

LESSONS FROM LIFE

Introduction: Why Lessons From Life?

Dear Steve, Josh, Andrew, Benji, Mark, David and Paul,

My Wake-Up Call

Last week, I received a wake up call. It came in the form of 5 e-mails over the space of a week. The first e-mail was from Roy - a likeable, witty young guy who worked with the *National Network of Youth Ministers*. While out hiking, something he loved to do, he had begun experiencing some dizziness and balance problems. Doctors discovered that a tumor on his brain was the cause. Roy requested prayer that the surgery would go well to remove it. Even in this serious e-mail, Roy threw in some of his characteristic wit. "Neat guy!" I thought.

The next e-mails were from his sister and wife. Initially, they thought the surgery had gone well. But he never regained consciousness and was soon pronounced dead. His wife's final e-mail showed her to be a strong believer who will draw strength to cope with the grieving process and help their two girls. I know that although it won't be easy, God will care for their family, just as he did ours during Laurene's illness and death.

What hit me like a ton of bricks was the realization that, as the bible says, *life is just a vapor*. It's fleeting. Each e-mail I send, each conversation I have, may be my last. I can't be certain of the time and place that I'll leave this world to meet Jesus. *I was forced to think about you as my children. If I were to die in a week, would I have given you everything you needed to live a successful life? I had to answer "No."*

What I'm Up To

I hope I've done two things right: 1 - I've tried to love you, befriend you, and let you know in every way I know how that I believe in you and am absolutely crazy about you. Although I don't always know the best way to express that love, I hope you feel it. I don't want you to ever doubt my love for you. 2 - I've tried to live my life for God openly before you, passing on to you my hopes, dreams and struggles as I give you rides, purchase guitars together, shoot guns, look at cars, build our tree house, go to concerts, or just hang out together. Please let me know if I'm letting you down in either of these areas. I really, really want you to know how much I love you.

What I've lacked is the more formal, systematic passing on to you the wisdom I've learned from my 46 years of life. Out devotions have been sometimes decent, but usually sporadic. Lately they've been nonexistent. Yet, during my years I've learned a lot about success in friendships, money, personal health, happiness and a relationship with God. I've learned from my own successes and failures, my many close friends and acquaintances, plus the hundreds of youth I've worked with as a minister to youth. I've

Personal Note: My wife Laurene was diagnosed with cancer while we were serving as missionaries in Slovakia. We returned to the States for emergency surgery and cared for her for four years until she left us to be with her Lord. Our twins, David and Paul, were 5 months old when she was diagnosed. Andrew was 9 and Benji was 6. I've since remarried to Cherie, who was raising three sons - Steve, Josh and Mark - as a single mom. We're all living an often fun, but consistently crazy life in Metro Atlanta, Georgia.

seen many succeed; I've seen many crash and burn. I've also taken a step further by reading voraciously about the lives of great people and reflecting on what I can learn from them. I propose that we discuss these "lessons from life" from the springboard of my personal experience and the lives of some of the most successful musicians, actors, sports stars, writers, inventors, teachers, and business tycoons that this world has ever known.

Personal Experience Can Be Costly

Although personal experience is a great teacher, it can also be costly. I'd prefer to learn from someone else's mistakes than my own. Perhaps by passing on my own successes and failures, as well as those of others, I can not only keep you from shipwrecking your lives, as so many are doing today, but can watch you become so successful in life that your own children and acquaintances will be eager to discover the principles that guided your lives. I suppose this is a part of what Solomon had in mind when he began his "Proverbs":

***"Hear, my son, your father's instruction,
And do not forsake your mother's teaching;
Indeed they are a graceful wreath to your head,
And ornaments about your neck." (Proverbs 1:8,9)***

The Challenge

I propose that we commit 5 to 10 minutes a day, three times per week, to talk about these areas of life. I suspect that often the topic will provoke conversations or even debates that will take us beyond that. I'm sure you'll disagree with me at times. That's fine! That means you're thinking and that you understand at least where I'm coming from on an important issue. I'm committed not to bore you. After the first week we can evaluate whether or not we need to do it a different way.

Questions That Make You Go Hummmmm...

1. *What do you think I meant when I said, "I'd prefer to learn from someone else's mistakes than my own."?*
2. *Look at the Table of Contents and tell me if you think we should cover topics in the order they're set up, or if you'd rather cover other topics first. It's usually best to cover topics that are interesting to you now.*
3. *What's the best time and place that we could meet? Would you prefer to do it while we're hiking, sitting in the tree house or doing something else?*

Series #1 - "Spiritual Essentials" Session #1 - Finding Assurance of Salvation

After the series of e-mails I talked about in our last discussion, I decided that I needed to write out what I wanted to leave you guys with...and quickly! In fact, I started thinking, "What if I have only a week left before God takes me? What few things would I want to pass on to you during that week?"

My #1 essential is a no brainer. I want each of you to be assured of your own salvation. No matter what you achieve in this life of 70 years, if you don't achieve assurance of your own salvation, you'll never be able to experience true peace.

He Had it All, Except...

I once read an interview with a record-setting, professional football superstar – the type hero that many athletes would worship. But while this quick and powerful running back was confident on the playing field, he wasn't so confident about a bigger issue. One day, an interviewer asked him what he feared - an interesting question for a player so quick and powerful that his opponents feared him. But his answer was revealing. What did he fear? In his own words, *"Dying and going to hell. But I hope I don't, because I've been a good person."* (Found in Sports Magazine)

Here was a guy who had it all as far as success in this world was concerned. Yet, his lack of personal assurance of salvation haunted his reflective hours.

As Jesus put it,

"What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?" (Lk. 9:25)

Asking God's Blessing

Who will pray for us, that God will make this devotion worthwhile for us?

Is Assurance Possible?

Most people I talk to don't think that an assurance of their salvation is possible this side of heaven. Yet, the bible makes it clear that God wants us to have that assurance:

"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." (1 John 5:13)

What does this verse say to those who don't believe they can have assurance of their salvation? (We **can** know that we have eternal life.)

Yet, if God wanted me to have this assurance, why did I struggle with doubt? ***Why do you think some people have doubts about their salvation?*** I'll hit one reason in this devotion and more in the next two.

Why People Doubt

#1 - They Doubt the Truth of the Bible

This was a biggie for me. Sure, the bible said that if I trusted Christ for my salvation, I'd go to heaven. But this all assumes the bible is true. Many people say that science and the bible contradict each other. And what about all those other religions? What if the Koran or the Hindu Vedas give the true way to salvation? I decided that life was too short to go to bed at night wondering whether I would make it to heaven.

Don't Evidence and Faith Contradict?

As I read the bible, I found that Jesus was never against evidence. In fact, He encouraged our seeking. **Look at these verses. What does each have to say to those who claim that our faith cannot be backed by evidence:**

Acts 1:3 *“After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive.”*

Acts 17:31 *“For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.”*

So, God wasn't down on proof. In fact, He encouraged my seeking when He said **“...seek and you shall find...”** (Matthew 7:7)

Do you ever question your faith, like I have in the past? (Let them talk about it.) If you are now, or ever do in the future, or need to help a friend who struggles with doubt, here's the path that led me from doubt to faith.

1. Pray

“This is the confidence that we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us – whatever we ask - we know that we have what we asked of him.” (1 Jn. 5:14,15)

How does this verse apply to doubters? (Since we know it's in His will to clear up our doubts, we know that He'll answer this prayer if we persevere.)

1 John 5:14,15 – “Ask” is in the Greek present tense, which could be translated “continually ask.” So, this verse doesn't promise that a person who asks only once should expect an immediate answer.

2. Be willing to follow Jesus

(Jesus is speaking) “If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.”
(John 7:17)

According to this verse, what must doubters do to find out whether or not Jesus' teaching is truly from God? (Choose to do God's will.)

I can remember sharing my faith with a skeptical student while I was studying at the University of Georgia. He explained that he had intellectual problems with the Christian faith. Instead of trying to clear his objections, I asked, *"If I could demonstrate to you that Jesus really did all the miracles He claimed to do, pulled off His own resurrection, and was truly the Son of God, would you be willing to give Him your life?"* The student kind of smiled and said, *"I suppose that's the real problem; I'm just not willing to give up my partying."*

This guy had a heart problem that was disguised as a head problem. If I want to know if the Bible's true, I must make sure I'm sincerely seeking the truth. If I'm not willing to follow God, I can't expect Him to clear up all of my doubts just to satisfy my curiosity.

3. Read the Bible

"Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." (Rom. 10:17)

According to this passage, what should a doubter do? (Read the Bible.)

I've found that many people's doubts come from listening to what people say about the bible rather than reading it themselves.

4. Study the evidence

"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." (1 Peter 3:15b)

The Bible is challenging us to sink our spiritual roots deeper. Reading up on Christian evidences was a big part of clearing up my doubts. If you've never read anything on this before, I recommend the little book, *More Than a Carpenter*, by Josh McDowell. He's a former skeptic who became a Christian after studying the evidence. (I recommend lots more resources in the section on Christian Evidences.)

Action Point

- 1) Do you need to take these steps to clear up your own doubts about the bible?
- 2) Would you prefer to skip to the section of devotions called "Christianity on Trial"? It will take you through many evidences for the Christian faith. If this isn't a big issue for you, just continue with the next sessions.

Prayer

God, sink my roots deeper so that I can be assured of my own faith and be better equipped to help others who doubt."

Series #1 - "Spiritual Essentials" Session #2 - Cementing Down Your Decision

It was the 1924 World Series, the bottom of the ninth inning, and Goose Goslin (who was eventually inducted into the hall of fame) was up to bat for the Washington Generals. The Generals were down one run and desperately needed to tie it up. The pitcher fired the ball. Goslin connected, sprinted for first base, then rounded second and third as the Generals' fans cheered him on. And I'm sure they went absolutely wild in that final stretch as they watched him beat the ball to home plate. But to everyone's utter dismay, the umpire ruled him out. He was obviously safe. Was this official blind? The umpire stepped up to the mic, calmed the furious crowd, and explained, "The runner missed first base." (Overheard from Mike Linch)

What do you think this illustration has to do with the Christian life? Some youth go to Christian meetings, pray to God and try to help others, but can't get a peace about their own salvation because they're afraid they may have missed first base, spiritually speaking.

Like Goose Goslin, they're sprinting around the bases, but may have never touched first base.

Last week we began a series that we entitled, "Show Me The Way," to learn how we can gain an assurance of our own salvation, how we can know that we're right with God, how we can be certain that if we died today, that we'd be in heaven tomorrow. Today, we want to make sure that we've all touched first base.

Asking God's Blessing

Who will pray for us, that God will make this devotion worthwhile for us?

On Bad Memories and Doubts

In our last talk, I shared how I overcame my doubts about the truth of the Bible. **Do you remember how I dealt with that problem?** (You might need to review the last week's headings.)

But another problem robbed me of assurance of my salvation as a teen. **Although I had prayed a prayer for salvation at my church when I was a child, I couldn't remember exactly what I had prayed or what I was thinking when I prayed.** For years after I made that decision, I couldn't see that my life was much different than the nonbelievers I knew.

Materials Needed: You'll need a gospel presentation booklet, such as the *Four Spiritual Laws*, or *Steps to Peace With God*. If you don't have one, you can copy one from the internet at <http://www.billygraham.org/believe/stepsToPeace.asp> (*Steps To Peace With God*) or <http://www.greatcom.org/laws/languages.html> (*Four Laws*, in about 150 languages!) If either of these Web pages has changed, back up to the basic site and find it from there (for example, go to www.billygraham.org and look for the booklet). In case you don't have Web access, I put a supplementary gospel presentation at the end of this session.

As a 10th grader, I rededicated my life to Christ at a retreat. After that, my life changed dramatically. I began to want to seek God's will more than my own. I wanted to get with other Christians and attend bible study groups.

So, if someone asked when I actually received Christ, I'd have to say, "I'm not sure." Since I couldn't remember if I'd received Christ correctly, I couldn't be sure I was saved. What could I do to make sure I had done it right?

On Alarm Clocks and Doubts

Whenever I've got a really important event to wake up early for, I usually set my clock, turn off the lamp and lie down. But sometimes as I lie there I start to doubt whether I set the clock for AM or PM, whether the music was turned up loud enough for me to hear, etc. My solution? I flip my lamp back on and reset the alarm to make sure I set it right. I think it's only natural that when you've got a lot riding on something, you want to make sure you've done it right. That's what I did to make sure I'd done my salvation right.

I took a little booklet that explained the gospel clearly. For me, it was the *Four Spiritual Laws*, by Campus Crusade for Christ. (Another good one is *Steps to Peace With God*, by Billy Graham.) Then I told God, "God, I'm almost certain that I've already done this before. But You know that my uncertainty bothers me. So I'm going to do this one more time to make sure I understand it and to make sure I'm sincere."

I went through the booklet, saying at the end of each page, "Yes God, I believe that." Then I sincerely prayed the example prayer at the end. I then wrote on the back of the booklet something like, "On Friday, June 2, 1976, I read this booklet, understood it, and prayed the prayer with sincerity." I then put the booklet in a small safe in my bedroom. Thereafter, whenever Satan whispered doubts in my ear, like "Are you *sure* that you *really* understood how to repent? Are you *sure* you believed?" I took the booklet out of the safe and said, "This is exactly what I did."

If you have doubts about your decision for Christ, why not confirm it right now? Use one of the above booklets, either in print form or on the Web, or use my presentation below.

Hints: 1) If you read one of these booklets either on the Web or below, print it off, write your personal note on it and put it in your safe place. 2) If you're a parent working with your teens, you might give them the option of either going through the booklet on their own, or doing it with you.

Gospel Presentation

1) We've Blown It

"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23)

You might say, "So, I've sinned. What's the big deal?" The big deal is this:

"For the wages of sin is death..." (Romans 6:23)

Think of it this way: Imagine that you're taking a Math test, and the passing grade is 100%. But you know that you've already missed a couple of problems. So here's the

question: No matter how many problems you get right from here on out, will you ever pass the test? (No. You've already blown it.)

Well, that's the way it is with heaven. God is perfect and people are sinful. So there's no way that sinful people have the right to get into heaven. The passing grade to get into heaven is 100%, and we've already missed a lot of problems.

So we're up the creek, with a hole in our boat, over your head, without a paddle, and we can't swim. We need help! Which brings us to point #2.

2) Jesus Paid Our Way

"But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8)

Remember - we've all sinned. And the penalty for sin is what? (Death, or spiritual separation from God.) So God wouldn't be a just God if He said, *"Oh well, boys will be boys. What's a little sin anyway? Let's just let them all into heaven!"* The penalty had to be paid for justice to be done, and that's exactly what Jesus was doing on the cross. He took the penalty that we deserved.

It's kind of like this. Imagine that one day you got so frustrated with school that you went out one night and torched it – burned it flat to the ground. You got caught and were brought before a judge. The judge says that you are guilty, and you have two options: 1) Pay five million dollars to build back the school. Or 2) Serve a life sentence for arson. You reply that you don't have any money, so you know what's coming.

But to your amazement, the judge slips off his judge's robe, walks down to you, and says, "Son, I believe in you and don't want you to go to prison. I'm a wealthy man. Here's a check I've written for the sum of five million dollars. Will you accept it?"

You see, just like the compassionate judge who paid your way out of jail, so our compassionate Savior paid our way out of hell. He paid the price, but you're still not free until you accept that check, which brings us to the final point.

3) We must receive Jesus

This is the way the Bible puts it:

"Yet to all who received him, to those who believe in his name, he gave the right to become children of God...." (John 1:12)

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

"For by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast." (Ephesians 2:8,9)

"I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus." (Acts 20:21)

Application

If you would like to make that decision for the first time, or get assurance of a decision you made long ago, then pray along with me silently, as I pray out loud, one phrase at a time.

"Lord Jesus, I need You. Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins. I open the door of my life and receive You as my Savior and Lord. Thank You for forgiving my sins and

giving me eternal life. Take control of the throne of my life. Make me the kind of person you want me to be.” (Prayer taken from “The Four Spiritual Laws,” by Bill Bright)

Thought Questions

If you have done what God says He requires in order to get to heaven (believe and repent), then are you saved? (Yes)

If you believed on Jesus and repented, but did not get saved, then what would this say about God and His promises? (He would be a liar.) So your salvation is as secure as the trustworthiness of God!

Series #1 - "Spiritual Essentials" Session #3 - "Three More Assurance Busters"

A Comedian's Confession

Many of you know comedian/actor Chris Farley from TV's "Saturday Night Live," or from his many movies, such as "Tommy Boy", "Black Sheep", "Beverly Hills Ninja", "Edwards and Hunt", "It's a Dog's Life" and "Almost Heroes." Before he died in 1997 at 33 years of age he revealed his serious side in an interview. He admitted, "Lust, gluttony, booze and drugs are most of the things I confess to. I can't help it. I hope to God that God will forgive me my sins. I don't know." ("SNL' alum's death echoes Belushi's," The Atlanta Journal and Constitution, by Lyle V. Harris, 12-19-97, p. G02)

Although outwardly successful, in Farley's reflective hours he was haunted by a lack of assurance concerning his relationship with God. My greatest priority for you as my children is that you achieve the the assurance that Farley missed in his life. **Why do you think he didn't know whether or not he was forgiven?**

Three More Assurance Busters

Over the last two weeks we discussed how doubts about the bible and doubts about our decision for Christ can wreck our assurance. Today, let's talk about how emotions can cause doubt.

Asking God's Blessing

Who will pray for us, that God will teach us during this devotion?

Emotional Salvation Experiences

I've heard some pretty dramatic testimonies of people who received Christ. But while some wept uncontrollably and others saw visions, I just kind of sat there. I was in a hotel room by myself. The gospel made sense to me. I gave my life to Christ. I went to bed.

But sometimes, when you hear one of those really emotional testimonies, you've got to wonder if you might have missed the real thing. I was relieved to find out that evangelist Billy Graham's decision to receive Christ was much like mine. As a high school student, he walked forward at a revival service to make his decision. When he noticed that a lady near him was in tears, he almost returned to his seat, thinking that his lack of emotion signaled some problem. But he decided to make his decision anyway. According to Graham, "No bells went off inside me. No signs flashed across the tabernacle ceiling. No physical palpitations made me tremble. I wondered again if I was a hypocrite, not to be weeping or something.... I simply felt at peace." (Just As I Am, pp. 29-31) And I know others who didn't even feel the peace!

Think about what Jesus said in John 3:16:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Jesus tells us who will have eternal life. Does He say, **“whoever weeps”** when he believes has eternal life? No. Does He say **“whoever gets very emotional”** when he believes has eternal life? No! What does he say we must do to have eternal life? He says **“whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”** So, if I believe Jesus for my salvation, I'm saved, *no matter what I feel.*

Bubbly Believers

Some people doubt their salvation because they don't feel close to God. They see other Christians who seem to be excited all the time, perky, bubbly. These bubbly believers raise their hands and weep out of joy during worship. I don't have a problem with bubbly believers. But God never promised that all Christians would feel bubbly. Some even struggle with depression.

Look once again at John 3:16. Did Jesus say, **“Whoever has a bubbly personality will be saved?”** No! He said, **“whoever believes”** has eternal life. Trust Him!

But You Just Don't Know How Sinful I've Been!

Some people look at the ways they've hurt her parents, their friends and others, and can't believe that God could ever forgive them. Perhaps they got strung out on drugs, introduced others to drugs, got pregnant unexpectedly, or killed someone in a gang fight. They think God could never forgive them.

My prescription for this person is to introduce them to "the chief of sinners."

Here's what he wrote:

“...I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man.... Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.” (I Timothy 1:13,15,16)

Can you guess who wrote that? It was the Apostle Paul, the guy who wrote most of the books of the New Testament and one of the most incredible Christians who ever lived. Do you know what he was like before he became a Christian? He blasphemed Jesus, tried to force Christians to blaspheme him, and was such a violent man, and so furiously enraged at Christians that he persecuted the church and Jesus, imprisoning Christians and having them beaten and killed (I Tim. 1:13; Acts 7:58; 8:1; 9:1,2,4,5; 22:4,5,7,19,20; 26:9-11). **But Paul wants you to know that if God can still have mercy on him, then nobody's too bad for God to save.**

So, you think *you've* been bad! Have you beaten or killed any Christians lately? Even if you have, I've got good news for you. It's in I John 1:7b:

“...the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.”

From how much sin? (“all sin”). Can you say it with me? (“all sin”) Can he purify us from hurting our parents? (“all sin”) from premarital sex? (“all sin”) from pornography? (“all sin”) from killing Christians? (“all sin”).

Now do you see why the word “gospel” means “good news?” **There’s no sin in your past that’s so black that God can’t take out the stain and leave you as white as snow.** His forgiveness is there for the asking. Look at I John 1:9:

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

The Greek word for “confess” is derived from the legal usage. It speaks of confessing or acknowledging sins, honestly facing a fact. (Dictionary of NT Theology)

Closing Activity

Write down a list of things that you’ve never felt completely forgiven for. Now write in bold letters over this list **“I John 1:9.”** Now, wad it up or tear it into small shreds and throw it into this garbage can.” It’s gone. Dropped into the deepest sea. Forgotten. Doesn’t it feel great!

Series #1 - "Spiritual Essentials" Session #4 - "The Lifestyle Exam"

One night, as a chaperone at a high school band camp, I was talking to a student who seemed really wild and confident during the day. I assumed he never thought of spiritual things. Yet, that night he looked at me and said, *"Sometimes I just stay awake nights wondering if I'll go to heaven when I die."*

Just like this guy, a lot of your friends think about their spiritual lives as well. If you're going to help them to find assurance of their salvation, you need to understand the roadblocks to that assurance. We've talked about several over the past few sessions. Today we'll talk about the final two that I've noticed.

People Who Don't Live For God

Some people lack assurance because they don't need to have assurance. They need to question their salvation. Although this may seem kind of callous, **the book of 1 John was written to help real Christians have assurance of their salvation. (1 John 5:13) John's basic message is this: in order to know if you're truly a Christian, don't look so much to some decision you made in the past; look at the way you're living now.** These verses tend to both comfort the afflicted and afflict the comforted. I'll let you read some of them for yourself and let you tell me what you learn about the lifestyle of a true believer.

Am I a Christian? (1 John's Lifestyle Exam)

- **Obedience: Am I Doing What God Wants Me to Do?** (1 John 2:3,4)

"We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him."

- **Faith: Do I Believe in Jesus?** (1 John 5:1)

"Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well."

- **Love: Am I Loving God and People?**

- **Loving God** (1 John 5:1,2)

"Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands."

- **Loving People** (1 John 3:14,15)

“We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.”

Caution! Some of us sensitive types may look at this list and get discouraged. After all, none of us live out faith, love and obedience 100% of the time. Does this mean we're not Christians? No! When John wrote the book of 1 John, he often used a tense that in the original Greek indicates a habitual lifestyle. 1 John 1:8 clarifies that we're not speaking of perfection.

“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”

Some people get so sensitive that when they miss a personal time with God they question whether they are saved or not. But just the fact that you are *trying* to meet with God and feel bad when you sin shows that the Spirit is working in your life.

When we accepted Christ, a big about face occurred in my life. Instead of making all decisions centered around "me, me, me," I started thinking more about loving others and living for God. According to 1 John, my assurance is based not on how emotional I got at a religious service, but the general direction of my heart and life here and now. As someone put it, ***“The faith that fizzles at the finish, was flawed from the first.”***

Are you believing in Jesus now? Are you following Jesus now? Do you love your brothers and sisters in Christ now? Are you following God rather than following self? According to God's Word you're a Christian and you have eternal life!

When I was struggling with assurance of my salvation, I read slowly through the book of 1 John and put check marks beside the characteristics of believers. That helped me greatly to see that I was indeed a true believer.

Caution! People who try to *earn* their salvation can't get an assurance because they never know when they've done enough good deeds to get into heaven. Although our lifestyle *gives evidence of* our salvation, it isn't what *causes or keeps* our salvation. Our salvation is by grace through faith, not something we earn.

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.”
(Ephesians 2:8,9)

One More Opportunity

Again, if I could leave you with any one thing in life, it would be an assurance of your own salvation. If some of these verses in 1 John made you question your salvation, why not go back to the last lesson and pray through that gospel presentation. Life sure is more fun when you don't have to worry about your eternity!

Series #1 - "Spiritual Essentials" Session #5 - "The Greatest Commandment"

Do you know what an "essentials" CD is? Do you have any "Essentials" CD's? Which ones? An "essentials" CD includes all the classic songs by a performer. In other words, if you're into electric guitars, you might own "Eric Clapton Essentials," "Jimi Hendrix Essentials," or "Van Halen essentials." Don't tell me you know Eric Clapton if you've never heard his song "Layla." It's got one of the best known guitar introductions of all time.

Tell me one of your favorite bands. Now, tell me what are a couple of essential songs that you'd want to play for someone else to introduce them to each band.

In the same way, I believe there are "Spiritual Essentials," those parts of your spiritual life that you can't afford to miss. The first essential was to make sure you have a relationship with God, that you've been born again, saved. That's what we covered in the first lessons.

After you're saved, there's all kinds of stuff to do as a Christian - reading the bible, going to retreats, going to church, trying to live right -- and all that stuff's important. But sometimes I'd like to know, **if I miss out on everything else, what are the essentials about the Christian life that I need to concentrate on? In other words, if someone were to write a small book entitled "Christian Living For Idiots," what would it say? Any ideas?**

Jesus on Essentials

Fortunately Jesus was once asked about this very question. It's in Matthew 22:34-40.

But when the Pharisees heard that He had put the Sadducees to silence, they gathered themselves together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?"

The Pharisee asking the question isn't a sincere seeker. He's trying to trip Jesus up. **How would you expect Jesus to answer this question?** I'd expect Jesus to say something like,

"All commands are equally important, because to disobey any command is to disobey My Father who gave them."

Or, He might turn their question back on them by saying,

"You Pharisees tell me the least important command and I'll tell you the greatest!"

But it's amazing to me that He answered. There *is* one commandment that's greater than the rest. There's something so essential that if we miss everything else about the Christian life, we can't afford to miss this. Here's what he said:

And He said to him, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."

This is the great and foremost commandment.

And a second is like it, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."

This isn't hard to understand. It's so simple that it can be reduced to 4 words. It's our family motto: **"Love God, Love People."**

Why do you think loving God and loving people is the most important command? (Possible answers: 1) If God's big purpose in this world is to develop people that He can have a relationship with, then the most important thing is for us to love Him. 2) If we love God and love people, then we'll automatically do the other things in the Christian life, like obeying Him in everyday life, going to church in order to worship Him, reading His Word in order to get to know him.)

*Someone said that the main thing about living the Christian life is keeping the main thing the main thing. **Could you put into your own words what you think he means by that statement? Jesus just told us the main thing. What is it?*** (Love God, love people.) Write it on a card. Laminate it. Put it in your wallet so that when you open it you can remember why you're here on earth. Write it on a paper, surround it with some artistic flair, and put it on your mirror or your bedroom wall. If we miss these two commands, we've missed them all.

Even for us who have been Christians

Going Deeper: Notes on Matthew 22:34-40

1) "the Scribes distinguished 613 commands in the Old Testament law." Since in principle every command was equally binding, "an incautious reply by Jesus could suggest that he repudiated some of these commandments, and thus lay him open to a charge of 'annulling the law.'" (French) **2)** Jesus draws these commands from Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and Leviticus 19:17,18. **3)** We can't make clear distinctions between "heart," "soul," and "mind." While "mind" "perhaps indicates more our intellectual commitment," it's also contained in the biblical word "heart." In our times "heart" tends to be identified exclusively with our emotions. In biblical times, it's broader, more like "the true person as he really is, not just as he appears outwardly." (French, see also on Matt. 15:18) The bottom line? "God is to be loved unreservedly with every faculty of your being." (Tasker) "supreme, devoted love to God," "to the utmost degree," "all that is within." (Expositor's Greek Testament) **4)** How is the second command related to the first? "though formally subordinate to the first, really the first in another form." (EGT) "similar," "in content and importance" (McNeile). **5)** What does it mean that all the law and prophets "hang on" these? "All the religious and moral demands in Scripture are valid because they can be ultimately traced to these two." (McNeile) "The two precepts which contain its sum and substance." (Alexander) It has been translated variously as "hang all," "in these two commandments all the law is contained," "depend," "is summed up in." (NT in 26 Trans) "The two great commandments do not dispense with all the rest (such an answer *would* have been a dangerous response to the 'test'), but the rest *depend* on them (literally 'hang', a technical term for laws which are derivable from others). They remain commandments of God, but they find their coherence in the overriding principle of the double commandment to love." (French) Thus, Jesus is not teaching situation ethics, which holds that whatever appears to be the most loving thing to do in any given situation is the right thing to do, no matter what other commands may be violated. Rather, God's other laws are to be obeyed since they are derived from or made coherent by the law of love.

for a long time, we get distracted from the main thing. We get the idea that the really great Christians are the ones who do everything right, make straight A's in school, come to church every time the doors are open, give all their money to charity and witness to everything that moves. But you can do all those things and still miss the main thing. The Pharisees did all that stuff, but Jesus condemned them. According to I Corinthians 13, if we have incredible gifts and give away all our possessions, but don't have love, we are nothing.

Action Points

In the next devotion we'll talk about practically how to live out the "love God" part of the Great Commandment. But before I spoil it with my ideas, try to describe a person who truly loves God with all his or her heart. **What does he do? What does he think about? What are His motives for doing things? Should this affect the kind of house he wants or car he drives? Why or why not?**

Series #1 - "Spiritual Essentials" Session #6 - "Love God"

In the last devotion, we started by talking about "essentials albums." **What are they and what does that have to do with "Spiritual Essentials"?** Today, let's just think about the first half of it: "love God."

"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.

This is the great and foremost commandment." (Matthew 22:37,38)

Asking God's Blessing

Who will pray for us, that God will help us to see better how to love Him?

Loving Him From the Heart

Loving God is kind of a vague concept to most people. I can understand how to love my dog. I feed him, pet him and don't beat him when I'm mad. But how do I love a God whom I can't see? In some ways it's a lot like loving a wife or husband, boyfriend or girlfriend. Let's go with that analogy.

If you want to really love God, you've got to...

1. Believe the Best.

Why is it important to believe the best about a person you love? If you want to see the romance in a relationship really fizzle, always believe the worst about the motives of the other person. You catch her talking to another guy, so you assume she's cheating on you. She can't go out with you this weekend, so you assume you're not important to her. After awhile, you build up this big list of grievances, before even hearing her side of things. Anger replaces your love. Why? Because you assumed the worst. But hey, maybe she had perfectly good explanations that had nothing to do with her thoughts toward you.

How do you think this applies to our relationship with God? Some people have a hard time getting excited about God because they've asked Him for some things in prayer and He didn't come through. Think about Todd. He tried to follow God, but God seemed to "reward" him with a messed up family and hard times at school. So, Todd *assumes* the worst: that God doesn't love him. That's why Todd has no desire to love God back. **How would you counsel Todd?**

Listen, God never said He'd answer every prayer or make your life easy. In fact, He warned his faithful followers, His disciples:

"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."
(John 16:33).

Note on John 16:33:

Tribulation "denotes great and pressing affliction, not some mild malady." (Morris)

God says that He allows us to go through hard times to strengthen us and to help us identify with others who go through hard times. (II Corinthians 1:3ff) We know that He loves us because He became a man, lived a hard but perfect life, died a cruel death on the cross, all for us. As Paul wrote,

"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8).

So, I have a good reason to believe the best about God when things don't go my way.

I know that this may sound pretty simplistic to those who are really bitter towards God. Lots of people have been there. It's hard to love Someone that you're bitter with.

Action Point

Some of us need to come to terms with how a loving God can allow bad things to happen to us. We've got an entire section of devotions on that, which we'll cover later. But for now, as weird as this might sound, **let's thank God for allowing us to go through some of our hard times.** After all, it's our hard times that grow us up. Life's so much easier if we praise God for the good and asking Him to help us through the bad, rather than getting mad at Him.

Let's start by thanking Him for the good things. This is a neat way to love on God. (Each pray.)

Next, let's ask Him to help us with some specific trials we're facing.

Series #1 - "Spiritual Essentials" Session #7 - "Love God"

Asking God's Blessing

Who will pray for us, that God will help us to see better how to love Him?

Girls, Guys and Love Languages

Often great romances go sour because they don't understand each other's love languages. **Do you have any idea what a "love language" is?** (It's how a person receives love.) So, you've got a girl who feels loved when her boyfriend communicates with her on the phone or personally. But the guy thinks the best way to show love to her is by training all the time to be the best at every sport in the school in order to impress her. Problem is, that doesn't leave much time for communication. So, she doesn't feel loved, no matter how hard he tries to show his love.

Some guys feel loved when their girlfriends speak highly of them or respect them. If the girl thinks it's more important to get her nails looking just right for him, and leaves him sitting in the den with her father for an hour while she perfects her nails, they've got a problem. She's trying to show love to him in a way that he doesn't receive love.

On God and Love Languages

Have you ever thought that it might be the same way with God? Could some people be trying to show love for God in ways that aren't really His love language?

What would you guess are some of God's love languages - the ways He wants to be loved? Here are some that come to my mind.

a. Spend Quality Time Together

Couples who keep the love in their relationship spend lots of quality time together. They talk on the phone, go places together, take walks together and just hang out together.

How does that relate to our love life with God? What are some ways we can spend quality time with God? Do you think that "quality personal time" is one of God's love languages? (See Matthew 14:23, Mark 6:46, Lk. 6:12, 59:16, 88:13)

Here are some ways to spend quality time with God:

- **Have a regular "date" with Him.** Many people call it a "quiet time." But it doesn't have to be quiet. You could have some Christian music playing in the background. Read a portion from the Bible to let God talk to you. Then talk to God, either out loud or silently. Ask Him to help you with things that worry you. But if all you talked to your girlfriend about was things you needed, you wouldn't have much of a relationship. Share with Him your dreams. Thank

Him for everything He's given you. Tell Him you're sorry for the times you've let Him down.

- **Be creative!** When I started having personal devotions as a teen, I really, really got bored kneeling day after day by my bed. So, I got creative, and began to love my time with God! Ideas: go on a walk with God in the woods or in a park. Sit in a tree and talk to Him. Write Him a song or a poem. Sing Him a song. Play a Christian CD you like and sing the words to Him. Play Him a song with an instrument. Write out a prayer to Him in a journal. Try using a devotional book. Take a Psalm (try Psalm 145) and pray it to God. Read a verse, pray what comes to your mind; read another verse and pray what comes to your mind, etc. **What are some of the things that you do to keep your personal times with God alive?**

3. Keep in Touch With Him During the Day

- **Talk to him about everything.**

"...pray continually..." (I Thessalonians 5:17)

- **Meditate continually on His Word.**

"Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful." (Joshua 1:8, Psalm 1:1,2)

Action Points

- **Honestly, how have your personal times with God been?** To be honest, it's very difficult for me to maintain a meaningful, personal time with God. **Can you keep me accountable for a week, asking me each day if I've spent time with God?**
- **What's some new, creative element that we mentioned today that you'd like to try in your personal time with God? Why not try one of the creative ways of worship right now, either as a group (if you're in a group) or personally?**
- **Talk to some Christians you respect and ask them for ideas on how they keep their personal time with God alive.**

Series #1 - "Spiritual Essentials" Session #8 - "Love God with Others"

Review

In our last time together, we talked about the first part of the greatest commandment. Do you remember what it was? Were you able to put into practice some of the creative ways of connecting with God through your personal devotions and throughout the day? What are some of the ideas that you'd recommend to others?

What Would You Say?

If you love someone, you just can't help but tell your friends how great he or she is. That's what worshipping God with a group is all about. Yet, some people don't get it. They say things like, *"I think that religion is a personal thing. I can worship him better sitting in a deer stand or fishing or in my bedroom than in a church."* **How would you answer this person?**

God likes to be worshiped by Christians gathered together. I don't know why. But it doesn't have to make sense to me. It's simply a part of His love language.

Remember our discussion in the last devotion about love languages? I don't have to understand why Cherie feels loved when I bring her coffee in the morning. I don't have to especially like making coffee. But since she's told me that this is a part of her love language, I accept it and do it to show my love for her. In the same way if I don't like worshipping with my fellow believers at church, then I need to either find a better church or get over it! Since I love God, I want to love Him in the ways He says he receives love.

If church isn't important, then...

- Why is the word "church" used 111 times in the New Testament (NIV)?
- Why does the Bible give us so many instructions on how the church should operate - qualifications for pastors, deacons, (I Tim. 3, Titus 1, Acts) what to do and not do in a church service? (I Cor. 12-14)
- Why are we commanded to "not give up meeting together...."? (Hebrews 10:25)

Who will read this verse out loud to us?

"Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Usually people who don't like to worship in church either aren't in a strong, biblical, relevant church, or just don't know how to get the most out of it. They sit in a church service, but don't get what's going on.

The Importance of Review

It's tempting to move directly into a new topic without reviewing the old. But review is one of the coolest elements of learning! Since your last devotion, you've had time to think about the truth and see how it fits into your life. Review gives you a chance to come to some conclusion. It's also a great reality check, seeing whether you're putting it into practice, or being "merely hearers, who delude themselves." (James 1:22) Review also lodges the truth more securely in your memory.

They're like the blonde (Not that I'm prejudiced against blondes! This lady just happened to be blonde.) who went to see a ventriloquist perform. Have you ever seen a ventriloquist? He has a toy girl or boy, called a "dummy," who sits on his knee, which he moves around with his hand. He talks to the dummy and then manipulates the dummy's mouth while he talks for the dummy. Since the ventriloquist has perfected the art of speaking without moving his own lips, he creates the illusion that the dummy is talking.

So, with his dummy on his knee, the ventriloquist is going through his usual dumb blonde jokes when the blonde on the 4th row stands on her chair and starts shouting: "I've heard enough of your stupid blonde jokes. What makes you think you can stereotype women that way? What does the color of a person's hair have to do with her worth as a human being? It's guys like you who keep women like me from being respected at work and in the community and from reaching our full potential as people... because you and your kind continue to perpetuate discrimination against, not only blondes, but women in general...and all in the name of humor!"

The ventriloquist is rather embarrassed and begins to apologize, when the blonde yells, "You stay out of this, mister! I'm talking to that little jerk on your knee!"

She obviously didn't get it. She thought the dummy was alive! But aren't so many people in church just like that blonde? They sit in the service, hear the sermon, hear the music, but have no clue what's going on - especially the worship that they're supposed to be caught up in.

Imagine that this same blonde lady comes to your youth group worship service. How would you explain to her (very simply!) how to really worship God during a service?

Ideas:

- **Listen to God.** God wants to communicate with you. Ready yourself by praying that God will tell you something through the music, the message or through another person.

"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path." (Psalm 119:105)

- **Sing From Your Heart.** True worship is active, not passive. Church isn't a concert, where the people up front perform and you're the audience. Actually, God's the audience and we're the performers - the ones singing to Him. Try to forget impressing everyone around you and concentrate on singing the words to God from your heart. Remember, we're to love Him by more than hanging out in a church service. God wants us to engage our hearts, souls and minds.

"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. (Matthew 22:37)

- **Love on People.** Whatever we do "for the least of these," we do for Jesus.

"The king will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'" (Matthew 25:40)

We love Him by loving the people He created. Maybe this is why Jesus said that the second command ("**Love your neighbor as yourself.**") was "like" the first one about loving God. Don't tell me about how much you love God if you can't love the people He created.

So don't come to church just to receive. Come to give. Look for someone sitting alone that needs a friend. Do you know how weird it feels sometimes to sit alone? Gather a few friends, introduce yourselves, and sit with her. Ask several people how they are doing...and wait for a response. Catch someone doing something right and compliment him for it. Encourage someone who looks down. Remember that prayer request from last week and ask how it turned out.

Wrapping It Up

Why am I so big on this stuff? Because according to God's Word loving God is no side show. It's the main thing. I don't want to get to the end of my life and realize that I've missed the main thing.

What do you think God would have you do as a result of this devotion? Could you go to your next meeting with these three things in mind and see if it makes a difference?

Series #1 - "Spiritual Essentials" Session #9 - "A Selfish Reason for a Selfless Life"

Review

In our last time together we talked about loving God in a corporate setting - with other believers. **In the light of that, how would you respond to a friend who said, "I don't think church is important because I can worship God better in my bedroom or going for a walk."? Did any of the hints help you to get more out of your corporate worship?**

An Embarrassing Math Class

Have you ever been doing an in class assignment in Math and completed your work, only to look around and realize that nobody else is finished yet? For me, that was always a bad sign. Sure enough, you look at the person on your left and notice she's on a different page. So is the person on your right. Totally embarrassed, you go up to the teacher's desk and show him that you were working on the wrong page during the entire class time.

Multiply this embarrassing feeling many times and perhaps you'll understand what many people may experience when they first meet God. They'll realize that the things they lived for - personal pleasure, cool clothes, status in society - were really pretty silly when seen in the light of eternity. They'll realize that for their entire lives, they were on the wrong page. As C.S. Lewis put it,

"All that is not eternal is eternally useless."

I want to be on the right page, doing things that will make a difference for eternity. I want to do the essentials. Let's look again at the verse where Jesus spelled out the essentials:

But when the Pharisees heard that He had put the Sadducees to silence, they gathered themselves together.

And one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?"

And He said to him, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.

This is the great and foremost commandment.

And a second is like it, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."

(Matthew 22:34-40)

So the way to live on the right page, to keep to the essentials, is to **love God and love people**. Notice that both of these are focused outward. I think that's significant. It's not about us; it's about others. Jesus challenges us to live a selfless life, where our excitement is found more in giving than receiving. As the Apostle Paul wrote:

...and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf. (II Corinthians 5:15)

Now at first it seems like Jesus is asking us to make some huge sacrifice. **He basically wants me to change from getting up each morning asking, "What's in it for me? How can I make me happy today" to begin waking up saying "How can I make God and others happy today?"**

Why would this be such a hard commitment to make? (It sounds like I might be missing all the fun in life. It sounds like drudgery?) **Why would you argue that it's still reasonable to decide to live for God and others?** (If God loves me and has the best for me, perhaps this is the life that would make me the happiest.)

This may sound really weird, but there are some really good selfish reasons to live a selfless life. In other words, God tells us to live a selfless life because it's really the most satisfying and rewarding and joyful life we could live. **People who put their own happiness first end up miserable. People who put other people's happiness first find happiness themselves. So, if I'm wisely selfish, I'll live for others in order to get the most out of life myself.**

A Good, Selfish Reason to Live a Selfless Life: It's More Fun!

Why do you think people live selfish lives? Basically, they think it will make them happy. There's nothing wrong with wanting to be happy. They're just going about it the wrong way.

Imagine for a moment that you're an idiot (easier for some to imagine than others) and don't understand how lights work. Walking into your bedroom you find that the light isn't turned on. So you immediately go to the light to try to make it turn on. **What's the problem with that?** Right. In order to turn the light on you don't go for the light. You go to the light switch.

In the same way, you don't find happiness by trying to find it somewhere. You find it by going to the switch. The switch to true happiness is making others happy. It's getting up in the morning and asking, "How can I encourage someone today? What can I do to make someone's life better today?"

It's okay if you don't believe me yet. To most students it probably looks like some of the most selfish people at school are the most happy. But after you live more of life, you begin to see the misery inside most of those people. Here's an example:

The great evangelist Billy Graham tells of a time that he and his wife Ruth visited an island in the Caribbean: "One of the wealthiest men in the world asked us to come to his lavish home for lunch. He was seventy-five years old, and throughout the entire meal he seemed close to tears. 'I am the most miserable man in the world,' he said. 'Out there is my yacht. I can go anywhere I want to. I have my private plane, my helicopters. I have everything I want to make me happy. And yet I'm miserable as hell.'" We talked with him and had prayer with him, trying to point him to Christ, who alone gives lasting meaning to life.

Then we went down the hill to the small cottage where we were staying. That afternoon the pastor of the local Baptist church came to call. He was an Englishman, and he too was seventy-five. A widower, he spent most of his free time taking care of his two

invalid sisters. He reminded me of a cricket--always jumping up and down, full of enthusiasm and love for Christ and for others.

'I don't have two pounds to my name,' he said with a smile, 'but I'm the happiest man on this island.'

'Who do you think is the richer man?' I asked Ruth after he left.

We both knew the answer." (Just As I Am: The Autobiography of Billy Graham, p. 697)

The question I'd like to ask is, **"Which man would you rather be, the wealthy one or the happy one?"** The reason people want wealth is because they want the happiness that they think comes with it. But true joy comes from a relationship with Jesus - focusing on Him and others rather than yourself. As Jesus said,

"I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." (John 15:11)

As someone said, "joy" is spelled:

Jesus first
Others second
You last

Action Points

Benjamin Franklin was considered by many people to be the greatest, wisest person of his time. One of the things he learned from a preacher was to get up each morning

and ask, **"What good thing can a do for someone today?"** Each evening before going to bed he'd ask, **"What good did I do for someone today?"** What a great way to remind ourselves to live for others! Let's try it for the next week and report at our next meeting specifically what you did for someone.

Comments on John 15:11

"Their love for others must therefore be a sacrificial love. But the practice of that love would never be a joyless duty. Jesus endured the cross for the joy that was set before Him, and part of that joy lay in the knowledge that His disciples, in obeying the commands He had given them, would find in their obedience the fullness of their own joy." (Tasker) "We can share His joy, and as we walk in His blessed steps, following Him as our pattern, abiding in Him and in His love, our joy in Him will be full. We rejoice with Him in the things in which He rejoices." (Gaebelein)

Series #1 - "Spiritual Essentials"

Session #10 - "On Selflessness, Doormats and Elvis"

Review

Last week we talked about selflessness as the way to happiness. **Do you think that always works? Why might some people be selfless, but still unhappy? Have you been able to ask each morning, "What good can I do for someone today," and each evening, "What good did I do for someone today?" Do you think it helped your life? What are some specific good things that you did for others?**

Caution!

While selflessness leads to happiness, being a doormat leads to misery. **In your opinion, what's the difference in being selfless and being a doormat?**

A Doormat - *does everything that everyone wants him to do in order to try to please everyone.* Since he can't please everyone, he's stressed and miserable.

A Selfless Person - *tries to do what's best for everyone.* If a person asks for help but should really help himself, the selfless person might refuse to serve.

Did Elvis Have it All?

You'd have thought that Elvis Presley had it all. He was called "The King" by millions of adoring fans and had tons of money, girls, and friends to help him with every aspect of his life. But inside he was often empty and miserable. Why? His stepbrother and closest friend, Rick Stanley, observes that

Elvis "*was brought up to find his fulfillment in pleasing others. Not in serving them, but pleasing them. There is a difference. People who are motivated to please others rarely have their need to love and be loved met. Their lifelong search for that kind of fulfillment is often tragically unsuccessful.*" (Rick Stanley, *Caught in a Trap: Elvis Presley's Tragic Lifelong Search for Love*, Word Publishing, Dallas, 1992, p. 21)

How tragic! Remember, we're not out to *please* everyone, but to *serve* them. There's a huge difference.

"The Grinch"

Do you remember in the movie "The Grinch," how miserable the Grinch was? Why do you think he was so miserable? (He was selfish, annoyed by people and constantly thought of himself.) **What changed the Grinch?** (After taking away "The Who's Christmas toys, he was startled to see them wake up Christmas morning happy and singing.) So, his heart grew and grew and GREW! Then, he came back down the mountain with the toys (and his little brave dog) and distributed the gifts. Then, of course, he experienced the great joy of a life of giving.

Action Points

Let's keep practicing the "What good can I do for someone today?" Remember some of the things that you do for others so that you can share them in our next meeting.

Series #1 - "Spiritual Essentials"

Session #11 - "More Selfish Reasons for a Selfless Life"

Review

Last week we tried to distinguish selflessness from being a doormat. **How can we tell the difference? What robbed Elvis of a lot of happiness, according to his stepbrother? What brought joy to "the Grinch"? What good were you able to do for others since our last meeting?**

The Eternal Payoff of a Selfless Life

The first reason we gave to live a selfless life was for the joy it brings here on earth. A second reason is to ensure your long-term happiness. Drugs are a shortcut to happiness that gives instant gratification, but long term misery. Ignorantly selfish people try to get happiness here on earth at any cost. The wisely selfish go for spiritual rewards both here and for eternity. Why not go for happiness that lasts forever? As Jesus said,

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal." (Matthew 6:19,20)

The Misery of Selfishness

A third reason to live selflessly is to avoid the misery of selfish living. Diedrick Bonhoffer wrote a book called *"The Cost of Discipleship,"* warning us against casual Christianity. Great book. But another one could be written called *"The Cost of Un-Discipleship,"* warning us about the cost of a selfish, ungodly life. As the Apostle Paul warned us,

"Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows." (Galatians 6:7)

Selfish people become miserable; I don't care how much money they have.

Howard Hughes was the wealthiest American of his time. He could have anything he wanted. Since he liked fresh squeezed orange juice, he had it flown in each morning from California. When the ice cream shop discontinued a flavor he liked, he paid thousands of dollars to have the company make a new batch. Since he despised popular entertainer Frank Sinatra, he didn't want him performing in his town of Los Vegas. So, he bought the hotel where he was performing just so that he could kick him out!

You'd think that he'd be supremely happy. But he was miserable. He loved things and used people. **His philosophy of life seemed to be "Get all you can; can all you get; sit on the can." His closest associates despised him. His latter years found him living a lonely and tortured existence.**

If you wake up each morning thinking "What's in it for me?" and go through the day trying to have fun at other's expense, get off of that road to misery while you still have a chance. It's a dead end existence. You're trying to turn on the light at the wrong place. You're headed for misery. But it's not too late to escape. Earlier we saw how "The Grinch" made the change. Another incredible change was made by "The Scrooge." Do you remember his story?

Ebenezer Scrooge lived a lonely, joyless life, consumed by his greed. People meant nothing to him.

But after three spirits reveal to him the misery he's caused others and the way others despise him, his life is forever changed. He begins to empathize with others, forgetting about himself and meeting their needs. By turning outward, he finds an incredible joy he never knew.

Do you lack joy? Perhaps you need to learn from Ebenezer Scrooge the joy of giving. Here's how Dickens (the author) describes the changed Ebenezer Scrooge:

"He went to church, and walked about the streets, and watched the people hurrying to and fro, and patted children on the head, and questioned beggars, and looked down into the kitchens of houses, and up to the windows; and found that everything could yield him pleasure. He had never dreamed that any walk – that anything – could give him so much happiness... Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh, and little heeded them... His own heart laughed, and that was quite enough for him."

I know that it's scary to make this huge shift in life - from living for self to living for God and others. But as one person in a recovery group said,

When I turned myself over to God, I took my life out of the hands of an idiot.

Action Points

I challenge you...No, I BEG you to put these priorities - love God, love people - at the center of your life. Here are some ideas:

- **Make Benjamin Franklin's morning and evening questions a part of your life for the next month**, then decide if you want to ask them for the rest of your life.
- **Selfless at home:** Think today how you can serve your mom, dad, brothers or sisters.
- **Selfless at school:** Who's someone at school that others don't pay attention to that you could encourage?
- **Selfless in the neighborhood:** Is there a sick or elderly or financially struggling person you could help with yard work or other practical matters?
- **Selfless at Church:** Who are people at church or youth group or a bible study group that you could encourage this week?

Series #2 - "Friendships: How to Make Them and Keep Them" Session #1 - "Prioritize Relationships"

What Makes Us Happy?

From my experience in life, the quality of my relationships determines much of my happiness. **Have you ever taken a vacation to a great place, like a beach or the mountains, only to find that everything erupted into World War III because somebody made everyone else miserable?** A first class resort can turn into hell if the relationships fall apart. And no amount of money make you happy if your relationships stink.

Misery on \$1,000,000.00 Per Week

A good example is a girl named Christina Onassis. Her dad was Aristotle Onassis, the richest man on earth at the time. She grew up on the largest yacht in the world, which was named after her: the "Christina." They would see the great sites of the world from this luxury ship, which had a large heated pool and a crew of 60 to cater to their every whim. She wintered in Paris and later lived luxuriously on an island they owned in Greece. When she got out on her own, she had a tax-free income of a million dollars a week!

If she wanted it, she could get it. For example, she loved Diet Coke, but it wasn't available locally. She couldn't pick up a year's supply, because she felt it lost its freshness if stored too long. Her solution? She paid a private jet to fly ten cases of Diet Coke from America to her European home every month, to the tune of \$3,000.00 per case! Sounds like a fun life. Right? Think again.

In the middle of all this luxury, her relationships made her life miserable. While she was growing up, her mom had an open affair on the yacht. Her dad retaliated by having his own open affair and divorcing his wife. She'd never get over these strained relationships. She'd get so mad that she'd throw her dad's clothes out of portals into the ocean. She couldn't get along with her parents or the new stepparents, often getting even by bringing them trouble. Neither could she get along with her own string of husbands. Eventually a miserable Christina attempted suicide. Her sister Tina succeeded. Those who knew Christina weren't surprised to hear that she died at the age of 37. She relied on drugs to get her through each day and probably died of an overdose. (Written by Steve Miller. Source: article by Jeff Woloson at The Divas Site.)

To Think About

What did Christina have going for her? What made her early life difficult? Do you think she was doomed to a miserable life? What decisions could she have made that might have brought joy into her life?

From the Power Source

As we saw in our last series, when Jesus was asked about the greatest command in the law, the second half of His answer was **"love your neighbor as yourself."** **What does that say about the importance that God puts on our relationships?**

It's easy to love our neighbor if our neighbor loves us. But what about when people don't deserve our love, or do things that hurt us? According to God's Word, our relationships, even with those who hate us, are so important that we need to forgive them and not hold grudges against them. The Bible puts it this way:

“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” (Ephesians 4:31,32)

How do you think Christina's life might have been different had she been willing to forgive her parents and work on cultivating healthy relationships? Who are some people who've wronged you that you can't seem to forgive? How could developing a lifestyle of unforgiveness hurt your life?

Connecting With God

Even if you think it's impossible for you to forgive, are you willing to pray that God will give you the power to forgive them? Could you pray a prayer of forgiveness right now? Here's a way that you might want to pray:

God, I can't hide my heart from you. You know that I hate ____ and ____ for what they did to me. But I really want to forgive them, just like You forgive me when I let you down. Give me the power to forgive them God. Yes, I forgive them for what they did. And if the anger keeps rising up in me, remind me to ask again for the power to love them. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Series #2 - "Friendships: How to Make Them and Keep Them" Session #2 - "Me: Forgive Him? It's Just Too Hard!"

A Friend's Dilemma

A friend says to you, "I know God wants me to forgive John, my former best friend, for making up those lies about me and stealing my girlfriend, but my heart's just not in it. I'd just be saying words to God that I didn't mean. How can I genuinely forgive John from my heart?"

What would you say to your friend? Let's look for clues in someone else's personal story:

Stephen Covey boarded a New York subway one Sunday Morning to find a peaceful setting, everyone quietly reading or resting. But mayhem broke loose when a man and his rambunctious children entered. The children yelled, grabbed newspapers from people, and threw things. And the man sat there with his eyes closed, doing absolutely nothing about it. Stephen said, "I could not believe that he could be so insensitive as to let his children run wild like that and do nothing about it, taking no responsibility at all." So he turned to the man and challenged him to control his kids.

OK, let's be honest. If you were on that tranquil subway trying to read a newspaper, and these rug rats started poking your backpack and CD player and creating chaos, wouldn't you be ready to strangle the unconcerned father? But what happened next cured Stephen's irritation.

"The man lifted his gaze as if to come to a consciousness of the situation for the first time and said softly, *"Oh, you're right. I guess I should do something about it. We just came from the hospital where their mother died about an hour ago. I don't know what to think, and I guess they don't know how to handle it either."* (Summarized by Steve Miller from Stephen R. Covey, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, Simon and Schuster, 1990, pp. 30,31.)

How would your attitude change once you heard that response? Would it be easier to forgive him for not controlling his kids? What made the difference? You see, we never know what hurts or experiences lurk beneath the surface that result in someone's obnoxious behavior or hurtful comments.

From the Power Source

The wisest man in the world wrote these words:

"Each heart knows its own bitterness, and no one else can share its joy."
(Proverbs 14:10)

How was the truth of this verse demonstrated to Stephen Covey? How do you think this experience helped Stephen deal with other people who would irritate him, even if he didn't know the cause? How would this insight help the friend at the beginning of this devotion, who found himself unable to forgive John from his heart?

Jesus didn't just see people's outward condition. Look at his response:

“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” (Matthew 9:36)

What prompted Jesus' compassion? Aren't all people somehow "harassed and helpless?" If John's character is so flawed that he'll lie about and steal from his best friend, what does the future hold for him?

Getting Personal

How does all this apply to those people you have difficulty forgiving? Can you see that their attitudes and actions hurt their relationship with God and may destroy their relationships with others throughout their lives? Does this help you move from hate to compassion for those people?

Connecting With God

Here's a suggested prayer to get you started in your talk with God:

Lord, you know how I struggle with hating _____ and _____. But I don't want to end up being one of those bitter people who never smile and that nobody likes. Help me to look beyond their happy disguise and see their hurts the way You see them. Give me the compassion that only You can give as I forgive them from the heart.

Series #2 - "Friendships: How to Make Them and Keep Them"

Session #3 - "Me: Forgive Him? It's *Still* Too Hard!"

We've seen that our relationships can make or break our *happiness*. They can also make or break our *success*.

The Importance of Relationships

Many of you have seen Ben Stein on the MTV game show "Win Ben Stein's Money" where people try to beat him by answering difficult questions. As well as being an actor, this brilliant, successful man also teaches Law. He wrote an article for Reader's Digest entitled "Mistakes Winners Don't Make." One of his biggest points was this: "The inability to make and keep friends is involved in every single failure I have ever seen."

It's Gonna Take Effort

We all know that our relationships are important. Yet, as Samuel Butler said,

"Friendship is like money – easier made than kept."

Relationships fall apart so easily. But we've got to learn to hang onto them, especially if we ever want to have good marriages and jobs that last over one year. Often, relationships fail because someone does us wrong and we refuse to forgive. So we just move from one relationship to another.

Corrie Forgives

Check out the following illustration of someone who refused to let unforgiveness ruin her life.

Corrie ten Boom miraculously survived Ravensbruck, one of Hitler's death camps. After the war, she started a home in Holland to help people recover from the trauma inflicted upon them by the Nazis. What she found was that those who were willing to forgive their tormentors could go on to rebuild their lives. But those who refused to forgive, hanging onto their bitterness, remained emotionally crippled.

At a speaking engagement in Munich, Corrie was challenged to apply her own teaching on a new level. After the service, her blood ran cold as she recognized a man walking toward her. He was one of her former guards from Ravensbrook – and not just any guard, but one of the cruelest guards. Suddenly, the horrid memories flooded her mind. "You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk," he said, "I was a guard there." Corrie realized that he didn't remember her, only one of the thousands of prisoners. "But since that time I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear from your lips as well. "Fraulein," and he put out his hand, "will you forgive me?"

Corrie just stood there, as she put it, with a "coldness clutching my heart." But she knew that forgiveness was an act of the will, not just of the heart. So she silently called out for Jesus' help, and prayed, "I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling."

"And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bring tears to my eyes."

"I forgive you, brother," I cried. "With all my heart."

"For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely, as I did then. But even so, I realized it was not my love. I had tried, and did not have the power. It was the power of the Holy Spirit as recorded in Romans 5:5, '...because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.'" (Corrie ten Boom, *Tramp for the Lord* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1976), pp. 53-55.

From the Power Source

In our first devotion, we read the following verses. This time home in on the last phrase to find something that should motivate us to forgive others.

"Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you." (Ephesians 4:31,32)

How much has Jesus forgiven us of? Our sin put Him on the Cross. What kind of torture did He have to go through for us, even before we were nice to Him? How should this motivate us to forgive others? Since Corrie was a Christian, how do you think this motivated her?

Getting Personal

Corrie knew that as a Christian she needed to forgive, but the power just wasn't there. She realized that the power had to come from outside of herself, as she allowed Jesus to love through her. As the Apostle Paul wrote,

"I can do everything through him who gives me strength." (Phil. 4:13)

Connecting With God

If this prayer expresses what you're thinking, why not use it to jump-start your prayer time?

Jesus, thanks so much for forgiving me of my sins. You know that I'm still struggling with hate and bitterness. I've just got to trust you to work your incredible love through me. Help me to love _____ and _____. My only hope is You.

Series #2 - "Friendships: How to Make Them and Keep Them" Session #4 - "Me: Forgiveness: The Flip Side"

Remember the quote last week from Samuel Butler? He said,

"Friendship is like money – easier made than kept."

Why are friendships so hard to keep? In past devos we saw that friends break up when they refuse to forgive. Another friendship buster is the flip side: someone won't ask forgiveness.

From the Power Source

Jesus put it this way:

"If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering." (Matthew 5:21-24)

Presenting offerings was very important to the worship of Jesus' time. **Why do you think Jesus said to be reconciled with your brother before presenting your offering?**

Did He say that we ask forgiveness only if we hurt someone intentionally? What if someone's mad at us, but we didn't mean to hurt him? Should we still try to reconcile?

From Real Life

Before I married Laurene, I knew that every couple seemed to think they were "in love" when they get married. But many of those happy newlyweds later experienced bitter divorces. So he wanted to make sure that I found a girl who had more than a fuzzy feeling for him. I wanted someone with the character to hang in there for the long haul. So when it looked like my friendship with Laurene could go deeper, I looked closely for how she handled a friend who began to shut her out. When I saw Laurene pursuing the relationship, willing to ask forgiveness, I knew that she had the right stuff to stay in love for the long haul.

Getting Personal

What if a potential mate checked out your character? Would this person see you as the kind of person who goes to others to try to reconcile misunderstandings and to ask forgiveness? Before you have your next devotional (before you "present your offering at the altar") is there someone you need to ask forgiveness of for something that he or she has against you? Why not get it right today?

Connecting With God

"Lord, help me to do my best to restore those relationships where people have something against me. You've got to give me the strength. I can't do it on my own."

Series #2 - "Friendships: How to Make Them and Keep Them"

Session #5 - "The Big Key to Making Friends"

What's the Big Key?

Dale Carnegie wrote a perennial best-selling book on relationships entitled, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. It sold over 15 million copies! His book is based on his massive research into the relational traits of successful people. His research led him to one principle that was so important that he called it "The Big Key." Here it is:

"You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you."

As a youth minister, I've watched lots of students flunk out over and over with their relationships because they don't get "The Big Key." They try so hard to impress others that they turn people off. If they really wanted friends, they needed to become *interested* than *interesting*, do more *listening* than *talking*, more *complimenting* than *bragging*.

From the Power Source

Jesus put it this way:

"And just as you want men to treat you, treat them in the same way." (Luke 6:31)

Getting Personal

Make a list of things that people do in relationships that really irk you.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

According to Jesus, if I should treat people the way I want to be treated, these are the things I shouldn't do to others. They ruin friendships.

Now list the things you really look for in a friend.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

According to Jesus, we should concentrate on treating others this way. Do you want to have more friends? Then be a friend; act like a friend. It's really that simple.

Connecting With God

"Lord, I know what I like in a friend. Help me to be that to the family members and classmates I see each day. Especially help me in those areas where I know I'm not a very good friend, such as _____ and _____."

Series #2 - "Friendships: How to Make Them and Keep Them" Session #6 - "Others First"

Getting Honest

Al Capone was one of the most dangerous men in Chicago. He led a notorious gang that took people's money illegally and cost many their lives. Yet, he didn't see himself in this light. Capone once complained, "I have spent the best years of my life giving people the lighter pleasures, helping them have a good time, and all I get is abuse, the existence of a hunted man."

Just like Capone, it's hard to be honest about our own faults. Let's be ruthlessly honest with ourselves as we look at our relationships in the light of God's Word.

From the Power Source

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." (Philippians 2:3,4)

To me, these verses could be summed up in two words which express one of the most important principles for any relationships: Others First.

Think of people you know who are conceited, hung up on themselves. **How does that characteristic hurt their relationships?** Now think of some people who are selfless, always interested in other people. **How does this characteristic help their relationships?**

Getting Personal

Unlike Al Capone, let's take a good, hard look at our relationships in the light of this passage. When we walk into our church group, are these the thoughts that dominate our minds?

"Don't trip."

"Don't say something stupid."

"Hang around the people who are the coolest."

"What can I say that will make people think I'm cool?"

Nothing wrong with some of those thoughts. But all of them are about me, me, me. What would be the difference if we went into youth group with these thoughts?

"Is there someone sitting alone who I can sit with and make feel welcome?"

"Is someone hurting that I could encourage?"

"I wonder how her soccer game (or band contest or Math test) went?"

The difference between the first set of thoughts and the second set is the difference between a person who's self centered and one who's other centered.

Connecting With God

"Lord, it's pretty radical to go from thinking of myself to thinking of others. Yet, my own hurts help me to realize how others hurt. Help me to make a difference in their lives. And if looking out for others would help me to have better friendships, that would be great! Help me to be the friend that you want me to be."

Series #2 - "Friendships: How to Make Them and Keep Them"

Session #7 - "The Power of Encouragement!"

What does the following study tell you about how you can radically change your friends' lives?

A study was conducted of 12 to 14 year olds. One group of children were told to run around a track and that they would be timed. No matter how well they did, the instructor told them, "I don't know what the problem is, but you are not as fast as the other groups. Let's try again." A second group also ran the track. But the instructors encouraged this group, telling them that they were very fast.

Then the groups were asked to run around the track again. How do you think each group performed the second time around? The first group (that was given a bad report) ran slower and slower with each succeeding run. The second group (that was told they were fast) ran faster with each run.

What does this study teach us about the power of encouragement?

From the Power Source

"...and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near." (Hebrews 10:24,25)

Can you think of some times when a teacher or friend or parent motivated you to do your best through something they said? What motivates you more, when people condemn you, or when they encourage you?

The word "stimulate" in the Hebrews passage is a strong one, which could be translated "provoke," "incite," "arouse," or "stir up."

It reminds me of my weightlifting days in high school when I'd go for a maximum weight on the bench press. Since we used free weights (not a machine), I'd always have a "spotter" to stand over me in case I couldn't complete the lift and needed someone to pull the weight off of me. But my spotters always did more than stand there. I loved the ones who'd yell at me as I struggled with a heavy lift: "Go for it Steve! You can do it! One more repetition!"

I see that kind of intense motivation among athletes as they applaud a teammate who made a good play or slap someone's helmet in celebration. No wonder they keep motivated! Does it strike you as strange that we so seldom use this life-changing encouragement to motivate our parents, youth ministers, and friends?

Getting Personal

Who is someone that you could encourage this week? Parents often get discouraged. When is the last time you complimented mom or dad for the daily stuff

they do, like preparing a meal or giving you a ride? What are some ways you can "stimulate" your friends to move in the right direction in their lives?

Going to church or a campus ministry isn't just about learning. According to this verse, we're supposed to "encourage one another" and "stimulate" fellow believers. Who is someone you could encourage at your next meeting?

Connecting With God

"Lord, help me to realize the awesome power I have to change my friend's lives through encouraging them. Remind me this week to encourage people at home, at school, and at church."

Series #2 - "Friendships: How to Make Them and Keep Them" Session #8 - "How to Become a People Blossomer"

This story shows us the power of encouraging words.

I heard a story of an unruly boy who was sent to the principal's office for his bad behavior in school. Apparently this was not the first time, and the principal looked at the boy, pondering what to do. This time, instead of scolding him, he looked down at the boy's hands. He told the boy, "Look at your hands. Thin fingers. Those are surgeon's hands. Go, fulfill your potential." All the boy could do that day was to look at his hands. Years later the principal heard from the boy, who had now completed medical school to be a surgeon. The turning point in the boy's life? The day he was encouraged by the principal.

Have we really figured out the power of encouraging words to change lives? Why do you think encouragement so powerful?

Educator John Dewey once stated that the deepest urge in human nature is "the desire to be important." Psychologist William James said, "The deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated."

So we've got people all around us who are craving to feel important and appreciated. How will it make a little brother or sister, or a younger person in your youth group or campus ministry feel if you notice a good quality in their lives and compliment them about it?

From the Power Source

If we really love the people we hang around, we want to bring out the best in them and see them blossom. The Apostle Paul put his purpose this way,

"We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone complete in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me." (Colossians 1:28,29)

Paul was all out to help others become all that they could be. The result? He had the incredible satisfaction of knowing that he had blossomed people's lives all over his part of the world. **Wouldn't it be totally awesome to come to the end of your middle school years or high school years and realize that some of your fellow students and neighbors and family members were changed forever because you encouraged them?**

Getting Personal

Some guys in a youth group wrote a note and signed a card to encourage a girl who got sick with sun poisoning at a beach retreat. Years later she showed me that card. She carried it in her pocket book all those years!

Who is someone you could encourage this week? Rather than majoring on catching your little brothers or sisters doing something wrong so that you can yell at them, why not try to catch them doing something right and complimenting them for it? Write down some people that you will either encourage verbally or through a note this week.

Connecting With God

"Lord, I confess that I'm often more of a discourager than an encourager. Ignite in me the passion to be a people blossomer. This week help me to catch people doing something right so that I can compliment them. Show me people who are discouraged so that I can encourage them."

Series #2 - "Friendships: How to Make Them and Keep Them" Session #9 - "The Importance of Your Closest Friends"

- **Bill Gates** is the richest man in America. A billionaire in his thirties, he made it by developing computer software that you find on almost every computer. His company? Microsoft, as in Microsoft Windows or Microsoft Word. When he started his business, he quickly became recognized as the person who knew more about the computer industry than anyone else. How did he become so knowledgeable? During his middle school and high school years, he loved computers, spent tons of time programming, and hung around with a small group of students at his school who shared his love for programming. They pretty much taught themselves. Had he hung out with the party crowd, he would have never made it.
- **Steven Spielberg**, the most successful movie producer of our time, filmed movies as a middle schooler with two other neighborhood kids who loved filming.
- **Arnold Schwarzenegger** decided at the age of 15 that he wanted to become the greatest body builder in the world. Guess who he hung out with? The home economics team? No! He hung out with adult body builders in his Austrian town who encouraged each other in body building. Schwarzenegger went on to repeatedly win the Mr. Universe Contest.

So what's the point? If you want to be a great body builder, hang out with body builders. If you want to be a great programmer, hang out with programmers. And if you want to be live for God and make a difference for Him, hang out with the sharpest Christians you can find.

This doesn't mean that you can't have friends and acquaintances who don't believe. Remember, Jesus was known as a friend of sinners. But His *closest* friends, those He shared His dreams and burdens with, were those who shared his spiritual values, His disciples.

From the Power Source

"He who walks with the wise grows wise but a companion of fools suffers harm." (Proverbs 13:20)

"Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character.'" (I Corinthians 15:33)

According to these verses, what good comes of having good friends and what problems come with having bad friends? What characteristics would you look for in a person for a close friend? How would this apply to any person you would consider dating?

Getting Personal

Who are your closest friends? Are they living for God?

Are they a positive influence or a negative influence? Are there some strong Christians that you should consider developing a relationship with?

Connecting With God

"Lord, thank you so much for loving me so incredibly! But sometimes it's hard to put my friendships totally into Your hands. Help me to be willing to let go of any friends who are pulling me down in order to make new friends of those who will pull me up."

Series #2 - "Friendships: How to Make Them and Keep Them"

Session #10 - "Choosing Close Friends: A Radical Approach"

An adult shared with me this sobering story. "When I was young, I hung-out with a very wild guy. Later, this friend began to date my sister. I warned my sister not to date him. 'I know him,' I objected. 'I know what kind of guy he is.' My sister replied, 'If he's so bad, then why are you such good friends?' Well, she married my friend and they always had a rocky relationship. He died an early death with his blood alcohol level extremely high. Now I have to live with the part I had in my sister's poor choice." You aren't the only person who will pay the price for your choosing the wrong friends.

In light of this story, why is it important to choose the right friends? Now use your imagination. How do you think he came to have a friend who was so wild?

My guess is that they either lived close to each other or just drifted together in school because they had similar interests or personalities. In other words, most people don't *choose* their friends, they just drift into friendships because they have similar interests or compatible personalities. Or, they get with a certain group because that's the only group that accepts them. But what's the danger of making friendships this way?

If the friendship is build on similar spiritual interests, that's one thing. But too often, we get our closest friends because we both love the same sport, share a passion for art, or like the same bands. That means that we could end up being best friends with a person whose morals stink.

From the Power Source

With this story in mind, let's take one more look at those verses from last week.

***"He who walks with the wise grows wise but a companion of fools suffers harm."* (Proverbs 13:20)**

***"Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character.'"* (I Corinthians 15:33)**

If we really believe these verses, can we allow ourselves to just drift into relationships because of common interests? Imagine that you're older and married and have a teenage daughter. You just moved to a new town. Your daughter will go to her new school tomorrow. You know that her friendships may make her or break her. **What will you advise her concerning choosing the right friends?**

What would I say? ***"Find the students who share your passion for God, your morals and your direction in life. Then, find something you have in common with them and try to make friends."***

Sure, it's a radical way to make friends. But according to the Scriptures, it could be one of the wisest choices you ever make.

Getting Personal

Now take the advice you'd give to your daughter and apply it to yourself. Pray the following prayer and reflect on any changes you need to make in your friendships.

Connecting With God

"Lord, I tremble when I realize that choosing a wrong friend could destroy my life. Give me wisdom in my choices. And help me to realize that having no close friend is better than a best friend who leads me away from You."

Series #2 - "Friendships: How to Make Them and Keep Them" Session #11 - "The Awesome Power of the Tongue"

Two stories tell us the power of our words both to build up and to destroy:

The Destructive Power of the Tongue

One youth had attended church all his life, until he finally told his parents that enough was enough. The problem? The other youth in his Sunday School class cut him down because he went to a different school. He felt left out because they only talked about their own school events. Now in his 30's, He seldom darkens the door of a church. The insensitive students' words pierced this sensitive guy like a sword, killing any spiritual interest he might have had. Their thoughtless words killed him spiritually.

The Positive Power of the Tongue

One day a schoolteacher asked the assistance of Stevie Morris, a blind student, to find a mouse in her classroom. For the first time, someone had appreciated Stevie's unusual ability to hear. This event changed his life. He began to concentrate on his assets rather than his handicap, and became one of the great pop singers and songwriters of the 70's, Stevie Wonder. His teacher's words brought him life.

From The Power Source

"The tongue has the power of life and death..." (Proverbs 18:21)

"An offended brother is more unyielding than a fortified city, and disputes are like the barred gates of a citadel." (Proverbs 18:19)

"The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell." (James 3:6)

Some people say, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." In the light of these verses, is this saying true? According to these verses, just how powerful are our words?

Getting Personal

Tim Shehan said, "Samson slew 1,000 Philistines with the jawbone of an ass. I have destroyed as many relationships with the same weapon..."

What practical tips would you give Tim to help him control his tongue?

Some people work on their "motor-mouth syndrome" by trying to listen more than they speak. Others may delay a few seconds in order to think of how their words will be taken before they say them. **What can you do today to keep from hurting people with your words?** Your words can bring either life or death to your family members and friends today. **Who are some people that you can intentionally try to build up today with your words?**

Connecting With God

"Lord, help me today to listen more and speak less. Help me to think before I speak. And help me to develop the habit of building people up with my words, rather than tearing them down."

Series #2 - "Friendships: How to Make Them and Keep Them" Session #12 - "Changing Your World, One Word at a Time"

The Power of Carefully Chosen Words

Winston Churchill was arguably one of the greatest men of the 20th century. He rallied the free world to stand against Hitler's onslaught, most likely changing the very course of history. He was especially known for the power of not only his formal speeches, but also of his seemingly spontaneous remarks. But I'm not so sure that they were so spontaneous. Apparently he gave careful thought to what he would say. In fact, someone said that Churchill spent the best years of his life preparing impromptu speeches! No wonder his words impacted the world and influenced history.

From The Power Source

Think through your typical conversations in light of the following verses. Circle the ones that you have the most difficulty living out.

"If a wise man goes to court with a fool, the fool rages and scoffs, and there is no peace." (Proverbs 29:9)

"Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices...." (Colossians 3:9)

"For I am afraid that when I come...there may be...slander, gossip..." (II Corinthians 12:20)

"Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue. (Proverbs 17:28)

"A man finds joy in giving an apt reply -- And how good is a timely word!" (Proverbs 15:23)

How would you define an "apt reply" or a "timely word?" Think of your teachers at school. Which of them use their words to discourage students? Which of them use their words to encourage students? Which teachers do students like best and why?

Getting Personal

It's truly amazing how our words can make people either like us or hate us. **What could you do today to start living out these verses?**

As one person said, *"Men are like fish. They both get in trouble when they open their mouths."*

So how did it go with your words yesterday? Were you able to hold back those destructive comments and use your words to encourage others? Especially if you've developed the habit of cutting others down, don't be surprised if it takes time and effort to become an encourager. It was hard for me to make that change as a teen

In most cases, our tongues are beyond our own power to control. We must pray for God to fill us with His Spirit and give us the power to control our words. As J. Sidlow Baxter said,

"The proof that you have God's Spirit in your life is not that you speak in an unknown tongue, but that you know how to control the tongue that you do know about." (J. Sidlow Baxter)

Connecting With God

"Lord, I need help today in controlling my tongue. Remind me to check in with You before I speak. Let me know when I blow it so that I can ask forgiveness and trust you for the power to do better next time. And don't let me get discouraged when I fail. I really want to become the person You want me to be."

Series #2 - "Friendships: How to Make Them and Keep Them" Session #13 - "Tips for a Tamer Tongue"

We Can Change!

One day Benjamin Franklin's friend sharply rebuked him. "Ben," he said, "you are impossible. Your opinions have a slap in them for everyone who differs with you. They have become so expensive nobody cares for them. Your friends find they enjoy themselves better when you are not around." Rather than get defensive or make excuses, like many people would, Franklin took the rebuke seriously and began to work on his relational abilities. The effort paid off in later years as he became one of the most sought after, respected men of his time.

From The Power Source

Just as we did last week, let's reflect on each of these verses, which give insight into how to use our tongues. Circle the ones that you have the hardest time with, or think that you should work on today.

***"Let another praise you, and not your own mouth;
someone else, and not your own lips."* (Proverbs 27:2)**

***"A cheerful look brings joy to the heart,
and good news gives health to the bones."* (Proverbs 15:30)**

***"He who answers before listening--
that is his folly and his shame."* (Proverbs 18:13)**

Listening Pays!

Although listening appears to be easy, it is actually an art that must be learned. Ted Koppel has for years hosted the popular TV program "Nightline." He is paid over \$1,000,000.00 per year to interview important people and lead interesting conversations. Yet, he never writes out his questions beforehand. What then is the key to successful interviews? "I listen." Koppel says. "Most people don't. Something interesting comes along and whooosh! - it goes right past them."

But Koppel does not consider his ability to be purely natural. He says that he sharpened his ability to listen while travelling with Henry Kissinger as a reporter for ABC news. (Written by Steve Miller)

How to Listen

Dale Carnegie writes,

"So if you aspire to be a good conversationist, be an attentive listener. To be interesting, be interested. Ask questions that other persons will enjoy answering. Encourage them to talk about themselves and their accomplishments."

But often we don't realize we are monopolizing conversations. One student talked incessantly and wondered why he couldn't make friends with people. I encouraged him and other motor-mouths to adopt "**The 2/3 Rule**" -- "**Try to get others talking at least 2/3 of the time.**"

Making It Personal

From the verses and discussion above, what do you think God wants you to work on today in your conversations with your family and friends?

Connecting With God

"Lord, help me today to take a sincere interest in those around me, asking them questions about things they are interested in, spending more time listening than speaking."

Series #2 - "Friendships: How to Make Them and Keep Them" Session #14 - "The Smothering Syndrome"

A Familiar Scene

I've seen it over and over in girl-guy relationships. You've probably seen it too. Here's the story. Guy loves girl. Girl likes guy, but wants some space. Guy can't stand for girl to be with other people. Guy talks to her continually. He's so possessive that the girl feels smothered and ditches him. What went wrong? He missed a principle of relationships that Solomon wrote about 3,000 years ago.

From The Power Source

***"Seldom set foot in your neighbor's house—
too much of you, and he will hate you. (Proverbs 25:17)***

Getting Personal

Smothering does the same thing to a relationship that it does to a fire. It puts it out. **Have you ever been smothered in a relationship? How did it feel? Have you seen others smothering people? Why do you think it's so hard for people to realize they're smothering others?** In dating relationships, the person who smothers another often says it's because he loves her so much. **But if we take a biblical definition of love as being "selfless concern and actions for another person," is the motivation to smother and be possessive coming more from love, or from selfishness? How can you know if you're smothering someone? Is there a relationship that you're in danger of smothering?**

An old saying goes something like this: *"Hold a person you love like a butterfly, with an open hand. If he flies away and returns, he is yours to stay. If he never returns, he was never yours in the first place."*

Steve Learns to Trust

Often people smother others because of a lack of faith in God. I well remember as a high school student loving a girl and desperately not wanting to lose her. I lived in fear that she would find someone that she liked better than me and leave me for him. But as I drew closer to God through His Word, He gave me a new perspective. It was as if God said, *"Steve, if this girl is the one for you, then nothing in heaven or hell can separate you. If she's not for you, then I've got someone else for you who would be even better for you."* Wow! Did that take the fear out of the relationship! After that I could be myself and stop performing for her.

Connecting With God

"Lord, help me to purely love those around me, neither clutching on to them for fear of losing them, nor smothering them to meet my selfish needs. Help me to always relate with the interests of others in mind and trust you to provide the relationships that I truly need."

Series #2 - "Friendships: How to Make Them and Keep Them" Session #15 - "Caring Enough to Confront"

A Lonely Man

A Christian mother, Mrs. Kimmel, lay dying in a Pennsylvania hospital. She had been a good mother. You could tell by the concern that her family showed her. Her children who lived nearby stopped by regularly, almost daily, to see her. Two sons who lived far away traveled to see her several times during her illness, calling each morning and evening that they could not be present.

In the same hospital another person lay ill, a man of power, influence and wealth. But no one had visited him since his arrival. His plight, though not as serious as the dying mother, was faced alone, except for hospital staff. He had a wife and children, but they never came. The man asked a nurse about Mrs. Kimmel, wanting to know all about her family. She told him about the extraordinary concern of the brothers who lived far away. Then he asked about Mrs. Kimmel's condition. The nurse replied that she could die any day, almost assuredly within a week.

With tear-filled eyes, this powerful, influential man looked up at the nurse and responded, "You know, I would gladly trade places with Mrs. Kimmel and die a week from now, if for that week I could have a spouse and children who care enough about me not to make me die alone." (From Little House on the Freeway, by Tim Kimmel)

This man had power, influence, and wealth. But he would trade it all for a decent relationship. I wonder what went wrong in his life? Why was it that a grown man, in all his years of life, had failed to cultivate friendships meaningful enough to make the friends want to visit him? I wonder if things could have been different had someone warned him in his earlier years of some traits that were hurting his relationships.

Sometimes, if we really love a person, we have to risk the relationship in order to help the person. It's not easy to do it. But sometimes we must warn those who are headed for heartache.

From the Power Source

"Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted."
(Galatians 6:1)

"Like an earring of gold or an ornament of fine gold is a wise man's rebuke to a listening ear." (Proverbs 25:12)

"He who rebukes a man will in the end gain more favor Than he who has a flattering tongue." (Proverbs 28:23)

According to these verses, do we gain favor from correcting someone in the short run, or in the long run? Can we have wrong motives in correcting friends? What should be our motive, the result we are shooting for, according to Galatians 6:1? If

you *enjoy* pointing out faults to those close to you, you're probably doing it with the wrong motives. It's never easy to risk hurting someone. Do you think we should rebuke every person for everything wrong that they ever do? What would life have been like for Jesus and His disciples if Jesus rebuked all of them for every bad motive and every bad thought? (He would have been correcting them every minute!) How do we choose when a friend's behavior needs to be addressed? Is it better to correct someone in private or in public? Has God's Spirit let you know that you need to try to correct a friend for something that's hurting him or her? Do you think your rebuke will go over better if you've always been an encourager in the past?

Connecting With God

"Lord, this is hard stuff. I don't like the idea of risking my friendships by occasionally warning my friends of attitudes or actions that are hurting them. But help me to love my friends even more than the relationships."

Series #2 - "Friendships: How to Make Them and Keep Them" Session #16 - "Taking Care of Blind Spots"

Stephen Takes Criticism

Stephen was a 10th grader when he took a job as a sports reporter for his hometown newspaper. His first assignment was to write a story about his school's basketball team. A player had broken a scoring record, making it big news in a small town. So he wrote the story and turned it into the editor, who proceeded to mark up his article with changes.

Stephen could have gotten mad at the editor for tearing apart his hard work. He could have ignored the criticism, thinking that he knew quite well how to write. Instead, he loved it, taking everything to heart. Looking back, Stephen says that this editor's ten minutes of criticism taught him more than any of his English Literature, composition courses, fiction courses, or poetry courses in high school and college! He kept on writing and became one of the most successful authors today, Stephen King. (Written by Steve Miller, information from Stephen King, *On Writing*, Pocket Books, 2000, pp. 56-58)

Although I don't know what Stephen King thinks about the Bible, I can tell you that he greatly benefited by following one of its principles. And the same can be said of many successful business leaders, who claim that one of the great keys to their success is getting input and criticism from their customers and those who work for them.

From the Power Source

***"Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge,
but he who hates correction is stupid."*** (Proverbs 12:1)

***"Plans fail for lack of counsel,
but with many advisers they succeed."*** (Proverbs 15:22)

***"Listen to advise and accept instruction,
and in the end you will be wise."*** (Proverbs 19:20)

Most of us don't like it when people criticize us. **Why do we hate it so much? According to these verses, what are the benefits of getting advice, accepting instruction and loving discipline? What are the consequences of rejecting it?**

Wise Counsel and Relationships

Here's a fascinating test. **Quickly** count the "F's" in the following text:

FINISHED FILES ARE THE RE-
SULT OF YEARS OF SCIENTIF-
IC STUDY COMBINED WITH THE
EXPERIENCE OF YEARS

Now, how many did you come up with? Three? If you did, you're like most people. Try again. The total is six! Look at it more carefully. For some reason the brain has difficulty processing the "F's" in the word "of."

The point? Some things that should be obvious are difficult to see. Just like most people are blind to three of the "F's" above, all of us tend to have blind spots in our personalities and people skills that hurt us in our relationships. They are easy to spot in other people - - friendship busters like moose breath, saying dumb or embarrassing stuff, body odor, and I could go on and on. Think about the teachers, family members and students you know who have a hard time making friends. **Where are they going wrong?**

Getting Personal

It seems so strange. Their faults are so obvious to others, but totally hidden from themselves. But now let's turn around from focusing on others' blind spots and looking at our own. **Can't see them, can you? Why? Because they're blind spots. Yet, whatever blind spots we have may hurt our relationships for the rest of our lives. How can we find out what they are? We've got to ask those who know us the best. We desperately need "many advisors" in this area.**

Action Points (Not for the Faint of Heart!)

Name some people (friends or family) who you think would be ruthlessly honest with you about your relationships. Tell them you've been doing some study on relationships and you want their input. Get them one on one, either by phone or face to face, and ask them questions like these:

- 1) Do I do any weird stuff that sometimes turns people off?
- 2) Do I pay attention to some people and ignore others?
- 3) Do I hog conversations?
- 4) How do you rate me as a listener?
- 5) Do I concentrate more on the interests of others, or do I mostly talk about myself?
- 6) If you were to wake up one morning and realize that you had been magically transformed into me, what would you change in order to help me (now "you") with my relationships?
- 7) Do you think I choose friends who are a negative, or positive influence?

Connecting With God

"Lord, help me to regularly get input from others about how I'm doing in my relationships. I truly want to put other people before myself, and to love them to You. Continually reveal to me blind spots that may hinder me from being the friend you want me to be."

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smillero@mindspring.com, 5814 Sailboat Pointe, Acworth, GA 30101.

THEN APOLOGETICS. THEN PEER PRESSURE. THEN JOY. THEN DATING. Then
MINISTRY.

