 16:15

15 ...Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.

Dr. J. Wilbur Chapman, a famous evangelist of yesteryear, pointed out that the New Testament records give the stories of forty people who were healed by Jesus. Of these, thirty-four were either brought to Jesus by friends or He was petitioned by friends to go to them. In only six cases out of the forty did the sufferers find the way to Jesus by themselves. This speaks to the importance of compassionately bringing the lost to Jesus.

JUDE 22

22 And of some have compassion, making a difference.

Illustration

D.L. Moody once asked a man if he were saved or lost. The man replied, “It’s none of your business!”

“Oh, yes,” Moody answered, “It *is* my business!”

“Then you must be D.L. Moody!” the man exclaimed.

Moody so gave his life over to telling others about Christ and urging them to salvation that everyone knew him as a man who was concerned about the

souls of others. This characteristic identified him as an authentic Christian.

C. *Abiding walk*

As Jesus walked with His disciples to Gethsemane, He gave them some final instructions. He explained the nature of the relationship He wanted them to have with Him after His resurrection, and He compared what He wanted for their lives with that of a fruitful vine.

JOHN 15:1–8

- 1 *I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman.*
- 2 *Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.*
- 3 *Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you.*
- 4 *Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.*
- 5 *I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.*
- 6 *If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.*
- 7 *If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.*
- 8 *Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples.*

The Christian life at its fullest is much more than activities or appearances; it is a relationship. Christ wants us to cultivate a genuine relationship with Him that

penetrates far deeper than a simple prayer before a meal or regular church attendance. He wants us to want *Him*, to daily share our lives with Him.

Relationships take time to cultivate. We must spend time in His Word and in prayer. We must include Him in every aspect of our lives. John 15 teaches us that as we are growing in our relationship with Christ, He wants to work in and through us to produce fruitful lives.

Throughout the New Testament we see that Christian growth is a work of God's Spirit in us, not a work accomplished by our frail efforts.

GALATIANS 2:20

20 I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.

PHILIPPIANS 2:13

13 For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.

The empowerment for an abiding walk with God is Christ! He has made His power available to us. We must simply rely on it and in faith walk in it.

If you are struggling in your Christian walk, take your struggles to the Lord. Be honest with God. Tell Him that you're finding it hard to be faithful, but that you want to obey Him and that you need His strength. Let Him be your sufficiency.

Illustration

The story is told of a new missionary who went to the field to relieve an experienced missionary who needed a furlough. The veteran missionary left his car for the new

Exclusive license for Aaron King Transaction: 1223348

missionary to use. It was parked across the street from the church, and it was pointing down the hill.

The new missionary tried to start the vehicle, but there was no power. He thought to himself, “This must be why the former missionary left the car parked like this, so he can roll the car downhill and jump start it.” So for three months, the new missionary parked the car pointing downhill and rolled it down to start it. There were times when the car died on him and he had to ask the local children to help him push it, using their strength and his.

When the older missionary returned three months later, the younger missionary commented, “You were so smart to leave the car parked downhill. Doing so helped me start it so much easier.”

The older missionary looked puzzled and went out to look at the car. He opened the hood and noticed that the battery cable had become loose. He tightened the cable, and the car started right up.

How many times do we try to use our own strength to accomplish God’s work? This story reminds us that what we really need is to be connected to God’s power through an abiding relationship with Christ.

D. Loving spirit

The final mark of an authentic Christian that we will consider in this lesson should be one of the most obvious to all who know us—love.

JOHN 13:35

35 By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.”

Three times, Jesus specifically commanded His disciples to “love one another.”

JOHN 13:34

34 A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.

JOHN 15:12

12 This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you.

JOHN 15:17

17 These things I command you, that ye love one another.

The Bible makes a strong connection between authentic Christian living and love.

1 JOHN 4:8

8 He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.

When we are connected to the Lord in a secure relationship of love and abiding in Him, the spontaneous outflow will be love for others.

One of the most famous chapters in Scripture, 1 Corinthians 13, lists fifteen characteristics of Christian love:

- Love is patient.
- Love is kind.
- Love knows no envy.
- Love is not boastful.
- Love is not proud.
- Love is not rude.
- Love is not self-seeking.
- Love is not easily angered.
- Love keeps no record of wrongs.
- Love does not delight in evil.

- Love rejoices in the truth.
- Love always protects.
- Love always trusts.
- Love always hopes.
- Love always perseveres.

How well does this list describe you? Does this kind of love define your relationships? Your motives?

TEACHING TIP

Read the list above aloud as a group. Ask each lady to replace the word love with her own name. (Each lady will be saying her name at the same time her neighbor is saying her own name.) Read the list slowly, pausing briefly after each phrase. Ask the ladies to contemplate whether or not those fifteen phrases could truly be said of them.

None of us can display perfect love all the time. Yet, Christian authenticity is marked by maturing love. Is your love for others stronger today than it was last year?

So far, we've examined four marks of an authentic Christian—righteous living, a heart for souls, an abiding walk, and a loving spirit. Although none of us is perfect, these characteristics identify Christians who have chosen authenticity over appearance. Each of these areas remind us to choose to let God work in our lives beyond outward conformity. They define a life that is real with God and growing in His grace. Determine to never settle for less!

Illustration

Years ago, a young boy heard that the circus was coming to town. He saw all the posters announcing the circus

around town. So, he faithfully saved his money so that he could attend. Finally, the day of the circus arrived. The boy rushed down to Main Street and saw the parade of clowns, lions, acrobats and the band. When the parade was over, he walked up to the circus master and paid his money and went home. It was not until years later that he learned the circus was held in a large tent at the edge of town.

The young boy settled for the parade and missed the circus. He missed the real thing. I pray that you will take action in your life and not settle for less than God has planned for you.

God has given us clear instructions in His Word on how to be the “real thing”—how to be a genuine Christian. Let’s look at three steps from Scripture that will help us ensure we don’t miss out on the joy of genuine Christianity.

III. How to Be a Real Christian

One day, over two million people gathered for a special meeting with their leader. The leader was old, and everyone present knew this may be his final public speech.

The people listened closely as this respected statesman recounted their national history in a mere eleven sentences. In this brief overview, he highlighted a significant pattern—the cause and effect sequence of the nation’s spiritual choices. He pointed out the blessings that came as they worshiped God and the judgment that followed when they turned to idols.

At the climax of the speech, the statesman urged his people to consistency and authenticity.

JOSHUA 24:14

14 Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the LORD.

The leader was Joshua, and the nation was Israel. Joshua 24 records this speech, and verses 14–27 spell out three steps that Joshua led the nation of Israel to take. We, too, can follow these steps if we want to live authentic Christian lives.

A. *Make a choice.*

Maybe this sounds like a simple first step. After all, these steps are *all* about choosing. Yet, we often overlook the significance of making a concrete decision.

Joshua basically drew a line in the sand and asked the Israelites to choose on which side they would stand.

JOSHUA 24:15

15 And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.

In this choice, there could be no divided loyalties—no mixed allegiances. And so it is with us. Authentic Christianity calls for complete consecration to the Lord. We cannot straddle the fence, changing our responses based on whom we are with at the moment. We cannot live one way publicly while feeding pet sins privately. The very nature of authenticity speaks of consistency.

B. Make a commitment.

Making a decision and following through on that decision are two different actions. Joshua challenged the people that it wasn't enough just to say they would serve the Lord.

JOSHUA 24:23

23 Now therefore put away, said he, the strange gods which are among you, and incline your heart unto the LORD God of Israel.

The people had to follow their stated choice with a commitment to action.

Perhaps as we studied the marks of authentic Christians earlier in this lesson, you noticed areas where your life isn't as genuine as you would like it to be. Make a commitment to act in those areas. List specifically what you need to change, and then set about to make those necessary adjustments.

C. Make a commemorative memorial.

Joshua wanted the people to remember and live out the decision they had just made, so he created a reminder for them.

JOSHUA 24:26–27

26 And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God, and took a great stone, and set it up there under an oak, that was by the sanctuary of the LORD.

27 And Joshua said unto all the people, Behold, this stone shall be a witness unto us; for it hath heard all the words of the LORD which he spake unto us: it shall be therefore a witness unto you, lest ye deny your God.

Every time an Israelite walked past that stone, Joshua wanted them to remember the special commitment they had pledged to the Lord.

Perhaps you could set a “memorial stone” in your life—a physical reminder of your choice to be a real Christian. This may be a record of the decision in your Bible, or it may be something in your home—maybe jewelry or a decorative item—that reminds you of authenticity. Whatever it is, find a way to remind yourself of your commitment to God to develop a relationship with Him that is real and fruitful.

Conclusion

TEACHING TIP

Bring contrasting items—such as a real diamond and a cubic zirconium, a five-dollar-bill and a play one-hundred-dollar-bill—to hold up as you conclude this lesson reminding students of the value of authenticity.

Which is more valuable—a diamond or a cubic zirconium? Leather or vinyl? A genuine five-dollar bill or a counterfeit one-hundred-dollar bill?

Imitation and synthetic products may be less expensive and easier to come by, but real is always more valuable. And so it is with real Christians.

Authenticity is a treasure. Choose it. Insist on it. Refuse to settle for half-hearted service or surface success. Determine to genuinely walk with God, and ask Him to, by His grace, work His likeness into your life.

Study Questions

1. Why is the choice of authenticity foundational for the other choices in our study?
If we want to cultivate lives that reach deeper than the external disciplines or visible evidences of Christianity, then at the core of our decisions must be hearts that are authentically hungry for God.
2. List the four “marks of a real Christian” given in this lesson.
Righteous living, a heart for souls, an abiding walk, and a loving spirit.
3. What does 1 Samuel 15:22 give as an indicator of our genuineness toward the Lord?
Our obedience to Him.
4. What three steps to authenticity do we learn from Joshua’s instruction to Israel?
Make a choice. Make a commitment. Make a commemorative memorial.
5. Authenticity is not the same as perfection. It simply speaks of a life that is real with God and growing in His grace. As you look back over the past six months, can you see areas of genuine growth in your life? What are they?
Answers will vary.
6. Joshua instructed the people to make a choice of loyalty. Has there been a time in your life when you have made the decision to completely consecrate your life to God—

to make a choice to authentically live for Him? If so, describe what brought you to that decision.

Answers will vary.

7. Of the four marks of a real Christian given in this lesson, which one do you see most absent in your life? What steps of action do you need to take to change in that area?

Answers will vary.

8. What “commemorative memorial(s)” do you have in your life that reminds you of your commitment to God? Or what type of reminder could you find this week?

Answers will vary.

Memory Verse

JOSHUA 24:14A

14 Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in truth...

LESSON THREE

choose to live by faith

Key Verses

EXODUS 2:1–9

1 *And there went a man of the house of Levi, and took to wife a daughter of Levi.*

2 *And the woman conceived, and bare a son: and when she saw him that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months.*

3 *And when she could not longer hide him, she took for him an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and with pitch, and put the child therein; and she laid it in the flags by the river's brink.*

4 *And his sister stood afar off, to wit what would be done to him.*

5 *And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to wash herself at the river; and her maidens walked along by the river's side; and when she saw the ark among the flags, she sent her maid to fetch it.*

6 *And when she had opened it, she saw the child: and, behold, the babe wept. And she had compassion on him, and said, This is one of the Hebrews' children.*

7 *Then said his sister to Pharaoh's daughter, Shall I go and call to thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee?*

8 *And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, Go. And the maid went and called the child's mother.*

9 *And Pharaoh's daughter said unto her, Take this child away, and nurse it for me, and I will give thee thy wages. And the woman took the child, and nursed it.*

Exclusive license for Aaron King Transaction: 1223348

Overview

As ladies, we try so desperately to control our circumstances and change the people around us. In reality, we can do neither. It's much wiser and far better to choose to draw close to our God and trust Him. He is the only one who can change our lives and shape our futures.

Lesson Aim

Faith in God is the foundation of the Christian life. Through this lesson, we learn how to choose and exercise faith. When we choose to honor God by our faith, we have the privilege of seeing God intervene and reward our faith in ways we could have never manipulated.

Lesson Goals

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should:

1. Understand that the Christian life is a journey of faith
2. Realize that while we often cannot change our circumstances, we can choose to respond to them in faith
3. Know God's provisions to grow our faith
4. Choose to actively trust God in every area and through every circumstance of life

Teaching Outline

- I. Walk by Faith
 - A. Faith is a journey.
 - B. Faith is a choice.
- II. Nurture Faith
 - A. Read your Bible.
 - B. Attend church.

C. Pray.

III. Exercise Faith

- A. Use your faith though it be small.
- B. Use your faith though it be ridiculed.

IV. Trust God

- A. Remember the past.
- B. Remember the promises.

LESSON THREE

choose to live by faith

Text

EXODUS 2:1–9

1 *And there went a man of the house of Levi, and took to wife a daughter of Levi.*

2 *And the woman conceived, and bare a son: and when she saw him that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months.*

3 *And when she could not longer hide him, she took for him an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and with pitch, and put the child therein; and she laid it in the flags by the river's brink.*

4 *And his sister stood afar off, to wit what would be done to him.*

5 *And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to wash herself at the river; and her maidens walked along by the river's side; and when she saw the ark among the flags, she sent her maid to fetch it.*

6 *And when she had opened it, she saw the child: and, behold, the babe wept. And she had compassion on him, and said, This is one of the Hebrews' children.*

7 *Then said his sister to Pharaoh's daughter, Shall I go and call to thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee?*

8 *And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, Go. And the maid went and called the child's mother.*

9 *And Pharaoh's daughter said unto her, Take this child away, and nurse it for me, and I will give thee thy wages. And the woman took the child, and nursed it.*

Introduction

During the dreadful days of World War II, a small boy clung to his father's hand as the two ran from a bomb-struck building. The father spotted a shell hole in the yard and jumped inside. He immediately turned and reached for his son. Through the din of explosions, he called for his son to jump to him for safety.

"But I can't see you, Daddy," the boy hesitated in fear.

"But *I* can see *you*. Jump!"

With nothing but faith in his father's promise, the boy jumped. He chose to trust his father.

This is the confidence with which God wants us to follow Him. There will be times when we cannot see how obeying God's Word will help us or work in our lives, yet when we learn to trust the Father, we will be willing to take any step of faith He requires.

Illustration

Women exercise faith on a daily basis and in many ways. For instance, when I eat at a restaurant, I have faith that the

Exclusive license for Aaron King Transaction: 1223348

cook's hands were clean while he prepared my food. When I go to the doctor, I have faith that the clinic has hired a qualified physician. And when I travel on an airplane, I *really* place my faith in a whole lot of people—especially the pilot!

There are times in all of our lives when we are required to exercise a greater amount of faith. Often trials, circumstances, and situations out of our control call us to a new level of faith in God.

If there was ever a person whose life appeared to be spinning out of control, it was Jochebed. A mother with two young children and one on the way, Jochebed's moments and days were controlled by external powers. She, her husband, and her people were part of Pharaoh's task force—slaves in a ruthless system.

Life became more difficult for Jochebed and her people when Pharaoh increased their work load. Driven by fear that the Israelites may attempt an escape, the Egyptians made the Israelites their slaves.

EXODUS 1:13–14

13 And the Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigour:

14 And they made their lives bitter with hard bondage, in mortar, and in brick, and in all manner of service in the field: all their service, wherein they made them serve, was with rigour.

But the more the Egyptians oppressed the Israelites, the more the Israelites multiplied. And the more the Israelites multiplied, the more fearful Pharaoh became that the Israelites would escape or form a military coup. Eventually, Pharaoh did the unthinkable. He commanded the Israelites to murder all their male children upon birth.

EXODUS 1:15–16

15 And the king of Egypt spake to the Hebrew midwives, of which the name of the one was Shiphrah, and the name of the other Puah:

16 And he said, When ye do the office of a midwife to the Hebrew women, and see them upon the stools; if it be a son, then ye shall kill him: but if it be a daughter, then she shall live.

How the fear must have gripped Jochebed’s heart! Not only was she powerless to control her own destiny, but now she was helpless to protect her unborn child’s future. If the baby were a boy, she would be required by law to throw him to the crocodiles in the Nile River.

Although every decision for her future was stripped out of Jochebed’s hands, she could, and did, choose to exercise faith. And that one choice defined her destiny.

I. Walk by Faith

Take a walk with me through what many have called “the great hall of faith”—Hebrews chapter 11. The men and women listed in this chapter are people whose lives were pivot points in Bible history.

Notice the portraits lining the walls in this hall of faith. Here we find Abel, whose faith to obey God’s command for a blood sacrifice singled him out as the first martyr (verse 4). Here is Enoch—a man who by faith, walked with God so closely that he was privileged to skip death (verse 5). Here is Noah, whose faith changed the entire course of human history (verse 7).

We move on and see Abraham and Sarah, the father and mother of God’s chosen people (verses 8–19). The landscape

of the Old Testament was shaped through the faith of this couple. Then there are Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph—three more great heroes in Scripture (verses 20–22).

Further on we see Moses, Rahab, Gideon, David, Samuel, and others—all people we recognize and admire (verses 23–28, 31–32).

But nestled within these portraits, notice the reference to Jochebed and her husband, Amram.

HEBREWS 11:23

23 By faith Moses, when he was born, was hid three months of his parents [Jochebed and Amram], because they saw he was a proper child; and they were not afraid of the king's commandment.

All who are portrayed in this chapter lived lives of great significance, not because they were powerful people who could control others and manipulate their circumstances but because of their extreme faith in God. Most of them were ridiculed, misunderstood, and knew what it was to suffer defeat. Most of them actually started as *insignificant* and would have been labeled as very *unlikely* to succeed. They just didn't have what we think people need to favorably shape their destinies.

So how did they do it? What was the defining factor? The key is faith. These people lived and walked by faith. A life of godly significance is always a life of faith.

A. Faith is a journey.

God has designed the Christian life to be navigated by faith from start to finish.

Ephesians 2:8–9 explains that it is only by faith that we can become Christians in the first place.

EPHESIANS 2:8–9

8 *For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:*

9 *Not of works, lest any man should boast.*

We cannot work our way to Heaven by good deeds or earn our way to Heaven by personal merit. We simply place our faith in the blood of Christ as the complete payment for our sins. We are saved through faith.

But, as A.W. Tozer aptly stated, “Faith is not a conclusion you reach; it is a journey you live.” God never intended for our faith to end with salvation. He calls us to a continuing journey of faith as we grow in our relationship with Him. And God tells us that faith is key to our progress on this journey.

HEBREWS 11:6

6 *But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.*

Have you ever considered how God may desire to reward *your* life as you pursue Him in faith? The simple choice of faith can define your future in a powerful way.

B. Faith is a choice.

When it comes to defining our future, we must understand that we can't do it by controlling either our circumstances or the people around us. If you've ever tried this, you know that it leaves you worried, frustrated, and depleted. God's plan is that we would instead choose faith. This choice gives us the opportunity to place our destiny in the hands of the One who can shape it best.

Think of it—God is the only one who has the power to control our circumstances. He is the only one who can shape our future. And He is the only one who can change our lives and hearts in the process, preparing us for what He will later do through us.

The key is that regardless of what comes into our lives, we choose to respond in faith—trusting that *God* is in control and that He will bring good through it.

ROMANS 8:28

28 And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

Choosing faith means we have decided that instead of attempting to control our *futures*, we will control our *responses* to what God allows into our lives. Jochebed couldn't have altered Pharaoh's decree if she had tried. She couldn't restrain the taskmasters' whips. She couldn't change anything *externally*, and she didn't waste her time or energy trying. Instead, she responded with faith. Her creative obedience shaped the future for millions of people. It was Jochebed's faith that made the difference.

Through Jochebed's story, we discover how we, too, can become women of faith.

II. Nurture Faith

From our earliest years we've learned to be cautious of trusting those we don't know. We drill this into our children as soon as they are old enough to walk and wander away from us in public places. Many times this caution explains why we struggle to trust the Lord. We simply don't know Him!

TEACHING TIP

Share a story about a person that you were untrusting of when you first met, but later, as you built a relationship, you learned he or she was very trustworthy. Perhaps this would even be the man who is now your husband!

How can I choose to have faith in God? I choose to have faith in God because I know Him. He has never failed me. He keeps His Word.

The people who *trust* God are the people who *know* God.

PSALM 9:10

10 And they that know thy name will put their trust in thee: for thou, LORD, hast not forsaken them that seek thee.

We may know in our head that God is absolutely and completely trustworthy, but until we grow in our relationship with Him and know Him personally, we will struggle to trust Him.

In our next lesson, we'll explore in more depth how to grow in our relationship with the Lord, but for now, here are a few pointers of how our faith grows:

A. Read your Bible.

The simple act of attentively reading God's Word increases our faith.

ROMANS 10:17

17 So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

Illustration

D.L. Moody testified how he learned the truth of Romans 10:17: "I prayed for faith and thought that some

Exclusive license for Aaron King Transaction: 1223348

day faith would come down and strike me like lightning. But faith did not come. One day, I read in the tenth chapter of Romans, ‘So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.’ I had closed my Bible and prayed for faith. I then opened my Bible and began to study, and faith has been growing ever since.”

Faith doesn’t come just because we *want* it. Faith comes as we read God’s Word and discover who God is. As we grow in our knowledge of Him, we learn that He can be trusted.

B. Attend church.

Bible preaching and teaching in church provide yet another opportunity to hear the Word of God. Hebrews 13:7 identifies pastors as those “who have spoken unto you the word of God.”

HEBREWS 13:7

7 Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation.

Listen attentively as your pastor explains God’s Word, and watch your faith grow.

In addition to the direct preaching and teaching of God’s Word, there’s another reason our faith grows through our time in church. As the great preacher Dr. Lee Roberson explained, one way to increase your faith is to be around those who have faith. Hebrews 13:7, speaking of pastors, exhorts, “whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation.” As you observe the lives of pastors and other godly men and women, you can increase your faith by following their faith—walking in their footsteps.

In your church, there are godly ladies who walk with the Lord and demonstrate what Christian living looks like on a daily basis. Find them, and observe them. Your life will be enriched by it.

C. Pray.

There's nothing like seeing God answer prayer to increase your faith. Keeping a prayer journal provides a written record of God's answers and becomes a great faith-booster. You can simply record the date you begin praying for a particular request. Then, when God answers, record that date and a brief description of how He answered.

TEACHING TIP

Bring your prayer list or prayer journal, and point out requests you recorded in the past that have since been answered.

Nurturing our faith is really quite simple, and God has already given us a set of incredible resources to do it. But we must take advantage of these resources by spending time in His Word and in prayer. As we do, our understanding of who God is will grow, and we will more freely believe Him enough to choose faith in daily circumstances.

III. Exercise Faith

True faith moves beyond belief to action. Faith is not simply a feeling, but rather a choice to obey God and trust that He will come through.

Jochebed had enough faith in God to engage in personal action. She entered a plan that brought faith from thought to reality. She built a tiny boat out of large river plants called bulrushes. Many think these bulrushes were the papyrus plant, which was believed to be a deterrent to river crocodiles. Jochebed then plastered the little ark to make it watertight and snuggled her baby inside. She placed the ark, baby and all, in the river near the place that Pharaoh's daughter frequented. This was faith in action.

James 2:20 emphasizes that action or “works” always accompanies true faith.

JAMES 2:20

20 But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?

Anyone can *say* she has faith. But only someone who *acts* on that faith has faith that makes a difference. Notice again the people listed in Hebrews 11. They all performed incredible wonders, and there was *action* involved for each of them. Abel made a sacrifice. Enoch spent time with God. Noah built an ark. Abraham prepared to offer Isaac.

Jochebed had enough faith to use what she had to make a difference.

A. Use your faith though it be small.

I know that *my* faith often isn't great. Sometimes when I see the great faith of others, I question if my faith is too small for God to even bless. Matthew 17:20 gives a promise that I have learned to love and claim.

MATTHEW 17:20

20 ...verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove

hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.

Even a small amount of faith can accomplish great things!

The very essence of faith is remembering our great God and trusting Him to do what we cannot. When we place our focus on how little our faith is, we forget to focus on how great our God is. Furthermore, if we wait to use our faith until it is great, we will never do anything by faith. Faith grows through use.

B. Use your faith though it be ridiculed.

I wonder what derision Jochebed might have faced if she had told others about the plan she was following. If anyone had known of the tiny boat she was weaving or the baby she was hiding, they probably would have told her she was crazy! Did she really expect she could save her baby in spite of the incredible odds against her? Yes, she did. She was using her faith, and it grew.

Faith is like a muscle. It develops as it is stretched and used, and it shrinks as it is neglected. If we want to be women of faith, we must *use* our faith. If we use our faith when it is small, it will grow. If we use it when it is ridiculed, it will triumph. If we use it when the outcome seems unlikely, God will be glorified.

IV. Trust God

I can only imagine the thoughts and prayers that must have flooded Jochebed's mind as she wove the tiny ark for baby

Moses. It required faith and courage to dare to attempt the plan she had formulated.

But undoubtedly, Jochebed's most difficult and daring feat was neither weaving the ark nor hiding Moses for three months. Jochebed's most faith-testing and faith-building move was to set that ark holding her baby into the river. She had believed in God's purpose for Moses' life, and she had exercised her faith by developing this plan, but now it was time to simply trust God.

EXODUS 2:3

3 *And when she could not longer hide him, she took for him an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and with pitch, and put the child therein; and she laid it in the flags by the river's brink.*

I've found this is the most difficult part of faith in my own life as well. I can plan and act, but it's a challenge to let go and simply let God work—without worrying or fretting over the outcome.

George Mueller pointed out this incompatibility of faith and worry when he said, "The beginning of anxiety is the end of faith, and the beginning of true faith is the end of anxiety."

Proverbs 3:5–6 has often been a help to me when I'm tempted to turn from faith to worry.

PROVERBS 3:5–6

5 *Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.*

6 *In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.*

Let's notice two areas in particular that will help our faith to grow if we will choose to remember them.

A. Remember the past.

When I'm tempted to doubt God's purposes or plan for my life in the present, I find it helpful to rehearse how He has helped me in the past.

David understood this secret. This is how he, a teenage shepherd boy, could have the faith to fight Goliath, a military hero and giant.

1 SAMUEL 17:37

37 David said moreover, The LORD that delivered me out of the paw of the lion, and out of the paw of the bear, he will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine. And Saul said unto David, Go, and the LORD be with thee.

David's remembrance of God giving him the strength to kill a lion and a bear built his faith for the battle ahead.

TEACHING TIP

To illustrate God's trustworthiness, ask the ladies in your group to raise their hands if God has ever failed them. Of course, no one who understands God's promises will be able to raise her hand. Remind them, "None of us can remember a time when God has failed us, because He never does!"

When you're tempted to give in to worry, pause to remember all God has done for you in the past. Remember your salvation, the times He has answered your prayers, and the ways in which He has provided for you. And remember that He has never failed you even one time. Surely He will come through again!

Remembering the past gives us not only courage for the present, but also confidence that God will care for the future.

B. Remember the promises.

Infinitely more powerful than our faulty memory is the written record of God's promises. When you are faced with overwhelming circumstances, open His Word and remember the unchanging promises of God.

Some of God's promises are so incredible that if they were made by anyone but God, we couldn't believe them. Abraham and Sarah received such a promise. When Abraham was one hundred years old and Sarah was ninety years old, God promised them a son.

GENESIS 18:10

10 And he said, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard it in the tent door, which was behind him.

Although Abraham could have responded in disbelief, he instead responded in faith.

ROMANS 4:20

20 He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God;

We, too, can claim God's promises with confidence!

There are two important keys to claiming the promises. First, we must *know* God's promises. For many women, the promises of God mean nothing—simply because they don't know them. As you read your Bible, begin marking the promises that speak to you. Write them down in a journal. Memorize them. Make

them accessible for easy reference when you need to claim them.

Second, we must *use* the promises. Like a check that is only valuable when cashed, God's promises do not help us unless we trust them. *Knowing* the promises is not enough; we must *use* them in our daily living. We must turn the promises of God into our present possessions!

Conclusion

The story that began in Exodus 2 of a young mother whose life was seemingly spiraling out of control, takes several unexpected turns and climaxes in a surprise ending. Jochebed, the mother who was commanded by the king to throw her baby to the crocodiles, ends up not only keeping her baby, but being *paid* to do it!

EXODUS 2:8–9

8 *And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, Go. And the maid went and called the child's mother.*

9 *And Pharaoh's daughter said unto her, Take this child away, and nurse it for me, and I will give thee thy wages. And the woman took the child, and nursed it.*

This turn of events is especially remarkable when you consider that Jochebed was a slave!

Through the assignment of nursing baby Moses, Jochebed was able to influence him during the most sensitive years of his life. Although Moses was only with Jochebed for a short period of time, her godly influence made a lasting impact. When Moses came of age, he turned from the fame of the palace and chose instead to identify with his people—the Israelites.

HEBREWS 11:24–26

24 *By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter;*

25 *Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season;*

26 *Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward.*

Years later, Moses—the baby who was to have been murdered—led two million Israelites out of the bondage he had been born into. This story ended dramatically different from what Pharaoh could have ever dreamed.

To what can we attribute this change in the storyline? Was it Jochebed's clever ideas? Was it chance? Was it coincidence? No, none of these could have accomplished the miraculous events of Exodus 2.

The change was a result of faith. Jochebed simply trusted God and obeyed Him. God honored this courageous woman who chose to trust Him and to use the resources she had at her disposal. She chose faith, and He chose blessing.

As ladies, we try so desperately to control our circumstances and change the people around us. In reality, we can do neither. It's much wiser and far better to instead choose to draw close to our God and trust Him. He is the only one who can change our lives and shape our futures.

Faith honors God, and God honors faith!

Study Questions

1. What woman's life did we study throughout this chapter to understand faith?
Jochebed (Moses' mother)
2. What chapter in the New Testament lists heroes of faith?
Hebrews 11
3. What are the three ways given in this lesson to nurture and grow your faith?
Read your Bible, attend church, and pray.
4. What two particular areas will help our faith grow if we choose to remember them?
The past and the promises of God
5. The Christian life is a journey of faith. Describe an area in which God has increased your faith in the past six months.
Answers will vary.
6. Our tendency in trouble is to attempt to control our circumstances or the people around us. Why is this futile? And what is a wiser response?
Trying to control our circumstances or other people leaves us worried, frustrated, and depleted. It is wiser to trust God instead and remember that He will bring good through it.
7. In what ways are you nurturing your faith? In what ways could you be more diligent?
Answers will vary.

8. List two or three promises from God's Word that have been a help to your faith in recent circumstances.
Answers will vary.

Memory Verses

PROVERBS 3:5–6

5 *Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.*

6 *In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.*

LESSON FOUR

choose to listen to God

Key Verses

MATTHEW 5:6

6 Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

1 PETER 2:2

2 As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby.

Overview

The choice to walk with God boils down to one word: appetite. Just as we choose physical food based on what we desire, so we choose our spiritual food based on our appetite for the Lord. If we want to be spiritually strong, we must train our spiritual appetites for the Lord. In this lesson, we learn how to change our appetites, and we examine four disciplines that will help us maintain a faithful walk with God.

Lesson Aim

Those in Scripture who were greatly used by God had a close walk with God. They hungered for God with intensity and focus. As Christian women, we, too, must develop a true hunger for God and His Word.

Lesson Goals

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should:

1. Understand the relationship between spiritual appetites and a close walk with God.
2. Examine their life and heart for unhealthy appetites that draw them away from passionately seeking God.
3. Purpose to develop a consistent habit of daily spending time with the Lord.

Teaching Outline

- I. Training Your Appetites
 - A. Desire
 - B. Change
 - C. Discipline
- II. Clarifying Your Goal
- III. Developing New Habits
 - A. Schedule
 - B. Menu
 - C. Food journal
 - D. Support group

LESSON FOUR

choose to listen to God

Text

MATTHEW 5:6

6 Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

1 PETER 2:2

2 As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby.

Introduction

Diet. What comes to mind when you read that word? What kind of emotions does it stir within you?

Okay. Maybe we shouldn't go there! But, if you're like me, you've tried different diets throughout the years in search of that magic plan that will help you lose weight or

become healthy—without much work. Often those diets create emotions such as frustration and disappointment!

The truth is, an effective diet isn't so much about learning to eat less as it is learning to retrain your appetite for healthy, nutritious food.

The same is true concerning our spiritual appetites. You *can* have a close walk with the Lord and enjoy the blessings of a healthy and growing Christian life. In fact, choosing to walk with the Lord daily is the *foundation* to a fruitful, joyful Christian life.

JAMES 4:8

8 Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you....

The choice to walk with God boils down to one word: *appetite*. Just as we choose physical food based on what we desire, so we choose our spiritual food based on our appetite for the Lord. If we want to be spiritually strong, we must train our spiritual appetites for the Lord.

I. Training Your Appetites

Think for a minute about your spiritual and emotional appetites. What do you long for? Acceptance? Friends? Money? Comfort? Happiness?

One of the sweetest promises in the Bible relates to our spiritual appetites.

MATTHEW 5:6

6 Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

This verse assures us that if we develop spiritually healthy appetites, we will experience spiritual fulfillment.

Have you ever noticed that we crave what we eat? If I eat a cookie, I crave another one. And, I don't know who introduced me to chocolate for the first time, but I have craved it ever since! I have some friends who crave pretty odd food items—food that I have never craved at all! Why don't I crave them? Because, the foods are so unusual that I haven't even had a chance to try them!

Illustration

There is a story about a little girl named Amy who lived with her parents in Russia. One day, German soldiers came to their home and offered her mother a piece of chocolate. Even though her mom loved chocolate, she selflessly gave it to Amy. But as soon as Amy tried it, she immediately spit it out of her mouth. When her mom saw the chocolate had gone to waste, she began to cry. You see, Amy's mom had tasted chocolate in her younger and happier days. She enjoyed the taste. Amy, in her young life, had never eaten chocolate. She had not acquired a taste for it and thus, had no craving for it whatsoever.

God made us with the ability to crave so that we would crave Him! Webster defines *crave* this way, “to long for.” God wants us to long for Him. David writes about his craving for God.

PSALM 84:1–2

- 1 *How amiable are thy tabernacles, O LORD of hosts!*
- 2 *My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the LORD: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God.*

Perhaps you don't have the longing for God that David had. The good news about appetites is that they can be retrained. We've all worked to retrain our physical appetites

through diets (with varying degrees of success!). While we may not have succeeded with past physical diets, we *can* retrain our spiritual appetites.

Let's consider three steps to a successful physical diet and learn how these same steps, when applied to our spiritual appetites, can help us develop a true hunger for God.

A. Desire

No diet lasts long without a desire for the right foods. The first element to changing our spiritual appetites is to cultivate a desire for God's Word.

One of the first desires of a newborn baby is food! A baby's hunger is actually an incredible gift from God. This desire for food helps ensure that the baby will receive the nourishment he or she needs to grow.

Similarly, God has put a hunger for His Word in the hearts of new Christians.

1 PETER 2:2

2 As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby.

Throughout Psalms we see examples of a heart that hungers after the Lord with intensity and focus.

PSALM 119:10

10 With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let me not wander from thy commandments.

PSALM 27:4

4 One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to enquire in his temple.

PSALM 63:1

1 O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is;

PSALM 84:2

2 My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the LORD: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God.

Is this the cry of your heart? Every spiritual hunger you have can be satisfied in the person of Christ.

JOHN 6:35

35 And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.

This is why it is so important that you learn to walk with the Lord and draw daily nourishment from His Word.

Mothers observe their children's appetites change as they grow. As newborns, babies want milk. But after several months, a mother will introduce new foods into their diets—oatmeal, fruit, and vegetables. Later, when children begin to eat sweets, they usually develop an immediate appetite for candy and desserts. Then it becomes a challenge to keep them wanting healthy foods!

Have you experienced a similar shift in your spiritual appetite? Perhaps you used to hunger for the Lord and find great delight in spending time with Him, but now you would prefer to spend your time satisfying other desires. How can you retrain your appetite so that your first and greatest desire is to walk with the Lord?

The answer to this question is found in the next step of adjusting our appetites.

B. Change

Even when I have a *desire* to diet, I must also make specific changes in my life to ensure that I will adjust my appetite. One of the most significant changes I can make is to avoid crowding out wholesome desires by filling up on harmful foods. For instance, if I eat candy bars and potato chips all morning, I definitely won't be interested in a salad at lunch time!

Similarly, if we fill our lives with sinful pleasures, we won't have a hunger for the things of God. In the same chapter that Peter encouraged readers to desire the sincere milk of the Word, he pleaded with believers to avoid sinful pleasures.

1 PETER 2:11

11 Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul.

Yielding to sin creates a dangerous conflict in our souls. On the one hand, we want a close relationship with the Lord, but at the same time we are feeding the flesh. When we continually indulge in sin that we know is contrary to God's will for our lives, we will not have a heart for the Lord or sensitivity to His Spirit. Developing an appetite for the Lord requires that we starve our appetites for sinful pleasures by refusing to feed them.

But there is another and less noticeable way that we crowd out spiritual desires. Sometimes instead of filling our lives with sinful pleasure, we fill it with that which has no sustenance.

There are many things that may not be sinful, but when they are consumed in excess they will spoil our spiritual appetites. Often, the amount of time we spend watching television, reading novels, talking on the

phone, connecting through social networks, or pursuing a hobby can rob us of spending time with God. Like candy, these things may be fine in moderation, but they become harmful when they spoil our spiritual appetites!

In Psalms, the psalmist expressed that the deepest longing of his heart was God Himself.

PSALM 73:25

25 *Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee.*

Is this the sincere cry of your soul as well? If not, perhaps you should consider what current desires you need to wean from your life to increase your hunger for the Lord.

C. Discipline

This third step in retraining appetites is where many fall by the wayside. *Wanting* to change is easy. Even identifying specific areas of needed change is easy. But to take definite steps to actually incorporate those changes into your life is where the real challenge begins.

This step is also where real success begins! Developing spiritual disciplines adds stability and consistency to your walk with the Lord, helping it to remain steady even during the ups and downs of circumstances and emotions.

Discipline is the step that takes you beyond simply *wishing* for different appetites to truly *possessing* different appetites. This is where your appetites actually change as you purposefully turn your heart toward the Lord. Although it takes some work to establish new habits, once you establish the guidelines in your life that we will look at in a moment, they become routine and incredibly enjoyable as you thrive on the benefits of walking with God.

II. Clarifying Your Goal

Successful dieters know exactly what they are aiming for, whether it be in terms of a target weight or a target exercise and meal routine. To start a diet with just a general “I want to be healthier” is a sure recipe for failure.

Likewise, if we are to walk with God and choose Him as our first desire, we must identify clearly what we have in mind. What will success look like?

Scripture provides several examples of people who walked closely with God. Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David all specifically and purposefully sought the Lord. While some mentioned in Scripture wanted only the blessings of God, these men wanted to know the Lord personally and intimately. They were thankful for His gifts, but more than the gifts, they wanted to know the Giver.

A common practice in the lives of these Christians was to spend specific, focused time with the Lord in the morning.

GENESIS 19:27

27 And Abraham gat up early in the morning to the place where he stood before the LORD:

GENESIS 22:3

3 And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him.

EXODUS 24:4

4 And Moses wrote all the words of the LORD, and rose up early in the morning, and builded an altar under the hill, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel.

EXODUS 34:4

4 *And he hewed two tables of stone like unto the first; and Moses rose up early in the morning, and went up unto mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and took in his hand the two tables of stone.*

PSALM 57:8

8 *Awake up, my glory; awake, psaltery and harp: I myself will awake early.*

PSALM 63:1

1 *O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee...*

PSALM 108:2

2 *Awake, psaltery and harp: I myself will awake early.*

Even the Lord Himself rose early to spend time in prayer with the Father.

MARK 1:35

35 *And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed.*

God desires that we would walk with Him all day long, enjoying His fellowship as we perform routine duties. Yet, carving out a time when we can specifically seek His face and draw nourishment from His Word is essential to cultivating a close walk with the Lord.

Making time with the Lord the first appointment of the day, gives us the opportunity for fellowship with Him that immediately turns our souls to the Lord and sets the tone for the rest of the day. The Bible even promises blessing to those who seek the Lord in the morning.

PROVERBS 8:17

17 *I love them that love me; and those that seek me early shall find me.*

Perhaps you are not a “morning person” or are not able to give as much time as you desire in the morning to cultivating a walk with the Lord. Even so, I encourage you to at least spend a few uninterrupted moments in the morning with the Lord in His Word. You can identify another time later in the day when you can spend more time with the Lord, but you will find that those moments in the morning are crucial to fixing your heart on the Lord and developing a hunger for Him.

III. Developing New Habits

To summarize our goals, we want to spend quality time with the Lord every day, nourishing our souls in His Word and communicating with Him in prayer. What then are the disciplines we need in order to make this a reality?

A. Schedule

When you are preparing dinner, it is important that you know when to begin so that it will be ready on time. You start by identifying what time you want to set the meal on the table. Then, you calculate how long each step of preparation will take (washing the potatoes, mixing the seasoning for the meat, etc.). Finally, starting from the time dinner will begin, you calculate backwards through the preparation steps to determine what time to start making the food.

We can use this same process to schedule what time we need to get up in the morning to be sure we have allotted a portion of time to spend with the Lord. Just taking a few minutes to schedule helps to insure we will be prepared and still able to accomplish all that needs

to be done. It doesn't matter how you determine your schedule, as long as you make one and stick to it.

TEACHING TIP

Ask the ladies in your group to take a moment to set a time which they can meet with the Lord in the morning. They can use the process described above, starting with writing down all they need to accomplish in the morning and then determining a time in which they can seek God's face.

Be careful, however, during this exercise not to pressure anyone who is not yet ready to plan this time or is even unable to do it because of working nights, etc. Keep it light and encouraging, and be available to give requested help and suggestions as necessary.

B. Menu

If you regularly plan and use a menu, you know what a difference it can make! Often, it saves me from standing in the kitchen at 4:30 and wondering, "What should I make for dinner today?" It is a definite time saver.

Applied to walking with the Lord, I think of a Bible reading schedule as a menu. You can find a variety of Bible reading schedules, including reading through the entire Bible in a year or two years, reading through the New Testament in ninety days, reading through the Old and New Testament simultaneously, or reading through the Bible in chronological order. If you are just getting started, you may have a goal of simply reading a chapter or two a day as you read through a particular book or portion of the Bible. The important thing is to select a schedule and then faithfully use it.

Exclusive license for Aaron King Transaction: 1223348

TEACHING TIP

Have a supply of Bible reading schedules available to give students who would like one. (Note: Schedules that take readers through the Bible in one year may be purchased from Striving Together Publications.) If you are not teaching this lesson in January, be sure to emphasize that there are a variety of schedules and that one does not need to begin reading in Genesis.

A Bible reading schedule helps me plan what I will do during the time I am spending with the Lord, and it provides direction and focus. Instead of randomly opening my Bible each morning and hoping to find a helpful verse, I know that I am systematically reading *all* of God's Word. Often the Holy Spirit speaks so directly through my scheduled reading that I am amazed that He would orchestrate my needs and His answers through the simple tool of a Bible reading schedule.

Just as I may occasionally change what I had planned for dinner on my family meal menu, I sometimes veer from my Bible reading schedule. There may be a day when instead of reading what is scheduled, I feel I need to read several psalms or review the Scriptures used in a recent sermon at church. But for the majority of the time, I follow it, and it helps make my time with the Lord more profitable.

Most of us don't have trouble with missing our physical meals. Yet many of us neglect time with God far too often. Scheduling an appointment with the Lord each day helps to affirm in our own hearts that this is a vital part of our day. Following through on this commitment helps us develop a hunger for the Lord.

C. *Food journal*

Serious dieters keep a log or a food journal, recording everything they put into their mouths. This does a few things for them: It provides a record for them to refer to of what they have eaten so they can find patterns in their food choices. It also provides accountability, as it requires a higher standard of honesty. It's easy to tell yourself, "I'm pretty much keeping my diet." But an accurate food journal helps the dieter maintain a greater awareness of what she is eating. Just the act of writing it down helps fix in her own mind what is really taking place.

A spiritual journal can accomplish all of these objectives for the Christian lady who is serious about walking with the Lord. In my journal, I simply write out the verse or passage that God has used to specifically speak to my heart that morning and then summarize how He spoke to me through it.

TEACHING TIP

Bring your journal to class and perhaps share a few recent verses you've recorded. If appropriate, you could also share how the Lord spoke to you through those Scriptures.

I greatly treasure my journals, as they record what God has taught me during different seasons of my life. I sometimes look back to them and remember the specific verses the Lord used to bring comfort, conviction, instruction, or growth during particular times in my life.

Using my journal in the morning also helps me throughout the day to remember what the Lord taught me earlier. The very act of writing out Scripture and

recording what God is doing in my heart and life in relation to those verses helps fix it in my mind.

And, finally, preserving what God is teaching me in a journal motivates me to want to write something every day. Because I date every entry, if I skip a day, it is much more obvious than without a journal.

D. Support group

For many of us, dieting choices seem very personal, yet having the support of others who are going the same direction is incredibly helpful. Maybe that's why Weight Watchers has become so successful! Their weekly meetings provide members with encouragement, support, and accountability.

God has designed the local church as a “support group” with far greater value than any diet group. And He's instructed us to be at every meeting.

HEBREWS 10:25

25 Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.

Developing godly relationships within your church family provides opportunities to give and receive encouragement with other ladies who also desire to walk with the Lord. Share with one another how God is leading in your life and helping you grow. Share answers to prayer you have recently seen and what He is teaching you through His Word.

Look for opportunities to fellowship and encourage one another—to nurture these relationships. This may happen in a Sunday school class, a ladies Bible study, or conversation before a church service. You may be able to

Exclusive license for Aaron King Transaction: 1223348

encourage a young Christian just beginning to walk with the Lord, or you may *be* that young Christian needing encouragement. In every phase of our walk with the Lord, it's encouraging and helpful to share with others who are growing with us.

Conclusion

Developing spiritual disciplines requires perseverance and work. But it is worth the investment! The tools and skills are simple: Take a few minutes to plan what time you will meet with the Lord. Find a Bible reading schedule that you would like to use. Then, just do it! Begin today.

But remember, walking with God and spending time in His Word is not merely a system. While schedules and methods help us stay on track, they are part of a larger goal—developing a relationship with God.

Every healthy relationship requires time and energy to sustain growth. The same is true in our relationship with the Lord. I look at my Bible reading schedule, my journal, and my quiet time routines as tools—not as the end goal. These simply help me keep on track and enrich my time with the Lord. But ultimately, my desire is to deepen my relationship with the Lord and to receive the spiritual nourishment He gives me through His Word.

Study Questions

1. The choice to walk with God boils down to one word. What is it?

Appetites

2. What three steps are given in this lesson to change your spiritual appetites?

Desire, change, and discipline

3. What four disciplines for a growing walk with God are given in this lesson?

Schedule—set a definite appointment; menu—use a Bible reading plan; food journal—keep a journal during your quiet time; support group—develop relationships in the local church.

4. Walking with God and spending time in His Word is not merely a system. What is the larger goal?

Developing a relationship with God

5. On a scale of 1–10, how strong would you say your spiritual appetites are? Through this lesson, did the Holy Spirit convict you of any competing appetites that you need to eliminate?

Answers will vary.

6. What is your current Bible reading plan? Or what plan could you begin tomorrow?

Answers will vary.

7. Do you need to find an accountability partner in your church to encourage you in your walk with the Lord? If so, write down the name of a mature Christian lady that you plan this week to ask for accountability.

Answers will vary.

8. Through what verses in your Bible reading has the Lord recently spoken to your heart? Write down the references and how He spoke to you, and then plan to share them with another Christian lady for mutual encouragement.

Answers will vary.

Memory Verse

MATTHEW 5:6

6 Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

LESSON FIVE

choose to talk to God

Key Verses

JEREMIAH 33:3

3 Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and shew thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not.

Overview

Prayer is one of the most incredible resources at our disposal. Through prayer, we have direct access to our Heavenly Father. We share our hearts with Him and seek His resources to meet our needs. And yet, as valuable as prayer is, it is one of the most neglected resources. In this lesson, we learn to regularly choose to commune with the Lord.

Lesson Aim

Statistics say that prayer is the most often talked about and the least practiced discipline in the Christian life. In this lesson, we learn how we can move beyond mere talk of prayer and become true women of prayer.

Lesson Goals

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should:

1. Desire to see God's intervention in their lives through developing a meaningful prayer life.

2. Understand the larger picture of prayer—getting to know the heart of the Father and allowing Him to change us.
3. Commit to a definite time of daily prayer.

Teaching Outline

- I. Commitment
 - A. Commit to consistency.
 - B. Commit to a schedule.
- II. Confession
- III. Confiding
 - A. Pray in secret.
 - B. Pray sincerely.
 - C. Pray specifically.
 - D. Keep a list.
- IV. Conformity

LESSON FIVE

choose to talk to God

Text

JEREMIAH 33:3

3 Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and shew thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not.

Introduction

Far too many Christian women have never discovered the incredible resource available through developing a consistent and meaningful prayer life. As we saw in our previous lesson, we need to regularly nourish our souls in God's Word. But more than hearing God's voice as we meet with Him, we need to commune with Him—to share our hearts with Him and seek His resources to meet our needs. All of this—and so much more—is available through the act of prayer.

Illustration

Two men were talking together when the first challenged the other, “If you are so religious, let’s hear you quote the Lord’s Prayer. I bet you \$10.00 you can’t.”

The second man responded, “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. And if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

The first man pulled out his wallet and fished out a ten dollar bill muttering, “I didn’t think you could do it!”

Hopefully, you are more familiar with the Lord’s Prayer than to confuse it like that! And hopefully, you are more familiar with prayer itself than either of these men!

No matter what our roles are—teacher, nurse, secretary, missionary, executive—we all need God’s resources. We need His direction, power, joy, blessing, provision, strength, and help. In short, we need God. We need to be women of prayer. And God gives an incredible and encouraging promise regarding prayer.

JEREMIAH 33:3

3 Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and shew thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not.

Prayer is such a valuable resource for the Christian. To think that when I pray, I have all of God’s resources at my disposal is amazing! Prayer should never be our last resort but our first resource. Yet, statistics say that prayer is the most often talked about and the least practiced discipline in the Christian life. Some say the average daily prayer time for Christians in America is less than five minutes—including praying before meals.

Hannah was a woman in Scripture who didn’t merely talk about prayer—she prayed. Hannah had a petition that she knew only God could fill. With the tender heart

Exclusive license for Aaron King Transaction: 1223348

of a would-be mother who lived in a culture that believed barrenness was a curse, Hannah desperately longed for a child. First Samuel 1 records her story.

If this chapter were the account of most of us, the story would tell of a woman who wanted something only God could provide. Then it would describe how she talked to her friends and family, sometimes asking them to pray for her and sometimes merely complaining of her unmet desire. It would tell how she wished and dreamed and even cried. But in the case of most of us, the story would never tell of a woman who humbly and sincerely took her need to God.

Hannah did share her burden with others, but they didn't feel her pain. Elkanah, Hannah's husband, thought he was certainly better to her than ten sons, and Peninnah mocked her for her barrenness. So Hannah tearfully poured out her heart before the Lord and asked Him to give her a son. When God answered Hannah's request, she joyfully—and truthfully—praised Him for answered prayer.

1 SAMUEL 1:27

27 For this child I prayed; and the LORD hath given me my petition which I asked of him.

Let's see how we can move beyond mere talk of prayer and become true women of prayer.

I. Commitment

Have you ever heard a child who was asking his parents for a pet? Of course, the child positively promises to care for the pet. And, indeed, for the first few days or weeks after getting the pet, the child diligently cares for it. But a short time later, things change. The thrill wears off, and the responsibility sets in.

Maybe you can relate. When you first got saved, you couldn't wait to talk to God and read His Word. You would get up early to spend time with Him. Even with your busy schedule, you would *make* time to pray, and you cherished the answers He gave you in the prayer closet. You lived and breathed for this special relationship between you and your Heavenly Father.

But then, the excitement wore off. Sure, God is still your Friend, and you call on Him when you need Him. But the commitment on your part is lacking.

In any relationship, commitment takes work. It requires personal discipline.

A. Commit to consistency.

We want results immediately, but at the heart of effective prayer is consistency.

LUKE 18:1

1 And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint;

1 CHRONICLES 16:11

11 Seek the LORD and his strength, seek his face continually.

1 THESSALONIANS 5:17

17 Pray without ceasing.

One of the best examples of consistent prayer in Scripture is Daniel. Through the many years he spent as a captive in Babylon, he carefully and regularly maintained daily communion with God. Daniel's testimony of faithful prayer was so reliable that even those who sought Daniel's harm knew he would never stop praying.

These men tricked the king into signing a decree against prayer that carried a stiff penalty—the lion’s den—for whomever disobeyed. Of course, they knew Daniel would still keep his daily prayer appointments. And the men weren’t disappointed.

DANIEL 6:10

10 Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime.

No threat could keep Daniel from the prayer closet. What would it take for you to develop this level of consistency in prayer?

B. Commit to a schedule.

Like Bible reading, I’ve learned that the only way to maintain consistency in my prayer life is to schedule a time and place for prayer—an appointment with God. It seems Jesus did something similar.

JOHN 18:2

2 And Judas also, which betrayed him, knew the place: for Jesus oftentimes resorted thither with his disciples.

When Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemene to pray, Judas knew where to find Him.

Jesus must have longed for communion with the Father throughout His time on earth. And how His heart must have been reenergized and renewed through prayer! Yet even Jesus didn’t simply wait for these times of communion to present themselves. He had regular times and places where He communed with the Father.

Exclusive license for Aaron King Transaction: 1223348

The Bible speaks of many times throughout the day when we can pray. The best way to start our day is to pray in the morning.

PSALM 5:3

3 My voice shalt thou hear in the morning, O LORD; in the morning will I direct my prayer unto thee, and will look up.

Jesus also prayed early in the morning.

MARK 1:35

35 And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed.

Spending time in prayer in the morning helps me establish a pattern of communion with the Lord before I even begin my day.

Then, too, I love closing the day by thanking the Lord for it and reviewing its events with Him as I prepare for sleep. It closes the day with comfort and security.

PSALM 4:8

8 I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: for thou, LORD, only makest me dwell in safety.

As we already saw, Daniel prayed three times each day. David also had this practice.

PSALM 55:17

17 Evening, and morning, and at noon, will I pray, and cry aloud: and he shall hear my voice.

Jesus set the precedent of praying before meals.

LUKE 24:30

30 And it came to pass, as he sat at meat with them, he took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them.

Not only is gratefulness for God's provision good for our own hearts, but it is a testimony of God's goodness to others as well.

There are many times we can and should pray. But it is vital that you identify and schedule a specific time when you will regularly take your requests before the Lord. And while you are planning a time, plan a place where you will pray, as well.

I love that I can pray anytime and anywhere. God delights to hear our prayers and actually inclines His ear toward our voices.

PSALM 116:2

2 Because he hath inclined his ear unto me, therefore will I call upon him as long as I live.

Throughout Scripture, we learn that we can pray alone, with others and at church, and even on the housetop.

MATTHEW 6:6

6 But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.

MATTHEW 18:19

19 Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven.

ACTS 10:9

9 On the morrow, as they went on their journey, and drew nigh unto the city, Peter went up upon the housetop to pray about the sixth hour:

Anywhere is good, but don't neglect private prayer with God.

How is your commitment? Are you serious enough about communing with God that prayer is part of your daily schedule? Perhaps you could pause for a moment right now to determine a time and place when you will pray daily. Ideally, this would be at the same time and in the same place that you identified in our previous chapter that you would read God's Word.

Becoming a woman of prayer requires commitment, but there's more. It also requires a clean heart.

II. Confession

Have you ever had someone treat you poorly, and then, without ever making it right, try to strike up a conversation? You may be gracious and chat with them, but it would be hard to develop a very meaningful relationship without ever addressing the earlier issue.

In a similar way, unconfessed sin can seriously hinder our communication with the Lord.

PSALM 66:18

18 If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.

Sometimes we wonder why we are not getting our prayers answered when it is our own sin clogging communication with Heaven.

ISAIAH 59:1–2

1 Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear:

2 But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear.

Is there a sin that you refuse to surrender to the Lord? Some of the sins we cling to the most tenaciously are the very ones Scripture specifically names as hindrances to prayer—an unforgiving spirit (Mark 11:25–26) and discord between a husband and wife (1 Peter 3:7).

MARK 11:25–26

25 And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.

26 But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses.

1 PETER 3:7

7 Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered.

Isn't it amazing that we sometimes try to ignore or cover sin rather than confess and forsake it? Think of it—we have a Father willing and ready to forgive and cleanse us, and until we ask Him to do so, we cannot know full communion with Him. Why then would we ever hesitate?

Ask the Lord to search your heart, and then receive His unreserved forgiveness. I often pray two Scriptures to the Lord during this process before I take my petitions before Him:

PSALM 139:23–24

23 *Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts:*

24 *And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

1 JOHN 1:9

9 *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

The first is an invitation to the Holy Spirit to search every corner of my life, and the second is a reminder of God’s full and guaranteed forgiveness as I confess my sin.

Begin your prayer time by asking the Lord to search your heart. Ask Him to reveal anything in your life that would hinder His answers from reaching you.

A clean heart—with nothing between you and your Lord—gives you the freedom to confide in Him and pour out your requests before Him.

III. Confiding

Illustration

Aren’t you thankful that God doesn’t have an answering machine? Someone sent me this humorous clip of a possible recording of God’s answering machine.

“Thank you for calling Heaven. All of the angels are busy helping other sinners right now. Please stay on the line, and your call will be answered in the order in which it was received. (The approximate wait time is seventeen minutes.) Or, you may select from one of the following options:

For general requests, press 1

For thanksgiving, press 2

For complaints, press 3

For healing, press 4

For help with the IRS, press 5

For help with weather conditions, press 6

For miracles, press 7

For all other inquiries, or just to say ‘hi,’ press 8”

I’m thankful that we cannot call our Heavenly Father too often. We never get a busy signal, and God takes each call personally. Not only that, but He wants us to confide in Him—to share every detail that is on our hearts and minds with Him and to trust Him to meet our needs.

When I call to pay a bill over the phone, I may need to make selections like those above. But when I finally do get to talk to another human being, I never *confide* in her. The lady at the other end of the line may ask me how I’m doing, but I don’t spill out my life story!

God literally invites us to tell Him everything—to share our hearts with Him. He wants us to share all of our secrets, tell our needs, explain our frustrations, seek His help. He wants to hear it all.

Hannah seemed to understand this.

1 SAMUEL 1:10

10 And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed unto the LORD, and wept sore.

This was not just a quick “bless my family and help me today, Lord.” As she explained to the priest Eli, she poured out her soul to the Lord.

1 SAMUEL 1:15

15 And Hannah answered and said, No, my lord, I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit: I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but have poured out my soul before the LORD.

A. *Pray in secret.*

I don't usually share my secrets or special needs in a roomful of people. Perhaps this is partly why Jesus instructed us to pray in secret.

MATTHEW 6:6

6 But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.

God wants us to carve out time when we will meet with Him one-on-one and share our most intimate needs.

Prayer should never be something we do to impress others or to be seen or noticed. Remember, we are praying to an audience of One! When we pray in secret, it is to help us block out distractions in order to focus completely on our time with God.

In my life, God hasn't always answered every request with a "yes." Sometimes, as any wise father would do, He says "no," because He has something better in mind. Sometimes He says "wait," and He gives what I've asked for at a better time. But whatever God's answer, I'll never get it if I don't take my requests to Him in prayer.

JAMES 4:2

2 ...ye have not, because ye ask not.

I wonder how many blessings and answers we miss because we neglect secret prayer.

Our place of secret prayer provides more than a place to read a list of needs to the Lord. In this place, we can unburden our souls.

1 PETER 5:7

7 *Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.*

Our Heavenly Father wants to carry *all* of our burdens—the large and the small. But when we neglect private prayer, we condemn ourselves to struggle through the day under pressures God never intended for us to carry.

Find a “prayer closet,” and frequent it daily. God waits to meet you there.

B. Pray sincerely.

Don't you love to hear children pray? They don't try to impress others with their depth or proficiency in prayer. They just talk to the Lord. This is exactly what Jesus tells us to do.

MATTHEW 6:7

7 *But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.*

There is no need for us to craft prayers from the collaborated phrases of others or repeat spiritual-sounding clichés. We can talk to God freely and sincerely. He is our Father, and He wants us to communicate with Him from our hearts.

C. Pray specifically.

Over the years, I've noticed that the more specific my prayers are, the more specific the Lord's answers are.

TEACHING TIP

Share a few testimonies of specific prayer requests you have seen answered, and emphasize the details that were answered.

Specific prayers and specific answers—whether they be big or small—are testimony to the fact that God delights to hear the specific desires of our hearts.

D. Keep a list.

One of the best ways I know to pray specifically for all the things that are important to me is to make and maintain a prayer list. I have so many things I want to see the Lord do in my life—for my family, in our church, for friends, neighbors, and loved ones. I can't possibly remember them all, unless I write them down.

My prayer list is one of the most helpful tools in my communion with my Heavenly Father.

TEACHING TIP

Bring your prayer list to class to demonstrate how you have it organized.

I've organized my prayer list into different requests for different days of the week. I have a section that I pray through every day. (This includes my husband, children, and other needs that I want to remember daily.) Then I focus on other specific needs each day of the week. For instance, one day I pray for missionaries, and another day I pray for friends, and another day I pray for those in authority.

Exclusive license for Aaron King Transaction: 1223348

I'm thankful that my Heavenly Father invites me to confide in Him—to take my needs directly to Him and pour out my specific requests. When I step back to consider the magnitude of His invitation and the incredible resources He has placed at my disposal, I wonder that I don't pray more.

Through prayer, God invites me to unburden my soul, and He hears and answers my requests. But as He does this, He does something even greater—He changes me.

IV. Conformity

Illustration

A mother sent her fifth grade son up to bed. A few minutes later she went to make sure he was getting in bed, and as she poked her head into his room, she saw him kneeling beside his bed in prayer. Pausing to listen, she heard her son repeating—with great intensity—the words, “Let it be Tokyo! Please, dear God, let it be Tokyo!”

After repeating this several times, he jumped into bed. The mother stepped into the room and asked her son, “What did you mean by, ‘Let it be Tokyo?’”

“Well, we had our geography exam today, and I was praying that God would make Tokyo the capital of France.”

As humorous as this sounds, I can think of times I've prayed for things that, in retrospect, are just as silly. Too often, I ask God to conform His will to my desires.

Prayer is not simply a magical means by which we get God to do what we want. In fact, the power of prayer is not that we succeed in changing God at all; it is the means through which God succeeds in changing us.

God does change our circumstances through prayer—He provides for our needs, opens opportunities, and even changes the hearts of others. But in the process, He changes us.

E. Stanley Jones once explained it this way: “Prayer is surrender to the will of God and cooperation with that will. If I throw out a boat hook from a boat and catch hold of the shore and pull, do I pull the shore to me, or do I pull myself to the shore? Prayer is not pulling God to my will, but the aligning of my will to the will of God.”

Prayer is so much more than just getting what we ask for. Through the very process of seeking God through prayer, He reveals His heart to us and changes our lives. As our relationship with Him grows, we learn that more often than we need a change of circumstances, we need a change of character. And at the same time, we learn the heart of our loving Heavenly Father who desires to conform us to the image of Christ.

The greatest fulfillment in my prayer life has not been the list of miraculous answers to prayer I have received, although these have been numerous and wonderful. The greatest thrill is to see the difference prayer makes in my relationship with God.

Conclusion

Through the invitation to prayer, God offers us so much—infinitely more than could be described in one lesson, or an entire series. He invites us to fellowship with Him, worship Him, and unburden our souls to Him. He listens and cares and answers. He communes with us and changes us.

None of us would look at an invitation like this and say, “No thanks—I have better things to do with my time.” But

every day, sometimes without even realizing it, we make the choice to accept or reject the invitation. Instead of spending time in prayer, we choose to let our minds fret all day. Instead of talking to the Lord, we call a friend. Instead of reaching up to trustingly take the hand of the Father, we try to do it on our own.

Prayer is a gift, an opportunity, a joy. It is also a choice.

I'm still growing in developing my prayer life. But I've experienced enough to know that prayer is wonderful! And I'd like to encourage you—choose prayer!

Study Questions

1. What woman in Scripture did we look at in this lesson who brought her pain and rejection to the Lord and saw God answer her prayer?

Hannah

2. Who prayed three times every day with such consistency that even his enemies could count on his faithfulness?

Daniel

3. What times in Scripture are mentioned as times for prayer?

The morning (Psalm 5:3; Mark 1:35), the evening (Psalm 4:8), all day long (Psalm 55:17), and before meals (Luke 24:30).

4. Which two sins mentioned in this lesson are specifically mentioned in Scripture as hindrances to prayer?

An unforgiving spirit (Mark 11:25–26) and discord between a husband and wife (1 Peter 3:7).

5. When was the last time that you asked the Lord to thoroughly search your heart? What two Scripture passages are suggested in this lesson as prayers for this process?

Answers will vary. Scripture passages are Psalm 139:23–24 and 1 John 1:9.

6. Where is your “prayer closet” where you regularly go to spend time in prayer? If you are not already in this habit, what place could you make your “prayer closet” as you begin to develop a prayer life?

Answers will vary.

7. List some recent answers to prayer that you have seen in the past thirty days.

Answers will vary.

8. In addition to seeing God answer your needs through prayer, have you seen God change *you* through the process of seeking Him in prayer? In what ways?

Answers will vary.

Memory Verse

JEREMIAH 33:3

3 *Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and shew thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not.*

choose to let go

Key Verses

PHILIPPIANS 3:13–14

- 13 *Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before,*
- 14 *I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.*

Overview

As ladies, we so easily allow our circumstances and other people (or even our *perception* of what others think) to define who we are. A proper perspective only comes when we choose to define ourselves by what God says is true. In this lesson, we learn how God teaches us to view our past and how He can use it to make us trophies of His grace.

Lesson Aim

Many ladies struggle with guilt and pain from their past—baggage that is real and heavy. Yet, God gives us the resources to release the past and press forward into the future—all by the power of grace.

Lesson Goals

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should:

1. Recognize that many in Scripture who were greatly used by God had shameful and painful pasts.
2. Know that God fully forgives the sins of our past and gives us the grace to fully forgive those who have sinned against us.
3. Choose to release their past to the Lord and claim His promise of Romans 8:28.

Teaching Outline

- I. Forgetting
- II. Dealing with the Accuser
- III. Forgiving
- IV. Embracing Grace

LESSON SIX

choose to let go

Text

PHILIPPIANS 3:13–14

13 Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before,

14 I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

Introduction

Illustration

Do you remember as a child having fun with the mirrors that distorted your appearance? One mirror might make you look tall, another short, and yet another extremely fat or skinny.

Now as “grown ups,” we realize that we can get a distorted view of our lives. Only now, instead of realizing

that our view is false and distorted, we begin to accept what we see.

We hear a lot about *self-acceptance*. Definitions of this term vary greatly. Some definitions say you should accept yourself just as you are without any thought of change. They suggest you should defend your right of acceptance to any who would encourage your growth or suggest change. Others use the term to imply that you should focus almost exclusively on yourself to make you acceptable. Both of these approaches are dangerous because they start from a faulty perspective.

In the next two lessons, we will approach *self-acceptance* from a different perspective—the vantage point of unchangeable truth. As we look in the mirror, let's consider how *God* sees us. In this lesson, we'll consider how we view our past and the impact it has on today. In the next lesson, we'll examine how we view the present and even our aspirations for the future.

As ladies, we so easily allow our circumstances and other people (or even our *perception* of what others think) to define who we are. A proper perspective only comes when we choose to define ourselves by what God says is true.

Many homes have an area where the family can store keepsakes, seasonal decorations, children's school awards,

TEACHING TIP

Bring items from your home storage that represent events from your past—perhaps a childhood toy, wedding pictures, diploma, etc. If you have a small enough group, you could even ask the ladies one week before you teach this lesson to bring an item from their home storage that highlights a memorable event of the past.

old records, miscellaneous items that may someday come in handy, and boxes of assorted junk. This place is the attic.

Although we don't all have physical attics, we each have an intangible attic where our past is stored. It's called our memories, and within its recesses are storage bins that represent a virtual timeline of our past. There are bins we like to revisit—memories of joy and fulfillment. But there are also bins of failures, disappointments, rejection, and hurts. These can come back to haunt us to the point that we feel unacceptable and unusable.

Everyone has things in her past that she wishes had never happened. It may be abuse, secret sin, drugs, divorce, rejection, rape—the list could continue.

Think of the attic as the timeline of your life. It's all there, and there is no changing it—it's already history.

But have you ever known someone who was controlled by their storage? They cling tightly to everything that comes into their lives and refuse to part with it. Soon their treasures overflow their storage places and pile into the living places of their home, restricting everyday activities.

This is what some of us allow the memories of the past to do in our lives—we let them control us. While it is true we cannot change what has happened in the past, we can lessen the influence and control it has on our lives now.

I. Forgetting

If anyone in Scripture could have felt self-rejection because of his past, it was the Apostle Paul. Paul literally murdered Christians. He tore apart families, hauling men and women off to prison and torture.

ACTS 8:3

3 *As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison.*

ACTS 22:4–5

4 *And I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women.*

5 *As also the high priest doth bear me witness, and all the estate of the elders: from whom also I received letters unto the brethren, and went to Damascus, to bring them which were there bound unto Jerusalem, for to be punished.*

That guilt alone would be overwhelming for anyone to deal with, but Paul had an added burden in that his past was public. He had to deal with other people's rejection of him as well as his own. His past was so openly known that when he came to Christ, other Christians had great difficulty trusting him or allowing him to participate in ministry.

ACTS 9:26

26 *And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple.*

Yet, Paul was greatly used of God. He was the human author of much of the New Testament, as well as being an incredibly effective church planting missionary throughout the Roman Empire.

How could one with such a past as Paul's become one so used by God?

Paul shared the secret to freeing himself from the grasp of the past.

PHILIPPIANS 3:13–14

13 *Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before,*

14 *I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.*

Did you catch Paul’s secret? It was to *forget* the past—to purposefully make a decision to turn his attention from it.

“But wait,” you might say. “How can I forget my past? It’s part of who I am! There’s no way.”

When Paul said “forgetting those things which are behind,” he didn’t mean that he completely erased them from his memory. That would have been impossible. In fact, much of Paul’s past is recorded in Scripture for everyone to see. None of us can (or should) forget our past in the sense that we pretend it didn’t happen. It’s part of our lives, and it is unchangeable.

Forgetting in this context isn’t a memory *lapse*; it is a memory *release*. It is a deliberate choice to release the past’s grip on our present.

Illustration

The most helpful illustration to me of “forgetting” is that of childbirth. When I was in labor with each of my four children, I was in a great deal of pain. Each contraction was completely consuming. For someone to try to tell me to forget the pain would have been ridiculous—it was all I could think about!

It’s been quite a few years now since my youngest was born, and I still remember that pain. But there is a big difference between *experiencing* the pain and *remembering* the pain. The pain of childbirth no longer consumes me when I think about it. It has released its grip on me.

This is what God wants us to do with the hurts and pain of our past. We can't erase them, but we can refuse to allow them to have control over our lives today.

II. Dealing with the Accuser

One difficulty with forgetting our past is that Satan insists on bringing it up! He is so intent on this that one of his titles in Scripture is “the accuser.”

REVELATION 12:10

10 And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night.

Satan continually reminds us of our failures and sins of the past, and he calls our futures into question because of it. “You can't serve God with a past like this,” he suggests.

Perhaps the facts Satan reminds us of are true, but the conclusions he would lead us to are absolutely false. When Satan brings up a sin in my past, I tell him that, yes, I know it is horrible and, yes, I wish it had never happened, but I am not going to let it influence me today. Then I remind myself of how God has already dealt with my past.

PSALM 103:12

12 As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us.

HEBREWS 8:12

12 For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.

1 JOHN 1:9

9 *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

Memorize these verses, and others like them, so you have truth to turn to when Satan lies about the claim your past has on your present. However bad our history may be (and all of ours is pretty bad in comparison to Christ's holiness), we don't have to cling to its memory. We have enough to deal with in today's struggles. Let's commit our past to God's forgiveness and accept His grace for today.

III. Forgive

Paul was able to forget, or release, his sinful past because he trusted in the Lord's forgiveness. But what do we do with pain from the past that is a result, not of *our* sin, but of others' infliction? For instance, many Christians have a past, especially through their childhood, that was full of unspeakable pain inflicted by others. Perhaps it was an alcoholic parent or an abusive family member. These are not our own sins that we can release by asking for God's forgiveness. So what do we do with them?

Joseph experienced a past like this, and his example shows that the answer is, once again, to forget.

Joseph was born into a family already at odds because of jealousy and polygamy. His father chose Joseph as his favorite, but that became more of a burden than a blessing to Joseph.

GENESIS 37:4

4 *And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him.*

Joseph's half brothers were so cruel to him that they literally sold him into slavery, thinking they were rid of him forever.

GENESIS 37:23–28

23 And it came to pass, when Joseph was come unto his brethren, that they stript Joseph out of his coat, his coat of many colours that was on him;

24 And they took him, and cast him into a pit: and the pit was empty, there was no water in it.

25 And they sat down to eat bread: and they lifted up their eyes and looked, and, behold, a company of Ishmeelites came from Gilead with their camels bearing spicery and balm and myrrh, going to carry it down to Egypt.

26 And Judah said unto his brethren, What profit is it if we slay our brother, and conceal his blood?

27 Come, and let us sell him to the Ishmeelites, and let not our hand be upon him; for he is our brother and our flesh. And his brethren were content.

28 Then there passed by Midianites merchantmen; and they drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmeelites for twenty pieces of silver: and they brought Joseph into Egypt.

Although Joseph was betrayed, mistreated, and lied about, he made a decision to release his past. As a token of this decision, he named his first son Manasseh, which means “forgetting.”

GENESIS 41:51

51 And Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasse: For God, said he, hath made me forget all my toil, and all my father's house.

As Joseph's story continues to unfold, we learn that his choice to release his past was also a choice to release, or forgive, his brothers from the pain they had caused him.

When Joseph was finally in a position to turn the tables and repay his brothers for their cruelty, he chose instead to provide for and love his family.

GENESIS 45:10–11

10 And thou shalt dwell in the land of Goshen, and thou shalt be near unto me, thou, and thy children, and thy children's children, and thy flocks, and thy herds, and all that thou hast:

11 And there will I nourish thee; for yet there are five years of famine; lest thou, and thy household, and all that thou hast, come to poverty.

Ultimately, God used Joseph to preserve his entire family and, in so doing, preserve the beginnings of the Hebrew nation.

Joseph's decision to choose forgiveness allowed him to see his life from God's perspective. Years later, he was able to explain to his brothers how God had actually brought good to all of their lives through the terrible evil his brothers had done to him.

GENESIS 50:20

20 But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.

This one decision, undoubtedly made many times over, let Joseph see God's sovereign hand orchestrating beauty from discord. Think of what Joseph would have missed if he had bitterly held on to the hurts of his past.

IV. Embracing Grace

God gives us a precious resource to enable us to forgive. It's called *grace*. God's grace gives us the ability to not only leave the sins or pain of the past behind, but to become stronger because of the forgiveness and healing Christ has given us.

Consider how God's grace worked in the lives of those in Scripture. Many of those in the Bible who God used in great ways were men and women with troubled pasts.

Jephthah had a past out of his control. His mother was a harlot, and his brothers refused to include him in his father's inheritance.

JUDGES 11:2

2 And Gilead's wife bare him sons; and his wife's sons grew up, and they thrust out Jephthah, and said unto him, Thou shalt not inherit in our father's house; for thou art the son of a strange woman.

Of course, Jephthah hadn't chosen his parents, and his brothers' grudge was unfair.

Years later, when Jephthah's brothers needed his skills, they didn't hesitate to demand his help. Jephthah could have retaliated in kind and refused to help them. Instead, Jephthah agreed to his brothers' request, and the Lord blessed.

JUDGES 11:32

32 So Jephthah passed over unto the children of Ammon to fight against them; and the LORD delivered them into his hands.

If Jephthah had reacted from the wounds of his past, he would have missed an incredible opportunity to see God use him to bring victory.

Rahab had an undeniably wicked past—she was a harlot. Rahab was not the person that we would have chosen as

“most likely to succeed” in the Christian life. She’s not who we would have guessed would be used to help bring the first victory in Israel’s conquest of the Promised Land. Yet God used her in that very way (Joshua 2).

Rahab’s soiled past was so unforgettable that even after she came to the Lord, she is referenced as “the harlot.” Yet she refused to allow her sins of the past to prevent her from present faith.

HEBREWS 11:31

31 By faith the harlot Rahab perished not with them that believed not, when she had received the spies with peace.

Mary Magdalene was another woman with a sinful past, including demon possession. Yet, the very severity of her past intensified the glory of her deliverance. Mary received Christ’s forgiveness, and out of gratitude for His grace, she was early at the tomb after Jesus died. It was to Mary that Christ first appeared after His resurrection.

MARK 16:9

9 Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils.

Each of these had baggage from their past that was real and heavy. They could have focused on these elements and lived in the past, continually replaying the hurt or shame of days gone by. But had they done this, they never would have experienced the future God made possible by His grace. Because they put the past behind them, severing the chains of bitterness and guilt, they became triumphant trophies of God’s amazing grace.

Conclusion

One of the greatest promises in the Bible is Romans 8:28.

ROMANS 8:28

28 And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

Only God can make all things—the pain, the guilt, the impossible—work together for good.

When we release our past to the Lord, He does an amazing work. He reaches into the attic storage of our lives, and from the bins we've long forgotten, He creates a future wrapped in His amazing grace. Let's receive the strength of the Lord and choose to move into the future He's prepared!

Study Questions

1. Many people define *self-acceptance* by our own perception of ourselves. But what do we use in this lesson to gain a proper perspective?

We gain a proper perspective when we choose to define ourselves by what God says is true.

2. Paul the Apostle had a past that was stained by sin. After receiving God's forgiveness through salvation, what one word summarizes his secret to freeing himself from the grip of the past?

Forgetting

3. Joseph had a painful past brought on by the hatred of others. What did Joseph choose to do to enable him to release himself from the past?

Forgive his brothers

4. God offers us the incredible resource of grace to enable us to forgive. What three Bible characters mentioned in this lesson had troubled pasts but became trophies of grace? Can you think of any others?

Jephthah, Rahab, and Mary Magdalene. Answers will vary.

5. Who does Scripture call "the accuser"? And what verses are given in this lesson that tell the truth of God's forgiveness? Can you think of other verses to add?

Satan is called "the accuser" (Revelation 12:10). Verses given in this lesson about God's forgiveness are Psalm 103:12, Hebrews 8:12, and 1 John 1:9.

6. What godly Christian do you look up to who had a sinful or painful past? How have you seen God's grace magnified in his or her life?

Answers will vary.

7. Has there been a sinful or painful area in your past in which you have seen God's grace sever the chains of bitterness and guilt and bring healing? Is there an area from your past that the Holy Spirit brought to mind in this lesson that still needs the touch of God's grace as you choose to release it and forgive?

Answers will vary.

8. In what ways have you already seen God fulfill the promise of Romans 8:28 in your life? What areas are you still waiting to see Him work all things together for good?

Answers will vary.

Memory Verses

PHILIPPIANS 3:13–14

13 Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before,

14 I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

choose to press on

Key Verses

PHILIPPIANS 3:13–14

- 13 *Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before,*
- 14 *I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.*

Overview

In our previous lesson, we identified our need to see our past from God’s perspective. In this chapter, we explore what God says is true concerning our present and our future potential. And we learn how His truth enables us to press on in spiritual victory.

Lesson Aim

That God would choose to bestow His love on us and that He would create a plan for our lives is a truth beyond comprehension. We can respond to His love by choosing to release our past to Him, accept the unchangeable areas of our present, and yield to His work of transforming us into His image. With His help, we can press on for His glory.

Lesson Goals

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should:

1. Understand the perfect acceptance we have with God through Christ.
2. Have a desire to press forward for the Lord by His grace and strength.
3. Commit to yielding to God's work of being transformed into Christ's image.

Teaching Outline

- I. Our Person
- II. Our Position
- III. Our Performance
 - A. Attained worth
 - B. Assault on our perspective
- IV. Our Potential
 - A. Ask for God's help
 - B. Accurately measure worth by the Bible
 - C. Apply God's Word

LESSON SEVEN

choose to press on

Text

PHILIPPIANS 3:13–14

13 Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before,

14 I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

Introduction

In our previous lesson, we identified our need to see our past from God's perspective. But not only does our past affect our self-acceptance, the present does as well. In this chapter, we'll explore what God says is true concerning our present and our future potential.

Illustration

For fifty-two years, Amy Carmichael labored as an Irish missionary in India, and much of her work was in rescuing children from the most tragic forms of slavery in Hindu temples.

When Amy herself was a little girl, she was deeply disappointed by the color of her eyes. To her, brown eyes seemed much more boring than her mother's and brother's brilliant blue eyes. So, Amy made a change in eye color a matter of special prayer.

With the sincere faith of a three-year-old, Amy explained her desire to the Lord and cheerfully went to bed, sure that Jesus would change her eye color by the next morning.

But as Amy stood in front of the mirror early the next day, she was dismayed at her reflection. Her still-brown eyes filled with tears as she assimilated her disappointment. Amy's mother assured Amy that God had chosen the best color for her eyes, but Amy was unconvinced. It was obvious to her that blue eyes were superior.

About thirty years later, with this incident long forgotten, Amy (now a missionary in India) purposed to visit a Hindu temple. She had heard stray rumors of the plight of young girls sold into human trafficking at the temples. Having great difficulty securing any real answers, Amy decided the only way to know the truth was to visit a temple herself.

Because foreigners were not allowed in the temples, Amy had to creatively disguise her identity. She wore an Indian sari and used coffee to stain her skin to match the color of a typical Indian woman. As she checked her coffee-dyeing skills in the mirror, she noticed her brown eyes. This time, tears of gratitude filled them as she realized that she could never pull off a disguise such as she was attempting if she had blue eyes. What Amy had, in her childish immaturity, wanted to change, the Lord had specially planned for her life as an enablement in ministry.

Like Amy Carmichael, we don't truly know how the present fits into the future. The things we would like to change about ourselves or our present circumstances are often the early phases of a masterpiece God is working on in our lives. This is why self-acceptance is only possible when we choose to see our lives from *God's* perspective.

I. Our Person

Many ladies have a wish list of things they would like to change about their appearance. Have you ever thought any of the following statements?

- I wish I was skinny.
- I wish I was taller.
- I wish I was prettier.
- I wish my hair wasn't so curly.
- I wish my skin was a different color.
- I wish I looked like her.

The reality is that God specially formed us in the womb to perfectly suit His masterful plan for our lives. Psalm 139 eloquently expresses this truth, especially verses 13–16.

PSALM 139:13–16

- 13 *For thou hast possessed my reins: thou hast covered me in my mother's womb.*
- 14 *I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well.*
- 15 *My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth.*
- 16 *Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them.*

These verses remind us that God not only specially designed us, but He did it with love and purpose. Many of

God's greatest servants have been those who had what we would consider defects or handicaps, yet it was their "defects" that made them dependent upon God's grace.

Moses was "slow of speech" and protested that he was thus unqualified to lead the Israelites out of Egypt (Exodus 4:10). But God promised him, "...I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say" (Exodus 4:12). Even with a speech impediment, Moses delivered the now famous message from God to Pharaoh, "Let my people go!"

Zacchaeus was short and seemingly unable to participate in welcoming Christ into his town of Jericho. Luke 19:3 tells us, "And he sought to see Jesus who he was; and could not for the press, because he was little of stature." Amazingly, it was this very handicap that gave Zacchaeus occasion to put extra effort in seeing Christ. "And he ran before, and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him..." (Luke 19:4). That day, Zacchaeus was saved, and Christ completely changed his life.

Paul felt frustrated in his ministry by a physical handicap, and he was sure that he could accomplish more for Christ without it (2 Corinthians 12:7). He asked the Lord three times to remove it, but Christ's loving response realigned Paul's perspective: "...My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

All of us have things we would change about ourselves if we were given the power, but in so doing, we would miss God's purpose for our lives. We must choose instead to trust every aspect of the unchangeable features of our lives to the Lord.

II. Our Position

It seems that deeply planted in our beliefs is the thought that we become valuable and acceptable based on what we do. We struggle to perform enough to measure up to what

Exclusive license for Aaron King Transaction: 1223348

we perceive as the standard for acceptance. These efforts, however, leave us frustrated, depleted, or prideful.

Thankfully, God has declared our worth by another standard. When we become His children by salvation, we receive assigned worth—not earned worth. Like children born into a royal family, we are not valuable because of *who* we are, but because of *whose* we are.

Illustration

From birth, Princes William and Harry of Great Britain have enjoyed a prestige and position in society that they did nothing to earn. It's simply part of their birthright. As Christians, we also have assigned worth. We, likewise, don't deserve our position of being children of the King, but we have it because it is part of our birthright.

Ephesians 1:1–12 details our position in Christ and the love that made it possible. If you struggle with self-acceptance, this is an excellent passage to commit to memory.

As long as we are trying to earn acceptance, we will never measure up, but when we realize that we are “accepted in the beloved” because of Christ's love for us, we are free to enjoy our assigned worth.

EPHESIANS 1:6

6 To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved.

III. Our Performance

We all carry an unseen, and sometimes even undefined, illusion of what we think “the perfect me” would look like. In your mind, you have a picture of how you should act and

what kind of mom, grandma, wife, friend, teacher (or any other hat you wear) you should be.

Perhaps if you were to write a description of your “perfect self” she would look similar to mine:

- She is always loving, patient, and understanding.
- She is well-organized, maintaining a perfect balance between discipline and flexibility.
- Her house is always neat and well-decorated, so she is never embarrassed if friends drop by unexpectedly.
- Her children drop whatever they are doing and obey her every request.
- She never gets angry with her children, even when they forget.
- She is serious yet lighthearted, submissive but not passive.
- She is energetic and never tired even after getting up five times during the night to tend to sick children.
- She reaches out to her neighbors and takes meals to the sick and needy.
- She looks fresh and attractive at all times.
- Her hair always does what she wants it to do, and it’s never flat.
- Her fingernails are never broken.
- She always plans healthy, balanced meals for her family and bakes everything from scratch.
- She never gets sick, lonely, or discouraged.
- She walks faithfully with God every day and studies and memorizes Scripture.
- She prays “without ceasing.”
- She is never fearful or inhibited about telling others about Christ and speaking the truth to someone who may be in error.

It was a good day for me when I defined my expectations and realized that I will never be that lady described above. To be sure, I want to grow in all of these areas, but as long as I am carrying the pressure of becoming like this person who does not exist, I'm not free to grow.

You too have probably pictured something so perfect and idyllic that it is completely unattainable. Yet every day we subconsciously judge our performance by our personal expectations and self-imposed standards. Since we cannot match those standards, our feelings of worth suffer.

Second Corinthians 10:12 warns us that when we compare ourselves to “the perfect me” or what others say, we are unwise.

2 CORINTHIANS 10:12

12 For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.

We would be wise to shed “the perfect me” and ask the Lord to continually change us into His likeness.

A. Attained worth

Do you find satisfaction in completing a task?

TEACHING TIP

Ask the ladies in your group to describe a reoccurring task that they find satisfaction in completing—perhaps cleaning or sorting a closet, catching up on the laundry, reaching a point of completion in a task at work, etc.

The Lord gives us opportunities in our Christian walk to enjoy a sense of well-doing. Although our acceptance in Him is based on the assigned worth that comes just because we belong to Him, we can increase our value as His servants when we are obedient to Him. This gives us attained worth. As we grow in obedience, we experience the God-given satisfaction of faithfully accomplishing a task and being obedient to the things of God.

We must remember, however, that our acceptance is not based on what we do—ever. It is based on who we are in Christ.

Nothing can change our position in Christ, and nothing can separate us from God's love:

ROMANS 8:38–39

38 For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come,

39 Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

B. Assault on our perspective

As we understand that our worth does not come by what we do, but by our position in Christ, there is a balancing truth we must also understand. Sin is a distorter of our perspective. In other words, we are absolutely accepted in Christ, and there is nothing that can change that. But when we sin and refuse to repent and forsake it, we will not enjoy the acceptance of Christ. In fact, we may *feel* separated from Him.

Continuous sin causes a person to focus on self, even to the point of a false humility. Some may think, “I’m no good, and God can’t use me.” But if we are too focused on self, we won’t be able to reach out and serve others. We need to ask the Holy Spirit to reveal any areas of sin, confess our sin, and then do something for the Lord.

IV. Our Potential

One of Satan’s favorite tactics is to make us feel hopeless about the future. He reminds us of our past and suggests that we are *unable* to change. But even when it seems that there is no hope for change or improvement in sight, with Christ’s help, there is *always* hope.

LUKE 1:37

37 For with God nothing shall be impossible.

With God’s help, each of us can overcome failure—past and present. As we release our past to the Lord and submit our present to His control, the potential for the future is tremendous!

Often we become discouraged when we expect the change to come overnight. Lasting change is rarely instant, so be patient, and continue to seek the Lord. As the Chinese proverb reminds us, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”

So, what’s our first step?

A. *Ask for God’s help*

Although nothing is impossible with God (Luke 1:37), no spiritual fruit is possible without God.

JOHN 15:5

5 *I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.*

Too often we attempt change in our own strength, and we fail miserably. How much better it would be to answer the invitation of Jeremiah 33:3.

JEREMIAH 33:3

3 *Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and shew thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not.*

B. Accurately measure worth by the Bible

We've already seen that God says we are valuable because of whose we are and not because of what we do. Yet our tendency is still to measure our worth by what we do. Breaking this pattern boils down to a personal choice. We must choose to believe that what God says about our worth is true.

Luke 13:11–13 tells of a woman who had been physically deformed for eighteen years. She was so crippled that she was “bowed together,” unable to straighten her body for normal activity. When Jesus healed her, He said, “Woman, thou art loosed from thine infirmity.” This woman could have doubted Christ and remained “bowed together” for the rest of her life, even though she was healed. But she chose instead to believe what Christ said was true, and “immediately she was made straight.”

LUKE 13:11–13

11 *And, behold, there was a woman which had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and was bowed together, and could in no wise lift up herself.*

12 *And when Jesus saw her, he called her to him, and said unto her, Woman, thou art loosed from thine infirmity.*

13 *And he laid his hands on her: and immediately she was made straight, and glorified God.*

We can spend our lives believing the lies that we will never change and that we aren't acceptable to God. Or we can take God at His Word and claim His promises by faith.

A key step to being able to believe what God says about your worth is actually knowing what He says! Mark verses in your Bible and secure them in your heart through memory. This way, when the devil tries to make you feel unacceptable, you can defeat him with Scripture.

TEACHING TIP

References for some excellent verses to encourage your students to begin memorizing are listed in the conclusion to this lesson.

C. Apply God's Word

This final step is the true decision point. To see our potential from God's perspective, we must be willing to apply His Word to our lives. This is where our steps require the action of obedience.

Someone once said, "The Christian world is suffering from a deficiency in vitamin A—application." We can *know* God's truth, but we must choose to *obey* God's truth. Commitment was never meant to be separated from action.

Conclusion

Once again, we see that our growth boils down to a choice. We must choose to apply God's Word regardless of what our feelings tell us. Choosing to press on for Christ is not a one-time decision but a daily commitment to apply truth.

Below are ten statements that affirm the truths we've covered in this chapter. Perhaps it would be helpful for you to review them daily until these principles become ingrained in your soul. Reading each statement out loud can help reinforce the choice to believe it in your own mind.

- God created me, and even before I was born God supervised my total development (Psalm 139).
- God is presently working in me to make me like Christ (Romans 8:28–30).
- I will be patient with myself. God has entrusted me with the potential, gifts, talents, and personality to do His perfect will (Philippians 1:6).
- I will trust that God will continue to equip me to do His will (Philippians 2:13). Whom God calls, He qualifies.
- I will set out to improve the changeable areas as God gives me insight and power (Philippians 4:13). I will seek to fulfill my potential by setting goals for myself.
- I will not use my background or lack of abilities as an excuse for sin or lack of progress in my life (Philippians 3:13–14).
- I will daily confess and forsake sin and seek cleansing through the Word (1 John 1:9).
- I will accept myself as a special person created to fulfill a unique purpose (Psalm 139:14–16). I will believe God's estimate of me. He loved me enough to send His dearest treasure, Jesus, to die for me

(John 3:16). This act alone is a statement that God believes I'm a worthwhile person.

- I will reach out to other people, remembering that they, too, are special and worthy of love (Philippians 2:3–4).
- I will remember it is not *who* I am but *whose* I am that determines my value (Ephesians 2:10).

That God would choose to bestow His love on us and that He would create a plan for our lives is a truth beyond comprehension. We can respond to His love by choosing to release our past to Him, accept the unchangeable areas of our present, and yield to His work of transforming us into His image. With His help, we can press on for His glory.

Study Questions

1. What four areas are given in this lesson in which we need to choose to press on?
Our person, our position, our performance, and our potential.
2. What three Bible characters are mentioned in this lesson who had some kind of “defect” that made them dependent upon God’s grace?
Moses, Zacchaeus, and Paul
3. Is there something about your person—your appearance—that you have wished you could change, but now see that you need to trust to the Lord? Have you already seen how God has specially used, for His glory, a feature or “handicap” that you would have created differently?
Answers will vary.
4. What verse teaches us that we do not need to *earn* God’s acceptance, but are simply accepted by our position in Christ?
Ephesians 1:6
5. All of us tend to look for acceptance based on what we do instead of on God’s love. In what areas do you most notice this tendency in yourself?
Answers will vary.

6. Is there a task the Lord has clearly given you to do that you are experiencing the joy of obedience in performing?

Answers will vary.

7. What verse teaches us that there is *always* hope for change in our lives with Christ's help?

Luke 1:37

8. The conclusion to this lesson listed ten statements affirming the truths we studied in this lesson. Which three truths and their corresponding Scripture verses do you most need to focus on this week?

Answers will vary.

Memory Verses

PHILIPPIANS 3:13–14

13 *Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before,*

14 *I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.*

LESSON EIGHT

choose to be joyful

Key Verses

JOHN 15:11

11 These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full.

PHILIPPIANS 4:8

8 Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

Overview

Our circumstances are constantly changing; yet, Christ desires to give us full and constant joy. This is only possible, however, as we deliberately choose joy. Circumstances change and feelings fluctuate, but the mind that is stayed on Christ can know continual joy. To rejoice is a choice!

Lesson Aim

Everyone who has trusted Christ has the privilege of experiencing full joy. Yet, so few Christians take advantage of this privilege. Why are so many Christians unhappy, disappointed, and miserable, when they could be experiencing Christian joy? In this lesson, we discover how

we can choose joy regardless of the circumstances as well as seven reasons we can continually rejoice.

Lesson Goals

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should:

1. Understand the difference between happiness and joy.
2. Recognize that rejoicing is a choice of the will and identify reasons for joy.
3. Purpose to develop a single mind that rejoices in the furtherance of the Gospel.

Teaching Outline

- I. The Thief of Joy
- II. A Choice for Joy
 - A. Discovering the secret
 - B. Developing a single mind
- III. Reasons for Joy
 - A. Personal relationship with Christ
 - B. Position as servants
 - C. Pleasant memories of people
 - D. Perfect confidence in God's plan
 - E. Precious friends
 - F. Pioneers of the Gospel
 - G. Privilege of seeing Christ magnified

LESSON EIGHT

choose to be joyful

Text

PHILIPPIANS 1:1–8, 12, 20–21

1 *Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:*

2 *Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ.*

3 *I thank my God upon every remembrance of you,*

4 *Always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy,*

5 *For your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now;*

6 *Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ:*

7 *Even as it is meet for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart; inasmuch as both in my bonds, and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel, ye all are partakers of my grace.*

8 *For God is my record, how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ.*

12 *But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel;*

20 *According to my earnest expectation and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but that with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death.*

21 *For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*

Introduction

I can't think of a better description of the Christian life than that found in Deuteronomy 11:11.

DEUTERONOMY 11:11

11 *But the land...is a land of hills and valleys....*

Isn't this a similar picture of our lives? The topography of our circumstances rises and falls in "hills and valleys": A child does well in school—hill. The car breaks down—valley. Your husband surprises you with a date night—mountain! You learn you have a chronic illness—dark valley.

Up and down, constantly shifting—our circumstantial paths are far from smooth. Sometimes, we even have hills and valleys at the same time, as we experience joy in one area and sorrow in another. Other times, we feel completely swallowed up in a storm-swept valley. Divorce, miscarriage, financial crises, wayward children, torn relationships, physical pain—all of these can leave us feeling overwhelmed and helpless.

Thankfully, God is a God of the hills *and* the valleys (1 Kings 20:28), and He is a very present help in whatever circumstances we face (Psalm 46:1).

1 KINGS 20:28

28 And there came a man of God, and spake unto the king of Israel, and said, Thus saith the LORD, Because the Syrians have said, The LORD is God of the hills, but he is not God of the valleys, therefore will I deliver all this great multitude into thine hand, and ye shall know that I am the LORD.

PSALM 46:1

1 God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Because of the Lord's presence, we can experience constant joy in changing circumstances.

PSALM 16:11

11 Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.

Even in the ups and downs of life, we can know full joy when we are living in the presence of God.

Just before Jesus went to the Cross, He explained to His disciples that He wanted them to live with His joy.

JOHN 15:11

11 These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full.

The path ahead for the disciples was steep. In the next several hours, their Master would be crucified, and they would be scattered. Over the next years, they were to face their own torture and persecution as they preached the message of the Gospel. And what did Jesus tell them before any of this took place? Right before the most tragic experiences of their

lives would begin to unfold, Jesus told them they could know His constant, remaining joy—full joy.

Everyone who has trusted Christ has the privilege of experiencing full joy. Yet, so few Christians take advantage of this privilege. Why are so many Christians unhappy, disappointed, and miserable, when they could be experiencing Christian joy?

Where is the disconnect between Christ’s promise and our experience?

I. **The Thief of Joy**

The number one thief of joy is circumstances. It’s the unplanned, unexplainable, and unchangeable things that cross our paths. We’re not ready or willing for them, and they easily steal our joy. Most of us will agree that when things are going “our way” we feel a lot happier, and we are much easier to live with. But our happiness quickly fades when things go wrong.

This is a problem, since very few of the circumstances of life are under our control. We have no control over the weather, the traffic, the price of food, or how people respond to us. We have little or limited control over our finances, accidents, or our family’s health.

If our joy depends upon circumstances, and if we can do little or nothing to control those circumstances, we will be miserable most of the time! We must learn to capture this thief by *choosing* joy.

You must understand that happiness is based on what *happens* to you, and it depends on external circumstances that are often beyond your control. Joy, on the other hand, is based on what is in your heart, and Jesus promised us that our joy can remain constant regardless of surrounding circumstances.

JOHN 16:22

22 ...*your joy no man taketh from you.*

JOHN 17:13

13 *And now come I to thee; and these things I speak in the world, that they might have my joy fulfilled in themselves.*

TEACHING TIP

Share with your class a recent experience in which everything seemed to go against you, and yet you were able to remain joyful. This may have been as simple as a really bad day, or it may be a time of a difficult trial in your life. Use this story to reinforce the truth that a person can have joy even when circumstances go haywire. (Alternately, you could share the example of another person you have watched remain joyful through difficult days.)

D.L. Moody wrote, “Happiness is caused by things that happen around me, and circumstances will mar it; but joy flows right on through trouble; joy flows on through the dark; joy flows in the night as well as in the day; joy flows all through persecution and opposition. It is an unceasing fountain bubbling up in the heart; a secret spring the world can’t see and doesn’t know anything about. The Lord gives his people perpetual joy when they walk in obedience to him.”

II. A Choice for Joy

If you knew you were receiving a letter from an unjustly incarcerated man, what would you expect to read? Frustration? Anger? Gloom?

The book of Philippians actually *is* such a letter—a prison epistle. The Apostle Paul penned this letter from the recesses of a Roman prison. While we would expect the letter to be sad and gloomy—or at least mournfully resigned—it’s not. The book of Philippians is even known as “the epistle of joy.” In these four short chapters, Paul mentions *joy*, *rejoicing*, or *gladness* no less than nineteen times!

PHILIPPIANS 1:25

25 *And having this confidence, I know that I shall abide and continue with you all for your furtherance and joy of faith;*

PHILIPPIANS 2:17

17 *Yea, and if I be offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy, and rejoice with you all.*

A. Discovering the secret

So what was Paul’s secret? How could he maintain a positive outlook and even mentor others in joyfulness while he was enduring such difficult circumstances? I believe the answer is found in another oft-repeated word in Philippians—*mind*. Paul used *mind*, *think*, and *remember* at least sixteen times in this epistle.

What do we learn from this? The secret of Christian joy is found in the way the believer thinks—her mindset. You can’t always choose what happens to you, but you can always choose how you will shape your mindset.

PHILIPPIANS 4:8

8 *Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.*

In the book of Philippians, Paul describes an attitude of mind that will produce joy regardless of surrounding circumstances. This short epistle has much to teach on how we can cultivate the right kind of mind.

B. Developing a single mind

In Philippians 1, Paul discusses his difficult circumstances and faces them honestly. But he looks at them from a completely different perspective than most of us would. Rather than looking at the circumstances in themselves, he looks at them in relationship to Jesus Christ.

Paul's greatest passion was to know and serve the Lord. Thus, every circumstance he faced was viewed by how it could be used to accomplish his goal. Prison, hunger, loneliness, unjust treatment, fear, uncertainty—none of these things could rob Paul's joy, because he was not living to enjoy circumstances. He was living to serve Jesus Christ. When we look at our circumstances through Christ, everything changes.

For instance, Paul referred to the chains he wore, not as heavy restrictions, but as “my bonds in Christ.”

PHILIPPIANS 1:13

13 So that my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace, and in all other places;

Paul did not see himself as facing an unjust civil trial but as being “set for the defense of the gospel.”

PHILIPPIANS 1:17

17 ... knowing that I am set for the defence of the gospel.

He even went so far as to explain his adverse circumstances as ultimately good because they

encouraged the furtherance of the Gospel. Paul truly was a single-minded Christian!

PHILIPPIANS 1:12

12 But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel;

Joy is a matter of choice. It is a positive mindset we choose to embrace and express. It does not come from our circumstances; it comes as we choose to see our circumstances in relation to Christ.

Illustration

Our response to our circumstances can be likened to that of a sailor's response to the wind. The following poem describes this truth:

One ship sails east;
One ship sails west.
Regardless of how the winds blow,
It is the set of the sail—
And not the gale—
That determines the way we go!

Two people can experience the same circumstances, but their emotions can be on opposite spectrums.

III. Reasons for Joy

Since joy is determined by the mindset we choose, what is it that we should focus our minds on during difficult circumstances? The answer is found in the book of

Philippians. Notice what Paul decided to think about as he penned this epistle.

A. Personal relationship with Christ

The very foundation of our joy is that we know Christ. Paul's opening words in Philippians affirmed his relationship with Christ as well as reminded his readers in the Philippian church of their relationship with Christ.

PHILIPPIANS 1:1

1 Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi...

Regardless of the ebb and flow of earthly circumstances, we can rejoice in knowing that we have a secure home in Heaven and an eternal future greater than any of us could plan.

And yet, our relationship with Christ gives us *so much more* than a home in Heaven. It gives us direct access to our Heavenly Father and the privilege of an ongoing and ever-growing relationship with Christ Himself. In fact, Jesus pointed to this as the best part of the eternal life He gave us at salvation.

JOHN 17:3

3 And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.

David enjoyed an intimate relationship with the Lord, so much so that God called him “a man after his own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14). Although David faced a myriad of overwhelming circumstances, he consistently found great joy in God's salvation. Throughout the psalms, he often came back to this as a cause for rejoicing.

PSALM 21:1

1 The king shall joy in thy strength, O LORD; and in thy salvation how greatly shall he rejoice!

PSALM 9:14

14 ...I will rejoice in thy salvation.

PSALM 51:12

12 Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit.

The prophet Habakkuk also made a choice to rejoice in his relationship with the Lord—even when circumstances were bleak and, humanly speaking, hopeless.

HABAKKUK 3:17–18

17 Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls:

18 Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation.

Sometimes we just need to refocus our attention from our circumstances to the blessing of knowing the Lord. We need to choose to remember the privileges we have in Christ.

B. Position as servants

At first thought, the position of a servant may not seem to you a very good reason to rejoice! But that would depend on whom you had the opportunity to serve. For instance, those who serve in the White House as the president's aides, count it an honor to serve!

This was how Paul felt about the opportunity to serve the Lord. In Philippians 1:1, he focused on his special position.

PHILIPPIANS 1:1

1 *Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ...*

Serving Jesus was a privilege to Paul! Through years of ministry, Paul faced many difficulties (including hunger, shipwreck, beatings, and imprisonment), but even these he endured cheerfully, because he chose to remember that serving Christ is an honor. In Acts 20:24, Paul shared his view on the difficulties.

ACTS 20:24

24 *But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God.*

This position, when faithfully fulfilled, also gives us the incredible opportunity to one day experience the joy of hearing words of praise from the Lord Himself.

MATTHEW 25:21

21 *... Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.*

C. Pleasant memories of people

As Paul suffered in prison, he turned his mind and prayers toward those he had previously led to Christ and then disciplined. As he purposefully filled his thoughts with the memories of their fellowship, his soul was filled with joy.

PHILIPPIANS 1:3–5

- 3 *I thank my God upon every remembrance of you,*
4 *Always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy,*
5 *For your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now.*

We all have memories. We can draw from our memory bank sorrowful memories or joyous ones, and we need to *choose* to cherish the pleasant, wholesome memories of people we love.

Do you remember the person who led you to Christ? Do you remember someone who has had a positive spiritual influence in your life? Do you remember someone you've led to the Lord or been able to disciple and teach?

TEACHING TIP

Perhaps you could share a brief memory of the people mentioned in the paragraph above. Also, if time permits, you could ask your class to share some of their pleasant memories of people who have had a positive spiritual influence in their lives.

Take time to remember. And take time to *make* a memory when you cross the path of another. Develop and cultivate the kind of fellowship Paul enjoyed with the Christians from Philippi. Then, even when adverse circumstances threaten to overwhelm you, you can draw pleasant memories of joy from your memory bank.

D. Perfect confidence in God's plan

Choosing to focus our minds on the confidence we can have in God's plan for our lives is major! So much of our mental and emotional energy is wasted on worry, doubt, and fear.

Paul had every reason to feel concern over his own situation and that of the Christians in Philippi. For himself, Paul did not yet know if he would be freed or condemned to death. Yet, his confidence in God's ability to perform His will was so great that he dismissed the worry entirely, reminding his readers that Christ would be magnified either way.

PHILIPPIANS 1:20

20 According to my earnest expectation and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but that with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death.

Paul could have also felt great concern for the Christians in Philippi. If he were condemned to death, who would fill his place in their lives? Who would love, care for, and instruct them as he would? Instead of worrying, however, Paul chose to put his confidence in God's work in the lives of those he loved.

PHILIPPIANS 1:6

6 Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ:

What emotional freedom we give ourselves when we choose to place our confidence in God and remember His promises! One of my favorite promises which settles my spirit during times of unrest is Proverbs 3:5–6.

PROVERBS 3:5–6

5 *Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.*

6 *In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.*

Just quoting these words is like pouring a soothing balm on my troubled soul. Joy is a deep, settled confidence that God is in control in every area of my life.

E. Precious friends

I don't think of a prison cell as the most socially stimulating environment, but even in the loneliness of isolation, Paul rejoiced in the friends God had given him.

PHILIPPIANS 1:7–8

7 *...I have you in my heart; inasmuch as both in my bonds, and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel, ye all are partakers of my grace.*

8 *For God is my record, how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ.*

Paul nurtured spiritually enriching friendships everywhere he traveled. In Corinth, the Lord gave him Aquila and Priscilla. In Lystra, he began a mentoring relationship with Timothy. From the outset of his ministry, Paul traveled with Barnabas, and later he took Silas for his traveling companion.

Relationships such as these are treasures. But these types of relationships cannot be developed in the midst of the all-too-common sins of women—sins such as envy, gossip, and criticism. Spiritually enriching relationships thrive only where ladies desire to work together for the cause of Christ. As you share a common heart for the

Lord and common goal to see His work accomplished with other ladies, you will find common fellowship.

F. Pioneers of the Gospel

More than anything, Paul's desire was to preach the Gospel in Rome. Rome was the hub of the great Empire and the key city of its day. From Corinth Paul wrote of his great desire to preach the Gospel in Rome.

ROMANS 1:15

15 So, as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also.

Originally, Paul wanted to go to Rome as a preacher; but instead he went as a prisoner. This was obviously not the plan Paul had in mind. Yet, sitting in a Roman prison, Paul wrote a letter to encourage Christians to rejoice in the Lord. How could this be possible?

In Philippians 1:12, Paul rejoiced in the fact that his circumstances, unplanned and unpleasant as they were, actually *furthered* the Gospel.

PHILIPPIANS 1:12

12 But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel.

The word *furtherance* in this verse was a Greek military term referring to a “pioneer advance.” It described those who went ahead of the troops to open the way into new territory. We so often allow troublesome circumstances to keep us from advancing in our Christian life, especially in spreading the Gospel. But sometimes God arranges circumstances to allow us to pioneer new areas of ministry.

TEACHING TIP

Share a personal illustration of a circumstance that started as a troubling or odd situation that turned out to be a tool to witness to someone who needed the Lord.

Paul endeavored to see *every* difficult situation in this light. From the very beginning, Paul’s ministry in Philippi had been full of unpleasant circumstances—including a public beating and a dungeon imprisonment (Acts 16). And what did Paul and Silas do? They rejoiced—holding a midnight prayer meeting and singing praises to the Lord. As a result, the jailer was saved, and a church was planted in this city.

As Paul wrote the epistle of Philippians years later, he hadn’t lost his “choice to rejoice.” He still viewed the discomfort of his circumstances as special tools in God’s hand to further the Gospel.

While our chains may not be as dramatic or difficult as Paul’s, God can use any difficulty we surrender to Him. The secret is this: you must look upon your circumstances as God-given opportunities for the furtherance of the Gospel. You must choose to rejoice at what God is going to do, instead of complaining about what God did not do.

LUKE 15:10

10 Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.

If the angels rejoice over someone being saved, how much more should *we* rejoice in the opportunity to have a part in leading that sinner to Christ, even if that opportunity is made possible by “chains”?

G. Privilege of seeing Christ magnified

Troublesome circumstances provide another opportunity—that of magnifying Christ.

PHILIPPIANS 1:20–21

20 According to my earnest expectation and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but that with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death.

21 For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

Have you ever wondered what Paul meant when he expressed his desire to see Christ magnified in his body? After all, Christ is already infinitely bigger than we are. How can we magnify Him?

Perhaps this analogy will be helpful: Our role in magnifying Christ is similar to that of a telescope in helping us see the stars. Although the stars are infinitely larger than the telescope, the telescope magnifies them—not by making them bigger, but by bringing them closer for observation.

This is what we as believers are to do—bring Jesus close to others. Many people think of Jesus as a myth. Others think of Him only as a mere human who lived centuries ago and has no bearing on our lives today. But let an unsaved person watch a believer endure a crisis with joy and hope, and that unsaved person can see Jesus magnified—brought close to their life.

For those of us who know and love the Lord, understanding that trials are an opportunity to magnify Him through our lives transforms adversity into a privilege of joy.

Conclusion

In our home, a simple instrument is mounted on the wall in our hallway. It's called a thermostat. With the ease of pushing a button, we can raise or lower the temperature in our home, and the thermostat regulates it to our comfort.

In another room we have a different instrument. This one is called a thermometer. If we are too hot, we can take a look at the thermometer and know just how hot we are. If we're not feeling well, we can use another thermometer to help us identify if we have a fever, which indicates infection. But unlike the thermostat, the thermometer does nothing to change the temperature; it merely reports it as it is.

Without the special enabling of God, we are all like the thermometer. Our actions and reactions merely reflect our surrounding circumstances. Our responses rise and fall according to our emotional climate.

By deliberately choosing joy, however, we can be thermostats—literally adjusting our emotions to match the promises of God and the privilege we have to serve Him and pioneer the wonderful news of the Gospel.

Circumstances change and feelings fluctuate, but the mind that is stayed on Christ can know continual joy. To rejoice is a choice!

Study Questions

1. What is the privilege that every child of God has, yet so few take advantage of?
Experiencing fullness of joy
2. What is the number one thief of joy?
Our circumstances
3. What is the difference between happiness and joy?
Happiness is based on what happens to you; joy is based on what is in your heart.
4. What is the secret of Christian joy?
The secret of Christian joy is found in the way the believer thinks—her mindset.
5. Is there a reoccurring situation or burden that continually attempts to steal your joy? What truths from Philippians 1 could you have ready to meditate on and rejoice in next time that situation arises?
Answers will vary.
6. One of the best reasons Christians have for rejoicing is our relationship with Christ. Describe when you trusted Christ as your Saviour, and write down several attributes of Christ in which you can rejoice.
Answers will vary.

7. Have you ever wondered why God put you in a circumstance, place, or position that you would never have chosen for yourself, and then later realized it was so someone could be saved? If so, describe that situation.
Answers will vary.
8. As a general rule, would you say that you are more of a thermometer or a thermostat for those around you—at home, work, church, school?
Answers will vary.

Memory Verses

JOHN 15:11

11 These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full.

PHILIPPIANS 4:8

8 Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

LESSON NINE

choose to be strong

Key Verses

1 PETER 1:6–7

6 *Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations:*

7 *That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ:*

Overview

The Christian life is not free of trials. In fact, God actually uses the difficult times in our lives to mature our faith and give us greater strength in Him. The Lord uses trials as a furnace to refine us. In the furnace of affliction, God purifies our faith so we can one day present it to the Lord, untarnished and sparkling with His glory.

Lesson Aim

Many ladies who are in the midst of a trial tighten their jaw in resolve and, through gritted teeth, say, “I just have to be strong.” Yet, God doesn’t call on us to pull strength from ourselves during trials. Trials themselves, in fact, reveal just how small our reserves of strength actually are. God offers to give us His strength through the fire. Choosing

strength is simply a matter of choosing to receive the gift of God's strength.

Lesson Goals

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should:

1. Understand that trials and difficulties are part of the Christian life.
2. Believe that God wants to work good in their lives through the hard times.
3. Choose to experience victory through the trials by knowing and claiming God's promises.

Teaching Outline

- I. Bible Truths about Trials
 - A. Remember it won't last forever.
 - B. Acknowledge the pain to God.
 - C. Trust the Father's filter.
- II. God's Work through Trials
 - A. He draws us back to Him.
 - B. He prepares us for spiritual growth.
 - C. He purifies us.
 - D. He gives us the opportunity to comfort others.
 - E. He lets us point others to Him.
- III. Our Response to Trials
 - A. Don't resist.
 - B. Read God's Word.
 - C. Rejoice.
 - D. Wait on the Lord.

LESSON NINE

choose to be strong

Text

1 PETER 1:6–7

6 *Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations:*

7 *That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ:*

Introduction

As wonderful as the Christian life is, it is not free of trials. In fact, God actually uses the difficult times in our lives to mature our faith and give us greater strength in Him.

Sometimes our difficulties are simply a piling up of annoyances and what would individually be petty

frustrations. Sometimes our problems are overwhelming seasons of heartache and loss. But in every adversity, God can give us victory and growth *through* the trials. In the middle of a trial, we usually just want relief—we want it to end. But God desires to give us something much greater than relief—He wants to give us *victory*.

The Lord uses trials as a furnace to refine us.

TEACHING TIP

If you have a wedding ring or another piece of gold jewelry, bring it to class. Point out that long before the gold was shaped into the jewelry it was embedded in the depths of a mine, mingled with dirt, rocks, and other metals. It wasn't until it was put through the fiery refining process that it could be transformed to a sparkling piece of jewelry.

In the furnace of affliction, God purifies our faith so we can one day present it to the Lord, untarnished and sparkling with His glory.

1 PETER 1:6–7

6 *Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations:*

7 *That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.*

But as glorious as the finished product may be, the process is often quite painful. Sometimes we feel as if we won't make it through. It seems as if the very fires that are meant to consume the impurities in our faith are actually going to consume *us*.

This is why in God’s infinite grace, He offers us the strength to emerge from the refiner’s fire victorious.

ISAIAH 41:10

10 Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness.

I’ve seen many ladies who are in the midst of a trial tighten their jaw in resolve and, through gritted teeth, say, “I just have to be strong.” Yet, God doesn’t call on us to pull strength from ourselves during trials. Trials themselves, in fact, reveal just how small our reserves of strength actually are.

God offers to give us *His* strength through the fire. Our hearts melt in the flames, but God’s strength is sustaining.

PSALM 73:26

26 My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.

Yes, trials will come. And yes, we must choose strength if we will emerge from the furnace with purified faith. But choosing strength is simply a matter of choosing to receive the gift of *God’s* strength.

I. Bible Truths about Trials

The book of 1 Peter was written to Christians in the fiery furnace of persecution. Their homes were taken from them; they were beaten, imprisoned, and falsely accused. Some were killed. Peter wrote to this group of suffering believers to encourage them to choose God’s strength.

Just a few verses into this epistle, Peter penned words of great encouragement to these believers.

1 PETER 1:6–7

6 *Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations:*

7 *That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ:*

From these verses, we notice a few specific truths we should embrace when we consider trials.

A. Remember it won't last forever.

I love the phrase in 1 Peter 1:6, “for a season.” Trials don’t last forever. They have limits imposed by God and will eventually end. When God permits His children to go through the furnace, He keeps His eye on the clock and His hand on the thermostat.

PSALM 30:5

5 *...weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.*

For some of the Christians receiving Peter’s letter, their season of trial didn’t end until they were martyred. Yet, even for them, the trial was only for a season. When it ended, they were ushered into the brilliant glory of Christ’s presence.

At the longest, a trial can only last until the end of our lives, which, in comparison to eternity, is almost nothing.

2 CORINTHIANS 4:17–18

17 *For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory;*

18 *While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.*

B. Acknowledge the pain to God.

Peter didn't hesitate to describe the "heaviness through manifold temptations" his readers were facing. He didn't trivialize it either, as he likened it to the process of gold in a fiery furnace.

In our own false impression of the strength we think God wants us to have in trials, we sometimes fear to acknowledge the pain we are going through. It's okay to hurt when you are going through a trial. And it's important to take that hurt to the Lord.

David didn't sugar-coat his pleas for God's help when he was going through difficulties. The psalms are full of raw expressions of emotion as David cried out to God in pain.

PSALM 13:1–2A

- 1 *How long wilt thou forget me, O LORD? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me?*
- 2 *How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily?*

PSALM 28:1–2

- 1 *Unto thee will I cry, O LORD my rock; be not silent to me: lest, if thou be silent to me, I become like them that go down into the pit.*
- 2 *Hear the voice of my supplications, when I cry unto thee, when I lift up my hands toward thy holy oracle.*

PSALM 69:1–3

- 1 *Save me, O God; for the waters are come in unto my soul.*

2 *I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me.*

3 *I am weary of my crying: my throat is dried: mine eyes fail while I wait for my God.*

Yes, when trials come, we want to choose strength, but we will never find that strength within ourselves. The purpose of trials is not to toughen us, but to make us tender to the Lord. We want to choose *God's* strength, and that comes by acknowledging our pain, calling out to God for help, and trusting in His faithfulness.

PSALM 46:1

1 *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*

C. Trust the Father's filter.

One of my favorite statements concerning trials is, "Every trial is Father-filtered." This doesn't mean that God *originates* every trial in our lives, but that He *filters* them, allowing only that which, as a loving Father, He will sustain us through.

For instance, God does not create fathers to be alcoholics and to abuse their families. Some chose the addiction of alcohol, and their families pay many of the consequences. Yet even that pain God can—and does—use for good.

I truly believe there is nothing in my life that God did not allow. Reading Job 1 makes it very clear that anything that comes our way must first pass through the permission of God.

JOB 1:9–10, 12

9 *Then Satan answered the LORD, and said, Doth Job fear God for nought?*

10 *Hast not thou made an hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side? thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land.*

12 *And the LORD said unto Satan, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand. So Satan went forth from the presence of the LORD.*

Every trial in our lives is examined by God, and He never allows more than He gives us the strength to bear.

First Peter 1:6 indicates that there are times when God knows we actually *need* to go through trials, as it says, “...if need be ye are in heaviness....” We never think we *need* a trial, but neither did my children think they needed to go to school or struggle through grueling sports practices. We must trust that our Father knows best.

Illustration

Many years ago, a woman was traveling with her baby across Western Montana in a stage coach. The weather was bitter cold, and, in spite of all the driver could do to protect her, he saw that the mother was becoming unconscious from the cold. He stopped the coach, took the baby, and wrapping it warmly, put it under the seat. He then seized the mother by the arm, and dragged her out upon the ground and drove away, leaving her in the road. As she saw him drive away, she ran after him, crying for her baby. When he felt sure that she had run long enough to raise her body temperature, he allowed her to overtake the coach and resume her place by her baby.

Exclusive license for Aaron King Transaction: 1223348

Although the driver's actions must have seemed cruel to the woman at that moment, he actually saved her life. Similarly, God sometimes knows we need a trial to protect us from spiritual lifelessness and apathy and to stir our hearts into vibrancy.

I don't know what trial you may be going through. In fact, I hope you're not going through one at all—*unless* you *need* one. And in that case, I hope you are. I don't like trials any more than the next person, but I've learned that they help me in ways I could never accomplish on my own.

II. God's Work through Trials

When we are in the midst of a trial, it is comforting to remember that God is doing far more in our lives than we can see. Let's look at just a few ways God works through trials.

A. *He draws us back to Him.*

We all have times when our love for the Lord cools and our zeal for Him wanes. Trials have a way of turning our hearts toward the Lord as we cry out to Him in simple dependence.

PSALM 119:67

67 Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word.

B. *He prepares us for spiritual growth.*

Like the April showers that bring May flowers, stormy situations in our lives prepare us for spiritual growth. As

much as we'd like to skip the storms and still have the roses, it just isn't possible.

Illustration

Author Franklin Elmer, Jr. once described a place in Northern Chile where it almost never rains, “Morning after morning the sun rises brilliantly over the tall mountains to the east; each noon it shines brightly down from overhead; evening brings a picturesque sunset. Although storms are often seen raging high in the mountains, as heavy fog banks are observed far out over the sea, the sun continues to shine on this favored and protected strip of land. One would imagine this area to be an earthly paradise; but it is not. Instead, it is a sterile and desolate desert! There are no streams of water, and nothing grows there.”

Just as the soil needs rain to support growth, so we need storms in our lives to help us grow in the Lord. Without question, the greatest times of growth in my life have been during trials.

C. He purifies us.

The Bible speaks of the refining process of silver. Even so, the Lord uses the difficult times in our lives to purify our hearts.

PROVERBS 25:4

4 Take away the dross from the silver, and there shall come forth a vessel for the finer.

Malachi 3:3 gives us a glimpse of the Lord carefully monitoring the furnace during the trials.

MALACHI 3:3

3 *And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness.*

In the furnace of trials, selfish motives and hidden agendas surface in our lives. The strain of the trial has a way of bringing out all that is self-centered and self-seeking. Although this process is humbling, it is truly a blessing in disguise, for it allows us to see ourselves as we really are. We can then seek God's forgiveness and help.

Some trials we encounter are actually caused by the Lord's chastening hand of correction in our lives. But even this is evidence of God's love for us.

HEBREWS 12:10–11

10 *For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness.*

11 *Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.*

D. He gives us the opportunity to comfort others.

Have you ever been going through a trial and wished for a listening ear of someone who could understand what you were going through? When we go through trials, God gives us the opportunity to *become* that someone for others. As we receive God's comfort, we are made better comforters.

Paul reminded the Corinthian church that the difficulties they were enduring and the comfort from God they were receiving would enhance their ministry as comforters.

2 CORINTHIANS 1:4

4 *Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.*

E. He lets us point others to Him.

The classic “furnace story” in the Bible is that of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Daniel 3 tells the story of these three Hebrew young men who were put in a literal fiery furnace because they refused to worship a false Babylonian idol. God miraculously protected them in the fire with His very presence, and, as a result, the pagan king who had ordered their execution was pointed to God. He even made a decree that no one could speak a word against the God of these three Hebrews.

DANIEL 3:29

29 *...That every people, nation, and language, which speak any thing amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made a dunghill: because there is no other God that can deliver after this sort.*

Only God can take something difficult and use it to accomplish such good in our lives and, through us, in the lives of others!

III. Our Response to Trials

What God desires to do in our lives through trials doesn’t “just happen.” It requires a choice on our part to receive His strength. Without God strengthening our faith through the

trials, we will melt in self-pity and emerge from the furnace with our emotions charred by bitterness.

Paul ministered for years with a “thorn in the flesh,” which was likely a physical infirmity. After he asked the Lord three times to remove it, the Lord told him that the thorn provided a special opportunity for Paul to know God’s strength.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:9A

9 And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.

Paul then had a choice. He could spend his energy wishing for a healing that God had decided not to give, or he could embrace what God allowed and rejoice in the strength God provided. He chose strength.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:9B–10

9 Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

How should we respond when a trial comes into our lives? We should choose strength! But, from a practical standpoint, just how do we choose victory through God’s strength?

A. Don’t resist.

One of the easiest—and worst—responses to a trial is to expend our energy trying to escape. But if we could escape, we would miss what God is doing in our lives.

Ruth 1 tells the tragic story of Elimelech and Naomi’s escape from the trial they were in. Israel was

held by a famine, and this couple decided to head to the country of Moab, where there was food. The only problem was that they didn't seek the Lord's will before making their decision. In Moab, they may have found bread, but they lost their walk with God. Both of their sons married heathen women, and then all three of the men in the family died. Naomi was left as a widow in a foreign country.

RUTH 1:1, 5

1 Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehemjudah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he, and his wife, and his two sons.

5 And Mahlon and Chilion died also both of them; and the woman was left of her two sons and her husband.

I wonder what blessings of provision God may have given Elimelech and Naomi had they simply remained in Israel. Surely He could have provided for them! The famine would have passed eventually, and their sons would have been strengthened in their faith.

The book of Ruth tells the beautiful story of God's care and provision even in the aftermath of wrong choices. Yet, when we make running from a difficulty a greater focus than asking God what He wants to teach us through it, we cause ourselves more harm than we could have imagined.

B. Read God's Word.

Perhaps nothing becomes more precious to us in times of trial than God's Word. As we are being purified in the furnace, we can draw strength, hope, and comfort from the pages of Scripture.

PSALM 12:6

6 *The words of the LORD are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times.*

Please understand that it is impossible to “choose strength” apart from the Bible. The decision to choose strength is often simply the decision to spend time with God daily. It is through His Word that hope is ignited and faith is strengthened.

C. Rejoice.

As we saw in our previous lesson, to rejoice is a choice! How can we rejoice in pain? We don't rejoice in the pain itself, but in what God will work in our lives through the suffering.

JAMES 1:2–4

2 *My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations;*

3 *Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience.*

4 *But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.*

God uses times of trial to bring spiritual maturity and completion to our lives. None of us enjoys the pain, but when we focus on what God will do through it, we can rejoice. We can either slump in pouting apathy, or we can lean forward, straining to learn all God wants to teach us.

D. Wait on the Lord.

Only God can bring “beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness” (Isaiah 61:3). And it only comes in His time.

Exclusive license for Aaron King Transaction: 1223348

Often, I would like to rush the work of God when I am in the furnace. (I want Him to teach me patience... but quickly!) Yet, if we could rush God's timing, we would have an incomplete product. The Lord encourages us instead to choose strength and courage while we wait on Him.

PSALM 27:14

14 Wait on the LORD: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the LORD.

The best way I know to face difficulties with courage and trust is to remember God's promises. These are a few of my favorites:

ROMANS 8:28

28 And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

1 PETER 5:7

7 Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.

1 PETER 4:19

19 Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator.

ISAIAH 26:3

3 Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee.

Conclusion

One day we will see our Lord face to face. And in that moment, our suffering will pale in significance to the joy

of presenting Him something of great value. It's not gold or silver or even accolades of service. It is simple faith—faith that has been tried and purified. And this faith is exceedingly precious to Christ.

1 PETER 1:7

7 That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.

Are you in the furnace today? Choose strength—God's strength. It enables you to walk with your Heavenly Father through the flames, enveloped in His grace. And it enables you to give the Lord the precious treasure of pure faith when you stand before Him.

Study Questions

1. How are our trials like a refining fire for gold?
God uses trials to remove the impurities in our lives and purify us.
2. How have you seen God use trials or difficulties in your life to remove impurities?
Answers will vary.
3. What are the three truths we learn from 1 Peter 1 about trials?
That they don't last forever, to acknowledge the pain to God, and to trust the Father's filter.
4. What five ways are mentioned in this lesson that God works in our lives through trials?
He draws us back to Him, prepares us for spiritual growth, purifies us, gives us the opportunity to comfort others, and lets us point others to Him.
5. Can you describe a time in which God used a trial in your life to work in one or more of the five ways listed above?
Answers will vary.
6. What are the four practical ways given in this lesson that we can “choose strength”?
Don't resist, read God's Word, rejoice, and wait on the Lord.

7. It is impossible to continually experience God's strength apart from the Bible. Are you spending time in God's Word daily? What are some recent Scriptures God has used to strengthen your heart?

Answers will vary.

8. Trials allow us to have something of great value to present to the Lord when we see Him face to face. What is it?

Faith that has been tried and purified.

Memory Verses

1 PETER 1:6–7

6 *Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations:*

7 *That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ:*

choose to succeed

Key Verses

1 PETER 1:6–7

6 *Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations:*

7 *That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ:*

Overview

The Bible records many failures, because it records life as it is. The biographies in Scripture are about real people who suffered real defeats. In this lesson, we learn from the life of Peter that failure doesn't have to be final and that we can actually use it as a stepping stone to success.

Lesson Aim

In our Christian walk, we each fall. When we fall, however, we can either allow the failure to set us back, or we can determine to use the failure to propel us forward in growth. Not everyone will learn or profit from failure. Failure comes naturally; learning from failure requires a personal choice. We must choose victory if we are to fail forward.

Lesson Goals

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should:

1. Be familiar with Peter's betrayal of Christ and his later usefulness for God.
2. Understand that after forgiveness, failure can become one of our best opportunities for growth.
3. Determine to walk forward in victory by growing through past failures.

Teaching Outline

- I. An Example of Failure
 - A. Recognize that failure is not final.
 - B. Realize forgiveness is the foundation to victory.
- II. Growth from Failure
 - A. Learn to ask the right question.
 - B. Expect to grow.
 - C. Adjust your vocabulary.
 - D. Appreciate the value of failure.
- III. The Road to Success
 - A. Develop selective hearing.
 - B. Make failure a gauge for growth.
 - C. Maintain a finish-line perspective.

LESSON TEN

choose to succeed

Text

1 PETER 1:6–7

6 Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations:

7 That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ:

Introduction

In our Christian walk, we each fall. I wish we didn't. I wish I could give you a lesson on how to never fail. That would, however, present some challenges, the first being that I'm not in the least qualified to teach it. The second challenge is that no one else is either.

But, since we all fail (repeatedly), wouldn't it be great if each time we could "fail forward"—learning from our mistakes and gaining ground even by failure? Believe it or not, there is a way to fail successfully.

Have you ever struggled with failure? Maybe you have failed in...

- making a dish from a recipe
- following a traffic signal
- keeping a diet (Why do all magazines at the counter have some sort of weight loss program on the front? Because we keep failing at our diet and hoping the next one will work!)
- exercising consistently
- reading the Bible faithfully
- being a witness
- holding your temper
- keeping quiet
- keeping a promise
- being faithful to pray for prayer requests you've been given
- trusting God rather than worrying
- being a supportive friend
- being submissive
- being thoughtful, sensitive, or loving

TEACHING TIP

Share a story—perhaps humorous—of your own failure in one or more of the areas listed above. Admitting your own need will warm your class to you and to your teaching on growth from failure through the remainder of this lesson.

We could spend an entire lesson on the ways we fail. But instead, let's look at how we can "fail forward."

Exclusive license for Aaron King Transaction: 1223348

I. An Example of Failure

The Bible records many failures, because it records life as it is. The biographies in Scripture are about real people who suffered real defeats. One such person is Peter.

As one of Jesus' disciples, Peter seemed to be eagerly involved in every aspect of ministry taking place around him. He was a hands-on type person who liked to be "in on it." He was somewhat outspoken and had an opinion about everything. But he was wholehearted in his enthusiasm.

Later in life, Peter would preach the sermon at Pentecost when three thousand people trusted Christ (Acts 2:14–41). He would provide energy and leadership to the early church, and he would sacrificially give of himself to preach the Gospel. He would write the epistles of 1 and 2 Peter. And, ultimately, he would give his life as a martyr for the Gospel of Christ.

But in between Peter's early eager involvement and later mature leadership, he failed miserably. He denied His Lord three times. As Christ was enduring the horrors of crucifixion, Peter pretended he didn't even know Him.

Peter's failure was actually a *series* of failures. First, as Christ warned him of the coming test, Peter pridefully boasted that he was above failure.

MATTHEW 26:31–33

31 *Then saith Jesus unto them, All ye shall be offended because of me this night: for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad.*

32 *But after I am risen again, I will go before you into Galilee.*

33 *Peter answered and said unto him, Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended.*

Then, the evening Jesus was arrested, Peter failed to stay awake and pray for just one hour, even though Christ asked him three times to do so.

MATTHEW 26:40

40 And he cometh unto the disciples, and findeth them asleep, and saith unto Peter, What, could ye not watch with me one hour?

During Christ's arrest, Peter followed from afar and kept company with those who were leading in the evil plot.

MATTHEW 26:58

58 But Peter followed him afar off unto the high priest's palace, and went in, and sat with the servants, to see the end.

JOHN 18:18

18 And the servants and officers stood there, who had made a fire of coals; for it was cold: and they warmed themselves: and Peter stood with them, and warmed himself.

Soon, Peter openly denied the Lord and even blasphemed His name.

JOHN 18:25

25 And Simon Peter stood and warmed himself. They said therefore unto him, Art not thou also one of his disciples? He denied it, and said, I am not.

MARK 14:70–71

70 And he denied it again. And a little after, they that stood by said again to Peter, Surely thou art one of them: for thou art a Galilaean, and thy speech agreeth thereto.

71 But he began to curse and to swear, saying, I know not this man of whom ye speak.

Invariably, we wind up experiencing similar failures in our own lives. We start out well and have the best of intentions. We are excited, and we want to succeed in the faith. We have a desire to be a soulwinner, to be faithful in our devotions, to love our husbands and care for our children. Yet, so often, we become distracted from the Lord. We make wrong choices, and as a result, we experience failure.

But remember, the season of failure in Peter's life was temporary. What is encouraging about Peter's failure is that he learned from it. Less than two months later, he was preaching the sermon at Pentecost.

A. Recognize that failure is not final.

When we fail, we can either allow the failure to set us back, or we can determine to use the failure to actually propel us forward. Not everyone will learn or profit from failure. Failure comes naturally; learning from failure requires a personal choice. We must *choose* victory if we are to fail forward.

For many ladies, failure actually keeps them from trying again. We allow it to turn our thinking into believing that we *can't* succeed, or we generate excuses for not trying. Success, on the other hand, is the result of learning from failure.

Illustration

Mary Lou Retton was America's golden girl gymnast at the 1984 summer Olympics. When commenting on her victory, she explained, "Success comes from setting a goal and then being willing to achieve it. Achieving that goal is a good feeling, but to get there you have to also get through the failures. You have got to be able to pick yourself up and continue."

Exclusive license for Aaron King Transaction: 1223348

We already noted the fact that everyone fails—no exceptions.

ROMANS 3:23

23 For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;

That we all fail is a fact. It is *not* a fact, however, that the experience of failure makes you a failure as a person.

Illustration

If I were to ask you to name a great baseball player, who would you name? Many people would think of Babe Ruth. Most know Babe Ruth as the guy who hit 714 home runs—the home run king. But did you know that he also struck out 1,330 times? Each of those times he failed, but he was not a failure!

If I were to ask you to name a great football player, an NFL quarterback, you might think of Terry Bradshaw. Terry Bradshaw led his team to four Super Bowls. But, did you know that Terry Bradshaw threw more incomplete passes than 99.9 percent of the players who ever played the game? Each of those times he failed, but he was not a failure!

If I were to ask you to name a great President, you might think of Abraham Lincoln. President Lincoln, affectionately called Honest Abe, led our nation through one of its most difficult periods and worked tirelessly to give freedom to *all* Americans. Yet, did you know that Abraham Lincoln lost eight elections? Before that, he failed twice in business, and he had a nervous breakdown. Abraham Lincoln failed, but he was not a failure!

Each of these men learned from his mistakes and failed forward.

PROVERBS 24:16

16 *For a just man falleth seven times, and riseth up again: but the wicked shall fall into mischief.*

How can we turn our failures into assets on the path of victory? Let's continue to look at the life of Peter to see what turned his failure around. If we apply these truths to our lives, we, too, can slant our failures forward and choose victory.

B. Realize forgiveness is the foundation to victory.

The starting point for victory is forgiveness. We, of course, want to succeed—that's what this lesson is all about! But we need to remember that we don't *earn* God's love by our success, and we don't earn His forgiveness by our penance. He loves and forgives us because of who He is, not because of our performance.

Even after Peter denied the Lord, the Lord wanted to restore him to fellowship. The angel at the empty tomb took care to emphasize the forgiveness available to Peter. As the angel told the women visiting the tomb that Jesus was risen, he specifically told them to let Peter know as well.

MARK 16:7

7 *But go your way, tell his disciples and Peter that he goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see him, as he said unto you.*

Peter being singled out for special notice is proof of the kindness and mercy of the Lord. Although Peter had denied Christ and forsaken Him in His greatest hour of need, Christ was still Peter's Lord and Redeemer.

No matter how we have failed, we can experience God's love and forgiveness. But "failing forward" never happens when we refuse to admit our failure.

PROVERBS 28:13

13 He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.

Peter grieved deeply over his sin of denying Christ.

LUKE 22:60–62

60 And Peter said, Man, I know not what thou sayest. And immediately, while he yet spake, the cock crew.

61 And the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice.

62 And Peter went out, and wept bitterly.

The Lord had only to look at Peter, and as Peter met Christ's pained gaze, his heart broke. When you fail, look to Jesus. Grieve over your failure before Him. Confess your sin honestly and simply. Don't try to shift blame or pretend sin is less than it is.

1 JOHN 1:9

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

II. Growth from Failure

Failure is too costly to waste! After you seek the Lord's forgiveness, learn all you can from the experience.

Although Peter committed a terrible sin, he grew through it. After Peter's failure, he was a far more mature Christian than before. (Can you imagine the outspoken Peter

we read about early in the Gospels writing two books of the Bible?) He grew from his failure, and in less than two months, he preached a powerful sermon in which three *thousand* people were saved.

ACTS 2:14, 41

14 *But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice, and said unto them, Ye men of Judaea, and all ye that dwell at Jerusalem, be this known unto you, and hearken to my words:*
 41 *Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.*

Even bitter experiences can teach us if we will be attentive students.

Let's see how we can make failure a learning experience.

A. Learn to ask the right question.

One of the greatest assets to learning is a wisely-worded question. Too often, we ask ourselves the wrong questions when we fail, and in so doing, we are distracted from discovering the correct answers.

Our typical question is, "Why did I do that?" But this question (and the self-condemnation with which we ask it) rarely leads us to a profitable conclusion. What if instead we asked, "What lessons can I learn from this failure?" The very nature of this question leads to growth, rather than to continuing defeat.

B. Expect to grow.

Why is it that when we fail once we automatically assume we will fail again? Sometimes we even go so far as to tell ourselves that we will *never* succeed!

We must choose a different line of thinking. Most of us naturally default to an assumption such as “I’m a failure, and I’ll never be good at anything.” This, however, is pure assumption. The problem is that we usually get what we expect.

TEACHING TIP

Share a story of a time when you were sure you couldn’t do something—perhaps learning to cook or giving a speech—and actually did fail because you had already convinced yourself that you would.

Sooner or later, we’re going to get what we expect. If you assume you will fail, you will. But if you expect to succeed, you will have the freedom to learn from your failure and use it as an asset on the road to success.

C. Adjust your vocabulary.

Two of the saddest words in our language are *if only*. Peter could have repeated this phrase to himself a thousand times, “If only I hadn’t denied Christ....If only I hadn’t followed afar off....If only I hadn’t cursed the Lord....If only I could control my tongue....”

Perhaps you’ve repeated a similar phrase. “If only I hadn’t said that.” “If only I wouldn’t have lost my temper.” “If only I had kept my promise.”

How do you think it would impact our future success if we replaced the words “if only” with the phrase “next time I will”? “Next time my preschooler soaks the dishcloth in the toilet, I’ll lovingly *train* him, rather than lose my temper.” “Next time my teenager is frustrated

with his homework, I'll listen." "Next time I will think before I speak."

Dwelling on "if only" subverts your attention from the present, causing you to miss today's opportunities for success. "Next time I will" positions you for growth.

D. Appreciate the value of failure.

Failure may be costly, but it is also precious when it drives us to the Lord. Some failures, such as Peter's, are the result of sin. When this is the case, thank the Lord for intervening in your life through allowing you to feel the consequences of your sin and thus bringing you back to Himself. Truly, it is far better to fail by sinning and then return to the Lord than to succeed in wrong-doing and spend a longer time away from Christ.

Some failures are simply the result of poor judgment, undeveloped skill, or undeveloped methods. In these cases, remember that each failure brings you that much closer to success.

Illustration

It is said that as Thomas Edison was working to discover a filament for the incandescent light bulb, he failed thousands of times before he succeeded. When asked by a reporter if he thought he was a failure, he replied, "Young man, why would I feel like a failure? And why would I ever give up? I now know definitively over nine thousand ways that an electric light bulb will not work. Success is almost in my grasp." Failure is costly, but it is also valuable.

It's a fact—we all fail. But failure isn't fatal, if we choose to learn and grow from our failures.

Exclusive license for Aaron King Transaction: 1223348

III. The Road to Success

English author, Oliver Goldsmith, wrote, “Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising each time we fall.” Indeed, any person who has arrived at the destination of success has arrived by the road of failure. We must never use failure as an excuse for not trying again. As we saw earlier, the Bible teaches that no matter how many times we fall, success comes through getting back up!

PROVERBS 24:16A

16 *For a just man falleth seven times, and riseth up again.*

Once you have recognized your failure and decided to grow from it, what steps can you take to press forward to success?

A. *Develop selective hearing.*

Children (and sometimes husbands!) seem to have a unique ability for hearing only what is convenient for them. Perhaps you have called your children for dinner and had them immediately show up, but if, with the same volume you called for them to take out the trash, it seemed no one could hear you.

Wouldn't it be helpful if we could develop this skill to hear only that which will encourage us in our growth? While some criticism helps us grow (and we need to be willing to learn from it), the criticism that concludes, “You'll never succeed,” is neither building nor helpful. We should turn on our selective hearing and tune out this defeating criticism.

Nehemiah learned how to do this. While he was building the walls of Jerusalem, enemies of God attempted to distract and discourage him through

criticism and attack. But Nehemiah refused to give these men his ear. Instead, he continued building and kept his focus on what God had called him to accomplish.

NEHEMIAH 6:3

3 *And I sent messengers unto them, saying, I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?*

Illustration

Many whom we consider to have reached pinnacles of success were told early on that they should give up. For instance, Louisa May Alcott's family was glad when she found work as a maid or seamstress, because they felt she couldn't write. Beethoven's music teacher said he was hopeless as a composer, and Thomas Edison's teacher said he wasn't very bright. Walt Disney was once fired by a newspaper editor because "he lacked imagination and had no good ideas."

What if these people had listened to those remarks and believed them? They would never have succeeded.

Who are *you* listening to? Is there someone in your life who always tells you that you can't succeed? Choose to turn on your selective hearing—tune out the naysayers, and tune your ears to the Lord. What does *He* want to empower you to accomplish or become?

B. Make failure a gauge for growth.

All of us want immediate, brilliant success; but sometimes reaching less than we had hoped for isn't as bad as we think—especially if it is better than the last time. Consider, for instance, a runner in training. As she

begins, she will be far behind the others. As she continues to train, she won't immediately get to first place, but she will do better than before. Each time she runs a race diligently, even though she may not win first place, she will be that much closer to achieving her goal.

We may not yet be at the point of success that we want to be. But if we are doing better than yesterday or last year, our failures have helped us grow.

C. Maintain a finish-line perspective.

Our tendency is to get so wrapped up in the success or failure of the present that we forget we still have a long marathon in front of us. Even when we fail, we should get up and press toward the finish line.

PHILIPPIANS 3:13–14

*13 Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before,
14 I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.*

HEBREWS 12:1–2

*1 Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,
2 Looking 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 is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

You might fall here or there, but keep looking to Jesus, and keep the big picture of finishing the race in mind.

Conclusion

We have the privilege of serving a God who *never* fails. Remember that His love and compassion for you are constant, and He will pick you up when you fall.

Our greatest failures can become our greatest assets—*if* we will learn from them. Every time we fail, we get a little closer to our goal—*if* we will fail forward.

No one goes through life without failing. But victory requires a choice. Choose to make your failures your friends.

Study Questions

1. What Bible character did we see in this lesson who failed and then became a dynamic witness for Christ?
Peter
2. What is the foundation to victory? And what step do we need to take to experience it?
Forgiveness is the foundation to victory. We must confess our sin to the Lord to experience His forgiveness.
3. What verse promises us God's full forgiveness when we confess our sin to Him?
1 John 1:9
4. What is the question we must learn to ask after we fail?
What lessons can I learn from this failure?
5. In addition to Peter, what other Bible characters can you think of who sinned or failed but the Lord used again?
Answers will vary, but some examples are Moses, David, and Paul.
6. What failure of the past in your own life have you grown from? How does remembering this encourage you to grow through current struggles?
Answers will vary.
7. Is there an area of failure in your life with which you are currently struggling? How can you apply the truths of this lesson to gain victory and growth?
Answers will vary.

8. One of the most important keys to victory is to maintain a finish-line perspective. Do you find yourself easily caught up in the failures of today? What verses can you memorize to keep your mind focused on keeping the whole race in mind?

Answers may vary, but the verses included in this lesson would be helpful—Philippians 3:13–14 and Hebrews 12:1–2.

Memory Verse

PROVERBS 24:16A

16 *For a just man falleth seven times, and riseth up again.*

choose to serve

Key Verses

LUKE 10:38–42

38 *Now it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house.*

39 *And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word.*

40 *But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me.*

41 *And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things:*

42 *But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.*

ACTS 9:26–27

26 *And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple.*

27 *But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.*

PHILIPPIANS 1:18

18 *...I...rejoice, yea, and will rejoice.*

Overview

One of the most important choices we can make as growing Christian women is to give to others what God has given to us. In this lesson, we will look at three characteristics of healthy service—demonstrated by three different people in the Bible. Through their lives, we'll see what it means to choose to be a giver of what we have received.

Lesson Aim

The opportunity to serve God is an incredible privilege. But we have to make the choice to do it. We must surrender to Him and make daily choices to selflessly and joyfully serve others.

Lesson Goals

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should:

1. Understand that Christ-directed service can only come by knowing Christ and spending time with Him.
2. See opportunity to serve the Lord in even the mundane or unnoticed opportunities to serve others.
3. Determine to serve others as a joyful encourager.

Teaching Outline

- I. Surrendered Service
 - A. Purifies motives
 - B. Initiates action
- II. Selfless Service
 - A. Preferring others
 - B. Restoring others
 - C. Encouraging others

III. Joyful Service

- A. Look for God's hand in everything.
- B. Live expectantly.
- C. Let go of the past.
- D. Lean on God's power.

LESSON ELEVEN

choose to serve

Text

MATTHEW 10:8

8 ...*freely ye have received, freely give.*

Introduction

The Dead Sea attracts thousands of tourists each year. Many enjoy the high salinity of the water, which acts as a buoyant and makes it possible to literally float with no aid. Some treat this location as a natural spa resort, enjoying the minerals and pollen-free air.

But as relaxing as this place may be, it is also deadly. In fact, the title “Dead Sea” is actually a gentler translation from the Hebrew term *Yam ha-Mavet*, which means “Sea of Death.” There are no fish or animal life living in these waters. A fish that might accidentally find his way in through the Jordan River is immediately killed by the salt.

What causes this life-quenching level of salt? The Dead Sea is the recipient of water from the Jordan River. Here, however, the water stops, for it has no outlet. The only way water leaves the Dead Sea is through evaporation. As salt does not evaporate with the water, the Dead Sea has a salt content of 33.7 percent. The Dead Sea is continually receiving, but it is never giving.

Eighty-one miles upstream from the Dead Sea is the Sea of Galilee, another body of water fed by the Jordan River. In obvious contrast to the Dead Sea, the Sea of Galilee flourishes with life. It supports commercial fishing and is also the principle freshwater source for the nation of Israel and supplies the national water system.

What is the difference between the two? The Sea of Galilee is continually receiving and giving, while the Dead Sea only receives.

Many Christians have a pattern of receiving without giving, similar to that of the Dead Sea. We enjoy the blessings of our own walk with God, but we fail to give them to others. As the blessings sit in our lives without any outlets of service, we lose our ability to nurture spiritual growth. If, however, we freely give to others what God has given to us, we will not only enjoy spiritual vibrancy in our own lives, but we will be able to encourage others' spiritual growth as well.

One of the most important choices we can make as growing Christian women is to give to others what God has given to us.

MATTHEW 10:8

8 *...freely ye have received, freely give.*

In this lesson, we will look at three characteristics of healthy service—demonstrated by three different people in the Bible. Through their lives, we'll see what it means to choose to be a **giver of what we have received.**

Exclusive license for Aaron King Transaction: 1223348

I. Surrendered Service

I once heard someone say that most people desire to serve God, but only in an advisory capacity! How easy it can be for us to serve God in our way and on our own terms without any regard to what is truly important to Him. Yet, the first characteristic of life-giving service is that it is surrendered, operating according to the direction and heart of the Lord.

One of the most familiar passages on service is found in Luke 10:38–42. Notice the actions and responses of the two contrasting characters in this story—Mary and Martha.

LUKE 10:38–42

38 *Now it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house.*

39 *And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word.*

40 *But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me.*

41 *And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things:*

42 *But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.*

Martha was cumbered about with “much serving,” and I would imagine that if we were at her house that day, we would have been right there in the kitchen with her—helping her prepare the meal, set the table, light the candles, and wash the dishes. Furthermore, we would have been proud of ourselves for our much serving! Yet *Jesus* was pleased with *Mary* as she sat at His feet. He said that she made the right choice by spending time with Him first.

God calls us to serve from a heart and life that have been first filled with time at Jesus' feet. We aren't fit to serve God until we have chosen to take the time to know His heart, understand His will, and follow His guidance.

So often, our "Martha hearts" wake up, ready to charge the day—ready to impress God and others with our "much serving." Yet, in remembering to choose service, we must also remember to choose surrender.

Godly, Christ-pleasing service starts with a heart that relinquishes any expectations, impure motives, or selfish desires and lays them at Jesus' feet. Sometimes ladies are willing to serve—but only if they get to teach a certain grade. They are excited to help with a ladies event—until they realize they won't be in the spotlight. Surrendered service, however, means that we will serve God in any way He allows. It means we will be sensitive to His leading, and this sensitivity and surrender can only come from spending time in His presence.

While it might seem contradictory to begin a lesson on service with a reminder to be still, the quiet time we spend with Jesus is what prepares our hearts to serve Him! Moses, for example, spent much time in solitude in the backside of a desert, shepherding sheep and preparing for a great opportunity of service—leading God's people out of Egypt.

Although we cannot physically sit at the feet of our Lord as Mary did, we can choose to spend time with Him on a regular basis, surrendering our expectations of service and determining to serve Him in whatever capacity He chooses for us. What happens when we fully surrender to the Lord for service?

A. Purifies motives

One of the blessings of a surrendered heart is that it removes the greatest obstacle of serving—impure motives.

Exclusive license for Aaron King Transaction: 1223348

Illustration

The story is told of a circus that had come to town with exceptionally entertaining clowns. On one particular day, the clown act was especially exciting, and toward the end of the show, a little clown wearing a very high hat bowed elaborately to a dignified woman sitting near the front. As he bowed, however, the hat fell off, and an elephant sat right on it.

The clown did everything he could to get the elephant to stand so he could retrieve his hat, but to no avail. He waved and shouted to the elephant, but the elephant was not impressed. Angrily, he got a running start and then kicked the elephant with all of his might. Still, the elephant would not budge.

Then, frantic with anger, the little clown turned back to the elephant and tried to lift him off the hat. Defeated and in complete despair, the clown sat down and started to eat peanuts. It was then that the elephant saw the peanuts, got up, walked to the clown and begged for the peanuts.

This story reminds me of how many women tend to respond when asked to serve. It seems that no matter how they are asked or what opportunities come their way, they just can't get motivated. Occasionally though, an opportunity does arise that meets their criteria and piques their unique interests, and they jump at the opportunity because it caters to their desires and agendas.

God does not call us to serve Him only when others are watching or only when it's convenient for our schedules. Some of the most needed areas of ministry are unseen and even uncomfortable. Working in the nursery is not the most glorious job. Visiting the shut-ins doesn't get much recognition by others. Cleaning the church

doesn't usually mean that your name will be engraved on the plaques in its halls.

TEACHING TIP

Adapt the paragraph above to your class by giving illustrations of needed areas of service in your church.

Our motivation must be Jesus Christ and Him alone. If anyone or anything other than love for Him serves as our motivation, it will only be a matter of time before our excitement fades and our commitment diminishes. *Why* we serve the Lord is just as important as *how* we serve Him.

Spending time with God, as Mary did, helps us remember that our service should be for Him. If He is our motivation, we will be willing to do whatever He requires. God desires that we serve Him from the heart.

EPHESIANS 6:6

6 Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart;

Serving from a surrendered heart helps us maintain our proper focus. Sometimes, like Martha, we see only the dirty dishes, the mountain of laundry, the soiled diapers, the cranky babies, and the unexpected guests. Yet, God sees the value in our service to Him. He sees the importance of the small things, and so should we.

Surrendered hearts see the child in need of love, the husband and family dependent on our help, and the visitors in need of encouragement. A heart of surrender sees the value in any opportunity to serve God—big or small.

If you're cumbered about with much serving, pause. Take time to surrender—to sit at Jesus' feet, to glean from His heart. Then, and only then, set out on the task He has given you, motivated by Him and His love for you!

B. Initiates action

When our hearts are fully surrendered to the Lord, we will be responsive to His promptings. We are prone to procrastinate in two important areas: our time with the Lord and also our time spent in service to Him.

I'm sure Martha *planned* to sit at Jesus' feet, too, just like Mary. But, she had to finish what *she* wanted to do first. In this case, we see good intentions to spend time with the Lord, but she was distracted by her serving.

On the other hand, while service that pleases the Lord begins by sitting at His feet, we must be compelled to action rather than content with simply good *intentions* of ministering.

We may have every intention of spending time with the Lord and serving Him, but oftentimes intentions are as far as it gets. So, how do we move past intentions to actual surrender and service? We must realize that we always make time for what is important to us. So, perhaps the answer lies in prioritizing your time with the Lord and service to Him.

ECCLESIASTES 3:1

1 To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

As women, we are excellent planners. We are great at scheduling and implementing what we want to accomplish. We plan weddings, baby showers, bridal showers, birthday parties, and graduation parties. We

schedule doctors appointments, dentist appointments, lunch appointments, and spa appointments. We make a plan and we work that plan.

For example, if I have a scheduling conflict with my hair appointment, I will probably make the necessary adjustments to keep my hair appointment. But, if something interrupts my time with God or service to Him, I notice it's easier to let that slide.

When was the last time you planned time to spend with God? Has He made it on your appointment calendar lately? When was the last time you *kept* your appointment with God? On the other hand, when was the last time you scheduled to bake a pie, fold a bulletin, or do something special for your family? Ask God to help you move from intention and procrastination to action as you serve Him from a surrendered heart.

Have you made the commitment to serve the Lord with complete surrender? With no reservations? With no requirements? If so, the Lord will direct you and give you opportunities to live out your commitment. For one lady, it may mean serving in the nursery, while for another, this surrender may lead to a mission field. Whatever the case, we can rest assured that, as Andrew Murray said, "God is ready to assume full responsibility for the life wholly yielded to Him."

Illustration

Betty Stam was a young missionary wife and mother who served in China during the Chinese Civil War. Eventually martyred with her husband for their service to the Lord and the Chinese people, Betty is an example of complete surrender. Each time I read this prayer from her diary, I'm challenged to surrender more wholly to the Lord. I

hope it is also an encouragement to you as you embark on a new level of service for Christ:

“Lord, I give up all my own plans and purposes, all my own desires and hopes, and accept Thy will for my life. I give myself, my time, my all, utterly to Thee to be Thine forever. Fill me and seal me with Thy Holy Spirit. Use me as Thou wilt, send me where Thou wilt, work out Thy whole will in my life at any cost, now and forever.”

Anything done in our flesh is bound to fail miserably or to succeed even more miserably! Don't serve Jesus from impure motives or from the fear of man. Don't put off good intentions. Choose to be filled with the Spirit and to serve Him with a surrendered heart. A woman seeking to make right choices will choose to empty herself for others by putting more of Jesus in her life. Spend time at His feet. Surrender to His purposes. And choose to serve Him wholeheartedly.

II. Selfless Service

A surrendered heart leads to selfless service. A surrendered heart is not concerned about preference, and selfless service is not concerned about position.

The Bible gives us a wonderful example of selfless service and sincere encouragement through the example of a man in the New Testament. If I gave you his name originally given to him by his parents, you probably would not recognize him. Yet he is the epitome of someone who possessed this gift of exhortation. His name was first Joses, but we know him as Barnabas.

Barnabas was such a helper and encourager of people that he was given this new name, which means “encourager,”

by the apostles. In fact, every time he appears in Scripture he is encouraging someone. He helped needy saints and endorsed an unwelcome convert named Paul. He accepted alien believers, the Gentiles, and enlisted a very promising teacher—again, the Apostle Paul. Time and again, Barnabas demonstrated selfless and encouraging service.

A. *Preferring others*

In the book of Acts, it is easy to notice that when Barnabas and Paul are mentioned together, Barnabas is named first and Paul (or his former name, Saul) second.

ACTS 11:30

30 Which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.

ACTS 12:25

25 And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem, when they had fulfilled their ministry, and took with them John, whose surname was Mark.

This indicates that as Paul's mentor and friend, Barnabas led the relationship spiritually. He encouraged Paul as a new convert to the faith. In fact, if Barnabas had not used his gift of encouragement, we might be missing half of the New Testament books, which were written by Paul!

ACTS 9:26–27

26 And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple.

27 But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord

in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.

Further into the book, in Acts 13, the roles seem to change, and Paul is mentioned before Barnabas.

ACTS 13:7

7 Which was with the deputy of the country, Sergius Paulus, a prudent man; who called for Barnabas and Saul, and desired to hear the word of God.

ACTS 13:43

43 Now when the congregation was broken up, many of the Jews and religious proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas: who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God.

Often in Scripture, the name listed first in a group of names indicates the leadership or importance of an individual. So we learn that Barnabas was willing to serve in a leadership role, but later, he was willing to serve by following *Paul's* leadership. Without envy on his part, Barnabas recognized the God-given authority of Paul. The senior member was willing to let the junior member take over top slot. A Christian has gone far in Christian grace when she can become the assistant to her assistant!

“It takes more grace than I can tell,
To play the second fiddle well.”

B. Restoring others

Selfless service requires giving of yourself to another. In the case of Barnabas, we see how he invested in the life of Mark, especially after Paul decided not to take Mark on one of his missionary journeys.

ACTS 15:36–39

36 And some days after Paul said unto Barnabas, Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they do.

37 And Barnabas determined to take with them John, whose surname was Mark.

38 But Paul thought not good to take him with them, who departed from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work.

39 And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other: and so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus;

Barnabas could have left Mark, since he had not gone with Paul on one of his previous missionary endeavors. Yet, he chose to restore the young deserter, to train and mentor him despite the contention that had arisen between Paul and him.

Often as women, we get sidetracked by disagreements and contention rather than choosing to serve the Lord graciously in spite of them. What an example Barnabas sets for us in serving God while maintaining good relationships with those whom he served.

May we be like Barnabas, lavishing encouragement, looking for the good in others, and encouraging others to serve with us.

Is there a young Paul in your life? Someone who wants to serve, but needs a little encouragement? Is there someone in whose life you can selflessly invest? Barnabas didn't know it, but when he encouraged Paul, he was encouraging the human writer of thirteen New Testament epistles.

Is there an impressionable “Mark” under the sphere of your influence? Perhaps you can identify potential in a

young lady in your church that she doesn't see in herself. Can you serve God by helping her and involving her in service to others? Mark probably didn't see himself as being used by the Holy Spirit to write the second Gospel! You never know what a little selfless and encouraging service can do for another person.

The author of Hebrews challenges us to exhort one another “so much the more” as we see the day of Christ's return approaching.

HEBREWS 10:25

25 Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.

Quite often, we may not feel like selflessly serving others. However, if we remember to surrender our lives to Christ's control and empty ourselves so we can be filled with Him, then through His Spirit, we can find the strength to encourage, involve, and serve others in the way that Barnabas so effectively did.

C. *Encouraging others*

I've heard women say over the years, “Well, encouragement is just not my spiritual gift. I don't serve in that capacity.” But, serving and encouraging others from a heart of sacrificial love is not reserved for the select people who possess the gift of encouragement! God desires that all of us selflessly give of ourselves in the service of others.

You can't serve God without serving others. Serving and encouraging others is the essence of serving God. Throughout Scripture, the Lord emphasizes the ministry of encouragement.

He encouraged Isaac.

GENESIS 26:24

24 And the LORD appeared unto him the same night, and said, I am the God of Abraham thy father: fear not, for I am with thee, and will bless thee, and multiply thy seed for my servant Abraham's sake.

He used Isaiah to comfort His people.

ISAIAH 41:10

10 Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness.

He met His disciples in the midst of a storm.

MATTHEW 14:27

27 But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid.

He identifies Himself as “the God of all comfort,” and He encourages us when we need comfort.

2 CORINTHIANS 1:3–4

*3 Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort;
4 Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.*

Jesus was the ultimate example in selfless service.

MARK 10:45

45 For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

He literally gave His life for us! And, He calls us to follow in His steps (1 Peter 2:21).

If you are surrendered to serve in any capacity and are willing to selflessly expend yourself for the cause of Christ, be sure that you put feet to your intentions. A heart to serve is wonderful, but we must daily make the choice to actually serve.

TEACHING TIP

Ask students for practical ideas on serving others, and allow for a few minutes of class discussion. Suggestions may include an encouraging note, a kind word, a small gift, a loving gesture, or a heartfelt prayer. Areas of service in the church may include helping in the nursery, cleaning the buildings, assisting in the office—the possibilities are limitless.

If you're not sure what to do, ask the Lord to give you some ideas. But, don't neglect to serve.

III. Joyful Service

I hope that at this point, you are excited to serve the Lord! My prayer is God has already laid ideas on your heart—ways in which you can express your love for Him and others. But, I want to give you one warning: you will be subject to discouragement at some point. If it hasn't happened already, you will be disappointed by a teenager who rejects your love. You will have a really rough Sunday school class with the four-year-old boys. You will undoubtedly feel like a failure in your attempts to serve God effectively. To assume that all

your efforts of service will work perfectly is to set yourself up for great disappointment.

I try to remember the following equation when it comes to maintaining joy in Christian service:

$$\begin{array}{r} \text{Accepting difficulty} \\ + \text{Expecting victory} \\ \hline \text{Biblical optimism} \end{array}$$

Yes, I am surrendered and committed to serving the Lord selflessly. I accept, however, that difficulty will come in my Christian life. And through that difficulty, I expect that God will give the victory. Remembering these truths enables me to maintain a true heart of joy in my service to Christ.

Our third biblical example in service is the Apostle Paul. We studied his life in a previous chapter, but Paul was one of the greatest servants in our Bible. Through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he wrote the book of Philippians which gives great insight on how to possess joy in serving. But, just four years before Paul wrote this book, he endured two years of imprisonment. He was shipped to Rome to face Nero, who was known for burning Christians alive. He was shipwrecked during the winter, stranded on an island where he was bitten by a poisonous snake, and then sent to Nero for another two years! While in prison at Rome, Paul was chained to a prison guard twenty-four hours a day.

Paul could have had a serious pity party. (Sometimes we have a pity party just because no one said “thank you” after a long night in the nursery.) But, in spite of the hardships Paul faced, he rejoiced.

PHILIPPIANS 1:18

18 ...I...rejoice, yea, and will rejoice.

How can we maintain joy in service?

A. *Look for God's hand in everything.*

Paul chose to look for God's hand in every situation. In *Philippians*, he wrote how God used his time in prison to lead people to Christ.

PHILIPPIANS 4:22

22 All the saints salute you, chiefly they that are of Caesar's household.

The palace guard consisted of an elite group of prison guards (not just soldiers) who were training to become the future leaders of Rome. To gain understanding on how Caesar and his household operated, these up-and-coming rulers were assigned to VIP prisoners for six hours at a time. Sounds like a pretty strategic group for Paul to win to Christ. Imagine how these future leaders would have watched Paul's service to Christ as he wrote much of the New Testament, prayed for new converts, and told them personally about the love of Christ. And, every six hours, Paul had a new captive audience.

By the time Paul wrote *Philippians 4*, those in Caesar's household were greeting the saints to whom the letter was addressed. Paul saw God's guiding hand in his life and chose to serve Him wherever He led.

B. *Live expectantly.*

Isn't it fun to watch a new mother as she is expecting her first child, especially as the time of arrival draws near? She will set up the baby's nursery, prepare a bag for the hospital, install the car seat, wash some newborn clothes, and prepare in any other way she can.

What are you expecting? Perhaps not a baby. But, are you expecting to be used of God? Are you living as if

you believe God will use you? Do you wake up expecting to be a vessel fit for the Master's use?

PHILIPPIANS 1:20

20 According to my earnest expectation and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but that with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death.

Paul had an earnest, sincere expectation that God would be glorified in his life (and death). He hoped and believed that God would use him. I pray you have that same expectation.

C. Let go of the past.

When you choose to serve Christ with total commitment and surrender, your flesh and the devil will fight that decision. One of the major methods of distraction is memories of a disappointing past. This is why Paul purposefully chose to let go of the past.

PHILIPPIANS 3:13

13 Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before,

Maybe you've failed in previous attempts to serve Christ. Maybe you've lapsed in your level of dedication to service. Maybe you've made mistakes or faced rejection when attempting to do something for God.

Some of the unhappiest people on earth are those who dwell in their past—living the same offense and mistake over and over again.

Illustration

Have you ever watched clips of sports bloopers? So long as they are not showing your favorite team in their pinnacle fail, these can be hilarious.

Sadly though, I think some women have a mental video reel, like those sports bloopers, that plays over and over again in their minds. They rehearse their sins, mistakes, and blunders in their Christian life, and it hinders them from future service.

Choose to forget the past, and reach for the future God has for you.

PHILIPPIANS 3:14

14 I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

D. Lean on God's power.

We can make the initial choice to serve the Lord, but if we try to do it in our own strength, we won't last long. We must rely on God's strength.

PHILIPPIANS 4:13

13 I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.

Sometimes we think *we* can do all things. We're excited, motivated and ready to serve. But, we forget the second part of that verse. Christ must work through us and give us the supernatural strength needed for divine service.

I pray that you will commit to serving your husband, children, church family, neighbors, and those who still need to meet our Saviour. But, remember to always refill. If you don't fill up on God's power, there won't be anything left for you to give.

Conclusion

The opportunity to serve God is an incredible privilege. But we have to make the choice to do it. We must surrender to Him and make daily choices to selflessly serve others. It's too easy to have good intentions of serving, but never actually initiating service.

Illustration

Which type of china dishes do you believe is the most valuable? Expensive and ornate china that sits on a shelf, never used because it might break? Or inexpensive china that serves meals and is regularly used?

I believe the china that is used is the most valuable because it serves the highest purpose—being used.

You, too, can serve a wonderful purpose—God's purpose—if you choose to be used by Him. Don't sit on a shelf waiting for those special opportunities that may never come. Be willing to be used on a daily basis.

TEACHING TIP

If possible, bring a piece from both types of china for the illustration above.

2 TIMOTHY 2:21

21 If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work.

Give of yourself, and become a vessel that is valuable, fit for the Master's use.

Study Questions

1. What body of water serves as a warning against always receiving and never giving?

The Dead Sea.

2. Like Mary, we must spend time at Jesus' feet to understand His heart before we serve Him. When do you spend time with the Lord each day? In your time with the Lord, are you sincerely seeking to understand His heart?

Answers will vary.

3. A true servant is completely surrendered to serve in any capacity. Is there an area of service in which the Holy Spirit has been prompting you to serve, but you are unwilling? When was the last time that you reaffirmed to the Lord your willingness to serve in any capacity?

Answers will vary.

4. What Bible character did we study in this lesson whose very name means “encourager”?

Barnabas

5. Is there someone who has been an encourager in your life? How specifically has God used them to encourage you?

Answers will vary.

6. Through this lesson, has the Holy Spirit brought to your mind the name of someone you need to encourage? What could you do this week to serve through the ministry of encouragement?

Answers will vary.

7. On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate your joyfulness as you serve the Lord and others? What verses from Philippians could you memorize to help you remain joyful as you serve?

Answers will vary.

8. One of the greatest joys of the Christian life is to be used by God. Describe a time in which you knew God was using you and you rejoiced in being available to Him.

Answers will vary.

Memory Verse

2 TIMOTHY 2:21

21 If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work.

choose to speak wisely

Key Verses

PSALM 19:14

14 Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.

PROVERBS 18:21

21 Death and life are in the power of the tongue: and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof.

JAMES 3:5

5 Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!

Overview

Our words have a profound impact on our own lives as well as the lives of those around us. In this lesson, we see the potential our words have both for positive and destructive influence, and we learn how to change our speech patterns so they are pleasing to the Lord.

Lesson Aim

We so easily let words slip out without even considering the effect they will have on others. Scripture teaches us, however, that our words are an indicator of our hearts. We must learn

to think before we speak and to use our words to praise the Lord and encourage others.

Lesson Goals

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should:

1. Understand the weighty influence of their words.
2. Examine their own hearts for a true look at their regular speech patterns.
3. Commit to thinking and speaking in a way that pleases the Lord and builds others.

Teaching Outline

- I. A Powerful Influence
 - A. Positive words
 - B. Destructive words
- II. An Honest Exposure
- III. A Makeover for Your Mouth
 - A. Examine your heart.
 - B. Rely on the Holy Spirit.
 - C. Renew your mind.
 - D. Choose your words carefully.
 - E. Listen more.

LESSON TWELVE

choose to speak wisely

Text

PSALM 19:14

14 Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.

Introduction

Do you think women or men talk the most? Well, proverbs and sayings in many languages throughout history have portrayed women as the talkers:

- Women's tongues are like lamb's tails. They are never still. (English)
- The North Sea will sooner be found wanting in water than a woman at a loss for words. (Jutlandic)

- The woman with active hands and feet, marry her. But, the woman with overactive mouth, leave well alone. (Maori)
- Nothing is so unnatural as a talkative man or a quiet woman. (Scottish)
- Where there are women and geese, there is noise. (Japanese)

I'm not sure if you've noticed, but women have taken the brunt of *many* jokes on the subject of their excessive speech! One study, however, conducted a few years ago, concluded that men and women both speak about the same amount—roughly sixteen thousand words per day.

Sixteen thousand words! We speak enough words in one week to fill a five hundred page book. And, with just the words we use in everyday conversation, we could fill over fifty huge volumes each year!

Our words are a significant part of our lives—and the lives of those to whom we speak. No wonder David prayed that his speech would be acceptable to the Lord.

PSALM 19:14

14 Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.

Words affect us more than we realize.

PROVERBS 18:21

21 Death and life are in the power of the tongue: and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof.

JAMES 3:5

5 Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!

Have you ever experienced a wildfire? Often, these large wildfires are caused by one little match left unattended, and the destruction is massive. Even so, our words—even ones that seem insignificant to us—have a huge impact.

As you might expect, a topic of this significance is a substantial theme in the pages of Scripture. The book of Proverbs, especially, has many verses about words and the tongue. In this lesson, we will see many of these verses compiled into lists. I hope they will be helpful reference points for you as you strive to choose gracious speech.

I. A Powerful Influence

The focus of this lesson is on *what* we say and on *how* we say it. Words are not just letters strung together. Words are the manifestation and stimulation of emotion. A word can be a balm or a bomb. A positive word makes you feel good. A negative word leaves you feeling depressed and defeated. Words can make us laugh. They can make us cry. Words can make us happy or angry. Words have the power to affect our thoughts, feelings, images, memories, fears, anxieties, and actions. Words lay a foundation on which we build our worth, character, values, and attitudes. A good word will build up, strengthen, and encourage. But a careless word can tear down homes, break hearts, and wreck reputations as they wound, hurt, and destroy. Our words have incredible influence—for good or for bad.

A. Positive words

Some of the most positive experiences of my life have rested on words of encouragement or help. Each time I benefit from the positive words of others, I'm more motivated than ever before to use my words in an uplifting way.

PROVERBS 15:23

23 A man hath joy by the answer of his mouth: and a word spoken in due season, how good is it!

Notice these verses that tell us some of the positive influence our words can have:

TEACHING TIP

Choose a couple of the points below to give a personal illustration of how someone's words made a positive influence on your life.

Positive words give instruction and wisdom.

PROVERBS 1:8

8 My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother:

PROVERBS 10:31

31 The mouth of the just bringeth forth wisdom: but the froward tongue shall be cut out.

PROVERBS 15:2

2 The tongue of the wise useth knowledge aright: but the mouth of fools poureth out foolishness.

PROVERBS 16:23

23 The heart of the wise teacheth his mouth, and addeth learning to his lips.

Positive words give direction.

PROVERBS 19:20

20 Hear counsel, and receive instruction, that thou mayest be wise in thy latter end.

PROVERBS 27:9

9 *Ointment and perfume rejoice the heart: so doth the sweetness of a man's friend by hearty counsel.*

Positive words praise the Lord.

PSALM 34:1

1 *I will bless the LORD at all times: his praise shall continually be in my mouth.*

PSALM 51:15

15 *O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise.*

Positive words encourage others.

PROVERBS 25:11

11 *A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.*

PROVERBS 15:23

23 *A man hath joy by the answer of his mouth: and a word spoken in due season, how good is it!*

ISAIAH 50:4

4 *The Lord GOD hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary...*

Positive words are pleasant and appropriate.

PROVERBS 10:32

32 *The lips of the righteous know what is acceptable: but the mouth of the wicked speaketh frowardness.*

PROVERBS 15:26

26 The thoughts of the wicked are an abomination to the LORD: but the words of the pure are pleasant words.

PROVERBS 16:24

24 Pleasant words are as an honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones.

PROVERBS 31:26

26 She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness.

Positive words facilitate healing.

PROVERBS 10:11

11 The mouth of a righteous man is a well of life: but violence covereth the mouth of the wicked.

PROVERBS 15:4

4 A wholesome tongue is a tree of life: but perverseness therein is a breach in the spirit.

PROVERBS 12:18

18 There is that speaketh like the piercings of a sword: but the tongue of the wise is health.

Positive words bring security and truth.

PROVERBS 22:20–21

20 Have not I written to thee excellent things in counsels and knowledge,

21 That I might make thee know the certainty of the words of truth; that thou mightest answer the words of truth to them that send unto thee?

This is the power of our tongue! If we will learn to choose our words carefully and wisely, we can positively invest in the lives of others—just with simple words.

Something this powerful is able to be used for harm as well. Before we learn how to control our tongues, let's look at the kind of words we naturally say—the words we use if we don't purposefully choose gracious speech.

B. Destructive words

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me!” Remember this little chant from the school playground? How long did it take you to realize, however, that this little saying is completely untrue? I'm guessing not very long at all! We just said the catchy phrase to cover up the very real hurt we felt in our hearts when someone spoke negatively to us.

Just as our words have the potential for positive influence, they have the potential to be destructive.

PROVERBS 13:3

3 *He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his life: but he that openeth wide his lips shall have destruction.*

What kind of words destroy?

Idle words

It's interesting to me that the word *idle* in Greek means “lazy, free from work.” This tells me that every word that I speak that doesn't produce some good, is an idle word. And God will hold us accountable for even the idle words we say.

MATTHEW 12:36

36 *But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.*

PROVERBS 26:20

20 *Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is no talebearer, the strife ceaseth.*

PROVERBS 14:7

7 *Go from the presence of a foolish man, when thou perceivest not in him the lips of knowledge.*

Angry words

The word *anger* is just one letter away from the word *danger*. Once spoken, angry words cannot be taken back.

PROVERBS 15:1

1 *A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger.*

PROVERBS 17:14

14 *The beginning of strife is as when one letteth out water: therefore leave off contention, before it be meddled with.*

PROVERBS 20:3

3 *It is an honour for a man to cease from strife: but every fool will be meddling.*

Insincere words

Words of praise and encouragement are helpful, but insincere words of flattery are hurtful. They feed pride in others and are usually used by the speaker as a tool of manipulation. Be very careful to give genuine praise

rather than flattery. And be cautious of those who attempt to flatter you.

PROVERBS 26:28

28 A lying tongue hateth those that are afflicted by it; and a flattering mouth worketh ruin.

2 PETER 2:3

3 And through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you: whose judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not.

PSALM 55:21

21 The words of his mouth were smoother than butter, but war was in his heart: his words were softer than oil, yet were they drawn swords.

PROVERBS 12:18

18 There is that speaketh like the piercings of a sword: but the tongue of the wise is health.

Gossip

Illustration

A man in a small village had been found guilty of starting a malicious rumor about another man. This rumor was not only untrue, but it had seriously damaged the other man's reputation and family. As is often the custom in a small village, the accused was taken before the chief of the village who served as a judge. The chief would hear the case and decide his punishment, if found guilty.

After hearing the facts of the case, the chief found the accused to be guilty and prepared a unique sentence. The old, wise chief handed the man a large bag of feathers and told him to place a feather on the doorstep of every

person to whom he had told the rumor. The man was relieved at such a light punishment and quickly took the bag of feathers and set about his task. Four hours later, the man returned to the chief with the empty bag and said, "I completed your task, sir. Is there anything else?"

"Yes," the wise chief replied. "Report to me in the morning, and I'll give you the second half of your punishment."

Early the next morning, the man found his way to the chief for the final part of his punishment. "Gather all the feathers you put out last afternoon, and return them to the bag," the chief instructed.

"But, sir," the man replied, "didn't you hear the storm that raged through our village last night? Didn't you feel the force of the winds that blew? It would be impossible to know where those feathers are now."

The wise old chief raised his index finger and pointed knowingly at the man. "Now you see, my child, the damage that you have done to another. For although you told only a few lies here and there, the storm of gossip took hold of those lies and spread them far beyond your grasp to undo them. You can regret what you said, but you can never fully undo what you've done."

As much as we hate to admit it, most women do struggle with gossip. This deadly sin of the tongue destroys relationships and damages reputations. We would do well to memorize these verses about gossip... and maybe even to place them close to our telephones or computers.

PROVERBS 11:13

13 A talebearer revealeth secrets: but he that is of a faithful spirit concealeth the matter.

PROVERBS 15:28

28 *The heart of the righteous studieth to answer: but the mouth of the wicked poureth out evil things.*

PROVERBS 16:27–28

27 *An ungodly man diggeth up evil: and in his lips there is as a burning fire.*

28 *A froward man soweth strife: and a whisperer separateth chief friends.*

PROVERBS 18:8

8 *The words of a talebearer are as wounds, and they go down into the innermost parts of the belly.*

Lying words

We live in a society that excuses lying as acceptable, and sometimes even necessary. We are taught to lie so we won't hurt someone's feelings. Sometimes we lie in order to protect ourselves or to get ahead. We might even lie just to try to get others to like us more.

But no matter how much we rationalize it, a lie is a lie. And God detests it.

PROVERBS 6:16–19

16 *These six things doth the LORD hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him:*

17 *A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood,*

18 *An heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief,*

19 *A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren.*

Murmuring and complaining

Complaining comes so easily. We complain about the weather, our schedules, lost opportunities, what we don't have, and anything else we can think of. Yet, God plainly tells us that complaining is dishonoring and displeasing to Him.

NUMBERS 11:1

1 And when the people complained, it displeased the LORD....

PHILIPPIANS 2:14

14 Do all things without murmurings and disputings:

The power of our words—for good or for bad—is great. We must choose to obey God's instruction regarding our speech.

EPHESIANS 4:29

29 Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.

Let us determine that no corrupt or unwholesome words will be part of our vocabulary any more.

II. An Honest Exposure

The Bible refers to our tongue as a “little member” of the body.

JAMES 3:5

5 Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!

But, little as it is, the tongue is still very important. Have you ever had a sore on your tongue? Have you burned your tongue when taking a sip of hot coffee? What about when you bite your tongue? The pain on our tongue at these moments can affect our entire body. Even when you go to the doctor, he tells you to stick out your tongue.

Just as your tongue can reveal your physical condition, it can reveal your spiritual condition as well. Sometimes we need to place a spiritual thermometer under our tongue to check our spiritual temperature.

Your speech is a reflection of your true character. Your words will reveal the real you.

LUKE 6:45

45 A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh.

So, think honestly for a moment: how does your speech identify you? Are you known as a gossip or complainer? Does your speech reveal your divisive spirit? Do your words encourage or uplift? Are you honest?

Now, you may not characterize *yourself* as a gossip or complainer. But, what do other people hear? Whether we like it or not, people hear what we say and identify us by it.

MATTHEW 12:37

37 For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.

Even though we may appear to be good Christians, our tongues will reveal whether or not that is really the case.

JAMES 1:26

26 If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain.

Our heart is the storehouse for our tongue. Everything we allow in our hearts comes out of our mouths. Just as a tea bag set into hot water reveals what was in the tea bag all along, so the words we say simply draw out what is already in our hearts.

III. A Makeover for Your Mouth

So, how can you transform your speech? If you feel convicted (as do I!) that the words of your mouth are not always acceptable to your Redeemer (Psalm 19:14), how can you change that? Here are a few ways to have a complete makeover:

A. Examine your heart.

We've already seen that the mouth is simply the exit point for the feelings of our heart. If we want to change our speech, then we have to ask God to change our hearts. Psalm 139:23–24 are verses that I often use as a prayer to the Lord.

PSALM 139:23–24

23 Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts:

24 And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Ask God to do a thorough heart examination. Are you hurting? Often, hurting people hurt people. Are you angry? Are you harboring any bitterness? These emotions are bound to result in distasteful speech.

PROVERBS 4:23

23 Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.

Inevitably, when God examines your heart, and when you see yourself as He sees you, you will be painfully aware of some heart sins that need to be confessed and forsaken. Bring those to the Lord, and ask for His forgiveness.

1 JOHN 1:9

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

B. Rely on the Holy Spirit.

Even with our best intentions, we simply are not able to control such a powerful force as our own tongues.

JAMES 3:8

8 But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

This is not to say, however, that the tongue is uncontrollable. For the Holy Spirit is willing to control our tongues if we will but surrender them to Him. Just as we use a bit to control a horse, we should allow the Holy Spirit to control our mouths.

JAMES 3:3

3 Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body.

And just as a soldier stands guard to protect something valuable, so we should ask the Holy Spirit to guard our speech.

PSALM 141:3

3 Set a watch, O LORD, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips.

The words we speak are very important to the Holy Spirit and when we ignore His promptings to use our tongues as He directs, we actually grieve Him.

EPHESIANS 4:29–30

29 Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.

30 And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.

If we are to have controlled and gracious speech, we must yield our tongues to the Holy Spirit's direction.

C. Renew your mind.

Have you ever noticed that you say what you've been thinking about? We must be careful, then, to censor our thoughts. We've all heard the saying, "Garbage in, garbage out." If we are allowing our minds to dwell on that which is negative toward others, we will speak hurtful words.

This is why God instructs us to renew our minds—to fill our thinking with His Word and His truth.

ROMANS 12:2

2 And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may

prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

God gives us the perfect filter to determine what we will allow to fill our minds.

PHILIPPIANS 4:8

8 Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

D. Choose your words carefully.

Illustration

Every morning we stand in front of our closet and pick our outfit for the day. Some of us take great care in making sure that we have just the right outfit. Others of us may not take as long, but we still don't just stand in front of our closet with our eyes closed and reach for the first thing we touch! How would our speech improve if we took as much care choosing our words as we choose our clothes?

Our problem is that we often speak before we think!

PROVERBS 29:20

20 Seest thou a man that is hasty in his words? there is more hope of a fool than of him.

Sometimes we just need to slow down and think! I like this acrostic that helps us think through what we say before we say it. Before you speak, ask yourself the following questions:

- T Is it **true**?
- H Is it **helpful**?
- I Is it **inspiring** (encouraging and building)?
- N Is it **necessary**? (Do I need to say anything at all?)
- K Is it **kind**? (Are these words based on a desire to help?)

E. Listen more.

There are times when it's best just to remain silent.

JAMES 1:19

19 Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.

As you rely on the Holy Spirit, He will prompt you to know when to not say anything at all. Calvin Coolidge once said, "I have never been hurt by anything I did not say."

Sometimes, it's good to remain quiet during times of grief, anger, or uncertainty. Verses in Proverbs suggest some of these times to remain silent:

When you don't thoroughly understand the situation

PROVERBS 18:13

13 He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him.

When there is nothing helpful or constructive to say

PROVERBS 10:19

19 In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin: but he that refraineth his lips is wise.

When it is not necessary to speak

PROVERBS 17:28

28 Even a fool, when he holdeth his peace, is counted wise: and he that shutteth his lips is esteemed a man of understanding.

By taking time to listen, we learn. We learn about the needs of others. We hear what is on their hearts. We give the Holy Spirit an opportunity to speak to us as to how we can offer help and encouragement. As the old proverb says, “Talking comes by nature, silence by wisdom.”

Conclusion

One of the most significant choices in our daily lives is the choice of our words. Not only does this choice affect us, but it also affects all with whom we speak. The following poem (by an anonymous author) reminds me of the power of our words:

*I stood on the streets of a busy town,
Watching men tear a building down:
With a “Ho, heave, ho,” and a lusty yell,
They swung a beam and a sidewall fell.
I asked the foreman of the crew,
“Are those men as skilled as those you’d hire if you
wanted to build?”
“Ah, no,” he said, “no indeed.
Just common labor is all I need.
“I can tear down as much in a day or two,
As would take skilled men a year to do.”
And then I thought as I went on my way,
Just which of these two roles am I trying to play?
Have I walked life’s road with care,*

*Measuring each deed with rule and square?
Or am I one of those who roam the town,
Content with the labor of tearing down?
I want to be a builder and encourager with my words.
I want to use words that will nurture life and growth.*

COLOSSIANS 4:6

*6 Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt,
that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man.*

Let's choose gracious speech!

Study Questions

1. What book of the Bible has many verses about our words?

Proverbs

2. List at least three ways, given in this lesson, that positive words provide positive influence.

Answers will vary, but should include three of the following: Positive words give instruction and wisdom, give direction, praise the Lord, encourage others, are pleasant and appropriate, facilitate healing, bring security and truth.

3. Do you know someone who seems to always have positive words? How have you seen that affect her life and those around her?

Answers will vary.

4. List at least three types of speech, given in this lesson, that bring a destructive influence.

Answers will vary, but should include three of the following: Idle words, angry words, insincere words, gossip, lying, murmuring and complaining.

5. Describe a time in which you have seen the destructive power of words. Are these types of words part of your regular speech patterns?

Answers will vary.

6. Your speech is a reflection of your character, and others identify us by what we say. Would your family, coworkers, or others who spend time with you remember you saying more positive or negative words?

Answers will vary.

7. What are the five ways given in this lesson to change your speech patterns?

Examine your heart; rely on the Holy Spirit; renew your mind; choose your words carefully; listen more.

8. Which one or two areas in the answer above do you need to concentrate on this week?

Answers will vary.

Memory Verse

PSALM 19:14

14 Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.

choose to be filled with the Spirit

Key Verses

EPHESIANS 5:18

18 And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit;

GALATIANS 5:16

16 This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.

Overview

Every choice we have examined so far is important. Each of those choices, and especially as they are made and practiced daily, has the power to transform your walk with God and to shape your future into something magnificent. But this final choice is more than important; it is essential. The choice to walk in the Spirit has the power to shape every other choice that you make.

Lesson Aim

The Spirit-filled life is not a mystical privilege reserved for a few; it is the daily reality that God makes available to each of His children. He commands us to walk in the Spirit, and as we yield ourselves to His control through surrender of our wills and obedience in our choices, He leads us to the

best future imaginable! Choosing the Spirit-filled life will transform your walk with God.

Lesson Goals

At the conclusion of this lesson, students should:

1. Understand that being filled with the Spirit is a simple matter of giving the Holy Spirit full control in every area of life.
2. Recognize the biblically-defined characteristics of a Spirit-filled life.
3. Commit to making daily choices to walk in the Spirit.

Teaching Outline

- I. The Command
- II. The Choice
 - A. Desire
 - B. Surrender
 - C. Obey
- III. The Characteristics
 - A. Grateful speech
 - B. Joyful song
 - C. Loving relationships

LESSON THIRTEEN

choose to be filled with the Spirit

Text

EPHESIANS 5:18

18 And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit;

GALATIANS 5:16

16 This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.

Introduction

As we have seen through these lessons, our lives are a result of the choices that we make. Making wise choices today allows us to enjoy a walk with God and live the plans He has for us tomorrow.

Every choice we have examined so far is important. Each of those choices, and especially as they are made and practiced daily, has the power to transform your walk with God and to shape your future into something magnificent. But this final choice is more than important; it is essential. The choice to walk in the Spirit has the power to shape every other choice that you make.

Walking in the Spirit allows us to know God's power in making and living by the choices we have studied so far.

Sometimes we forget how much we need God's power. We tend to enlarge ourselves in our own imaginations. We think we are big and capable. But if we are to have the wisdom to make choices that honor God and then the strength to carry out those choices, we must have the power of God in our lives.

Thankfully, God has made His power available to us personally. He Himself indwells us, and He wants us to daily experience His mighty power.

EPHESIANS 1:19

19 And what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power,

When you trusted Christ as your Saviour, the Holy Spirit took up permanent residence in your spirit.

EPHESIANS 1:13–14

13 In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise,

14 Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory.

He indwells you and will remain with you until you see the Lord face to face.

EPHESIANS 4:30

30 And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.

Yet, so many Christian women live as if they didn't have the Holy Spirit. We stumble through life trying to make decisions and accomplish actions on our own. We live according to what feels good to us, and we make choices on the faulty authority of our own wisdom.

How is this possible? How can it be that we have God Himself within us, yet we live as if life and success rested on our own shoulders?

Perhaps it's because we've relegated the influence of the Holy Spirit to small sections of our lives. Sure, He indwells us, but we've never learned to listen to His voice for direction or wisdom, much less heed what He prompts us to do.

If we want to live life as God intended, something must change. We must give the Holy Spirit entrance into *every* area of our lives. This is what Scripture calls being "filled with the Spirit."

EPHESIANS 5:18

18 And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit;

Whether or not we experience this filling is our choice.

I. The Command

Have you ever felt that living the Christian life—living as Christ—is impossible? Actually, it is. This is because God never intended for us to live in the power of the flesh. Without Him, we truly can do nothing.

JOHN 15:5

5 *I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.*

But the flip side to that truth is that with Him, all things are possible.

MARK 10:27

27 *And Jesus looking upon them saith, With men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible.*

Let's look at two verses that hold the secret to daily experiencing the power of God:

EPHESIANS 5:18

18 *And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit;*

GALATIANS 5:16

16 *This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.*

Notice that both of these express a command. "Be filled with the Spirit," and "walk in the Spirit."

These do not give a suggestion, a hint, a proposition, or a good idea. They deliver a command. In other words, Spirit-filled living is non-optional if we are to walk in obedience to our Heavenly Father.

The word *filled* in Ephesians 5:18 refers to *control*. In a comparable way to a person being filled with, or controlled by, alcohol, so we are to be controlled by the Holy Spirit. We are to let Him fill us—our minds, thoughts, wills, and actions—so that we are governed by His control.

The very fact that God commands us to be filled with the Spirit indicates that it is quite possible to *not* be filled

with the Spirit. Too often, we give control of our lives to other sources. We let our own selfishness control our decisions. We let our friends, our desire for acceptance, or our quest for monetary success govern our lives. What a loss is ours when we settle for anything less than Holy Spirit control!

Most of us have come to the place where we don't anticipate being filled with the Spirit or expect it as the standard of normal Christian living. We've become willing to settle for good-looking mediocrity (even the flesh has a "good side") that makes minimal attempts at pleasing God, yet is governed by a love for what feels good at the moment.

Please understand, this is not how God designed for you to live the Christian life. He has made His power available to you, and He instructs you to take advantage of it—to be filled with the Spirit.

II. The Choice

Like every other command or principle we have studied in this book, this one boils down to a choice. The best part about this choice, however, is that it makes every other choice simpler and clearer. For if you are filled with the Spirit, you will choose to spend time nurturing your relationship with Him. If you are filled with the Spirit, you will have His strength to help you choose joy regardless of your circumstances. If you are filled with the Spirit, you will choose to serve others. In short, being filled with the Spirit means you have given your will to Him.

So, just how do we make this most important choice?

A. Desire

Have you ever known a young lady who was so desperate to get married that she did everything within her power

Exclusive license for Aaron King Transaction: 1223348

to make it happen? Her desire for marriage dictated her daily choices. Even so, when we desire to be filled of God, we will make daily choices that validate our desire.

God wants us to desire His filling with intensity. The psalmist expressed his deep hunger for God.

PSALM 63:1

1 O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is;

When we desire the filling of the Spirit, we will gladly surrender to His control.

B. Surrender

In Romans 12:1, the Bible gives vivid imagery of what it means to surrender to Him.

ROMANS 12:1

1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

The picture in this verse would have reminded first-century Christians of animal sacrifices—an illustration of complete surrender. An animal could not be “partially sacrificed” or even “mostly sacrificed.” It was all or nothing. Even so, we must wholly and completely surrender ourselves to God.

There is a great distinction, however, between the animal sacrifices mentioned here and the sacrifice God calls us to make. We make a *living* sacrifice. Laying our will on the altar does not call for a physical death, but a death to self. It is the deliberate decision to offer our

will to God—without reservation or stipulation—and then live in surrender to His will. It is to be a “no strings attached” transaction.

One person expressed this surrender with the following prayer: “Lord, I am willing to receive what You give, to lack what You withhold, to relinquish what You take, to suffer what You inflict, to be what You require. And, Lord, if others are to be Your messengers to me, I am willing to hear and heed what they have to say.”

To so completely surrender ourselves to a *person* would be extreme, unhealthy, and unwise. But when considering the sacrificial mercies of God, a complete sacrifice of the will to Him is the only reasonable course of action.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:15

15 And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again.

If we want God to use our lives, we must give Him full control. We must let go of ourselves and continually give ourselves to Him.

C. Obey

When we surrender to God, He begins to direct our lives in an incredible way. Through His Word and through His inner promptings (which are always consistent with His Word), He gives us instruction and guidance. This is the point of opportunity for us to live out the choice we made to surrender. It’s not enough to *say* we surrender, we must actually obey the Lord. Being filled with the Spirit starts with a decision of complete surrender, but it still requires daily choices to yield to His control.

Exclusive license for Aaron King Transaction: 1223348

Resisting or ignoring the promptings of the Holy Spirit damages your relationship with Him.

EPHESIANS 4:30

30 And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.

When we reject the Holy Spirit's control, we grieve Him and demonstrate that we believe our own way is better than His.

Each time the Holy Spirit reminds you of His will, convicts you of error, or prompts you to reach out to someone else, obey Him. It's the only right choice.

TEACHING TIP

Describe a time in which you knew the Holy Spirit was prompting you to act and reach out to someone (whether it be witnessing, writing a note of encouragement, or just giving encouragement to another lady with a hug), but at the moment you didn't understand why...until you obeyed and then learned of the timely need in that person's life.

Desire the Holy Spirit's filling. Ask Him to give you a complete dissatisfaction with mediocrity. Surrender your will to Him, every day and in every way. And then obey Him completely.

III. The Characteristics

You can tell a lot about a person by how she walks. Often, just by a person's step, you can tell if she is bored, sad, hurried,

sick, happy, excited, or has an attitude. Similarly, we can tell a lot about Christians by the way they walk. Our actions, responses, and attitudes reveal if we are walking in the flesh or walking in the Spirit.

Sometimes we just need to pause briefly to examine the characteristics of our own lives. Is there visible evidence that reveals the work God is doing in our hearts and souls? Galatians 5:22–23 lists the evidences.

GALATIANS 5:22–23

22 *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith,*

23 *Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.*

So what does walking in the Spirit look like? What are the characteristics of a life filled with—or given to the control of—the Holy Spirit?

Ephesians gives us a picture of the Spirit-filled life.

EPHESIANS 5:19–22, 25, 28

19 *Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord;*

20 *Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ;*

21 *Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.*

22 *Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.*

25 *Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;*

28 *So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself.*

Let's notice three specific characteristics of Spirit-filled living.

A. Grateful speech

Just walk up to a group of ladies involved in a conversation, and, simply through their words, you can hear what is on their hearts and minds. Sometimes you'll hear negativity, ingratitude, or harshness. But around those who are walking in the Spirit, you'll hear hope, gratefulness, and encouragement. Our speech is so revealing of our hearts!

LUKE 6:45

45 A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh.

In Ephesians 5:20, the Bible describes the speech of one who is filled with the Spirit as expressing constant gratefulness and praise to the Lord: "Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Psalm 34:1 reinforces this truth.

PSALM 34:1

1 I will bless the LORD at all times: his praise shall continually be in my mouth.

B. Joyful song

Illustration

Perhaps you have heard the story of Chippie the parakeet, first told in a newspaper in Galveston, Texas. Chippie belonged to a loving, albeit distracted, housewife who tried to be diligent in her care for him. One day, while vacuuming her living room, she decided to vacuum out the bottom of Chippie's cage. The phone next to the cage rang, and without turning off the vacuum, she answered

it. As she turned from the cage, her hand holding the vacuum nozzle shifted, and Chippie was sucked through the tube and into the canister of the vacuum.

The lady was devastated. She quickly excused herself from the call and opened the vacuum canister. There was Chippie—covered in dust, but still alive.

The lady ran Chippie into the bathroom and held him under the running faucet to clean him. Then she spotted the hair dryer and blasted Chippie dry. He was now washed and dried, but terribly stunned.

After the newspaper reporter heard this story, he called the lady the next day to see how Chippie was doing. “Well,” the lady explained, “Chippie is still alive, but he doesn’t sing any more. He sits and stares.”

There are times in all of our lives when we feel as if we’ve been through Chippie’s misery. It seems we’ve been sucked into the dirt bag of life, stuck under running water, and hit with a blast of hot air! But, unlike Chippie, we have the Holy Spirit. And if we choose to walk with Him, we can keep a song in our hearts even in the midst of trials.

Paul and Silas made a choice to praise the Lord even through dark and painful circumstances. They were unjustly beaten and imprisoned for preaching the Gospel, and yet they sang praises to God.

ACTS 16:25

25 And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them.

Their joyful song not only strengthened their own hearts, but it was a testimony to the other prisoners as well.

Joy is characteristic of someone who is walking in the Spirit.

C. Loving relationships

Ephesians 5–6 has a lot to say about relationships. The verses in these chapters speak of the relationship between a husband and wife, and they describe the submission, sensitivity, and love that should govern that union. Chapter 6 speaks of the relationships between parents and children, as well as those between employers and employees.

When we walk in the Spirit, our relationships with others will be filled with love, understanding, and forbearance. The fruit of the Spirit is not something we keep to ourselves; it is something we offer to others through sacrificial relationships.

ROMANS 12:10

10 Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another.

When we are filled with the Spirit, we invest into relationships with godly, sacrificial love.

Conclusion

Illustration

There is a story of a woman who went to great trouble and expense to have electricity installed in her home shortly after electricity became available in remote rural areas. A few months after the power was turned on, the power company noticed that the home didn't use very much power. Fearing

that there was a problem, they sent a meter reader to check on the matter.

The meter reader saw that the power was indeed working properly and then asked the woman, “Do you use your electricity?” “Of course, we do,” she answered. “We turn it on every night when it gets dark so we can see to light our lamps, and then we turn it back off.”

Doesn’t it sound ridiculous to have all of the power you need and the ability to tap into it any time you wish, but to only use it to see to light candles? Would we ever do anything that made so little sense? Yes, we do, when we apply that same reasoning to the power and presence of God in our lives. We have full access to the power of God, yet we fail to avail ourselves of it.

The Spirit-filled life is not a mystical privilege reserved for a few; it is the daily reality that God makes available to each of His children. He commands us to walk in the Spirit, and as we yield ourselves to His control through surrender of our wills and obedience in our choices, He leads us to the best future imaginable!

Choosing the Spirit-filled life will transform your walk with God. Surrendering to the Holy Spirit is just the beginning of an unforgettable journey better than any trip you could ever imagine, and it will lead you to a destination beyond any you could dream for yourself.

Are you ready to begin? The choice is yours!

Study Questions

1. Why is the choice to walk in the Spirit the most important of all choices Christian women encounter?
The choice to walk in the Spirit has the power to shape every other choice we make.
2. How do we know that Spirit-filled living is non-optional if we want to be obedient to God?
Because Scripture commands us to be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18) and to walk in the Spirit (Galatians 5:16).
3. What does the word *filled* in Ephesians 5:18 mean? What does it mean to be “filled with the Spirit”?
Filled refers to control—like a person would be filled, or controlled by, alcohol. To be “filled with the Spirit” means to be completely governed by His control.
4. What are the three characteristics given in this lesson of Spirit-filled living?
Grateful speech, joyful song, and loving relationships
5. Is your speech regularly filled with gratefulness, praise, and encouragement? Would those around you characterize you as a complainer or encourager?
Answers will vary.
6. Has there been a time when you have observed a Spirit-filled Christian walk through a difficult trial with joy? How did God use their testimony in your life?
Answers will vary.

7. How healthy are your relationships with your family, friends, pastor, church members, and coworkers? Are these relationships characterized by sacrificial love on your part?

Answers will vary.

8. Looking back over this lesson series on choices, what are three areas of choice we have studied in which you can see growth in your own life? What three specific choices do you need to continue to focus on growing in?

Answers will vary.

Memory Verses

EPHESIANS 5:18

18 And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit;

GALATIANS 5:16

16 This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.



Striving Together
P u b l i c a t i o n s

For additional Christian
growth resources visit
www.strivingtogether.com

