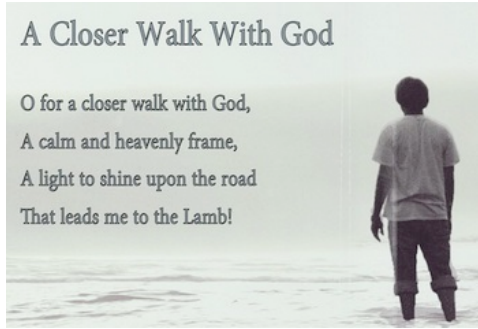


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A Closer Walk With God

O for a closer walk with God,
A calm and heavenly frame,
A light to shine upon the road
That leads me to the Lamb!



David Cambridge

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Preface

This is a series of lessons based on a study titled “A Closer Walk With God” by Mark Copeland.

On His website, Mark says:

“The outlines were developed in the course of my ministry as a preacher of the gospel. Feel free to use them as they are, or adapt them to suit your own personal style. To God be the glory!”

I have adapted all fourteen lesson to better suit my own style and, while following the main structure of the lessons and keeping some of the wording as presented, I have made some significant changes. You can view the original series of lessons here:

<http://executableoutlines.com/cw.htm>

The purpose of this series of lessons is to encourage a closer walk with God and fruitful service as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Lesson One

ARE YOU A DISCIPLE OF JESUS?**Introduction**

“And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen” (**Matthew 28:18-20**).

1. The above statement was made by Jesus to His apostles shortly before He ascended into heaven in what is commonly called “The Great Commission”. The mission of Jesus’ disciples was to “make disciples”. This, then, is the goal of preaching.
2. Are you a disciple of Jesus? Perhaps you believe in Jesus and meet with other Christians on a regular basis, but are believing and attending services all there is to being a disciple of Jesus?

“These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from me” (**Matthew 15:8**).

4. The purpose of this study is to clearly set forth what is involved in being a true disciple of Jesus.

1. THE DEFINITION OF A DISCIPLE

We begin by giving the scriptural definition of “disciple”.

a. Defining “disciple”:

- 1) The word “disciple” literally means **a learner**. It denotes “one who follows another’s teaching” (Vine).
- 2) But a disciple was not only a learner, he was also **an adherent**. For this reason disciples were spoken of as *imitators* of their teachers (cp. **1 Corinthians 11:1**).

b. The goal in being a disciple:

- 1) Jesus stated that the goal of a disciple was to be like his teacher¹:

“A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is perfectly trained will be like his teacher” (**Luke 6:40**).

- 2) To be a disciple of Jesus is to strive to be like Him, which agrees with God’s goal in the redemption of mankind, that they be conformed to the image of His Son:

“For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren” (**Romans 8:29**).

2. THE MARKS OF A DISCIPLE

Do you have a strong desire to follow Jesus and become like Him? Unless you do, it cannot be said that you are truly His disciple. There are also some “identifying marks” of discipleship given by Jesus which can help us to further identify a true disciple of Jesus.

a. A disciple is one who abides in Jesus’ words:

“Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, **If you abide in My word**, you are My disciples indeed” (**John 8:31**).

- 1) This would imply being a diligent student of the teachings of Christ (**2 Timothy 3:14-17**; **1 Peter 2:1-3**; cp. **Acts 17:11**).
- 2) It also requires one to be a “doer” of the word (**Matthew 7:21-27**; **James 1:22-25**).

¹ A popular hymn is “Oh! To Be Like Thee” and the first line reads, “Oh! to be like Thee, blessed Redeemer, This is my constant longing and prayer; Gladly I’ll forfeit all of earth’s treasures, Jesus, Thy perfect likeness to wear.”

“Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does” (James 1:21-25).

A true disciple will not fail to study the Bible diligently or willingly refrain from opportunities to study with other Christians (e.g., Bible classes, church services, gospel meetings).

b. A disciple is also one who loves the brethren:

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35).

- 1) It is a love patterned after the love of Jesus - “as I have loved you” - and a love that is visible to the world - “by this all will know” (cp. 1 John 3:16).
- 2) Therefore, a true disciple will make every effort to get to know his brethren and take advantage of every occasion (attending whenever the church meets) to encourage one another (Hebrews 3:12-13).

c. A disciple is one who bears much fruit:

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

- 1) Notice the word “much” (also found in verse 5). Jesus is not talking about an occasional good deed, but a lifestyle (Ephesians 2:10; 1 Timothy 6:18-19; Titus 2:14; 3:8, 14) which prompts people to glorify God (Matthew 5:16).
- 2) This is so important because a failure to bear *much* fruit will result in being severed from Christ (John 15:1-2), and how can one be a disciple if he is cut off from Christ?

To be a disciple of Jesus means more than just attending services once or twice a week, it requires *commitment*, especially in regards to: (i) The teachings of Christ, (ii) The love of brethren, and (iii) Bearing fruit to the glory of God.

3. THE COST OF BEING A DISCIPLE

The kind of commitment involved in following Jesus is seen in considering the cost of discipleship:

“Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them, If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it - lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace. So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:25-33).

a. Jesus must come first:

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

- 1) The word “hate” here is an unfortunate translation because we know we are, in fact, to honor our parents (Ephesians 6:2) and love our wives (Colossians 3:19). In a similar passage, Jesus says, “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me” (Matthew 10:37). The idea is that our relationship with and service to Christ must take precedence over our relationships with other people. To “hate” in this context, then, is to “love less” (see TCWSD).
- 2) Not only are we to put the Lord before others (Matthew 10:34-37), we must also love Him above ourselves; more than our own lives (Luke 9:23-25).

b. We must be willing to suffer for Christ:

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

- 1) To bear one’s cross means that we must establish and maintain in our lives the divine, spiritual purpose for living. We must commit ourselves to doing whatever is necessary to develop and maintain true spirituality in our lives. The degree to which we suffer is overseen by the Lord Himself.
- 2) In trying to live a godly life in an ungodly world, we may find that following Christ sometimes involves ridicule and persecution (2 Timothy 3:12). Yet despite such persecution, to whatever degree, we must continue to live godly lives and expend our time and effort in promoting the gospel (1 Peter 2:11-12; 3:13-17; 4:19).

Putting it simply, we must forsake all to follow Christ (Luke 14:33). In other words, Jesus must be King and Lord of our lives. Nothing can take precedence over Him and His Will for us. This kind of “high cost” of discipleship demanded by Jesus caused many people to turn away from following Him, but Jesus wasn't trying to attract large crowds, He wanted disciples.

4. THE REWARDS OF BEING A DISCIPLE

The cost of following Jesus is high, but the rewards far outweigh the cost (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

a. There is the promise of future blessings.

- 1) We shall be saved from the wrath of God which is yet to come upon the world for its sins:

“Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him” (Romans 5:9).

- 2) We can look forward with joyful anticipation of spending eternity with God; a life that is free from sorrow, pain and death:

“Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away. Then He who sat on the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And He said to me, Write, for these words are true and faithful. And He said to me, It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts. He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son. But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death” (Revelation 21:1-8).

b. There are also present blessings:

- 1) Jesus offers a *peace* the world cannot give to calm the troubled heart:

“Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (John 14:27).

- 2) His words inspire *joy* to lift our spirits out of any depression:

“These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full” (John 15:11).

- 3) Jesus also offers to those who follow Him *the abiding love of God*, which can cast out fear:

“As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love” (John 15:9).

“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18).

- 4) Jesus makes it possible for us to be *members of the family of God*, which is able, if need be, to replace our physical family:

“Then Peter began to say to Him, See, we have left all and followed You. So Jesus answered and said, Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time - houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions - and in the age to come, eternal life” (Mark 10:28-30).

There are many other blessings we could mention that are enjoyed by disciples of Jesus; but these suffice to demonstrate that though discipleship is costly, the rewards far exceed the cost.

5. BECOMING A DISCIPLE

Understanding the nature of discipleship, its cost, and its rewards, may kindle your desire to be a true disciple of Jesus Christ. But how does one begin?

- a. According to Jesus becoming a disciple involves baptism:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19).

- 1) Why baptism?

- a) The goal of discipleship is to be like Jesus (Luke 6:40; Romans 8:29). He was holy and sinless (Hebrews 4:15), yet we are to be like Him (1 John 4:17).
- b) Fortunately, baptism is described as an act of faith which puts us in contact with the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ so we can be forgiven of our sins (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; Romans 6:3-4; 1 Peter 3:20-21).

“But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:4-7).

- c) Baptism is also the means by which one puts on Christ:

“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27).

Baptism is the logical starting place for true discipleship.

- 2) But what is baptism?

- a) Baptism is an act of submission which must be preceded by faith in Jesus and repentance of our sins (Acts 2:36-38; 8:36-37).
- b) Baptism is also an act of submission which involves a burial in water in which one then rises to walk in newness of life through the power of God (Acts 8:38; Romans 6:3-4; Colossians 2:12).
- c) When baptism is done according to the scriptures, it then becomes an act of faith on our part which results in a wonderful working of God in our lives: (i) Our sins are washed away by the blood of Jesus (Acts 22:16; Ephesians 5:25-27), (ii) We are “regenerated” and “renewed” by the Spirit of God so we can now live for God (Titus 3:5-6), (iii) It is truly a “rebirth” involving both water and the Spirit (John 3:5).
- b. But baptism is only the beginning; *teaching and obedience* must follow (Matthew 28:20). This is the very definition of a disciple – one who learns and follows (obeys). Jesus clearly states that people must be TAUGHT (that is, to be learners) and we are to OBSERVE (that is, to be adherents or doers). In this way we embark on a life devoted to learning and doing all that Jesus has commanded us to do.

Conclusion

1. A disciple of Jesus is one that learns from and adheres to Jesus with the objective of becoming like Him (**Luke 6:40**). A true disciple is one that abides in Jesus' teaching, exercises love toward his brethren, and bears much fruit (good works) in his life.
2. If we desire to be a disciple of Jesus, then we must first count the cost (**Luke 14:25-33**). First, it means that Jesus must be our Lord and King, and our relationship with and service to Christ must take precedence over our relationships with other people (**Matthew 10:34-37; Luke 14:26**). We must also love Him above ourselves; more than our own lives (**Luke 9:23-25**). Second, Christians have always been persecuted to some degree and we must be prepared to suffer for the Lord's sake (**Luke 14:27**).
3. The cost of being a disciple is high, but the rewards are much higher. (i) Despite all the trials and tribulations a disciple may suffer for Christ's sake, he enjoys a peace (**John 14:27**) and joy (**John 15:11**) that are inexpressible. (ii) A disciple has the promise of eternal life (**1 John 2:25**) in heaven (**Revelation 21:1-8**).

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (**2 Corinthians 4:16-18**).

4. Jesus instructed His apostles to “make disciples of all the nations” and this involves being baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit (**Matthew 28:19**).
 - a. If you desire to be a disciple of Christ, then speak to someone today about being baptized in Christ for the forgiveness of your sins (**Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16**).
 - b. If you are a disciple of Jesus Christ, then the prospects of a closer walk with God and a more fruitful service as a disciple should be of great interest to you. We pray that the following lessons will help fulfill that interest.

Questions

1. What is a disciple of Christ?
2. What is the goal of a disciple of Christ?
3. What are the marks of a genuine disciple of Christ?
4. What is the cost of being a disciple of Christ?
5. What are the rewards of being a disciple of Christ?
6. How does one become a disciple of Christ?

Lesson Two

THE BLESSINGS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF BEING A CHRISTIAN**Introduction**

1. We all experience several big events in our lives, but the most important event in anyone's life is to be "born again." Jesus said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (**John 3:5**).
2. There are some, unfortunately, that have not fully comprehended the significance of being a Christian, a child of God. Serving the Lord can only be productive and enjoyable by grasping the true significance of being Christian.
3. This lesson is designed to encourage us to be fruitful in our service as disciples of Christ. To help motivate us in fulfilling this goal we shall summarize just a few of the blessings and responsibilities we have as Christians.

1. GOD AS OUR HEAVENLY FATHER

God is our Father and we, as His children, have a responsibility to submit to Him in all things.

"Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him" (**1 John 3:1**).

a. Consider the blessings of having God as our Father:

- 1) He is the source of every good and perfect gift from above (**James 1:17; Matthew 7:11**).
- 2) He provides us comfort in all our afflictions (**2 Corinthians 1:3-4**).
- 3) He chastises us as sons (**Hebrews 12:5-11**).
- 4) He will never forsake us (**Hebrews 13:5-6**).

b. Having God as our Father brings with it responsibilities:

- 1) We must **submit to God** (**James 4:7**). We do this by submitting to His word (**Romans 2:12-13; James 1:22**) and to His providential workings in our lives (**1 Peter 5:6-11**).
- 2) We must also **draw near to God** (**James 4:8**). Just as an earthly father delights when his children want to draw near to him, so does God (cp. **Matthew 23:37**). We draw nearer to God by "cleansing our hands" and "purifying our hearts" (**James 4:8**).
 - a) We *cleans*e our hands and *purify* our hearts by obtaining forgiveness and then strengthening our resolve to serve Him (cp. **2 Corinthians 7:1**).
 - b) For a Christian, this involves repentance, confession of sins, and prayer (**Acts 8:22; 1 John 1:9**).

2. JESUS CHRIST AS OUR LORD AND HIGH PRIEST

Since Jesus is our Lord we must submit to His authority (**Luke 6:46**), and as our High Priest we must turn to Him as our only advocate with the Father (**1 John 2:1**).

"Yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live" (**1 Corinthians 8:6**).

"Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession" (**Hebrews 4:14**).

a. Think for a moment about this blessing:

- 1) Jesus is our Lord and rules over the kings of the earth (**Revelation 1:5-6**), He has all authority in heaven and earth (**Matthew 28:18**), all things have been made subject to Him (**1 Peter 3:22**), and yet, He calls us His "brethren"!

"For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying: I will declare Your name to My brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will sing praise to You" (**Hebrews 2:11-12**).

2) As “High Priest”, Jesus intercedes on our behalf (**Romans 8:34; 1 John 2:1**).

a) He is a High Priest who understands how we feel (**Hebrews 2:17-18**).

b) He is a High Priest who “ever lives” to make intercession for us (**Hebrews 7:24-25**).

b. What are our responsibilities toward Jesus as our Lord and High Priest?

1) If Jesus is truly *our* Lord, then we must do what He says (**Luke 6:46**). This means carefully observing everything He taught (**Matthew 28:18-20**) and keeping His commandments (**John 15:10, 14**).

2) We must also utilize Jesus’ role as our High Priest (**Hebrews 4:14-16**). This means we can go to the throne of grace to obtain grace and mercy in times of need. There is no other advocate apart from Jesus (**1 John 2:1**).

3. THE HOLY SPIRIT WHO DWELLS IN US

Since the Holy Spirit dwells in us, we must ensure the church is holy and we must glorify God in our bodies.

“Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” (**1 Corinthians 3:16**).

a. Wonderful blessings are attributed to the Holy Spirit’s indwelling:

1) The Holy Spirit gives us strength to put to death the evil deeds of the flesh (**Romans 8:11-13; Ephesians 3:16, 20**).

2) The Holy Spirit intercedes for us when we pray (**Romans 8:26-27**).

b. Since the Spirit dwells within us, we have three essential responsibilities:

1) To keep the temple of God, the church, holy (**1 Corinthians 3:16-17**).

2) To glorify God in our bodies (**1 Corinthians 6:18-20**).

3) To walk in the Spirit, which will be evidenced by the fruit of the Spirit in our lives (**Galatians 5:16-18, 22-25**).

4. THE CHURCH AS OUR FAMILY

As God’s children we are all brothers and sisters, and we have a responsibility to love and edify one another.

“But if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (**1 Timothy 3:15**).

a. The blessing of having the church as our family: in God’s family we have many fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters (**1 Timothy 5:1-2; cp. Matthew 12:46-50**).

b. Responsibilities of having the church as our family:

1) We are to “edify one another” (**Hebrews 10:24-25**). Indeed, each one is to fulfill their part (**Ephesians 4:15-16**). This necessitates assembling together frequently (**Acts 2:46; 5:42; 20:7; 1 Corinthians 14:26; Hebrews 3:13**).

2) We are to “bear one another’s burdens” (**Galatians 6:1-2; Romans 12:15**).

Conclusion

1. There are some Christians that have not fully comprehended the significance of being a Christian, which is essential in order to be productive and experience the joy of serving the Lord. In this lesson we have summarized some of the blessings and responsibilities we have as Christians:

a. God is our Father and we are His children, and we have a responsibility to submit and draw near to Him.

b. Jesus is our Lord and High Priest and we have a responsibility to obey Him as Lord and to utilize His role as our High Priest in going to the throne of grace to obtain grace and mercy in seasons of need.

c. The Holy Spirit dwells in us and we have a responsibility to walk in holiness, glorify God in our bodies, and to walk in the Spirit.

d. All of us are God’s children; we are members of God’s family and we have a responsibility to love and edify one another and bear one another’s burdens.

2. There are certainly many more blessings and responsibilities that we have as Christians, but these ought to suffice to impress upon us how blessed we are as Christians and how important it is that we fulfill our responsibilities toward one another. A failure to fulfill our responsibilities will result in the loss of all the blessings we have:

“Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called today, lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, while it is said: Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion” (**Hebrews 3:12-15**).

Questions

1. Why is it essential to grasp the true significance of being a Christian?
2. What responsibilities does having God as our Father bring with it?
3. Since Jesus is our Lord and High Priest, what responsibilities do we have toward Him?
4. What responsibilities are implied having the Holy Spirit dwell within us?
5. What responsibilities do we have toward the church as our family?

Lesson Three

OUR PUBLIC ASSEMBLIES**Introduction**

1. One of the blessings, privileges, and responsibilities we have as Christians is that of regularly assembling with other Christians (Acts 2:46; 5:42; Acts 20:7). Indeed, we are warned not to forsake the assemblies (Hebrews 10:25).
2. The purpose of our assembling is to express praise and devotion to God and Christ (Ephesians 5:18-21) and to exhort and encourage one another to greater service (1 Corinthians 14:26; Hebrews 10:24-25).
3. In this lesson we shall briefly discuss the activities in which we engage during our assemblies, show how each activity is designed to express praise to God and edify the members. We will also consider how we can get the most out of our public assemblies.

1. THE ACTIVITIES OF OUR ASSEMBLIES

There are five basic activities in which the church engages: praying, singing, teaching, the Lord's Supper, and taking up a collection.

a. Prayer:

- 1) We have several examples of group prayer in the early church (Acts 4:23-24; 12:5, 12).
- 2) The value of such prayer is implied by James: "Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much" (James 5:16). If such is true concerning the prayer of *one* righteous man, how much more the prayers of *many* righteous! Prayer not only praises God, it blesses (or benefits) those who pray:

"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7).
- 3) **Getting the most out of prayer.** To get the most out of public prayers, make each prayer your own and, if you agree with what has been said, offer a hearty "Amen".

b. Singing:

- 1) Christians are commanded to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16).
- 2) These verses teach us that the emphasis ought to be on praising God, teaching one another, and making melody "in your hearts". So the emphasis is not on *how we sound*, but on *what we say* and how we feel:
- 3) **Getting the most out of singing.** To get the most out of public singing, focus on how you feel, not on how you sound; pay attention to the words more than the melody; concentrate on engaging the mind and heart, not just the mouth. Also, spend time singing in private (James 5:13).

c. The word of God:

- 1) Teaching or preaching of the word of God was part of public worship in the early church (1 Corinthians 14:26; Acts 20:7). Preaching and teaching is necessary for spiritual growth (1 Peter 2:2). Indeed, the Lord Himself has ordained teachers for this purpose:

"And He Himself gave some to be **apostles**, some **prophets**, some **evangelists**, and some **pastors and teachers**, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head – Christ - from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love" (Ephesians 4:11-16).

- 2) How we listen to the proclamation of God's word is an indication of our devotion to God:
 - a) We should be quick to *hear* what God's word has to say (**James 1:18-19**) and to *receive* it with a proper attitude of meekness (**James 1:21; Mk 4:23-25**).
 - b) But merely hearing the word of God is of no benefit, it must be applied. In other words, we must do what it says (**Luke 6:46-49; Romans 2:13; James 1:22**).
- 3) **Getting the most out of public teaching.** Listen attentively, take notes, and ask yourself, "What are the applications for *me*?"

d. The Lord's Supper:

- 1) The Lord's Supper is also called the "breaking of bread" (**Acts 2:42; 20:7**) and "Communion" (**1 Corinthians 10:16**). It is a memorial feast instituted by Jesus Himself (**Matthew 26:26-29; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26**). In taking of the Lord's Supper we...
 - a) Look back and remember Jesus' death on the cross for our sins (**1 Corinthians 11:23-25**).
 - b) Look inwardly to ensure we are discerning the Lord's body (**1 Corinthians 11:27-32**).
 - c) Look forward to His coming again (**1 Corinthians 11:26**).
- 2) When partaken of in the right manner:
 - a) It honors Jesus ("This do, in remembrance of Me").
 - b) It renews us to greater faithfulness (**1 Corinthians 11:28-32**).
 - c) It strengthens our oneness in the body of Christ (**1 Corinthians 10:17**).
 - d) We continually share in the "body and blood of the Lord" (**1 Corinthians 10:16**); not literally; perhaps referring to a continual communion with the benefits of that sacrifice (e.g., forgiveness).
- 3) **Getting the most out of partaking of the Lord's Supper.** Before partaking of the Lord's Supper: (i) If any comments are made, pay attention to what is said (ii) if there is a scripture reading, read along and focus on the words, (iii) if there is an appropriate song, think about the sentiments being expressed, (iv) some people like to read a scripture as the elements are being passed around, e.g., Isaiah 53; Psalms 22; Luke 22:40-44.

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| The Lord's Supper is a time of <i>retrospection</i> , <i>introspection</i> , and <i>anticipation</i> . |
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e. The collection:

- 1) The early church is noteworthy for its love for one another (**Acts 2:44, 45; 4:32-35**), which went beyond those in the local congregation (**Acts 11:27-30**). In time, a systematic manner for providing for needy Christians was instituted (**1 Corinthians 16:1-2**). The primary purpose of the collection, then, was to provide for needy Christians, which included the support of preachers (**2 Corinthians 11:8-9; Philippians 4:10-18**).
- 2) How much should one give? The New Testament does not set a percentage (like the "tithe" under the Law of Moses), but rather instructs us to give according to the following principles:
 - a) Give as we have prospered (**1 Corinthians 16:2**).
 - b) Must give with a willing mind (**2 Corinthians 8:12**).
 - c) Give according to what we have (**2 Corinthians 8:12-13**).
 - d) Give as we have purposed in our heart (**2 Corinthians 9:7**).
 - e) We must give cheerfully, not grudgingly or of necessity (**2 Corinthians 9:7**).
 - f) We ought to keep in mind the principle of sowing and reaping (**2 Corinthians 9:6, 8**).

- 3) As we give into the treasury each week, we fulfill the purpose in assembling together:
 - a) We are blessed in giving (**Acts 20:35; 2 Corinthians 9:11**).
 - b) Brethren's needs are met (**2 Corinthians 9:12a**).
 - c) God is glorified (**2 Corinthians 9:12-15**).
- 4) **Getting the most out of giving.** (i) When we give into the treasury each week, we are giving to God, (ii) we are contributing toward the propagation of the most important message anyone can ever hear – the gospel, (iii) our giving is not forgotten by God because it is a fruit that abounds to your account (**Philippians 4:7**), and (iv) remember the examples of the churches in Macedonia and of the Lord Himself (**2 Corinthians 8:1-9**).

2. HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF OUR ASSEMBLIES

What we get out of coming together will be determined by what we ourselves are willing to contribute.

a. Being encouraged by the presence of the Lord:

- 1) In a vision, John saw seven golden lampstands and Jesus walking among them (**Revelation 1:12-13**). Jesus Himself explains that the seven golden lampstands are “the seven churches” (**Revelation 1:20**). Jesus mentions the seven churches of Asia because those are the churches to which He writes, but Jesus actually walks in the midst of all the churches throughout the world. It is a great encouragement to know that Jesus is in the midst of our assemblies (cp. **Hebrews 2:11-12**).
- 2) For many of us, the first day of the week and the midweek Bible class are the only opportunities we get to see one another, and, after spending so much time in the world, it is a great encouragement to be among sincere brethren of the same mind and the same heart (**Psalms 133:1; cp. 122:1**).
- 3) We might sometimes begin to feel that we are the only Christians in the world, and so it is a great encouragement to have visitors from various places who remind us that there are indeed brethren all over the world going through the same struggles (**1 Peter 5:8-9**).

b. You get out of it what you put into it. There are some that whine, saying, “I find I just don’t get anything out the service”. I suspect that the majority of these whiners are those that don’t put anything into the service, either!

- 1) I believe there are two basic attitudes we ought to have: (i) Go to services expecting to be encouraged and edified, and (ii) Go to services prepared to encourage and edify. Preparation beforehand makes a big difference: such as praying and meditating upon what you are going to do, and thinking about what you can do to make the assembly more edifying (such as welcoming and visiting). In fact, you will find that the more you put into a service, the more you will get out of it.
- 2) Perhaps, though, you need to examine your heart. Is your whining a symptom of a deeper spiritual problem?

“If the thought of attending services is disagreeable and you rejoice when they are over, then you might ask yourself, ‘What is my real motive for attending?’” (Advice For Daily Living by David Collins).

Conclusion

1. There are several activities in which we engage on the first day of the week that are designed to express praise to God and by which we may edify one another: prayer, singing, preaching and teaching, the Lord’s Supper, and even the weekly collection.
2. If our attitude is right and our heart is engaged, then we will go to services to both give and receive.

“I was glad when they said to me, Let us go into the house of Jehovah” (**Psalms 122:1**).
3. Neglecting the assemblies is detrimental to our spiritual growth. Do we express our love for God, our brethren, even our own selves as we should? One of the greatest spiritual blessings we enjoy in Christ in this life is the fellowship we share in our public assemblies... Let's all do our part to fully utilize that blessing.

Questions

1. Does one attend the assemblies to be entertained, or to serve?
2. Do you attend *every* assembly of the congregation? If not, why not?!
3. What can you do before the assemblies to get more out of them?
4. What are the benefits of attending services?
5. Why would someone attend services when they have no real desire to do so?

Lesson Four

PRINCIPLES OF PRAYER**Introduction**

1. One of the greatest blessings and privileges enjoyed by Christians in this life is that of prayer; through which we can approach the throne of God (**Hebrews 4:16**). It is through prayer that we receive:
 - a. Forgiveness for sins (**1 John 1:9**).
 - b. Peace of mind (**Philippians 4:6-7**).
 - c. Strength for the inner man through the Spirit (**Ephesians 3:14-16**).
2. This is why Paul exhorts Christians to be diligent in their prayers:

“Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints” (**Ephesians 6:18**).

“Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving” (**Colossians 4:2**).

“Pray without ceasing” (**1 Thessalonians 5:17**).
3. Jesus knows that people have a tendency to become slack in their prayers (**Luke 18:1**), and it is out of a similar concern that prompted two lessons devoted specifically to prayer. The aim of this and the next lesson is to encourage us to be more diligent in prayer. To this end, we shall examine:
 - a. The basic principles of prayer.
 - b. The practice of prayer in our daily lives.

1. CHARACTERISTICS OF ACCEPTABLE PRAYER

There are seven characteristics of prayer that are essential in order for our prayers to be acceptable.

- a. Praying in expectation:
 - 1) Jesus said, “And all things, whatever you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive” (**Matthew 21:22**). A prayer must be **offered in faith**. It is a vain thing to pray if we do not believe we will receive that for which we ask.
 - 2) The Hebrew writer says, “But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (**Hebrews 11:6**). We must have **faith in God and in His ability to answer our prayers** (**Hebrews 11:6**); otherwise our prayers will not be answered (cp. **James 1:5-8**).
 - 3) Is your faith weak? You can increase your faith by reading and studying God's word (**Romans 10:17**).
- b. Praying with the right attitude:
 - 1) Prayer must be offered in the spirit of humility. One of the best examples of the right and wrong attitude is seen in the parable told by Jesus regarding a Pharisee and a publican that went to the temple to pray:

“Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men - extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (**Luke 18:9-14**).

- 2) The Publican confessed he was a sinner and the Pharisee viewed himself as a righteous man. In fact, he thanked God that he was in no wise like the publican. The Pharisee's spiritual blindness and bankruptcy astounds us, but such is the power of pride. This is why James says, "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (**James 4:6**). Indeed, the Publican went home justified.
- 3) What about us, has pride so blinded us that we fail to see our need for the blood of Jesus? Do we consider ourselves to be standing firmly in righteousness and despise those around us that we judge to be sinners? We would do well to heed Paul's admonition: "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (**1 Corinthians 10:12**). And let us remember that "Jehovah is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit" (**Psalms 34:18**).

c. Praying in the will of God:

- 1) John says, "Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us" (**1 John 5:14**). Notice carefully the condition: "... if we ask anything according to His will", then "He hears us". This, of course, means we must know the will of God, which is what Paul says: "... understand what the will of the Lord is" (**Ephesians 5:17**). The only way to know the will of God is by studying the scriptures.
- 2) Jesus provides the example for us in His prayers at Gethsemane shortly before His arrest

"Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done" (**Luke 22:42**).

- 3) Too often, though, a person's prayers are unanswered because they are more concerned with *their* will, rather than *God's* will (**cp. James 4:3**). Let us be sure, then, that our concern, first and foremost, is with the will of God, not our selfish desires.

d. Praying in righteousness:

- 1) David wrote, "The eyes of Jehovah are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their cry" (**Psalms 34:15**). Indeed, James tells that, "The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective" (**James 5:16**). Solomon said, "One who turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination" (**Proverbs 28:9**).
- 2) While it is generally true that God hears the prayers of the righteous and the prayers of the lawless are an abomination to Him, we ought to be careful about stating categorically that "God will not hear the prayers of anyone that is not a Christian". Consider: Cornelius was not a Christian but the angel that appeared to him said, "Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God" (**Acts 10:4**). God hears the prayers of those that are seeking Him (**Isaiah 55:6**).
- 3) Since God hears the prayers of the righteous, it is essential to ensure that we are righteous before God. Attaining to a state of righteousness will not be achieved by our own efforts, but through faith in Christ. To be righteous before God requires that we submit to the righteousness of God offered in Christ (**cp. Romans 10:1-4**), which means obeying the gospel of Christ (**Romans 1:16-17**).

e. Praying with thanksgiving:

- 1) I once knew someone that was always getting himself into financial difficulties and coming to me for help. The thing is, while he was always willing to receive my help, he very rarely thanked me for helping him. Maybe you have known someone like that?
- 2) Do we have a tendency to go to God and ask for help but fail to offer thanksgiving... thanksgiving for the general blessings of life but also for answering our past prayers? You might remember the occasion when Jesus healed ten lepers and yet only one returned to thank Him (**Luke 17:11-16**). The Lord responded, saying, "Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine? Were there not any found who returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?" (**Luke 17:17-18**).

Knowing the will of God is essential to living a godly life (Ephesians 5:17). Some people, though, think they can know the will of God and live a godly life without devoting themselves to reading and studying the scriptures. They may have some knowledge of the scriptures and they may even be living a godly life to some extent, but, ultimately, they are pursuing their own will - NTW, Vol. II, #462.

- 3) When we go to God in prayer it is essential to express our thankfulness if we expect God to heed our requests. Again, this means thanking Him for all our daily blessings, but also for all past blessings and answers to prayer. Note the following verses:

“Giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:20).

“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6).

“Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving” (Colossians 4:2).

“Pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:17-18).

f. Praying persistently:

- 1) While vain repetitions are of no avail (Matthew 6:7-8), persistent, sincere prayers reveal a strong desire. Jesus illustrated this aspect of prayer through two parables:

“And He said to them, Which of you shall have a friend, and go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me on his journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and he will answer from within and say, 'Do not trouble me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give to you'? I say to you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as many as he needs. So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened” (Luke 11:5-10).

“Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart, saying: There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, 'Get justice for me from my adversary.' And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, 'Though I do not fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.' Then the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:1-8).

- 2) The virtue of persistence is demonstrated in the prayers of (i) Jesus at Gethsemane (Matthew 26:44), (ii) Paul, pertaining to his thorn in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7-8), and (iii) the early church (Acts 2:42).
- 3) The message is simple: persist in your prayers and don't give up. Such persistence reveals the strength of your faith and desire.

g. Praying to God through Christ:

- 1) All our prayers must be offered in “Jesus’ name”. Praying in Jesus’ name means praying with His authority and asking God the Father to act upon our prayers because we come in the name of His Son, Jesus (John 14:13-14). Jeffrey W. Hamilton says, “The phrase ‘in Jesus' name’ means that the requests being made are done in accordance to Jesus' will or by His authority”.
- 2) Paul says, “Giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:20). This means much more than simply adding a little phrase “in Jesus' name” at the end of our prayers; we must realize that Jesus is the only way by which we can approach God (John 14:6); we must view Him as our “High Priest” who intercedes for us (Hebrews 7:24-25; John 14:13).
- 3) Appealing to God in the name of His Son can give us great confidence that God will provide our needs (Hebrews 4:14-16).

II. OBSTACLES TO PRAYER

We can pray but that is no guarantee that God hears us! We must ensure that we are not hindering our own prayers.

a. Selfish motives:

“You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures” (James 4:2-3).

- 1) Much good can be accomplished for ourselves, our brethren, and all men. James says, “The effective, fervent prayer of a *righteous man* avails much” (James 5:16). But some may have noticed that their prayers are not answered! If so, then we ought to examine the content of our prayers – it could be that we are asking amiss, that is, asking for things to satisfy our selfish desires (James 4:3).
- 2) A person might pray for legitimate things like a job, prosperity, restoration of health, wisdom, greater abilities, etc. While these are legitimate things for which to pray, whether God grants these things will depend on the motive of such requests. James makes this clear: “You ask and do not receive...” Why? “... because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures” (James 4:3). A selfish purpose in prayer robs prayer of power, and so our words simply fall powerless to the ground.
- 3) Evil motives and selfish purposes will certainly hinder our prayers. Let us, then, examine the content of our prayers, but, more importantly, our motives and purposes, and, if necessary, realign our motives to the will of God (1 John 5:14).

b. Unconfessed sin:

“Behold, Jehovah’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear” (Isaiah 59:1-2).

- 1) Some may wonder whether God hears our prayers, and sometimes He doesn’t! This is not because He is unable to hear (like a lifeless idol), but because of some sin in our lives. Sin causes God to hide His face from us, so that He will not hear (Isaiah 59:2; cp. John 9:31). David recognized this truth, saying, “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear” (Psalms 66:18). The idea is, “If I have cherished it in my soul; if I have gloated over past sins; if I am purposing to commit sin again; if I am not willing to abandon all sin, and to be holy” (Barnes).
- 2) I believe there are two types of sinners: (i) The sinner that is aware of sin in his life and is stricken by his conscience day after day until he confesses it. David describes this, saying, “When I kept silent, my bones grew old through my groaning all the day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was turned into the drought of summer. Selah” (Psalms 32:3-4). (ii) The sinner that is deluded and walks in his own self-righteousness. The self-righteous Pharisee praying in the Temple comes to mind: “The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men - extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess’” (Luke 18:11-12). So you can see that one needs to honestly examine himself to discover his error. In fact, we ought to pray and ask God to expose sin in our lives. David prayed:

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalms 139:23-24).

- 3) If we feel that God is not answering our prayers, then it may be due to some unconfessed sin. The way to remove this hindrance is to (i) “Search out and examine our ways, and turn back to Jehovah” (Lamentations 3:40), and, (ii) Confess our sins to God:

“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8-9).

c. Improper treatment of others:

- 1) The poor: Solomon wrote, “He who has pity on the poor lends to Jehovah, and He will pay back what he has given” (**Proverbs 19:17**). Later he warned, “Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be heard” (**Proverbs 21:13**).
- 2) One’s spouse: Peter says, “Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered” (**1 Peter 3:7**). True, Peter is specifically addressing husbands, but I think a wife can also behave in such a way toward her husband that would hinder her prayers.
- 3) One’s brother: if there is an issue between brethren, then it is essential to resolve it. A failure to do so will render our worship unacceptable (**Matthew 5:23-24**; cp. **Matthew 6:14-15**; **18:21-23**).

3. ANSWERS TO PRAYERS

God answers our prayers much in the same way we answer the request of someone: yes, no, yes but wait, yes, but not as you expect.

a. There are several ways in which God may answer our prayers:

- 1) “Request granted”:
 - a) God may answer “Yes” and grant the petitions we ask of Him. Such will be the case the more we try to do His will in our lives (**1 John 3:22**).
 - b) On one occasion the disciples prayed for boldness (**Acts 4:23-30**) and the Lord answered immediately: “And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness” (**Acts 4:31**).
- 2) “Request granted, but not yet”:
 - a) God may grant our request, but in a time that is in accordance with His will and purpose for our lives.
 - b) Hannah was barren and prayed for a child. The Lord granted her request but it was several years before her request was granted (**1 Samuel 1:1-20**).
- 3) “Request granted, but not as you might expect”:
 - a) Sometimes God answers our prayers but in a way than we don’t anticipate.
 - b) Moses delivered Israel from bondage as far as the Red Sea, but the Lord had hardened Pharaoh’s heart and he pursued the Israelites. Seeing Pharaoh and his army approaching them, the Israelites cried out to the Lord for deliverance (**Exodus 14:1-10**). The Lord answered their prayer but certainly not in a way they would have expected. He did not rain down fire from heaven but, instead, opened up the Red Sea to allow the Israelites to pass through it (**Exodus 14:11-31**).
- 4) “Request denied”:
 - a) Sometimes God denies our request, and while we may not understand His decisions, we trust that He knows best (**Isaiah 55:8-9**).
 - b) The following passages are not only examples of God denying requests but He also explains why:
 - (i) David committed adultery with Bathsheba and a child was born to them, but God told him the child would die. So David prayed for the child but his request was denied and God told him why: “However, because by this deed you have given great occasion to the enemies of Jehovah to blaspheme, the child also who is born to you shall surely die” (**2 Samuel 12:14**).
 - (ii) Paul had a “thorn in the flesh” and he prayed three times for it to be taken away. But the Lord denied his request, saying, “My grace is sufficient for you...” (**2 Corinthians 12:9**). Interestingly, Paul had been told why God allowed Satan to inflict him with this thorn: “... lest I be exalted above measure” (**2 Corinthians 12:7**).

Conclusion

1. One of the great blessings and privileges we have as children of God is that of prayer. The importance of prayer is seen in the number of exhortations to pray throughout the New Testament (e.g., **Ephesians 6:18; Colossians 4:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:17**).
2. In this lesson we have discussed some of the basic principles of prayer: (i) Characteristics of acceptable prayer, (ii) Obstacles to prayer, and (iii) Answers to prayer. Hopefully, understanding and applying the principles discussed in this lesson will assure greater success in having our prayers answered.
3. In the next lesson we will consider “the practice of prayer”, which will offer suggestions on the when, with whom, how and what of prayer.

Questions

1. Do you find it easy or difficult to pray?
2. Do you believe in the power of God to answer prayer?
3. Should we be disappointed when it appears that God has not answered our prayer?
4. Are you spending time every day devoted to prayer?
5. For what things ought we to pray?

Lesson Five

THE PRACTICE OF PRAYER**Introduction**

1. In the previous lesson we discussed Principles Of Prayer: (i) Characteristics of acceptable prayer, (ii) Obstacles to prayer, and (iii) Answers to prayer.
2. In this lesson we will offer several suggestions regarding The Practice Of Prayer.

1. WHEN SHOULD WE PRAY?

As Christians we have a great deal of freedom in regards to when and where we pray.

a. Praying at set times:

- 1) Praying at set times can help to create the habit of praying:
 - a) David prayed three times a day: “Evening and morning and at noon I will pray, and cry aloud, and He shall hear my voice” (**Psalms 55:17**). Notice his confidence: “He shall hear my voice”.
 - b) Daniel prayed three times a day: “Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days” (**Daniel 6:10**).
- 2) David and Daniel (and there were likely others) made it a habit to pray at set times throughout the day, and we would do well to imitate their example. It may not be practical for everyone to pray three times a day, but, at the very least, we ought to make some time each day to be alone with God in prayer - early morning may be best for some (**Psalms 5:3; 119:47**) and late at night may be easier for others (**Psalms 119:55, 62**).

b. Praying when needs arise:

- 1) There are occasions that call for an immediate prayer:
 - a) When the time came for Him to select His apostles, Jesus spent the whole night in prayer (**Luke 6:12-13**).
 - b) When Paul and Silas were cast into prison they prayed and sung hymns to God (**Acts 16:25**).
 - c) When Peter was thrown into prison, the church continued in prayer for him (**Acts 12:5**).
 - d) When Paul and Barnabas appointed elders to serve a congregation, they prayed (**Acts 14:21-23**).
 - e) When Nehemiah was about to request permission to return to Judah to rebuild Jerusalem, he offered a short prayer (**Nehemiah 2:4-5**).
- 2) It might be that we pray at appointed times, but neglect to do so when various occasions arise when prayer would be fitting; either for ourselves or others. It would be good to make a conscious effort to pray on such occasions until it becomes a habit.

c. Praying without ceasing:

- 1) Paul says, “Pray without ceasing” (**1 Thessalonians 5:17**). I don’t believe he means this literally because we would not be able to function properly. But I do believe that God desires prayer to be dominant in our lives; we are to be *a praying people*. Another aspect of his thought might be that we continue in our prayers without interruption. In other words, we don’t just pray twice a week or when we feel like praying, but to continue in prayer every day.
- 2) A young lady once said to me, “I try to pray, but I can’t think of much to pray about.” So I listed various categories of prayer and then filled in all the sub-headings under each. This list of things about which she could pray overwhelmed her. Sometime later, she came to me and said, “I wish there were more hours in the day because I don’t have enough time to pray about everything!”

2. WITH WHOM SHOULD WE PRAY?

There are various occasions on which praying with others is appropriate, and even necessary.

- a. Different occasions demand that we pray alone, sometimes with a few, and sometimes with the whole church:
 - 1) Jesus exhorted us saying, “But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly” (**Matthew 6:6**). I believe that private prayer should occupy the largest portion of our total life of prayer. Consider the value of going to the secret place:
 - a) It allows you to be completely open and confess things that are only appropriate for God to hear.
 - b) It forms a close union, communion and fellowship with God (it is just you and Him).
 - c) It reveals your sincerity and devotion (one does not pray in private if his aim is to please men because they can't see you – Matthew 6:5. And one does not pray in private to impress God because you know He will see right through you).
 - d) Your Father will reward you (**Matthew 6:6**).
 - 2) In the following scriptures we see Christians praying together. In each case it is not an individual praying, and it is not within the assembly.
 - a) Husbands and wives can pray together (**1 Corinthians 7:5; 1 Peter 3:7**).
 - b) A few brethren praying for someone who is sick (**James 5:14-15**), Paul and Silas praying together (**Acts 16:25**), Paul praying with the elders from Ephesus (**Acts 20:17 <> 26**).
 - c) Sometimes many gathered together for prayer (**Acts 12:12**).
 - d) When Paul left Tyre, all the disciples accompanied him out of the city, and then they all prayed together (**Acts 21:3-5**). While all the members of the church were present, this was not a church meeting.
 - 3) One of the activities in which we engage when we assemble together is public prayer (**1 Timothy 2:1-2; cp. Acts 12:5**).
- b. I have encountered people that believed that you had to “go to church” to pray. Such a belief is far from the truth – we can pray anywhere at any time and with whom we will. So as we seek to “pray without ceasing” let us take every opportunity to pray, whether in the secret place, with a spouse, with brethren, or in the assemblies.

3. HOW SHOULD WE PRAY?

We feel so small, so inadequate, and we don't know how to pray. Fortunately, we have been left Jesus' teaching about this important subject.

- a. Jesus taught His disciples *how* to pray

“Now it came to pass, as He was praying in a certain place, when He ceased, that one of His disciples said to Him, Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples. So He said to them, When you pray, say: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done On earth as it is in heaven. Give us day by day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, For we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one” (**Luke 11:1-4**).
- 1) The “Lord's Prayer”, as it is commonly called, is a *model*; a guide for learning how to pray. A careful examination of this prayer reveals the elements of acceptable prayer:
 - a) “Our Father in heaven”. Our prayers are directed to our “Father” in recognition of our spiritual relationship with God.
 - b) “Hallowed be Your Name”. This expresses our desire that the name of God might be held in proper veneration by people throughout the world.

c) Supplications:

- (i) “Your kingdom come. Your will be done...”. First, let us be sure to pray for God's purposes. The kingdom of God had not yet come at this time, and so it was proper to pray for it to come.
- (ii) “Give us this day our daily bread”. Many tend to take their daily food for granted, but this reminds us of our dependency upon God for all our physical needs. We ought to give thanks before every meal (1 Timothy 4:1-5).
- (iii) “Forgive us our sins...”. All of us have sinned (Romans 3:23; 1 John 1:5-10). We sin each day whether knowingly or unknowingly.
- (iv) “For we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us”. If we expect God to forgive us of our sins, then we must also forgive those who sin against us.

2) Our prayers ought to be sincere, heartfelt, and yet simple (Matthew 6:7-8).

b. A helpful acrostic in learning to pray is “ACTS”

1) **A**doration. This is when we offer our sincere praise to God. Spending time in sincere praise of God's greatness will help put us in the proper spirit of humility. A good example of this is found in 1 Chronicles:

“Therefore David blessed Jehovah before all the assembly; and David said: Blessed are You, Jehovah God of Israel, our Father, forever and ever. Yours, O Jehovah, is the greatness, the power and the glory, the victory and the majesty; for all that is in heaven and in earth is Yours; Yours is the kingdom, O Jehovah, and You are exalted as head over all. Both riches and honor come from You, and You reign over all. In Your hand is power and might; in Your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. Now therefore, our God, we thank You and praise Your glorious name” (1 Chronicles 29:10-13).

2) **C**onfession. This is when we acknowledge our sins before God. When we understand how sin can break the fellowship we have with God (Isaiah 59:1-2), we naturally desire its quick remission. As Christians we can be cleansed by the blood of Jesus as we confess our sins (1 John 1:9). A good example of confession is found in Psalms 51:

“Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight - That You may be found just when You speak, and blameless when You judge. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me. Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, and in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me hear joy and gladness, that the bones You have broken may rejoice. Hide Your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me by Your generous Spirit. Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners shall be converted to You. Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, the God of my salvation, and my tongue shall sing aloud of Your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall show forth Your praise. For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart - these, O God, You will not despise. Do good in Your good pleasure to Zion; build the walls of Jerusalem. Then You shall be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with burnt offering and whole burnt offering; then they shall offer bulls on Your altar” (Psalms 51:1-19).

- 3) **T**hanksgiving. This is when we offer our thanks to God for answering our prayers, providing our daily needs, His salvation, etc. Thanksgiving should be offered even when we are making requests (**Philippians 4:6**). Here are some further thoughts on this vital aspect of our prayers:
 - a) The benefits of giving thanks are many: (i) It causes us to acknowledge God's existence, love, and care, (ii) it reminds us of His goodness, and (iii) it helps to shift our focus from what we don't have to what we do have.
 - b) The kind of things for which to be thankful: (i) Things we can see: health, family and friends, God's guidance, answers to previous prayers, etc., (ii) Things we can see by faith: our adoption as His children, the forgiveness of sins, the hope of eternal life, the assurance of His continued presence, etc.
 - c) God's people have every reason to be thankful and we ought to be known for "abounding in thanksgiving" (**Colossians 1:12; 2:7; 3:15; 4:2**).
- 4) **S**upplication. This is when we come to God with our requests (**Philippians 4:6**). When we broaden our requests to include others, we enter into one of the noblest realms of prayer: intercession (**1 Timothy 2:1**). Examples for those whom we ought to pray are given in the next section.

IV. FOR WHOM AND WHAT SHOULD WE PRAY?

The people and things for which we ought to pray are as numerous as the stars!

- a. In general, we can say that God wants us to pray for everyone and everything:
 - 1) Self. We should pray for (i) our daily physical needs (**Matthew 6:11**), (ii) personal, spiritual growth in Christ-likeness and devotion to God (**Colossians 1:9-12**), and (iii) courage and boldness to preach the gospel (**Acts 4:29; cp. 2 Corinthians 3:12**).
 - 2) Family. We should pray for our parents, siblings, spouse, children, etc. praying for their physical and spiritual wellbeing.
 - 3) Community. We should pray for peace and harmony to prevail, and for opportunities to reach the lost with the gospel. The Lord said to Jeremiah, "Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters - that you may be increased there, and not diminished. And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to Jehovah for it; for in its peace you will have peace" (**Jeremiah 29:6-7**).
 - 4) Church. We should pray for (i) love and unity to prevail (**John 13:35; 17:20-21**), (ii) the spiritual growth of each member (**Philippians 1:9-11**), (iii) and the gospel to have free course (**2 Thessalonians 3:1**).
 - 5) Nation: we should pray for leaders to rule wisely (**1 Timothy 2:2**), and national repentance and consciousness of who God is (**Psalms 33:12; Proverbs 14:34**). The number one reason for the decline and fall of any nation is their failure to honor the God of the universe.
 - 6) Unbelievers. We should pray for their salvation (**Romans 10:1**), and the effort of those involved in teaching them (**Ephesians 6:18-20**).
 - 7) The sick. We should pray for their restoration to health (**James 5:14-15**), and spiritual strength and peace of mind (**James 5:16**).
 - 8) The poor and oppressed. We should pray for the homeless, fatherless, unborn children (**Proverbs 29:7**), and those in other nations oppressed by their own rulers or outside influences.
- b. There are many other things for which we ought to pray, and so it might help to have a "prayer strategy".
 - 1) Some people have a prayer book in which they keep a note of things for which to pray and refer to it when they go into the secret place.

- 2) Some people set apart each day of the week to pray for a particular group, e.g., Sunday to pray for the church, Monday to pray for family members, etc.
- 3) Some final thoughts on prayer: pray from a position of love, and pray faithfully, decisively, boldly, frankly, etc.

Conclusion

1. In the previous lesson we discussed The Principles Of Prayer and in this lesson we have considered The Practice Of Prayer.
2. Paul exhorts us to “pray without ceasing” (1 **Thessalonians 5:17**), and, as we have seen, there are many things for which we ought to pray. Indeed, we will find that there simply aren’t enough hours in the day to pray for all that we ought.
3. It is hoped these last two lessons have encouraged us to be more diligent in utilizing this wonderful privilege of prayer.

Questions

1. Do you spend time each day in prayer to God?
2. Do you find prayer an easy or difficult activity?
3. Do you pray with other people at times other than before meals, in Bible classes, or in the assembly?
4. Do your prayers include the needs of others, or just your own concerns?

Lesson Six

STUDYING THE BIBLE**Introduction**

1. Two essential elements involved in our walk with God are Bible reading and Bible study. There is a difference between reading and studying. While you can learn something from reading, you will greatly increase your knowledge and understanding by reading *and* studying.
2. There are two major reasons that make reading and studying so essential: (i) to increase our faith, and (ii) to grow spiritually.

“So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (**Romans 10:17**).

“Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious” (**1 Peter 2:1-3**).

3. I am certain that we all spend time reading and many will have a *read through the Bible in a year* plan that they follow. But there are some that neglect to *study* the scriptures for various reasons. Therefore, this lesson will focus on encouraging us to study the scriptures.

1. WHY BIBLE STUDY IS ESSENTIAL

Studying is essential because the word of God possesses the power of sanctification, preservation, and of salvation and condemnation.

a. There are many reasons we ought to study the Bible but here are just three basic reasons:

- 1) Because the Bible possesses the power of sanctification. The basic meaning of the word “sanctification” is *to set apart*, i.e., “separation unto God” (CWSD). It is by means of the truth, the scriptures, that God sanctifies us (**2 Thessalonians 2:13**). If we are going to be useful to God, then we need to study His word.

“The law of Jehovah is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of Jehovah is sure, making wise the simple; the statutes of Jehovah are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of Jehovah is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of Jehovah is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of Jehovah are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, Yea, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover by them Your servant is warned, and in keeping them there is great reward” (**Psalms 19:7-11**).

“Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth” (**John 17:17**).

- 2) Because the Bible possesses the power of preservation. A lack of knowledge has always destroyed the people of God (**Hosea 4:6**). But the young, and indeed all of us, can keep our ways pure by heeding the word of God and conforming our lives to it (**Psalms 119:9**). The Ephesian elders were exhorted to keep the church by the word (**Acts 20:28-32**). One of the first steps toward backsliding is to neglect God's word.

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (**Psalms 119:105**).

- 3) Because the Bible possesses the power of salvation and condemnation. If the word of God is received properly it can save our souls (**James 1:21**; **1 Peter 1:22-23**; **Psalms 19:7**). If we reject God's word, then God will reject us (**Isaiah 5:24**; cp. **Jeremiah 8:9**).

“I have come as a light into the world, that whoever believes in Me should not abide in darkness. And if anyone hears My words and does not believe, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him - the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day” (**John 12:46-48**).

- b. God's word will be the standard by which we will be judged (**John 12:48**). Will the word save us, or will it condemn us? Careful study and application of God's word will make the difference.

2. WHY BIBLE STUDY IS OFTEN NEGLECTED

The excuses people give for not studying are just that... "excuses". If we have a passion for something, then we will find the time for it.

a. There are several reasons that people resort for neglecting Bible study, but, in truth, they are not "reasons", they are excuses. Billy Sunday said, "An excuse is a skin of a reason stuffed with a lie". Let us now look at some of the excuses people resort for not studying:

1) Some people say, "I do study! I listen to preacher every week!" Yes, some believe that listening to a weekly sermon is studying the Bible, and so they see no need to study for themselves.

a) While the preacher may be a godly man and sincere in what he preaches, he can still be wrong – Apollos being an example (**Acts 18:24-26**). The spread of false doctrine partly depends on people's ignorance and partly on people not comparing the teaching of the preacher with the scriptures. John puts it this way: "Beloved, **do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits**, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God" (**1 John 4:1-2**).

b) It is our responsibility to "test the spirits" (**1Jn 4:1-2**), and to be able to identify "false apostles" (**2 Corinthians 11:13-15**).

2) Some people say, "I can't get anything out of the Bible". This may be because they hardly read it or because they do not know how to go about studying. Indeed many have made little effort to understand it. Yet Paul assumed that people could understand it if they read it (**Ephesians 3:3-4**).

"For we are not writing any other things to you than what you read or understand. Now I trust you will understand..." (**2 Corinthians 1:13**).

3) Some people say, "I don't have the time to study". Everyone has things to do and everyone is "too busy". There are many brethren whose lives are extremely busy, and yet they make the time to study. If we're honest, we know that we always find the time for things we really want to do, don't we? So often, the problem isn't that we don't have the time, it's that we don't have the desire! Perhaps this lesson will create the desire to study.

b. There is really no excuse for neglecting the word of God, and in view of its importance, we would be foolish to do so. But how shall one study the Word of God? There are several different approaches.

3. METHODS OF BIBLE STUDY

There are several methods of Bible study and here we present three basic methods: the planned-lesson method, the subject method, and the book method.

a. There are various methods one can employ to study the scriptures, and here we shall just present a few:

1) The planned-lesson method. The planned-lesson method is when someone prepares a series of lessons on a subject, and then it is studied in a class; either at the church building or at home. This study - "A Closer Walk With God" - is an example of this method. While this is a good way to study, we should not limit our study to this method because one is relying too much on a teacher who may, unintentionally, teach error.

2) The subject method. This involves selecting a subject (e.g., authority, baptism, the head covering, etc.) and then collecting every passage on that subject and studying each in its context (**Psalms 119:16**). This method has its advantages, but it can be easy to take things out of context and draw the wrong conclusion.

3) The book method. This consists of an intensive study of a single book of the Bible. This involves selecting a book and reading it through to discover the overall message and theme, and then rereading it a chapter at a time and making notes, then rereading it again a chapter at a time and making notes, etc.

b. These are just a few of the methods we can employ in studying the Bible and we could say much more about each method. But by employing these methods you will gain a good overall understanding of the Bible.

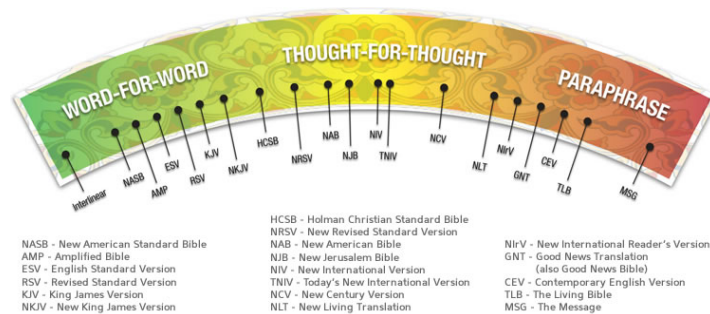
4. SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR BIBLE STUDY

Reading and studying requires time and effort, but, if done properly, we will reap great rewards.

a. These are just a few suggestions that will help you to get the most out of your studies:

- 1) Set a regular time. We all have busy schedules and it can be difficult to find the time. However, if we truly desire to study, then we will make the time; even if it means sacrificing some other activity or getting up a little earlier. It's all about good time management.
- 2) Pray as you study. It is good to begin and end your study with a prayer. As you study, ask God for the wisdom to understand and the will to obey His word (**Psalms 119:18, 25**).
- 3) Utilize various helps:
 - a) Bible Translations: comparing passages in different translations often aids one's understanding. Note: the best translations are the word-for-word translations. In my view, it is best to steer clear of thought-for-thought and paraphrase Bibles.

Types of Bible Translations



- b) Dictionaries: not knowing the meaning of a word often leads to misunderstandings, so a dictionary is vital. A standard dictionary (e.g., Collins Dictionary, American Heritage Dictionary) is good to some extent, but a Bible dictionary is better.
 - (i) Here's an example of why a Bible dictionary is better:
 - (a) The American Heritage Dictionary says of baptism: "A religious rite considered a sacrament by most Christian groups, marked by the symbolic application of water to the head or immersion of the body into water and resulting in admission of the recipient into the community of Christians." There are a few unscriptural things wrong with this definition, but notice that *application of water* (i.e., by pouring or sprinkling) is considered as baptism.
 - (b) Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary Of New Testament Words says of baptism: "Baptisma (G908), 'baptism,' consisting of the processes of immersion, submersion and emergence". The word *baptism* is from the Greek word *baptisma* and is an immersion in a water. The Greek word *baptisma* does not mean sprinkling or pouring.
 - (ii) Hopefully, then, you can see the value and necessity of a Bible dictionary like Vine's.
- c) Concordance. A concordance lists in alphabetical order all the words that appear in the Bible, and alongside each word are all the verses where that word appears. A concordance can be a great time saver in finding verses based on a given subject. For example, if you're looking for all the verses where the word "baptism" appears.
- d) Encyclopedias. This type of reference gives detailed articles on the people, places, and things mentioned in the Bible. Two good sets are: Zondervan's Pictorial Encyclopedia Of The Bible and The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia.

- e) Commentaries². These are books written by scholars commenting on various books of the Bible. One must be careful, as these scholars are not inspired and are subject to mistakes. But their insights and the fruit of their own study can be helpful.

B. These general reference helps will aid you in getting the most out of your daily Bible studies. Regarding the reference books, you can purchase these at any Christian bookstore, and many also come free with a good Bible program like e-Sword.

Conclusion

1. Bible study is essential to increase one's faith (**Romans 10:17**) and spiritual growth (**1 Peter 2:1-3**). In this lesson we considered the following:
 - a. Why Bible study is essential. It is essential because the Bible possesses (i) the power of sanctification, (ii) the power of preservation, and (iii) the power of salvation and condemnation.
 - b. Why Bible study is often neglected. People offer various excuses for not studying, but, as we pointed out, one will always find the time to do the things he wants to do. The real problem is a lack of desire rather than a lack of time. It is hoped this lesson has stirred up a desire to study.
 - c. Methods of Bible study. There are numerous methods of Bible study and we mentioned just three: (i) The planned-lesson method, (ii) The subject method, and (iii) The book method. By employing these methods you will gain a good overall understanding of the Bible.
 - d. Some suggestions for Bible study. To get the most out of your studies, (i) Set a regular time for study, (ii) Pray as you study, and (iii) Utilize various helps.
2. What is most important is that we are engaged in some sort of consistent, systematic study of the Bible so that we are ever being blessed by the Word of God.

The main reason people do not study is a lack of desire. But, knowing it reveals an unspiritual mind, they resound one of a myriad of well-worn excuses. Yes, they thoroughly deceive themselves, they believe others accept their excuses, but God knows the secrets of the heart.

Questions

1. For how long do you study the Bible each day?
2. If the Bible class teacher provides material, do you study it at home?
3. If you are not doing so now, are you willing to spend at least 15-30 minutes daily in Bible study?
4. What's your biggest problem in studying?
5. What are some of the most common excuses for not studying?
6. How can one develop a desire to study?

² Of course, any comments on the Bible, whether spoken or written, are merely that one's commentary.

Lesson Seven

THE JOY OF SINGING**Introduction**

1. Another important element of our walk with God is the act of singing. We sing together at services, we sing at home, and we may very well sing elsewhere. It is through sincere and heartfelt singing that we reap great spiritual benefits.
2. The saints of old that walked with God delighted in singing (**Psalms 9:2; 33:3; 71:3; 100:2; 146:1-2**), and Christians are exhorted to sing in seasons of joy (**James 5:13**).
3. To ensure that we all get the most out of singing we shall (i) look at the purpose of singing, (ii) consider how we can get the greatest benefit out of singing, and (iii) ask some questions to evaluate our singing.

1. THE PURPOSE OF SINGING

In our songs we praise God, honor the Son, and teach and admonish one another.

a. To praise the Lord (**Acts 16:25**).

- 1) This is the most popular concept of the purpose of singing. Indeed, this is the idea inherent in the word *hymn*, which comes from the Greek word *humnos*, meaning “to sing the praise of” (Thayer). The natural reaction to the blessings of God is to praise Him (**Psalms 28:6-7**).
- 2) As “spiritual priests” we are to offer up “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God” (**1 Peter 2:5; Hebrews 13:15**). We must be careful that we do not defile our sacrifices in offering them with a bad spirit (cp. **Malachi 1:7-8, 12-13**).

b. To honor the Son (**John 5:22-23**).

- 1) If we fail to honor the Son, we fail to honor God (**John 5:22-23**).
- 2) Many of the songs we sing honor Jesus as Lord (e.g., “All Hail The Power Of Jesus’ Name”). Thus, in honoring the Lord in this way, we also honor and glorify God.

c. To teach and admonish one another (**Colossians 3:16; Ephesians 5:19**).

- 1) Much of our singing is directed toward God and at other times toward one another (e.g., “Trust And Obey”). Read carefully through some of the songs and you will see how many are designed to teach and admonish us to live godly lives and enjoy the blessings of the Christian life.
- 2) Thus singing is a way that we can edify and encourage one another. When done properly, singing can be a wonderful blessing; but how can we get the most out of singing?

2. GETTING MORE OF OUR SINGING

It is essential to engage the heart and mind to get the most out of singing.

a. It is essential to engage the mind as we sing:

- 1) Remember, singing is “teaching and admonishing one another”. This assumes that we understand what we sing. Here are a couple of examples that highlight the necessity of carefully examining the lyrics of songs:
 - a) As a teenager I remember being obsessed with popular music and I spent a lot of money on records. But I found that I didn’t always know and understand the lyrics of many songs. Now that I’ve carefully examined the lyrics of many of those popular songs, I can see the errors they taught.

Christians are commanded to sing when they assemble – 1 Corinthians 14:26; Ephesians 5:18-19; Colossians 3:16.

**Come, we that love the Lord,
And let our joys be known;
Join in a song with sweet accord,
And thus surround the throne.**

**Let those refuse to sing,
Who never knew our God;
But children of the heav’nly King
May speak their joys abroad.**

“We’re Marching To Zion”

Examples: (i) The Beatles sang, “All you need is love”. Is that what the Bible teaches? (ii) John Lennon asks us to “Imagine there's no heaven; it's easy if you try. No hell below us; above us only sky”. The opposite of what the scriptures teach.

b) There's a popular hymn titled “I stand Amazed”, and one of the lines reads, “He had no tears for His own griefs, but sweat drops of blood for mine.” Is that true?

2) By all means, let us enjoy singing to the Lord, but let us be sure we understand what we are singing by giving careful attention to the words.

b. We must also engage the “heart” as we sing:

1) When we sing, we must do so “with grace in our hearts” (Colossians 3:16) and being sure we are “making melody in your heart” (Ephesians 5:19). This assumes that we involve our emotions as we sing.

2) To sing without engaging our hearts and emotions is hypocritical and renders our worship worthless (Matthew 15:7-8).

3) So as we sing, let us do so with both the emotions of the heart and the understanding of the mind. In a further effort to assure that we experience the “joy of singing”, let us now consider some questions to evaluate our singing.

3. QUESTIONS TO EVALUATE YOUR SINGING

Evaluating our singing from time-to-time will help us to get the most out of it.

a. Questions relating to our singing:

1) Do you limit the sphere of your singing? We certainly ought to sing in the public assemblies (1 Corinthians 14:26), but let us not limit singing to those times. Singing, like prayer, ought to be spontaneous, arising whenever the circumstances call for it (cp. Acts 16:25; Psalms 34:1-3).

“Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms” (James 5:13).

2) Is there lack of emotion in your singing? Remember, singing is to involve all the heart (Matthew 22:37). To sing “half-heartedly” reveals a spiritual problem (cp. Matthew 15:7-9). Luc de Clapiers said, “It is a great sign of mediocrity to praise always moderately”. Not everyone may be talented in voice, but all can and should bless the Lord with their “whole being” (Psalms 103:1).

3) Do you understand what you are singing? Singing must involve the mind. Some songs (like many worldly songs), while pleasing to the ear, contain lyrics that are simply not true.

4) Do you stress musical harmony to the detriment of New Testament singing? Fortunately, God stresses making melody in our hearts over making harmony with our voices. Let us be sure that our emphasis is in line with what God wants emphasized. The *emphasis* should be on praising God with the heart and mind, and not on how it sounds to the human ear.

5) Is your singing hindered by where you sit? It is good to sit with others who love to sing because people sing better when they are grouped together; making for a more uplifting, edifying experience.

b. There are probably other considerations but these thoughts will help us to get the most out of our singing.

Conclusion

1. Singing is an essential element of our walk with God. We sing together at services and we have the freedom to sing anywhere when we feel joyful and thankful for the blessings of God.

2. But not everyone gets out of singing what they ought, and so we have looked at the purpose of singing and considered how we get the most out of singing: (i) The purpose of singing is to praise God, honor Jesus, and to teach and admonish one another. (ii) To get the most out of singing it is essential to sing from the heart and with understanding.

3. There are questions we can ask to evaluate our singing: Do we limit the sphere of our singing? Is there a lack of emotion in our singing? Do we understand what we are singing? What we need to do to resolve these things is revealed in the questions themselves.
4. I hope that by reminding ourselves of the purpose of singing and how to get more out of it, we might rekindle this act of worship which can do so much for our walk with God. May David's attitude describe our own:

“I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have my being” (**Psalms 104:33**).

“Praise the Lord! For it is good to sing praises to our God; for it is pleasant, and praise is beautiful” (**Psalms 147:1**).

Questions

1. Which is more important when we sing, how we sound or how we feel?
2. Are we really teaching and admonishing one another in song if we just whisper or mouth the words?
3. Do we sing because we are happy, or are we happy because we sing?
4. Do you sing praises to God by yourself throughout the week?
5. Does your family ever sing spiritual songs together?
6. Which is more unscriptural: singing with mechanical instruments, or singing without engaging the instrument of the heart?

Lesson Eight

GROWING IN THE KNOWLEDGE OF JESUS CHRIST**Introduction**

1. An important element in having a closer walk with God is to “grow in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).
2. How can we be sure that we are growing in this “knowledge”? Peter explains what he means by growing in the knowledge of Christ, saying:

“Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:2-11).

3. In this lesson, we shall look a little closer at what is involved in growing in the knowledge of Jesus Christ, and consider reasons why we should desire to grow in this knowledge.

1. WHAT “GROWING IN THE KNOWLEDGE OF JESUS CHRIST” INVOLVES

Growing in the knowledge of Jesus Christ involves the development of eight graces and diligent effort.

- a. Growing in the knowledge of Jesus Christ involves the development of eight “graces”:

“But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love” (2 Peter 1:5-7).

- 1) Let us briefly define each of these graces:
 - a) Faith is conviction, strong assurance.
 - b) Virtue is moral excellence, goodness.
 - c) Knowledge is correct insight.
 - d) Self-control is self-discipline.
 - e) Perseverance is bearing up under trials.
 - f) Godliness is godly character out of devotion to God.
 - g) Brotherly kindness is love toward brethren.
 - h) Love is active goodwill toward all men.
- 2) It is essential that we “abound” in these eight graces. It is only by abounding in them that it can be said we are “growing in the knowledge of Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:8). It is clear, then, that we are talking about something far more than simply increasing our “intellectual” knowledge of Jesus Christ:

- a) Though such intellectual knowledge has a place, it is just one of the graces necessary. Peter is talking about growing in a *fuller and more personal knowledge of Jesus Christ*. This comes by developing the “Christ-like” attributes defined above. The more we grow in these “graces”, the more we really “know” Jesus (for He is the perfect personification of these “graces”).

**There Is A Difference Between
Knowing About Someone
And Knowing Someone!**

I know all *about* Admiral Byrd but I do not *know* him. One may know all *about* Jesus but not *know* Him. A Christian must know about Him and know Him.

- b) That it involves more than intellectual knowledge is also evident from the Greek word used for *knowledge*. Peter writes:

“Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the **knowledge** of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the **knowledge** of Him who called us by glory and virtue... For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the **knowledge** of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:2-3, 8).

- (i) The Greek word *epiginosko*, means “to become thoroughly acquainted with, to know thoroughly, to know accurately, know well” (Thayer). Paul expressed his desire to “know Him” (Philippians 3:10). Commenting on this, Mark Dunagan says, “Obviously, this means more than just knowing *about* Him, rather it is a knowledge that is intimate and personal... Paul longed for as much of Christ as he could get. He never reached the point of ‘satisfaction’ in his knowledge of Christ, and then, wanted more of Christ after this life (1:21-23)”

(ii) Such knowledge comes only as we *demonstrate* these “Christ-like graces” in our lives.

- b. Growing in the knowledge of Jesus Christ involves developing these “graces” in conjunction with each other:

“But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, **add** to your faith virtue, to virtue [add] knowledge, to knowledge [add] self-control, to self-control [add] perseverance, to perseverance [add] godliness, to godliness [add] brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness [add] love” (2 Peter 1:5-7).

- 1) Consider the word “add” and the proposition “to”:

- a) The word “add” or “supply” is also implied before each grace that is listed. The word “add” is from the Greek word *epichoregeo*, of which Dr. Steve R. Woods says, “(1) Originally, to found and support a chorus, to lead a choir, to keep in tune 2) Then, to supply or provide”. This word, then, suggests the idea of “each grace working in harmony with the others to produce an overall effect”.
- b) The preposition “to” or “in” suggests that “each grace is to temper and make perfect the grace that goes before it”. To illustrate: (i) “to knowledge (add) self-control” - the grace of self-control enables one to apply properly the knowledge one has acquired, (ii) “to self-control (add) perseverance” - self-control in turn needs the quality of perseverance to be consistent day-after-day.

- 2) Thus each grace is necessary. They must all be developed in conjunction with each other. We cannot be selective and just pick the ones we like and leave others behind.

- c. Growing in the knowledge of Jesus Christ involves diligent effort:

“But also for this very reason, giving all **diligence**, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge... Therefore, brethren, be even more **diligent** to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble” (2 Peter 1:5, 10).

- 1) The word “diligence” here means “‘earnestness, zeal,’ or sometimes ‘the haste accompanying this’” (Vine). To grow in the knowledge of Jesus Christ requires much effort; we do not “accidentally” or “naturally” develop these graces.
- 2) Is the effort worth it? In the context of this passage Peter gives five reasons why we should “give all diligence” to grow in this knowledge of Jesus Christ. This is discussed in the next point.

2. WHY WE SHOULD BE “GROWING IN THE KNOWLEDGE OF JESUS CHRIST”

As we diligently put forth the effort to grow in the knowledge of Jesus Christ, we will reap several benefits.

a. Grace and peace are “multiplied” in this knowledge:

“Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord” (2 Peter 1:2).

- 1) “Grace” and “peace” are common forms of greeting in the New Testament: (i) Grace is the greeting which requests God's unmerited favor upon the person addressed, and (ii) Peace is the greeting requesting the natural result of God's favor.
- 2) Note that these two blessings are “multiplied” in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. All men experience God's favor and its result to some degree (cp. Matthew 5:45), but it is only “in Christ” that one enjoys the “fullness” of God's favor and peace (Ephesians 1:3; Philippians 4:6-7).

b. All things pertaining to life and godliness are given through this knowledge:

“As His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to *life* and *godliness*, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust” (2 Peter 1:3-4).

- 1) “Life” in this context refers to our spiritual life and well-being, and “Godliness” refers to the pious conduct which comes out of devotion to God.
- 2) It is only as we grow in this knowledge that we enjoy the true, full life available by God's divine power (cp. John 10:10), which includes “exceedingly great and precious promises”; which enables us to be “partakers of the divine nature”; and which can free us from the “corruption that is in the world through lust”.

c. Failure to grow in this knowledge results in spiritual “myopia³” and “amnesia”:

“For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins” (2 Peter 1:9).

- 1) Our religion is “short-sighted” if we are not growing in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. After all, isn't our ultimate objective to become like Christ (cp. Romans 8:29; Colossians 3:9-11)? As we have seen, this is what it really means to grow in the knowledge of Christ.
- 2) A failure to grow in this knowledge indicates that we have *forgotten* why we were redeemed by the blood of Christ in the first place. We were redeemed to have our sins forgiven, but with a view to presenting ourselves to God and being conformed to the image of His Son (Romans 8:29).

d. It will prevent us from stumbling:

“Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble” (2 Peter 1:10).

- 1) This does not mean we will never sin (cp. 1 John 1:8, 10). The word “stumble” in Greek means “to fall into misery, become wretched; cp. the loss of salvation” (Thayer). We will never stumble so as to fall short of our ultimate salvation if we “do these things”.
- 2) But this is true *only* if we are “giving all diligence” to grow in the knowledge of Christ and thereby “making our calling and election sure”.

e. An entrance into the “everlasting kingdom” will be abundantly supplied:

“For so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:11).

³ Short-sightedness.

- 1) This “everlasting kingdom” is likely the “heavenly kingdom” referred to by Paul (2 Timothy 4:18). In other words, the ultimate destiny of the redeemed.
- 2) What is meant by the idea of an “abundant entrance”? Bengel says, “You may be able to enter, not as having escaped from a shipwreck, or from fire, but as it were in triumph”. By possessing the eight graces, we will be able to live victoriously in this life and to joyously anticipate what lays ahead (cp. 2 Timothy 4:6-8).

Conclusion

1. We are exhorted to “grow in the knowledge of Jesus Christ,” which involves the development of eight graces: faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love. This “knowledge” is far more than intellectual knowledge; it is *a fuller and more personal knowledge of Jesus Christ*. Growing in the knowledge of Jesus Christ involves:
 - a. The development of the eight “graces”.
 - b. Developing these “graces” in conjunction with each other.
 - c. Diligent effort.
2. We ought to be growing in the knowledge of Jesus Christ because:
 - a. Grace and peace are “multiplied” in this knowledge.
 - b. All things pertaining to *life* and *godliness* are given through this knowledge.
 - c. Failure to grow in this knowledge results in spiritual “myopia” and “amnesia”.
 - d. It will prevent us from stumbling.
 - e. An entrance into the “everlasting kingdom” will be abundantly supplied.
3. The five reasons for growing in the knowledge of Jesus Christ that we have discussed ought to be sufficient to motivate us to be diligent in “growing in the knowledge of Jesus Christ,” and in “giving all diligence to make our calling and election sure,” and have a closer walk with God, by making every effort to add these “graces” to our lives.

Questions

1. Which of these “graces” do you think you have developed best?
2. In which of these graces are you most lacking?
3. Do you feel you are making progress in the knowledge of Jesus Christ?
4. If one feels he is not making progress in the knowledge of Jesus Christ, what can he do to begin making progress?

Lesson Nine

OVERCOMING SIN**Introduction**

1. A wonderful blessing we receive when we obey the gospel is the forgiveness of sins through the blood of Jesus Christ (**Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; cp. Revelation 1:5**). This does not mean that our problem with sin is over; we still sin at times (**1 John 1:8, 10**). Peter warns us, saying:

“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (**1 Peter 5:8**).

2. If we are to maintain a close walk with God, and ultimately receive the riches of glory He has prepared for us, we must overcome the problem of sin in two ways:

a. By not letting sin dominate our lives (**1 John 2:1a**).

b. By knowing what to do when we do sin (**1 John 2:1b-2**).

3. In this lesson we shall learn how sin develops and look at the steps we can take to overcome sin with its terrible consequences.

1. HOW SIN DEVELOPS

Understanding the three stages whereby sin develops will put us in a better position to be able to resist the devil.

a. To overcome sin, we need to understand how it develops. James outlines the development of sin (**James 1:12-15**):

1) The first stage is “temptation” which consists of desire and enticement (**James 1:14**). Desire suggests a very strong longing for something and enticement suggests an opportunity and encouragement to satisfy the desire. Putting it in the form of a simple equation: Temptation = Desire + Opportunity. To illustrate:

John’s mother has placed a plate of cookies on the kitchen counter and has forbidden him to touch them. But John greatly desires one and is tempted to take one. His mother is out in the back yard and he has an opportunity to take one. At this stage in the development of sin, John has not actually sinned, he has simply been tempted. It is not a sin to be tempted. Consider, Jesus Himself was “in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin” (**Hebrews 4:15; 2:18**).

2) The second stage is “sin” itself. This is when desire has conceived and gives birth to sin (**James 1:15**). It becomes sin when we *act* and *yield* to the temptation. Thus sin involves the added step of *action* on our part. Again, in the form of a simple equation: Sin = Desire + Opportunity + Action. To illustrate:

John’s mother is still in the back yard and the temptation to take a cookie *seems* overwhelming, and so he yields to the temptation and takes one of the cookies. He has now transgressed his mother’s law – he has sinned.

3) The third stage involves the consequences of unrepented and unforgiven sin: “death”. James says, “And sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death” (**James 1:15**). The “death” spoken here refers to spiritual separation from God (**Isaiah 59:1-2**). If we refuse to confess our sin and repent, then this separation will continue after we die. This continued separation is called the “second death”, which involves eternal punishment (**Revelation 21:8**). Putting all this into a final equation: Desire + Opportunity + Action + No Forgiveness = Death. To illustrate:

John’s mother comes in from the back yard and sees there is a cookie missing, and, seeing the crumbs around his mouth, confronts John. But John refuses to confess he took the cookie and is defiant. His mother’s countenance is now showing much displeasure and she turns away from and refuses to talk to him.

b. Observations about the development of sin:

- 1) If we do not resolve our sin problem in this life, then sin will have overcome us, and we will have to suffer the eternal consequences (**Revelation 21:8**).
- 2) But there is a way to overcome sin and experience the glories God has prepared for His children. We can overcome sin by halting its development at any one of the four points leading to the final punishment.

2. HOW TO OVERCOME SIN

Sin can be overcome by putting the following four steps into practice.

a. There are four basic things we can do in our efforts to overcome sin:

- 1) Change our desires. This is where the process of sin begins (**Matthew 15:19**), it is, therefore, essential to examine our hearts and make the necessary changes. In fact, the heart must undergo a complete renewal:

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (**Romans 12:1-2**).

“And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (**Galatians 5:24**).

- a) How do we change our desires? The scriptures have always been instrumental in man's efforts in overcoming sin (**Psalms 119:11; Matthew 4:3-10**).

- (i) The scriptures reveal the perfect holiness of God (**Exodus 15:11; Leviticus 19:2; Psalms 22:3; Isaiah 6:3; 43:15; 1 John 1:5; Revelation 4:8**).

- (ii) All men are sinners (**Psalms 14:2-3; Romans 3:23**), and the Law of God reveals the exceeding sinfulness of sin (**Romans 7:13**).

- (iii) As we read of sin and its damnable consequences (**Romans 6:23; Revelation 21:8**), we come to hate sin (**Psalms 119:104**).

- (iv) As we read of God's love, longsuffering and mercy, we desire to serve Him (**Psalms 116:12-14**).

“For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation” (**Romans 5:6-11**).

- b) As we continue to study the scriptures we see the exceeding sinfulness of sin and the perfect holiness of God. Yet we see the great love and mercy of God revealed in Jesus, and this stirs up our love for God and the desire to sin is gradually quenched.

- c) But changing our desires takes time; while engaged in the process of changing our desires, what else can we do?

- 2) Limit our opportunities. We are tempted only when there is both desire and opportunity; so while we work on changing our desires, we should limit the opportunities to fulfill wrongful desires. This can be done by asking for God's providential help (**Matthew 6:13; 26:41**). We can cooperate with God by:

- a) By purposely avoiding evil thoughts and meditating on good things (**Joshua 1:8; Psalms 63:6; 77:12; 119:15, 48; 145:5; Philippians 4:8; 1 Timothy 4:15; cp. Proverbs 12:5; Isaiah 55:7**). This is essential because as a man thinks in his heart, so he is (**Proverbs 23:7; Matthew 12:35**).

- b) By purposely avoiding situations that might excite wrongful desires: consider the example of David (**Psalms 101:3-4**) and Job (**Job 31:1**).
- c) By purposely avoiding those whose evil behavior encourages us to sin: consider the example of David (**Psalms 101:6-7**). And the apostle Paul adds this warning: “Do not be deceived: evil company corrupts good habits” (**1 Corinthians 15:33**).
- 3) Exercise self-control. Despite our best efforts to avoid evil desires and opportunities that lead to sin, they will still come. It is when they do come that we must exercise self-control, which requires a great deal of effort.
- a) Remember, temptation itself is not a sin - it becomes sin when we yield to action in fulfilling our sinful desires. If we can control ourselves so as to not yield, then we can overcome sin. How do we exercise self-control?
- (i) The Holy Spirit dwells in every *sincere* Christian (**1 Corinthians 3:16**), and the evidence of this indwelling is the fruit of the Spirit demonstrated in our lives. One such fruit is self-control (**Galatians 5:22-23**).
- (ii) The Spirit is God's instrumental agent by which He imparts strength to us (**Ephesians 3:14-16**). Strengthened by the Spirit, we are able to “put to death the deeds of the body” (**Romans 8:12-13**).
- (iii) Indeed, as Paul says, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (**Philippians 4:13**).
- b) It is through faith in God's word that a Christian believes that he has this divine help (**Ephesians 3:20**). It is certainly proper to pray for strength, as Paul did in behalf of the Ephesians (**Ephesians 3:14-16**), but it is equally important to act upon it, trusting that you are not alone as you try to do God's will (**Philippians 2:12-13**).
- c) A Christian, then, has no excuse for yielding to temptation. Indeed, we have God's promise:
- “No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it” (**1 Corinthians 10:13**).
- 4) Seek forgiveness. There may be times when we are overtaken in a sin (**Galatians 6:1**) or we simply don't take advantage of the strength God provides through His Spirit, what then?
- a) Remember that sin has the victory over us when it results in punishment – spiritual death (**Isaiah 59:1-2**). However, if we obtain forgiveness through the blood of Christ, we can avoid that punishment and thereby still overcome sin (**1 John 2:1-2**).
- b) Yes, Christ is truly the “propitiation” for our sins. It is by His blood that we overcome:
- (i) By His blood, we were forgiven of past sins when united with Him in baptism (**Acts 2:38; 22:16; Revelation 1:5**).
- (ii) By His blood, we can be forgiven of present sins when we repent, pray, and confess our sins to God (**Acts 8:22; 1 John 1:9**).
- b. Some observations about overcoming sin:
- 1) If you noticed carefully, you should have seen that at each of the four points in the development of sin, God is able and willing to help us overcome sin.
- a) God helps us to control our desires by providing His word to renew our minds.
- b) God helps us to limit the opportunities through His providence as we pray for such.

Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.

Galatians 5:16

- c) God helps us to exercise self-control over our actions through His Spirit, strengthening the inner man.
 - d) God helps us to obtain forgiveness through the blood of His Son as we repent and pray - Isn't the grace of God wonderful (**2 Thessalonians 3:3; 1 Corinthians 10:13**).
- 2) In this lesson we have concentrated on "sins of commission":
- a) That is, sins we commit by overt action on our part.
 - b) There are also "sins of omission". These are sins which come from failing to do what is right (**James 4:17**). We overcome these sins in a similar way to sins of commission by:
 - (i) Changing our desires so we want to do what is right.
 - (ii) Exercising self-control so we act the way we should when we have the opportunity.
 - (iii) When guilty of sins of omission, we obtain forgiveness through repentance and confession.
- 3) In learning the four points at which we may overcome sin, we ought not to think to wait until we reach the fourth point to act, i.e., to just go ahead and sin, then ask God for forgiveness.
- a) There are several reasons why we should not do this:
 - (i) In baptism, we were freed from the power of sin, and should now present ourselves to God as servants of righteousness (**Romans 6:1-23**).
 - (ii) Though we can receive forgiveness for sin, we might still suffer the "temporal" consequences of sins (**Galatians 6:7-9**).
 - (iii) If we allow sin to deceive us so as to become "hardened", we may get to the point of sinning "willfully" and lose our salvation (**Hebrews 3:12-14; 10:26-31**).
 - b) We must not take the grace of God lightly and attempt to abuse it.

Conclusion

1. In order to overcome sin, it is essential to understand how it develops: (i) there is the initial temptation, (ii) there is the committing of sin, and (iii) there is the consequence of sin – death!
2. There are four basic steps we can take to overcome sin: (i) change our desires, (ii) limit our opportunities, (iii) seek forgiveness when we do sin.
3. It is essential to watch and pray that we are not led into temptation and to do all that we can to resist the devil. Where we fail, we can obtain grace and forgiveness through the blood of Jesus. But let us be sure we do not abuse the grace of God by adopting the attitude "It doesn't matter if I sin, I can always ask for forgiveness". The problem is, we can become so hardened toward sin that we reach a point where repentance becomes impossible!

"Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been proved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him" (**James 1:12**).

Questions

1. Are you engaged in a daily Bible study program which will help you develop the proper kind of desires?
2. Do you "watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation"?
3. Do you avoid circumstances and companions that you know would entice you to sin?
4. Do you pray that God will strengthen you "by His Spirit in the inner man"?
5. Do you ask God daily to forgive your sins, and to help you overcome sin in your life?

DISCERNING BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL

Introduction

1. In the previous lesson we talked about overcoming sin by (i) understanding the development of sin, (ii) utilizing the help of God to change our desires, limiting our opportunities to sin, exercising self-control, and seeking forgiveness.
2. Assumed in all of this is that we know or can discern the difference between what is good and evil. Knowing the difference between good and evil does not come automatically upon conversion, it is an ability that comes with time and “exercise” (cp. **Hebrews 5:12-14**).
3. This lesson is designed to help us develop the ability to discern between good and evil, so that we might truly have “A Closer Walk With God”.
4. In discerning between good and evil, we can ask ourselves a few questions about the matter at hand.

1. IS IT CLEARLY CONDEMNED IN THE BIBLE?

The scriptures are our sole authority and guide, and so, when we have difficulty determining whether something is good or evil, it is to the scriptures we must go.

- a. Many things are specifically mentioned as being wrong:

- 1) A list of sins can be found in Galatians and Ephesians:

“Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (**Galatians 5:19-21**).

“But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them” (**Ephesians 5:3-7**).

- 2) These things are specifically named and that settles the matter; there is no room for debate when the Scriptures clearly condemn specific practices.

- b. But not all sins are specifically named, so another question needs to be asked...

2. IS IT SIMILAR TO THINGS CONDEMNED IN THE BIBLE?

There are many things that are not specifically mentioned in the scriptures, but we can compare them to what we know is good or evil to help us.

- a. Paul lists seventeen works of the flesh and ends with the phrase “and the like” (**Galatians 5:21**).

- 1) Paul has listed a class of evils but has not specified all of them. So, when we are uncertain about some matter, we should ask whether it is *like* any of the sins he has specified. For example, there are many drugs that are not specifically condemned by name in the scriptures: marijuana, ecstasy, cocaine, etc. What are these drugs like? I believe we can compare them to alcohol because they produce similar effects.
- 2) We can even compare a particular practice with the good things Paul lists as the fruit of the Spirit (**Galatians 5:22-23**). We can ask, “Is the matter in question more like the ‘fruit of the Spirit’ (that which is good) or the ‘works of the flesh’ (that which is evil)?”

- b. Comparing a particular practice against the good and the evil to determine our action is useful, but if we are still uncertain, then we ought to consider another question.

3. DOES IT HURT MY CONSCIENCE?

The conscience is a good guide and we ought to listen when it “speaks”. But the conscience is only as good as the training it has had.

a. The importance of a good conscience:

- 1) One thing that Paul stresses to Timothy is that of holding to a clear conscience (1 Timothy 1:5, 18-19; 3:9). If we are about to say or do something and our conscience “speaks” to us, then we ought to listen.
- 2) A word of caution, however: the conscience ought not to be considered as **the** guide in our lives; the conscience is not a 100% reliable guide. For example, one man’s conscience is pricked when he steals food for his hungry children, but another man feels perfectly justified in doing so, and his conscience doesn’t bother him at all! Why the difference?
 - a) The first man has been a Christian for several years and has been studying the scriptures for just as long, and he has learnt that stealing under any circumstances is a sin. Thus his conscience pricks him; certain scriptures come to his mind (Ephesians 4:28) and he feels guilty. This man’s conscience has been properly trained. In this case, the Spirit speaks to him through the scriptures and condemns him.
 - b) The second man is not a Christian and lives his life according to worldly principles, and it is such that have taught him that he is perfectly justified in stealing food for his hungry children under such circumstances. His conscience does not prick him. In fact, his conscience condones his actions.
- 3) Another word of caution: if we continually ignore our conscience, then it will harden to the point where it doesn’t work; it doesn’t prick us. Violating our conscience to the degree it no longer bothers us is a sure sign of apostasy (1 Timothy 4:1-2).

b. Understanding how the conscience works will help us to appreciate what Paul says: “But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin” (Romans 14:23).

- 1) In this context, Paul is speaking to Jews and Gentiles who had become Christians and understood that the Law of Moses had been abolished; including laws regarding clean and unclean meats.
 - a) The Gentile Christians, never having followed the Law and never having made such distinctions between clean and unclean foods, had no problems eating whatever was put before them.
 - b) The Jewish Christians, though, had been following the law regarding clean and unclean meats all their lives. To make such distinctions was ingrained in their minds; their consciences had been trained in such distinctions. So, even though they understood that the Law had been abolished and that God had declared all meats clean, they found they could not eat unclean meats without their consciences pricking them; condemning their action.
- 2) This being the case, Paul instructs these conscientious Jews not to eat those meats that were once considered unclean. Doing something when you doubt its rightfulness is to violate your conscience, which is a sin. So an act may be approved of God, but if your conscience bothers you, then don’t do it!

c. Solomon said, “Where no wise guidance is, the people fall, but in the multitude of counselors there is safety” (Proverbs 11:14). This will be discussed in the next point.

4. WHAT DO MATURE CHRISTIANS SAY ABOUT IT?

There are many mature and knowledgeable Christians to whom we can go when we have a difficult question.

a. There is safety in a multitude of counselors (Proverbs 11:14), and so if we are unsure about something, we can consult other, mature Christians “who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil” (Hebrews 5:14).

1) We ought to take advantage of those with knowledge and understanding:

- a) The Lord Himself gave gifts to the church - apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers – “for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-12).

- b) Paul told Timothy to instruct the brethren in the things he had taught him (1 Timothy 4:6).
- c) The older, mature women are told to instruct the younger, immature women (Titus 2:3-5).

2) This doesn't mean their word is infallible and the determining factor because such can be wrong and give bad advice. But, nevertheless, this is no excuse to ignore their advice because they are mature, knowledgeable, and better able to discern good and evil (Hebrews 5:14).

- a) Let us again remind ourselves that there is safety in a multitude of counselors (Proverbs 11:14).

b) The example of Rehoboam's failure to listen to the advice of older, mature men should teach us something (1 Kings 12:6-20).

b. Another interesting question that is often overlooked regarding our influence is considered in the next point.

5. DOES IT HINDER MY INFLUENCE?

Whatever we are about to do, we must always consider whether it will help or hinder our influence.

a. The influence we have on others ought to be of great concern to us:

1) Jesus says that we are the "salt" of the earth and the "light" of the world – this is speaking of our influence in the world (Matthew 5:13-16).

2) It is because we can influence others for good and evil that we must be careful how we conduct ourselves:

a) The conduct of a wife could influence her unbelieving husband to obey the gospel (1 Peter 3:1-2).

b) The conduct of a proud unloving person could cause his brother to stumble (1 Corinthians 8:7-12).

c) Paul strove to become all things to all men for the sake of the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:19-23), and he urges us to imitate him in this attitude (1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1).

b. So, as we consider whether we should or shouldn't do something, we ought to ask ourselves whether our actions help or hinder our influence for the Lord.

6. IS IT POOR STEWARDSHIP?

Sometimes something might be good to do, but if it demonstrates bad management, then it is best to refrain from it.

a. That we are "stewards" of our time, money, and bodies, is evident from:

1) The Lord's Parable Of The Talents (Matthew 25:14-30).

2) Paul's instruction concerning our bodies:

"Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

3) Paul's directions for those rich in this world:

"Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life" (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

b. It is essential, then, to manage our time in all areas of our life. If we take this seriously, then, before we engage in something, we will ask, "Is this the best use of my time? Will engaging in this activity demonstrate to others that I am a good steward of my time?"

1) Some activities may be lawful and harmless but may take up so much of our time that we have no time to do the Lord's will or engage in spiritual exercises. This can be true of vacations, hobbies, etc.

2) We should bear in mind that time is limited and therefore priorities must be set and kept:

“Redeeming the time, because the days are evil” (Ephesians 5:16).

“But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (Matthew 6:33).

c. One final question we can ask depends on our knowledge of the life of Jesus, which we will discuss next.

7. WOULD JESUS DO IT?

If we know Jesus well enough, then, when faced with a decision, we can ask “Would Jesus do this?”

a. Every genuine believer is a disciple of Christ. What is a disciple?

1) A disciple is “a learner” and is in contrast to a teacher. “Hence it denotes ‘one who follows one's teaching’” (Vine).

2) But a disciple is more than just a learner or pupil “but an adherent” (Vine). This is why disciples are spoken of as *imitators* of their teacher (John 8:31; 15:8).

3) The goal of every *genuine* disciple of Christ is, not only to learn from Him, but to become like Him. Jesus said:

“A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is perfectly trained will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40).

b. So, when we are in a situation and we're not sure what to do, it would be appropriate to ask, “Would Jesus do it?” If you believe He wouldn't, then it is best not to do it.

1) This makes the study of Jesus of prime importance in our lives; studying His life, His examples, and His words, so that we can have the “mind of Christ” (Philippians 2:5).

2) An important point needs to be made and emphasized:

a) Think of someone you know extremely well. It may be a spouse, a child, a friend, etc. Now imagine you were contemplating climbing Mount Everest, but you were wondering whether it was a good idea. So to help you decide, you ask, “Would my uncle Tom do this?” You would have to know your uncle Tom very well to know whether he would climb Mount Everest, wouldn't you?

b) Likewise, before we can ask, “Would Jesus do this?” we have to make sure we know Him well enough. We cannot ask, “Would Jesus do this?” without having a knowledge of Jesus' life and teachings.

Conclusion

1. Every *sincere* Christian desires to please God (2 Corinthians 5:9) and abstain from every form of evil (1 Thessalonians 5:22).

2. There are some sins that are obvious, and such can be found listed in Galatians 5:19-21 and Ephesians 5:3-7. But there are some things that we find difficult to classify as good or evil.

3. In this lesson we have suggested seven questions we can ask to help us determine whether something is good or evil: (i) Is it clearly condemned in the Bible? (ii) Is it similar to the things condemned in the Bible? (iii) Does it hurt my conscience? (iv) What do mature Christians say about it? (v) Does it hinder my influence? (vi) Is it poor stewardship? (vii) Would Jesus do it?

4. The importance of properly discerning between good and evil is seen in such passages like 2 Corinthians 6:16-7:1 where we are reminded of how blessed we are to be the people of God, and the responsibility to act accordingly, if we wish to have a closer walk with God.

Questions

1. Do you have some older Christian to whom you feel free to go to for advice?
2. Do you feel that you usually give enough thought to the effect of your actions on other people?
3. Are you trying to keep a good conscience in all that you do?
4. Will you ask, when in doubt, "What would Jesus do?"

Lesson Eleven

THE CHRISTIAN AND GOOD WORKS**Introduction**

1. In lesson three (“Our Public Assemblies”) we discussed the matter of devotion or worship to God, especially in our public assemblies.
2. One objective of such activities is to stir us up to “good works” (**Hebrews 10:24-25**), the very thing for which we were created:

“For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (**Ephesians 2:10**).

3. In this short but important lesson, we shall examine the matter of “good works” which Christians are to do.

1. CHRISTIANS ARE TO DO GOOD WORKS

Good works demonstrate the living nature of our faith.

- a. Do not misunderstand the “purpose” of good works:
 - 1) They are not done to “buy” or “earn” our way into heaven.
 - 2) God saves us by His *grace*, not by our *works* (**Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:4-7**).
 - 3) Yet, as God's people, we have been created in Christ Jesus to do good works (**Ephesians 2:10; Titus 2:11-14; 3:1, 8, 14**).
- b. Why, then, are we to do good works?
 - 1) They bring glory to God (**Matthew 5:16; 1 Peter 2:11-12**).
 - 2) They can prepare unbelievers to be more receptive to the gospel (**1 Peter 2:12; 3:1-2**).
 - 3) They demonstrate the living nature of our faith (**James 2:14-17**).
 - 4) They are necessary if we are to be like Jesus (*cp.* **Luke 6:46 <> Acts 10:38**).

2. WHAT GOOD WORKS CAN WE DO?

Good works may be spiritual or physical in nature, and there are a myriad of things we can do.

- a. Some good works are “spiritual” in nature:
 - 1) Telling others of God's grace (**1 Peter 2:9-10**). We may not all be “teachers” in a formal sense (**1 Corinthians 12:27-31; James 3:1-2**), but all of us can share with others the wonderful grace of God available in Christ Jesus (*cp.* **Acts 8:1-4**).
 - 2) Encouraging other Christians (**Hebrews 3:12-13**). We can be a “Philemon” (**Philemon 1:7**) or a “Stephanus” (**1 Corinthians 16:15-18**). For example, through cards, calls, visits, Bible studies, etc.
 - 3) Restoring weak brethren (**Galatians 6:1-2**). We can be a “Barnabas” (who helped John Mark). Such good works saves souls from death (**James 5:19-20**).
- b. Some good works are “physical” in nature:
 - 1) Jesus did not limit His good works to things spiritual (**Luke 7:22**), and neither did He expect His disciples to so limit their good works: see (i) the “Limited Commission” (**Matthew 10:7-8**) and (ii) the judgment scene” (**Matthew 25:34-40**).
 - 2) Just as some may be gifted in talent and opportunities to “teach”, so others are gifted to “serve” in areas of physical service (**Romans 12:3-8**).

3) Some of the works we can do:

- a) Providing for the physical needs of widows and orphans (**James 1:27**; cp. **Acts 9:36-39**).
- b) Providing the physical needs of brethren (**1 John 3:17**).
- c) Providing comfort to people in distress (**Romans 12:15**; cp. **2 Corinthians 1:3-4**; **1 Thessalonians 5:14**).

Conclusion

1. No matter how we may serve the Lord, “good works” are *a mark of pure religion* (**James 1:27**).
2. Continuing in good works is *a key to spiritual blessedness* (happiness) (**James 1:25**; **Acts 20:35**).
3. So let us be sure to keep in mind the admonition of Paul to Titus:

“Those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works” (**Titus 3:8**).

Questions

1. What are some of the “spiritual” good works in which you are engaged?
2. What are some of the “physical” good works in which you are engaged?
3. Who should get the glory when you are praised for good works?

Lesson Twelve

A CHRISTIAN'S RESPONSIBILITIES AS PART OF A LOCAL CHURCH**Introduction**

1. As we grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord (2 Peter 3:18), and continue in our service and walk with God, we do not do so alone. One of the blessings we have in Christ is being members of His body, the church (1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 5:30).
2. When we have an accurate understanding of Christ's church and our responsibilities as members of the body of Christ, then we can better utilize this blessing to help us remain faithful in our lives as disciples of Christ.
3. In this lesson, then, we shall focus on two basic questions: (i) What is the church? and, (ii) As members of Christ's church, what are our responsibilities?

1. WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

The word "church" is from the Greek word *ekklesia*; it was a common word that referred to a called out body of people, an assembly of people.

- a. The word "church" is a translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*.
 - 1) This word occurs 116 times in the New Testament. It is translated "church" 77 times, "churches" 36 times, and "assembly" 3 times. It was a common word that referred to "a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place, an assembly" (Thayer).
 - 2) So the translators could have translated *ekklesia* as "assembly" in all 116 places, but I suppose they translated it "church" in 113 places because in those places it referred to an assembly of God's people, the saved, and "assembly" in 3 places because it referred to a secular assembly. It was a matter of clarity!
- b. A person is called out of the world through the gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14).
 - 1) When one obeys the gospel and is saved, the Lord Himself "adds" him to His church (Acts 2:47). As His "church" ("assembly" or "congregation"), we are members of God's "household" or "family" (1 Timothy 3:15).
 - 2) The "church" to which the Lord adds a saved person is not a local assembly but His *universal* church. This distinction between the *universal* church and *local* churches is explained more fully in the next point.
- c. The word "church" is used primarily in two senses:
 - 1) The *universal* sense. This refers to all the saved throughout the world (see Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:18). In the "universal" sense:
 - a) There is only *one* church (Ephesians 4:4 <> 1:22-23).
 - b) Christ is the head and individual Christians are members of His body (1 Corinthians 12:27).
 - c) There is *no earthly organization*; any organization there may be is of a spiritual nature (Ephesians 2:19-20).
 - d) The universal church never meets as such; it has no "officers" except Jesus Christ and the original apostles and prophets.
 - 2) The *local* sense. This refers to the saved in one particular locality (see 1 Corinthians 1:2; Revelation 1:11; Romans 16:16). In the "local" sense:
 - a) There are *many* churches or congregations (cp. Galatians 1:2). Note: there is a vast difference between establishing a new congregation and a new religious organization or denomination.
 - b) There is to be *earthly organization* within each local church. Ideally, each church has elders (also known as bishops, pastors) and deacons (Philippians 1:1). But churches may exist temporarily until such men can be appointed (cp. Acts 14:21-23).
 - c) Local churches meet regularly and Christians have responsibilities in connection with their brethren in the local church.

2. A CHRISTIAN'S RESPONSIBILITIES AS PART OF A LOCAL CHURCH

Every Christian ought to join himself to a local church, submit to the leaders, and seek to participate in every aspect of the work of the church.

a. We should “join ourselves” to a local church:

- 1) Only Christ can add a person to His church *universal*, but then it is up to a saved person to “join” themselves to a *local* church (**Acts 9:26-28**).
- 2) This enables you to benefit through the association of other Christians, and provides an opportunity to be of service to them (**cp. Hebrews 3:12-14; 10:24-25**).
- 3) There are some responsibilities Christ has given that you cannot fulfill on your own; for example, the Lord's Supper (**Acts 20:7**); it is a “corporate activity”.
- 4) So it is essential to find and join a local congregation of the Lord (a careful study of the New Testament can help you to identify such today; perhaps a subject for future study).

b. We should cooperate with the “leaders”:

- 1) In a fully developed local church there will be “elders” to oversee the congregation of God:
 - a) The terms “elder, pastor, bishop, shepherd, and overseer” are often used “interchangeably”, referring to the same position (**Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5-7; 1 Peter 5:1-2**); each term reveals a different aspect of an elder's work. These men must meet certain qualifications to serve in this position (**1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9**).
 - b) Our responsibilities to the elders of the local church to which we belong are as follows:
 - (i) To recognize and respect them (**1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; 1 Timothy 5:17-20**).
 - (ii) To obey and be submissive when they lead scripturally (**Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 5:2-3**).
 - c) Elders are shepherds and spiritual advisors; they are mature, experienced Christian men who are charged by God to “watch out for your souls” (**Hebrews 13:17**).
- 2) In a fully developed local assembly, there will also be “deacons” to serve the people of God:
 - a) The term “deacon” is from the Greek word *diakneo*, which basically means “to be a servant, attendant, domestic, to serve, wait upon” (Thayer). Thus they assist the elders in the work of the church. These men must meet certain qualifications to serve in this position (**1 Timothy 3:8-13**).
 - b) Our responsibilities to the deacons of the local church to which we belong. Consider: (i) Deacons serve under the direction of the elders, (ii) There are similarities in their qualifications to that of elders. Therefore, our attitude toward them ought to be similar to that of elders (**cp. 1 Corinthians 16:15-16; Philippians 4:3; 1 Thessalonians 5:12**).
- 3) In the majority of local congregations there will be those who serve as *evangelists* and *teachers* (**Ephesians 4:11**).
 - a) An evangelist concentrates his efforts on preaching the gospel to the lost and a teacher concentrates his efforts on edifying the members. Those commonly referred to as “preachers” or “ministers” may do both the work of an evangelist and a teacher. These men will be subject to the elders.
 - b) We ought to highly esteem all those who devote themselves to the work of the Lord (**cp. 1 Corinthians 16:15-16; Philippians 2:29-30; 4:3; 1 Thessalonians 5:12**).

c. We should contribute weekly to the work of the church.

- 1) The work of the church can be divided into three areas: (i) evangelism (**Matthew 28:19-20; 1 Timothy 3:15; 1 Peter 2:9-10**), (ii) edification (**Ephesians 4:11-16**), and (iii) benevolence (**1 Timothy 5:16**).
- 2) How the local church can raise funds to do its work is illustrated in 1 Corinthians 16:1-2.

d. We should do our part in the work of the church:

- 1) We cannot “pay” to have our part of the church's work done for us. A strong, successful congregation is one where every member is doing their part (**Ephesians 4:15-16**).
- 2) There are different kinds of functions we might perform (cp. **Romans 12:3-8**). What is essential is that we each do what we can with zeal and enthusiasm (cp. **1 Peter 4:10-11**).

Any member of the body that cannot fulfill its function is useless and a great burden to the rest of the body. Any member of the church that *refuses* to fulfill a function is useless and a great burden to the rest of the church.

e. We should strive to keep the unity of the faith.

- 1) Unity among believers is essential: Jesus prayed for unity (**John 17:20-21**) and created a body in which there would be unity (**Ephesians 2:14-16**). We are not surprised, then, to see division condemned in the Scriptures (**1 Corinthians 1:10-13; 3:3-4**).
- 2) To maintain the unity we have in Christ requires certain attitudes and diligent effort (**Ephesians 4:1-3**). Here are some things each of us can do:
 - a) Be peacemakers when brethren have disagreements (**Matthew 5:9**).
 - b) Avoid gossip (**1 Timothy 5:13, 19**).
 - c) Avoid discussion of speculative questions (**1 Timothy 6:3-5; 2 Timothy 2:23**).
 - d) Avoid partiality (**1 Timothy 5:21**).

f. We should live in a way that speaks well of the church. Be an example to others (**1 Timothy 4:12; Titus 2:7-8**). Some people delight in finding Christians who are not living right and use them as an example to attack the church. We must avoid giving them opportunities to do so (**Titus 2:8; 1 Timothy 5:14; 1 Peter 2:12**).

Conclusion

1. You often find that people (Non-Christians and Christians) have misconceptions regarding “church”, and so it is always necessary to clearly define what we mean by it. The most basic meaning is “a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place, an assembly” (Thayer). The term “church” is used primarily in two senses:
 - a. Universal. This refers to all the saved throughout the world (see **Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:18**). Christ is the head and individual Christians are members of His body (**1 Corinthians 12:27**). There is *no earthly organization*; what organization there may be is of a spiritual nature (**Ephesians 2:19-20**).
 - b. Local. This refers to the saved in one particular locality (see **1 Corinthians 1:2; Revelation 1:11; Romans 16:16**). Local churches, ideally, have elders, deacons, evangelists, teachers, and the members in general.
2. Every Christian ought to join himself to a local church and submit to its leadership. And each member should use his abilities and talents to participate in the work of the church. More could be said on this subject, but this should suffice to make the point that with the blessings of fellowship within the body of Christ come various responsibilities.
3. God did not intend for us to be “islands unto ourselves”, but to be joined together in Christ where we can encourage one another in an atmosphere of righteousness, joy, and peace (**Romans 14:17-19**).

Questions

1. Have you let a local church know that you wish to be identified as a working member of their group?
2. Do you know the elders, deacons and other members of the church where you attend?
3. Do you have a sense of what function you provide in the body of Christ, and are you fulfilling it?
4. Think about your participation in the work of the local church to which you belong: (i) it may be that you participate as you ought or (ii) it may be that you hardly participate at all. If every member of the church participated as much or as little as you, then what kind of church would it be?

Lesson Thirteen

INCREASING OPPORTUNITIES TO SHARE THE GOSPEL**Introduction**

1. The importance of sharing the gospel of Christ with those who are lost cannot be over-emphasized (**Romans 1:16** <> **10:13-15** <> **Luke 10:2**):
 - a. God's will is that all men be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth (**1 Timothy 2:4**; **2 Peter 3:9**).
 - b. Jesus commissioned His disciples to preach the gospel – God's power unto salvation (**Romans 1:16-17**) - to the entire world (**Mark 16:15-16**).
 - c. The first converts to Christ preached the gospel wherever they went (**Acts 8:1-4**).
2. What is the most effective way to reach people today? The Institute For American Church Growth asked over 10,000 people this question: "What was responsible for your coming to Christ and this church?" Their replies were...
 - a. 3% said, "I had a special need".
 - b. 3% said, "I just walked in".
 - c. 6% said, "I liked the minister".
 - d. 1% said, "I visited there".
 - e. 5% said, "I liked the Bible classes".
 - f. 0.5% said, "I attended a gospel meeting".
 - g. 3% said, "I liked the programs".
 - h. **79%** said, "A friend or relative invited me".
3. What we learn, of course, is that, the most effective method that leads to growth is that of individual members inviting a relative or friend to services. While congregational efforts are worthwhile, **the most effective method that leads to growth is through the efforts of individual members**. Every member of the church has daily contact with many people who need to hear the gospel of Christ. Two things are needed to utilize the contacts made through individual members:
 - a. A concern for the lost (cp. **Matthew 9:36-38**; **Romans 9:1-3**; **10:1**).
 - b. A knowledge of how to increase opportunities to share the gospel with those with whom we frequently come into contact.
4. Assuming that the concern is there, in this lesson we shall consider five basic suggestions on *how* we can **increase opportunities to share the gospel**.

"If you do not believe in the gospel enough to share it with your own family and friends, then you ought to question the value you yourself place on it!" (Nuggets Of Truth And Wisdom, #81).

"If you do not believe in the gospel enough to share it with your neighbors, then you ought to question the value you yourself place on it!" (Nuggets Of Truth And Wisdom, #95).

1. DO THINGS WHICH MAKE FOR A CARING CONGREGATION

If unbelievers cannot see our love being exercised among one another, it will undermine the message of the gospel. Will the Lord open doors of opportunity for such a church?

- a. The exercising of love (**1 John 3:18**):
 - 1) While correct doctrine, organization, worship, etc., is essential, it is the exercising of love that is the proof of discipleship (**John 13:35**).
 - 2) It is love that makes us useful to the Lord. The Lord knows the true condition of His churches and if we are a congregation that can be used by Him to take the gospel to the lost, then He will "open doors" for us (**Revelation 3:7-8**).

- b. If the congregation is not conducive to the nurture and growth in love of new Christians, then you might set an example to all by:
- 1) Making it a point to get to know *all* the members.
 - 2) Practice “hospitality” towards the members (**1 Peter 4:8-9**).
 - 3) Visit other Christians frequently; especially the sick, shut-ins, new members, absent members.

2. MAKE A LIST OF SOULS YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE SAVED

If we are genuinely concerned about the lost, then it will be demonstrated, not in words, but in actions!

- a. Having a list of people we desire to be saved helps us to focus our attention upon those we hope to reach for the Lord. In making up this list, start with those who are close to you and work outwardly: family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, relatives of fellow church members, regular visitors to the services, and casual acquaintances (mailman, store clerk, etc.). Keep this list where you will see it daily:
- 1) Pray for them each day that God will work together with you in giving you opportunities to do good for them (**Colossians 4:3; 2 Thessalonians 3:1**), and for the wisdom to make the most of those opportunities (**Ephesians 6:19-20**). And pray that they will have the opportunities to hear the truth, and that their hearts will be open and receptive to the truth (**cp. Acts 16:14**).
 - 2) Be sure to exercise your love toward them. Zig Ziglar said, “People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care”. A demonstration of love will make a person more likely to be receptive to the gospel when it is shared (**cp. 1 Peter 2:12**). So, for example:
 - a) Invite them into your home for dinner or tea.
 - b) Visit them, especially in times of trial or sickness.
 - c) Do things with them on a social level.
- b. In all the efforts you make, remember, it is God who gives the increase (**1 Corinthians 3:5-7**). We are simply servants whom God can use in His providential workings. So though we may work as though it all depends upon us, let us pray as though it all depends upon God (which it does!).

3. INVITE THOSE ON YOUR LIST TO ATTEND SERVICES

Before inviting someone to a service, it would be good to think about why we want them to come and then pray about it.

- a. Reasons we want someone to attend services:
- 1) They will (or should) have an opportunity to see a caring congregation in action. Combined with your own demonstration of love as an individual, the demonstration of love by others should make a lasting impression.
 - 2) They will have an opportunity to hear the gospel of Christ; perhaps for the first time (more on this, shortly).
- b. As you prepare to invite these souls, be sure to pray:
- 1) Asking for “wisdom” to invite them in the best manner.
 - 2) Asking for “boldness” to offer the invitation to attend.

4. DEMONSTRATE LOVE TOWARDS THOSE VISITORS WHO DO ATTEND

We ought to demonstrate our love toward all those that visit our services.

- a. Whether invited by you, someone else, or are “walk-ins”: greet them, let them know they are welcome, Invite them to your home for lunch, call or visit them after they have attended (**cp. Hebrews 13:2; Romans 12:13b**).
- b. In doing such things, you are preparing their hearts for the gospel: for by demonstrating love as a congregation of Christians they will be more likely to believe in the love of God demonstrated in the life of Christ (**1 Peter 2:11-12**).

5. SEE THAT THEY HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY TO HEAR THE GOSPEL

Have some kind of a plan that will lead to an opportunity for people to hear the gospel.

- a. Ideally, this will come after witnessing a demonstration of the gospel “in our lives” by our love, hospitality, etc.; both as individuals and as a congregation.
- b. If you feel confident in teaching others, then approach them yourself and suggest:
 - 1) A home Bible study with them (using aids like video tapes, charts, or simply an open Bible).
 - 2) Or that they study on their own with the aid of a Bible correspondence course.
- c. If you do not feel you are yet capable to approach them concerning a study, or in conducting the study yourself, then bring it to the attention of members who are able and willing to teach, or provide opportunities for the teacher and the prospect to become better acquainted, and the teacher can take it from there.

Conclusion

1. These suggestions are offered with a *firm conviction* that if they will be carried out, opportunities to share the gospel and save souls will be greatly increased, and with the *hope* that you will accept the challenge to implement these suggestions.
2. Inviting people you know or people with whom you are acquainted, is not only the *most successful* in saving and keeping souls, it is also one of the *most natural* and easiest ways to reach the lost for Christ.
3. I have known churches that have said, “It’s not worth having a gospel meeting for the lost because we never get any response”. Similarly, I have known individuals that have said, “I don’t try to share the gospel with the lost anymore because I never get a response”. Both attitudes are from below; satanic. Our responsibility as a church and as individuals is to continue preaching the gospel to the lost, regardless of the response. Our responsibility is to sow the seed and it is God that is responsible for the increase (**1 Corinthians 3:6-7**).
4. A suggestion for implementation by a congregation or a few interested individuals: have those interested in being involved meet together on a weekly basis, and encourage one another to *set goals* for the coming week.

This Simple Program Should Easily Increase Opportunities To Share The Gospel And Bring Many Souls To Christ.

Questions

1. Before you saw the results of the survey (seen in the introduction), what would you have guessed was the best method in converting souls for Christ?
2. What are the five basic things we can do that will increase our opportunities to share the gospel?
3. What is the greatest hindrance you experience in sharing the gospel with others? What can you do to overcome your hindrances?
4. If a congregation says, “It’s not worth having a gospel meeting for the lost because we never get any response”, what might be the underlying problem with that church?

Lesson Fourteen

CONTINUING TO GROW**Introduction**

1. Growth is necessary in all areas of life: business, science, industry, etc. This is especially true in our lives as Christians (**Ephesians 4:14-15**; **1 Peter 2:2**; **2 Peter 3:18**; **2 Thessalonians 1:3**).
2. Spiritual growth must be well-rounded, and balanced: a Christian must grow in knowledge, zeal, faith, Christ-likeness, and in good works, but there is a serious imbalance if we have heads full of knowledge, and a disposition of heart that remains unchristlike.
3. This final lesson is intended to help us continue growing ever closer to God and to be more productive in our service to Jesus Christ our Lord. We shall talk about hindrances to growth and offer several suggestions for continuing in spiritual growth.

1. HINDRANCES TO GROWTH

There are at least four things that will hinder our spiritual growth. The onus is on each one to identify hindrances and learn to overcome them.

- a. There are many things that can hinder our spiritual growth, and the following are just a few of the main hindrances:
 - 1) A lack of effort:
 - a) Growing in Christ is not automatic. One may still be a “babe” after many years (**cp. Hebrews 5:13**; **1 Corinthians 3:1-2**).
 - b) Growth requires effort: those who make the effort will make progress that is obvious to all (**cp. 1 Timothy 4:15**), but those who are spiritually lazy will simply follow the course of least resistance; such will forever remain “babes” and may fall away altogether.
 - 2) Discouragement:
 - a) Some people may begin their Christian life well enough, but then they become discouraged and even end up falling away. The reason for such discouragement may vary: church troubles, personal problems, lack of encouragement from others, etc.
 - b) But consider the example of the apostle Paul: few of us will ever have to face the same problems he had to endure (**2 Corinthians 11:24-29**), and yet he did not “lose heart” (become discouraged) (**2 Corinthians 4:8-9**). Why? Because he knew his labor was not in vain (**2 Corinthians 4:16-5:1**). And so he encourages us not to grow weary in doing good (**Galatians 6:9**; **1 Corinthians 15:58**).
 - 3) The law of disuse:
 - a) There are approximately 640 skeletal muscles in the human body and they will continue to function through regular daily use. However, when muscle and bone tissue are not used, they will begin to shrink and waste away, which is known as atrophy.
 - b) So it is with knowledge and wisdom, abilities and talents, and spiritual exercises – if we do not continue to use them and increase in them, then they will “shrink and waste away” and we ourselves will “drift away” from the Lord (**Hebrews 2:1**).
 - 4) The law of interference:
 - a) You are at home and you have to complete an important work assignment within the next couple of hours, and it requires all of your concentration. But your spouse is constantly interrupting you and the children are playing a game that, apparently, necessitates a lot shouting and screaming. I am sure we have all been in such a situation, whether at home or at work. But you know it is impossible to get anything done under such circumstances.

- b) We live in a world in which we have many responsibilities and little time fulfill them. If we are not watchful, the cares of this world will choke out the word and hinder our spiritual growth (**Mark 4:18-19**).
- b. More often than not, the problem is bad time management, a lack of organization, and a lack of discipline. In an effort to prevent succumbing to these hindrances, some suggestions for continuing your spiritual growth are offered in the next point.

2. SUGGESTIONS FOR CONTINUING YOUR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

To put it simply, we must keep going forward to keep growing; we must keep ourselves active in the service of the Lord.

- a. The following suggestions will help you in your efforts to continue in your spiritual growth:

- 1) Become active in the work of the congregation:

- a) Begin immediately! It is important not to delay (remember the “hindrances”). There is work for everyone (**Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; Ephesians 4:11-16; 1 Peter 4:10-11**). Even the most humble service can be a source of joy for those who are doing it to please God (cp. **Psalms 84:10; John 13:12-17**).
- b) A couple of suggestions: (i) Make known your desire to participate in the work of the church to the elders or men of the church. (ii) Look for work that needs to be done. The best servant is the one who can see things that need to be done and then does them without having to be told.

- 2) Start a program of regular private devotions:

- a) Spend time each day alone with God in prayer (**Matthew 6:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:17**), Bible study (**1 Peter 2:1-3**), and singing (**James 5:13**).
- b) Such time consistently spent will supply the spiritual nourishment necessary for spiritual growth. Many Christians do not grow because they try to exist on a “spiritual starvation diet” (cp. **Hosea 4:6**).

- 3) Participate in an informal Bible study group: meet weekly with other Christians in an informal setting to study the Bible together. This provides opportunity for mutual sharing and encouragement which leads to even more knowledge and spiritual growth.

- 4) Become involved in evangelism:

- a) You can invite family members, co-workers, and friends to have a Bible study, go door-knocking, set up a stall in your local market, etc. (cp. **John 1:40-46**).
- b) You can hand out Bible literature to family members, co-workers, and friends, distribute literature from house to house (commonly called “letterboxing”).

- 5) Practice constant self-examination: the Scriptures call us to examine ourselves in our relation to Christ (**2 Corinthians 13:5**).

- a) Here are some questions we should often ask ourselves:

- (i) Do I have a better Bible knowledge than one year ago?
- (ii) Have I helped someone else to become a Christian?
- (iii) Am I enjoying life as a child of God?
- (iv) Am I improving my life, my disposition, and becoming more Christ-like?
- (v) Do I set a good example for other Christians?
- (vi) Am I growing in such activities as Bible study, prayer, and worship?

- b) Self-examination is not an easy process, but true spiritual growth is impossible without it!

- b. There are likely other things we can do to help us continue in our spiritual growth, but these things are steps in the right direction.

Conclusion

1. Though we have come to the end of this series of studies, if we implement their suggestions, we will successfully embark on a spiritual journey with Christ that will last through eternity.
2. It is sad, but true, that many Christians are often just religious enough to be miserable; but the life of the Christian is intended to be one filled with love, joy, peace, and so much more (**Galatians 5:22-23**).
3. We pray that these lessons may be useful in helping you to truly experience the *abundant life* that Jesus provides (**John 10:10**).

“Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it” (**1 Thessalonians 5:23-24**).

Questions

1. Why do we need to grow spiritually?
2. Our spiritual growth must be balanced. What would be a serious imbalance?
3. What are some the things that hinder our spiritual growth?
4. What things – not listed above – can you think of that will help us continue in our spiritual growth?

A CLOSER WALK WITH GOD

by

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