

**BALANCING LIFE'S DEMANDS**  
**Balancing Your Personal Life - Part 1 of 6**  
**Luke 2:52.**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Today I want to briefly give you an introduction to the series we are going to study in some weeks to come. I am calling this series, "Balancing Your Personal Life". The entire world is based on this principle of balance. The principle of nature is that the world is perfectly balanced. It is tilted at a certain angle and rotates at a certain number of miles per hour without any vibration. If the world were a little bit closer to the sun we would burn up and if it were a few miles further away from the sun we would freeze to death. The world is in balance. In nature, the ecologists study the ecosystems where the food chain checks and balances in nature take care of each other. In architecture, there is balance. There is balance within a structure. Engineers know that if a building is not built right and is not balanced, it will collapse. In your body, doctors say when you get sick; it is an imbalance in your body. Health comes when your body is restored to balance. The red and white corpuscles are balanced and your hormones are balanced. All through your life, in everything we look at, it all focuses toward equilibrium - the principle of balance.

God wants our personal lives to be balanced. Proverbs 28:2 "*.....A man of understanding and knowledge maintains order.*" He has balance in his life. 1 Corinthians 14:32 "*For God is not a God of disorder, but of peace.*" God wants things to be in balance and equilibrium. Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 "*There is a time for everything...*" God wants us to live balanced lives. There is a problem that is seen in people. It is this problem of imbalance. Imbalance is a disease that has many different symptoms, but the root is the same. You can be imbalanced in anything. Sleeping? Yes. Eating? Yes. Work? Yes. Play? Yes. Everything. You can be imbalanced in the way you use your time in anything. The problem is that most of us have a tendency to work on our public lives and let our private lives slide. We work on how we look and how we smile and how we talk, but people don't see your private life, so you sometimes let that slide. I heard Howard Hendrix say one time that a lot of people's lives are like poor photographs: over- exposed and underdeveloped. I think that is true. A lot of lives are overexposed. Everybody sees us and knows us and we have contacts with a lot of people, but our private lives are underdeveloped. There are some problems when your personal life is not developed, not in balance then two things happen: frustration and fatigue.

### **1. Frustration**

When I was a kid, I used to watch these guys at circuses that would have poles they would try to balance dishes on. I think the first time I ever saw it was on the old Ed Sullivan show. The guy would have tall skinny poles and a stack of dishes. He would start swirling the pole until he got the dish perfectly twirling and balanced. Then he would take another pole and dish and start that. Then another and another. The problem was that about the time he got down to number nine, number one started to fall off.

So he would run back real quick and get that one shaking, then he would run back and start another, start shaking it. I thought, “A lot of people live their lives that way”. They go from this to that. They work on this area of their life a little bit and then they stop and work on that area of their life a little bit. Then another area. It is frustrating. Just about the time you get one thing in balance, the other one starts to fall off. We are often frustrated by things in life because we bring them on ourselves. Many of our biggest mistakes in life can be traced to handling disappointment in unwise ways. In times when we are emotionally low, it is easy to slip back into the habits that wreaked havoc on our lives in the past. Sometimes, we just need better coping mechanisms. Frustration comes when we try to keep some sort of law. It could even be a law we made unto ourselves or even an oath. It is trying to do something we simply are not able to do.

If we look at the things that frustrate us, it always has to do with someone not doing what we want them to do. That even includes us. Not being “perfect” the way we think “perfection” is. When unfinished tasks pile up, it is natural to feel overwhelmed. And when trivial matters or the unexpected interrupt you and prevent you from accomplishing what you really need to do, you get frustrated. Frustration is a result of imbalance in your personal life. All frustration is a result of trying to do what you think you need to be doing to be okay. This may include pleasing other people in your life. But the truth is, if we truly trusted and believed God we would never get frustrated because we would know that whatever is happening at the moment, God is in complete control and there is no surprise there for Him.

### **The Secret to Managing Frustrations**

“A man’s wisdom gives him patience...” (Proverbs 19:11 NIV). It is amazing how fifteen minor frustrations at the office can add up to one big, bad attitude by the time you head for home. Frustrations come in three varieties:

- i. **Interruptions:** Unexpected visitors or phone calls when you have a deadline to meet or something important requires your attention. Our best plans are often interrupted. You may have your day planned. You know what is supposed to happen. You know who you are supposed to talk to, you know who you are supposed to see, you know what tasks you are supposed to accomplish. You have it all set out. Then life and interruptions come and what you had planned to do just doesn’t get done, just doesn’t happen the way you think it should. I know you get really upset about that. I have since learned it is a sign of immaturity to get uptight when my schedule doesn’t go the way I want it to go. On the reverse, it is a sign of growing godliness when you are flexible as life comes your way. When we put Psalm 31:15, “**My times are in your hands,**” into practice, we reduce the stress in our lives. This verse becomes a prayer. “My times are in your hands, God. You are directing my life. You know the things I’m supposed to get done.” So if interruptions come, if things go differently, I can either get all bent out of shape and angry at the people who interrupted me or the situations that messed up my schedule, or I can flow with the changes in a gracious way, believing that God has my times in His hands. Mark 5:21–43 begins with Jesus on his way to heal the dying daughter of Jairus, a synagogue leader. It is an emergency situation. As Jesus heads to Jairus’s house to heal the dying child, a woman with a chronic health problem—the Bible says she has been bleeding continuously for twelve years—approaches Jesus to touch His clothes.

She believes if she does so, she will be healed. She touches the hem of His robe, and He instantly knows and turns to speak to her. Anyone in an emergency situation knows you don't stop for non-emergencies; you put all of your energy into taking care of the life-and-death situation first. We call that triage. But in an astonishing response to the woman with a non-life-and-death condition, He pauses, talks to her, and heals her. That just doesn't compute to me. Here is a girl who is near death. In fact, while Jesus lingers with the woman, Jairus receives word that his daughter has died. Shouldn't Jesus get it in gear and madly rush to revive her? Instead, He stops and talks to a woman who isn't dying, who isn't in an emergency, who isn't in a critical situation. You have to ask the question, why did He do that? Why did He allow someone to interrupt Him and even detain Him in the middle of a very serious situation?

Scripture is never random or meaningless, so there must be deep truth hidden in this odd, seemingly illogical, if not unkind (to Jairus and his daughter) encounter. I wonder if the principle we should grasp is this: sometimes the interrupted is not as important as the interrupter. Did you get that? We often act as though our plans for the day, our agendas, are sacred, untouchable and completely un interruptable. But God might know something we don't and allow us to be interrupted, which often completely destroys our carefully constructed to-do lists. Evidently, there are times when the interrupter; a child, a friend, a stranger, or a situation is more important than the interrupted. Honestly, I don't like that. I still want my schedule. But the truth is God knows what my day should hold. God knows what your day should hold. He knew before you got up this morning what was going to happen to you today. He knew the emergencies. He knew the things that were not emergencies but that were going to masquerade as emergencies. He knew the things that were going to come into your life and were going to derail you from what you thought you were supposed to do and who you were supposed to talk to and what you were supposed to accomplish.

I don't have the answer other than to say that too often we assume the interruptions are not important. Too often we think we know what today is supposed to hold and that an interruption cannot be as important as what we had set out to do. What I am trying to learn to do is to pause and say, "Okay, God, my times are in your hands. You knew what this day was going to hold before I did, so this interruption; child, husband, phone call, unexpected demand on my time are in your hands. Don't let me make the arrogant mistake of assuming that my schedule is what must be honored, not the interruption that you bring." Don't mishear me. Every interruption that comes your way is not important. Sometimes interruptions come because we live in a broken world and bad things happen. A three-car pileup on the road in front of you is not necessarily a good interruption. But with every interruption we have the opportunity to go to God, to seek His face, to talk to Him, and to hear His voice. He will either let you know that the interruption is part of what He has for you today or give you the insight to be able to sidestep the interruption so you can get back to the task or goal at hand.

- ii. **Inconveniences:** While interruptions are usually from people, inconveniences are usually situations involving things: the copy machine breaks down, traffic jams up, or you can't find what you need when you need it.

All human beings experience inconveniences every now and then. The word “inconvenience” and its derivatives come under different terms such as disruption, aggravation, hassle, trouble, stress, difficulty, and more. The kind of inconvenience I am talking about is the annoying inconveniences that cause one’s stress level to heighten, one’s blood pressure to elevate, and one’s heart rate to become erratic. These usually happen because our mind is set on what we want to do, but then something gets in our way and produces a different schedule other than our anticipated one. The Bible is full of people who were inconvenienced. Some are only inconvenienced for a short period of time while others for years.

- Saul was inconvenienced when he was charged to look for his father’s lost donkeys. When Saul decided to return to his father without locating his donkeys, Saul’s servant suggested they look for “a seer” in a different town to inquire about the journey they had set out upon. In those days, seers were also known as prophets. Saul had been inconvenienced again by having to go to a different city than he had planned. However, while there, God arranged for the prophet Samuel and Saul to meet and Saul was anointed to be the King of Israel. Here we see that disruptions and inconveniences are often part of the Lord’s plans for our life. (1 Samuel 9-10)
- Jesus was inconvenienced when the people kept following him wanting His attention, but He welcomed and ministered to them in love. (Luke 23:27-29)
- The disciples were tired and wanted to rest, but Jesus inconvenienced them by asking them to feed the 5,000. (Matthew 14:15-21)
- Paul was inconvenienced by being arrested and put in prison time after time when all he wanted to do was spread the gospel. (Acts 21:31-37)

In each of these situations, the Bible reveals that great things occurred out of inconveniences. A king was crowned, Ministry took place, people were miraculously fed and the gospel was spread through Paul’s writings in prison. Have you ever thought about how we should respond when we experience inconvenience? How can you respond to inconveniences?

- a. Recognize that the inconveniences we encounter are there to grow us closer to the Lord and to prepare us for what else might come in our future.
- b. Pray immediately by giving the situation to the Lord and seek His purpose for it.
- c. Understand and meditate on the Word of God with thanksgiving.
- d. Look at inconveniences as divine opportunities.
- e. Control anger

**iii. Irritations:** Long delays, unreliable people, playing telephone tag, catching cold, obnoxious clients, etc. But the truth is you can’t eliminate these. We like to blame our irritability on someone or something else. We try to convince ourselves that they make us irritated. If they were different, we wouldn’t be irritated. Or we blame it on being tired, ill, or stressed. Our irritability never has its roots in the soils of righteousness. It springs out of the soil of selfishness and springs up fast, like the sin-weed that it is.

We get irritated or easily provoked, not when God's righteousness or justice is scorned, but when something we want is being denied, delayed, or disrupted. It works like this:

- When I'm weary I want rest, but if it is denied/delayed/disrupted I get irritated.
- When I'm sick or in pain I want relief, but if it is denied/delayed/disrupted I get irritated.
- When I'm preoccupied I want uninterrupted focus, but if it is denied/delayed/disrupted I get irritated.
- When I'm running late I want to avoid appearing negligent, but if it is denied/delayed/disrupted I get irritated.
- When I'm disappointed I want my desire fulfilled, but if it is denied/delayed/disrupted I get irritated.
- When I'm fearful I want escape from a threat, but if it's denied/delayed/disrupted I get irritated.
- When I'm uncertain I want certainty, preferably reassuring, but if it is denied/delayed/disrupted I get irritated.
- When I'm enjoying something I want to continue until I wish to be done, but if it is denied/delayed/disrupted I get irritated.

The reason irritability is unloving, unrighteous anger is that it is a selfish response to an obstacle to our desire. What we desire may not be sinful, but a selfish response to its denial, delay, or disruption is a failure to trust God at all times (Psalm 62:8) and often a failure to value, love, and serve another human soul. Don't be discouraged by the fact that this is hard going at first. Changing ingrained habits is hard work. But it is possible through Christ who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13). Keep working at it. Faithful effort to lay aside this weight will result in lighter, more loving, and more joyful faith-running down the road.

The Bible says, "A man's wisdom gives him patience..." (Proverbs 19:11 NIV). The only way we can see all stuff as small stuff is to view it from God's perspective. When I am in tune with God, I remember he has everything under control even though I don't! So I don't have to sweat it: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23 NIV)

#### **Ask yourself:**

- i. **"Did I cause it?"** The Bible says, "A man reaps what he sows" (Galatians 6:7b NIV). We are frustrated by many things in life because we bring them on ourselves.
- ii. **"What can I learn from it?"** Romans 8:28 says, "In all things God works for the good of those who love him." There are many bad things in the world, but all things work together. God can even take the negative and turn it into a positive if we let him. Use irritation as an opportunity to become more like Christ by:
  - a. **Thank God in the situation.** 1 Thessalonians 5:18 says, "Give thanks in all circumstances." You don't have to be thankful for a bad situation, but you can be thankful in a bad situation. Frustration may be a blessing in disguise.

- b. **Turn the frustration into a funny, humorous event.** The Bible says, "A cheerful heart is good medicine" (Proverbs 17:22). A sense of humor is God's antidote for anger and frustration.
- c. **Ask God to fill you with his love.** Why? Because 1 Corinthians 13:5 says, "[Love] is not easily angered." Love is self-giving, not self-serving. We get irritated because we think everyone and everything has to revolve around us. Love concentrates on the other person.

Jesus faced constant frustrations, but he never got irritated. He always made time for people. We get so preoccupied with our own things that we forget that people are the priority in life

## Talk It Over

*Give examples of frustrations that we witness in everyday life, either in ourselves or in others.*

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## 2. Fatigue

You get tired when your life is out of balance. Anybody who has ever bought a car or a new set of tires knows that when you buy new tires, you need to get them balanced. If the tires on your car are not balanced, you are going to have a bumpy ride. There are going to be vibrations. The car doesn't handle the shocks and bumps so well. That is what happens in your own life. If you get an imbalanced tire, eventually it will rub in the wrong place. You get a bulge, a bald spot and it will blow out. Likewise in your life, like tires that are imbalanced, you will get rubbed the wrong way and eventually blow out. Tires blow out but people burn out because of imbalance. Just like a tire that is out of balance wears the wrong way, when your life is imbalanced you wear out much quicker. You get tired. Fatigue is extreme exhaustion, usually resulting from mental or physical exertion or illness. We all experience fatigue at times; it is part of life. God created our bodies to store enough energy to get us through the day. But we then need to rest in order to recharge.

This cycle of work and sleep is necessary to function at our best. When this cycle is interrupted or out of balance, fatigue results. 1 Samuel 30 tells of a time in David's life when the Philistines had captured the wives and children of all his men. The men were so overwhelmed with grief that they "*wept aloud until they had no more strength to weep*" (verse 4). Then six hundreds of them pursued the captors. After a while, two hundred of them "*were too exhausted to cross the valley*" (verse 10). We can imagine why. They had experienced emotional shock and sorrow, followed by physical exertion in pursuit of their enemies. They finally wore out. One cause of fatigue is the combination of emotional intensity and physical exertion. The depletion of emotional and physical strength can lead to illness if we don't rest both our bodies and our minds. David's response to the fatigue of his men was to allow them to rest but still include them in the celebration of success. He did not see their fatigue as a sign of weakness or cowardice but as a true condition that prevented them from keeping up with the troops. He honored their contribution of staying behind with the supplies, recognizing that, in their weakened state, it was the best they had to offer (1 Samuel 30:21–24).

When we are fatigued, we need to be aware of our own limitations and not press forward with major decisions that we later regret. Part of living wisely is recognizing our human weaknesses and compensating for them so that they do not control us. Deferring decisions until we have regained our strength is a wise practice in dealing with fatigue. Things look worse when you are tired. Vince Lombardi said, "Fatigue makes cowards of all of us." When you are tired, you lose your confidence. It is that simple. What is the remedy? It doesn't take rocket science to figure this out. The remedy for physical and emotional exhaustion and the confidence drain it can be is rest! Sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do is go to sleep. It is amazing how much better things look after you have had a good night's sleep. You will never be at your best if you are not getting rest. I have always been fascinated with the sudden change in the disciples before and after the resurrection. One minute they are defeated, and the next minute they are dynamic.

One minute they are crushed, and the next minute they are confident. One minute they are having a pity party, and the next minute they are taking on the world. What made the difference? When you personally meet a resurrected Jesus Christ, you become a more confident person. You can see this in the disciples in John 20. John 20:19 says, "That Sunday evening the disciples were meeting behind locked doors because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Suddenly, Jesus was standing there among them! 'Peace be with you,' he said. As he spoke, he showed them the wounds in his hands and his side. They were filled with joy when they saw the Lord!" (NLT) First, you can tell the disciples were tired. It was late that Sunday. It had been a rough week. They had Palm Sunday. They had the cleansing of the temple. They had the Lord's Supper. They had Gethsemane. They had the six trials. They had the Crucifixion. They were worn out! The most common cause of discouragement is physical and emotional exhaustion.

When you are tired, you lose your confidence. It is that simple. What is the remedy? It doesn't take rocket science to figure this out. The remedy for physical and emotional exhaustion and the confidence drain it can be is rest! You will never be at your best if you are not getting rest. Sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do is just go take a nap. That is because when you are physically down, it is hard to be emotionally and spiritually up. If you are discouraged right now, it might not mean you have to make a change; it may simply be that you need some rest. Farmers know that soil needs rest, so they rotate their crops and systematically leave a portion of their land fallow. They do this because land that has rested produces a greater harvest.

About one hundred years ago, a businessman named Frederick W. Taylor did a scientific study on the workplace and productivity. Do you know what his study proved? That people will produce more if they have periodic breaks; and from that, he introduced the coffee break. Rest is so important, in fact, that God put it in the Ten Commandments. In essence, He said, "Every seventh day you are to rest." Don't ignore what God established. A good night's sleep makes a big difference. And even a quick nap can help you see things clearly. Are you weary? Let us admit many of us experience spiritual fatigue. It can be a bucket of offenses, unanswered prayers, disappointments, or a shattered dream that contributed to weariness. There is hope today as "He gives strength to the weary, and increases the power of the weak," Isaiah 40:29. Are you ready to go from feeling weak to being strong? Here is how you can cut yourself loose from spiritual weariness, and get back on track. Take time off or get away to become refreshed again.

Jesus pulled away to spend time in prayer and find solitude. The Bible tells us in Matthew 6:6 “But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.” Here are some ways on how to handle fatigue

- a. **Rest the body.** When we suffer from fatigue, we feel as if we could sleep for a whole week. But when we go to bed, we often toss and turn and can’t get the sleep we so desperately need. In my experience, it is not sleep we need, it is rest. We need to rest our body and rest our mind. In order to feel rested, power naps are more useful than long sleeps.
- b. **Find the mind of peace.** When the mind is at rest, we feel peaceful. But this is sometimes difficult to achieve in a stressful life. There are so many things that disturb the mind. To find stillness is to be like a rock in the midst of a turbulent stream: we remain steady even when everything around us is turbulent. Here are two simple things you can do to quieten your mind.
  - Spend a day without reading newspapers or watching the news on TV or reading about it on the Internet.
  - Spend a day interacting as little as possible with people who make you feel agitated.
- c. **Let silence heal you.** Noise is a stress factor. If you live in a big city, you are constantly bombarded with noise. We also add to the constant assault of sounds through listening to the radio or TV, playing music, and so on. Silence can heal because it brings us to our center.
- d. **Have a laugh with friends.** Laughter is a great way to let go of tension. And good friends have a way of putting things back into perspective. Connect with friends.
- e. **Reconnect with nature.** Going for a walk. Nature is a wonderful way to connect with ourselves and with the world around us. There are some important points to remember: keep your head up, and let go of anxious thoughts. You can find tips on how to use walking as a spiritual practice
- f. **Use your comfort rituals.** Each one of us has some private comfort rituals. Maybe you enjoy drinking a cup of tea first thing in the morning, or doing a stretch at the open window, eating something you particularly enjoy, or tucking up in bed and reading a novel. Whatever your comfort rituals are, make sure that you take the time to do them. All too often we forget to take our small pleasures because they seem ‘unimportant’. But actually, they are a way to show kindness to ourselves. Remember your comfort rituals are things that glorify God.

John Henry Fabre, the great French naturalist, conducted a most unusual experiment with some Processionary Caterpillars. These caterpillars blindly follow the one in front of them hence, the name. Fabre carefully arranged them in a circle around the rim of a flower pot, so that the lead caterpillar actually touched the last one, making a complete circle. In the center of the flower pot he put pine needles, which is food for the Processionary Caterpillar. The caterpillars started around this circular flower pot. Around and around they went, hour after hour, day after day, night after night. For seven full days and seven full nights they went around the flower pot.



Finally, they dropped dead of starvation and exhaustion. With an abundance of food less than six inches away, they literally starved to death, because they confused activity with accomplishment. You are doing the same thing when we go on day after day without going to God for strength. You are literally doing nothing but going through spiritual motions that take us in one big circle after another. Is it any wonder that you're tired and spiritually exhausted? Don't you think that you need to make a change?

### **Talk It Over**

1. *Identify what is keeping us from not getting enough rest?*

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2. *Discuss how physical and emotional exhaustion keep us from doing the things God has planned for us?* \_\_\_\_\_

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### **CONCLUSION.**

Balance is a difficult thing to achieve. Success usually requires discipline, a large commitment of time, and a lot of hard work. But sometimes what is needed is to take a rest! Taking a trip is not always necessary, but taking a break from your normal routine is. You need time to think, and time to listen to what God is saying to you as well as physical rest. Without taking time to "recharge your batteries" you will never be your best. People who face relentless responsibilities, such as pastors, mothers of young children, care givers, and owners of small businesses, especially need an occasional break. We want to lead productive lives and be fruitful in our walk with the Lord, but we cannot take the place of God. We cannot do everything. We are not God. Humans require rest. To continue to be healthy and productive for many years, we must live a balanced life which includes rest and taking time off. A balanced life is characterized by order, peace, and wholeness. The various parts of life are as they should be and where they should be.

Each part of the balanced life gets the right amount of time and effort at the right time. It is not giving each part of life the same amount of time that makes life balanced; it is giving each part the necessary allotment of time. The life of Jesus is an excellent model concerning balance. Throughout his life, Jesus was under constant pressure. Friend and enemy alike pursued him. Yet, when examining his life as recorded in Scripture, one sees that he never hurried, that he never had to play catch up, and that he was never taken by surprise. He managed time well, bringing it under control, because he knew the importance of balance. Jesus' life was well rounded. He grew intellectually, physically, spiritually, and socially. Does your life reflect a balance? Do you make time for intellectual growth? If you are too busy to read a book or engage in study that stimulates the mind, you are too busy. Do you make time for physical health? Many people burn out because of improper personal maintenance.

Don't be another fatality on the emotional highway. Take care of your physical self. Do you make time for your relationship with God? Do you feel too busy for prayer, Bible study, meditation, or devotions? Psalms 46:10 can be translated, "Take time and know that I am God." A popular hymn gives this advice: "Take time to be holy, speak oft with thy Lord . . . Take time to be holy, the world rushes on," but do we do it? Do you make time for primary relationships? Is adequate time provided for your spouse, family, and friends? Only you can answer those questions honestly. And, only you can take the necessary steps to bring order, harmony, and balance back in your life. Start today.

**Talk it over.**

1. If you looked at your life as a wheel, what would be in the center?  
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2. Can you be mentally, emotionally and socially healthy be without being spiritually healthy?\_\_\_\_\_  
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3. What are the biggest distractions for you to having a balanced life?\_\_\_\_\_  
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4. The best life consists of work and rest. Refer to Genesis 2:2-3 and Exodus 20:9-10 and share why this is so. Is your tendency to work and not rest or rest and not work? Name one way to insure a balanced life for you and your family.\_\_\_\_\_  
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**VERSE TO REMEMBER**

"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:33 NIV).

**PRAYER FOR TODAY**

Lord, I thank you that you can help me to live balance live. Thank you that the principles of balance are found in your word. This time I pray that I will find a new renewal in my life becoming all that you want me to be, becoming balanced person. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen

**WHAT IS ON YOUR MIND**  
**Balancing Your Personal Life - Part 2 of 6**  
**1 Peter 1:13**

## **INTRODUCTION**

We are in a series I started last week on “Balancing Your Personal Life”. We are looking at your mental life, your physical life, your spiritual life, your emotional life, and your social life. In this study we are going to get our acts together. Today we are going to look at “What is On Your Mind?” How to stay mentally fit. 1 Peter 1:13. (NIV) *“Prepare your minds for action and be self-controlled.”* Prepare your minds for action in Greek literally means gird up your mind, like a soldier would cinch up his belt and prepare for battle. He is talking about being mentally fit. God is far more interested in changing your mind than changing your circumstances. We want God to take away all of the problems, pain, sorrow, suffering, sickness, and sadness. But God wants to work on you first, because transformation won’t happen in your life until you renew your mind and your thoughts begin to change.

A violent battle is raging around us twenty-four hours per day. In 1965, Donald Grey Barnhouse wrote a book it called *The Invisible War*. It is the battle for your mind, and that battle is vicious. It is intense. It is unrelenting, and it is unfair because Satan never plays fair. And the reason why it is so intense is that your greatest asset is your mind. I have seen what it is like when people are unable to hear God because their minds are broken and cannot seem to connect to God even when they want to connect to God. And I know whatever gets your mind gets you. So one of the most important things we need to learn and teach others is how to guard, strengthen, and renew our minds, because the battle for sin always starts in the mind.

## **WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT THAT YOU LEARN HOW TO MANAGE YOUR MIND?**

- 1. Manage your mind, because your thoughts control your life.** Proverbs 4:23 says, *“Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.”* (NIV). The power of your thoughts has tremendous ability to shape your life for good or for bad. For example, maybe you accept the thought someone told you when you were growing up, “You’re worthless. You don’t matter.” If you accepted that thought, even though it was wrong, it shaped your life.
- 2. Manage your mind, because the mind is the battleground for sin.** All temptation happens in the mind. Paul says in Romans 7:22-23, *“For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me.”* (NIV). One of the reasons why you get mentally fatigued is because there’s a battle in your brain 24 hours a day. It’s debilitating because it’s intense, and it’s intense because your mind is your greatest asset. Satan wants your greatest asset!
- 3. Manage your mind, because it is the key to peace and happiness.** An unmanaged mind leads to tension. A managed mind leads to tranquility. An unmanaged mind leads to conflict. A managed mind leads to confidence. An unmanaged mind leads to stress.

When you don't try to control your mind and the way you direct your thoughts, you will have an enormous amount of stress in your life. But a managed mind leads to strength and security and serenity. *"Letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace"* (Romans 8:6 NLT, second edition).

## **Talk It Over**

*How do you practice managing your mind?*

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## **HOW TO MANAGE YOUR MIND.**

### **1. Guard the access to your mind.**

*"Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things"* (Philippians 4:8 NIV). The more you think about something, the stronger it takes hold of you, which is why the Bible teaches that we should *"Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart"* (2 Timothy 2:22 NIV). Temptation begins by capturing your attention. What it gets your attention, it arouses your emotions. Then your emotions activate your behavior, and you act on what you feel. The more you focus on "I don't want to do this," the stronger it draws you in. Ignoring a temptation is far more effective than fighting it. Once your mind is on something else, the temptation loses its power. So when temptation calls you on the phone don't argue with it, just hang up! Sometimes this means physically leaving a tempting situation. This is one time it is okay to run away. Get up and turn off the television set. Walk away from a group that is gossiping. Leave the theater in the middle of the movie. To avoid being stung, stay away from the bees.

Spiritually, your mind is your most vulnerable organ. To reduce temptation, keep your mind occupied with God's Word and other good thoughts. You defeat bad thoughts by thinking of something better. This is the principle of replacement. You overcome evil with good (Romans 12:21). The way you think determines the way you feel, and the way you feel determines the way you act. If you act depressed, it is because you feel depressed. And if you feel depressed, it is because you are thinking depressing thoughts. If you want to get out of that depression, or whatever issue you are struggling with, you need to ask the Holy Spirit to give you better thoughts. Satan gives you thoughts – they are temptation. And God gives you thoughts – they are inspiration. Which one are you going to choose? Romans 8:6 says, *"The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace"* (NIV). I don't know anyone who wouldn't choose life and peace over death. But the truth is you have self-destructive thoughts all the time. So what do you do? Ask the Holy Spirit to give you new ideas to think about that will replace the old, bad thoughts. You will find that he will answer your request.

When you start thinking about something positive instead of something negative, something good instead of something evil, the old will lose its appeal and won't have its allure anymore. So invite the Holy Spirit to have free access to your mind to help replace those uncontrollable thoughts. Ask something like this: "Dear Holy Spirit, I give you permission to give me thoughts any time you want. I'm wide open and I will accept them. I have an open mind to you." Be choosy. Control what you allow in. Be discriminating. Don't just allow anything and everything to filter into your mind. A lot of people have what I call a Freeway Mind. Everything just goes right through it -- a book, an idea -- no thought as to whether it is good for you or not. I read a book one time called Positioning: The Battle For Your Mind. It is about how advertisers compete for your attention. Whether you realize it or not, everybody wants to get your attention. As they say in the computer industry: Garbage in, Garbage out. What you put into your mind is what is going to come out of your life. *"As a man thinks in his heart, so is he."* Guard the access to your mind. 2 Corinthians 10:5 *"Take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."* Guard your mind; be disciplined in the way that you think. Look at these four kinds of material that you can fill your mind with.

- i. **Poison.** Poison is stuff like pornography, the occult, trashy novels, things that blaspheme God, anything that is bad for your mind. Paul says in Romans 16:19 *"I want you to be wise concerning that which is good. But I want you to be innocent concerning evil."* Not to know evil by experience but by the word of God. In Psalms 101:3, David said *"I will set no vile thing before my eyes."* It is a promise he made to himself. I am not going to look at anything that is bad and unhealthy for me. A lot of people need that verse on their TV. I read this week that the average television is now on seven hours and seven minutes a day in the average home. An average person watch about 1000 hours of TV a year. That means if ones live to be 65, he/she will amass nine and a half solid years of TV viewing. Parents no longer teach values, the television teaches values. Nine and a half solid years of TV viewing. If you went to Bible study -- Sunday School -- every Sunday of your life from day 0 to day 65 that would only equal four and a half months of Bible teaching. Four and a half months of Bible study compared to nine and a half years of television. Poison.
- ii. **Stuffing.** Stuffing is simply stuff. It is neither good nor bad. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:23 *"All things are lawful but not all things edify."* He is saying that some things are not necessarily wrong, they are just not necessary. A lot of books, movies, TV shows are just stuffing. They are not harmful; they are just "there".
- iii. **Brain food.** These are things that inspire you, teach you, help you grow, teach you a skill, and make you a better person. Paul says in Philippians 4:7-8 *"Things that are true and just and honest, think on those kind of things."* Things that build you up rather than tear you down.
- iv. **The Bible.** The word of God. David said, *"Thy word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against thee."* It keeps us on the right track.

Joshua 1:8 -- that promise of success. Joshua says, if you'll do one thing you will be prosperous and successful, if you will meditate and memorize and study the word of God, fill your mind with it. God's Word will teach you what you won't find anywhere else. It answers fundamental questions like, "Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? Does my life matter? Is there a purpose to my life? Is there meaning? Am I significant?" You will only get answers to those questions in the Bible. We need to feast on God's Word daily.

You will hear a lot of concern these days about water pollution and air pollution. And those concerns are important. But there may be a more important pollution in our lives: mind pollution. The Bible tells us that what we feed our minds is just as important as what we feed our bodies. Psalm 101:3 says, "*I will not look with approval on anything that is vile. I hate what faithless people do; I will have no part in it*" (NIV). The Bible says there are four things that we are to guard our minds against:

- i. ***We are to guard our minds against false teaching.*** The Bible encourages us to contend for, "*The faith which was once and for all delivered to the saints*" (Jude 1:3 NKJ). That means the Gospel message that has been passed down for 2,000 years. How do you guard your mind against false teachings? Know the truth. If you know the truth, you can instantly spot a lie. Treasury agents are not trained to detect counterfeiting by handling counterfeit bills. They give them real bills and study them so well that when a counterfeit dollar bill is put in their hands, they immediately know that it's false. If we want to be faithful followers of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in this day and age, we must be alert and ready to boldly stand against the spirit of the age that seeks to modify the message of Christ, undermine His power to set us free from sin, repaint Christ's picture to make Him more acceptable to a wayward generation and rewrite the gospel to remove the offense of the cross. For the last 2,000 years, the church has been plagued with heresy after heresy seeking to tame the gospel, and today is no different. Here are just a few of the popular beliefs in our current culture that threaten to infiltrate the church:
  - a. **Universalism:** the belief that all people will be saved or that all ways lead to God and eternal life. Many who subscribe to this theology claim that, for instance, Christians and Muslim worship the same God.
  - b. **The Prosperity Gospel:** the belief that God's primary concern is for believers to be healthy and wealthy. If Christians are sick, suffering or poor, it is because of sin or a lack of faith.
  - c. **The New Age Movement:** a belief system of Eastern influence that emphasizes universal tolerance and doing what feels good (moral relativism). It contends that man is divine and can create his own reality and identity.
  - d. **Legalism:** the improper use of the law described in Scripture to try to attain or maintain salvation. Legalism also fosters judgment of fellow Christians for not adhering to one's own ideas of holiness rather than encouraging them to imitate Christ, obeying God's standards as explicitly outlined in Scripture.

- e. **Hyper-grace:** the overreaction to legalism, resulting in abuse of God's grace. Believers find themselves drawn to the modern hyper-grace movement because they are looking for freedom not just from legalism, but also from God's standards.
- f. **The Emerging Church:** a movement that claims to be Christian but employs culturally sensitive methods to make the gospel more palatable to a postmodern culture. Jesus' life is treated more as an allegory or narrative rather than a true event. Of particular concern is the inclusive approach to various belief systems, an emphasis on emotions over absolute truth and the notion that there is no hell, judgment or need for forgiveness. The Emerging Church movement also glorifies honesty and confession, but without repentance.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, arm yourselves with the Word of God. Know your Bible and speak the truth in love. In this way, may we remain faithful by the power of the Holy Spirit. One of the surest ways to become a victim of false doctrine is to think that it is not dangerous and you don't need to be concerned about it. When someone tells you that false teaching is not a big problem and you don't need to be very concerned about it, he is teaching you a false doctrine when he says it! And it is just a matter of time before he will try to get you to accept other false teachings! Not every false teacher will belittle the danger of false teaching. But anytime a man does tell you that false teachers are not a serious danger, you can be sure he is telling you that either because he is a false teacher or because he is under the influence of false teachers!

- ii. ***We are to guard our minds against temptation.*** Psalm 101:3 says, *I will not look with approval on anything that is vile. I hate what faithless people do; I will have no part in it.* (NIV). That's a good verse to put on your television. When was the last time you actually got up and switched channels because what you were seeing was worthless? When I start to feel tempted, I often say, "Lord, I mentally put on the helmet of salvation that Scripture talks about in Ephesians 6:17." What does a helmet do? It protects my mind. When I do this, I'm saying, "Lord, I want you to cover my mind with your blood. I will be guarding my mind from temptation." Every temptation starts in the mind. Proverbs 4:23 says, *"Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it."* (NIV). The battle for sexual purity is won or lost in your mind.

Any time you see people really messing up their lives, you can bet their problems didn't start with their actions, because their actions began with their thoughts. They lingered on dumb thoughts before making dumb decisions. The Bible says this very clearly and science backs it up: The way you think determines how you feel. Feelings motivate actions. To change your life, you don't just work on a bad habit, the action. Instead, you work on the thoughts that caused the feelings that caused the action. God says your thoughts control your life. *"The wise fear the LORD and shun evil, but a fool is hotheaded and yet feels secure.* (Proverbs 14:16 (NIV). It is common sense that if you don't want to get stung, stay away from the bees! If you don't want to get burned, don't get close to the fire!

If you don't want to fall off the cliff, don't hang off the ledge! The goal is not to see how close you can get to the temptation but rather how far away from it you can stay. A fool thinks he can handle temptation, but who is he kidding? You don't go to a bar just to eat pretzels! You need to do a frank assessment. You need to analyze when and where you are most tempted and vulnerable. Then, you need to stay away from those situations as much as you can. The Bible says to run from temptation: *"I have considered my ways and have turned my steps to your statutes."* (Psalm 119:59 NIV). If you have to physically remove yourself, do it! When Potiphar's wife tempted Joseph, he left his coat and split. Sometimes you may have to leave your coat. Get out of the situation. Run from it. Don't stick around. When you are tempted, get up and change the channel. Or take a shower. Or turn on music. Go for a walk. Read the Bible. Call a Christian friend in your support group. Do something to break the spell.

Here is some practical advice: Don't ever try to argue with the devil. You will lose every time. Don't rationalize it. Don't justify it. Don't argue it. The key thing to do is break the focus. Don't look at the cookies and repeat, "I don't want them! I don't want them!" Who are you kidding? Turn around! The more you fight a feeling, the more it grows in intensity. When temptation calls you on the phone, don't try to argue. Just drop the receiver, and go do something else. If you want to be able to handle temptation, you need to claim the promises of God that he has given in his Word about temptation. Everybody ought to memorize 1 Corinthians 10:13b: *"God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it"* (NIV). I have had many people tell me, "I couldn't help myself. It was impossible to resist. I had no choice but to give in." When you say that, you are calling God a liar!

God says he will always offer an escape from the temptation you face. It may be tough and painful. It might even be embarrassing. But there will always be a way out. God makes sure of it! That is his promise. Satan is constantly battling for your mind. That is where the battle happens. When God gives us an idea, it is inspiration. When the Devil gives us an idea, it is temptation. You choose every day which thought you are going to dwell on. You can change your mind by replacing the temptation with truth, and truth is found in the Bible. The Bible says to resist the devil. How do you do that? By preparing for the temptation. Ephesians 6:17 says, *"Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."* (NIV). There are two things you need to do in order to handle temptation. Salvation is the first step: *"Accept God's salvation as your helmet."* What does a helmet do? It protects your head and your mind, and that is where the battle is going on. Before you can say "no" to the Devil, you have to learn to say "yes" to Jesus Christ.

You get his power through salvation. The second step is to receive God's Word to use as a sword. Truth is the antidote to temptation. You can keep your Bible on the coffee table at home, but when you are at work and you are tempted, what good is it going to do you? No good at all! You need to get the truth that is in that book in your mind.



Without a doubt, the single most effective tool to combating temptation is to memorize Scripture. If you don't have any verses memorized, you have no bullets in your gun! When the Devil comes along, how are you going to counter him?

He's not afraid of your opinion, but he does fear the truth. The sword of God is God's truth, but it only becomes a weapon when you memorize it.

### Talk It Over

*Where are you most tempted? What changes do you need to make in your schedule or lifestyle to minimize your exposure to these situations?*

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- iii. ***We are to guard our minds against pride.*** Pride is the sin that God judges quicker than any other single sin. Aaron got prideful, and God smote him. Uzziah got prideful, and God smote him. Pride is the sin that got Satan kicked out of Heaven. People will tell you things that will puff you up. You have to remain humble and not let pride enter your mind. Too often when life is going well, we miss the warning signs of an impending fall. Pride blinds us. So does the spotlight. It is why I tell people who have seen some success in life that they need to go home and change some diapers, mow their own lawns, and wash their own dishes. When you have some success, make sure you keep in touch with your roots so you don't miss the warning signs of a fall.

Nebuchadnezzar's life is a clear picture of this. God cared enough about this pagan king to warn him about what was coming his way in Daniel 4. The Lord didn't just remove him from power. God gave him a dream, he brought Daniel to interpret the dream, and Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar what was going to happen and how to avoid it. Read it for yourself. You can't get much clearer. Daniel told the king, *"Therefore, Your Majesty, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue"* (Daniel 4:27 NIV). Daniel gave him three steps: Stop sinning, do what is right, and be merciful to the poor. Success would follow. But the king missed the sign. Is it possible you are missing one, too?

It could be conflict in a relationship. You are just passing it off as the other person's problem, but God wants to show you that you are off track in some area of your life. It could be a temptation you are battling against because you are continually putting yourself in a bad situation. Maybe it is chaos and confusion in your life. Both are signs you are not well-connected to God. You are trying to do life on your own terms. And God is trying to tell you through these warning signs: "Halt! Stop sinning! Come back to me!" If you are heading down the wrong path, God will warn you because he loves you too much to not give you a warning. ***"The Lord detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished (Proverbs 16:5 NIV).*** When it comes to pride, none of us is exempt from temptation.

For instance, success is one of the most important tests God gives us before he increases our responsibility, and if we become prideful, then we have not passed the test. Pride is the root of all sin, no matter what the sin is. It got Satan kicked out of Heaven. God hates pride because it declares, “I’m God, and I don’t need God.” The Bible says pride goes before destruction. If you keep reading about Nebuchadnezzar, you realize he was setting himself up for a major fall. Pride puts you on the opposite side of God. But God is always for you, not against you, and he wants to help you pass the test of success.

### **Talk It Over**

*In what ways are you most tempted to show pride? What is one specific way you can demonstrate humility this week?*

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- iv. ***We are to guard against an overworked mind.*** We strain our minds too much by overwork. This can cloud our ability to make sound judgments. That is why we need to have a day of rest every week. Jesus Christ has an incredible offer for you. He says, “*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*” (Matthew 11:28 NIV). I like that verse because it says the exact opposite of what most people think God will say to them. They think that if God wants them to come home, he is going to say, “Come home to me, and I will give you rules. Come home to me, and I will give you regulations. Come home to me, and I will give you restrictions. Come home to me, and I will give you religion. Come home to me, and I will give you rituals.” But God doesn’t say any of those things. He says, “Come home to me, and I will give you *rest*.” The reason why you are so tired and fatigued and stressed out all the time is because you are trying to live on your own power. God never meant for you to do that. The Bible says, “*He gives power to the weak and strength to the powerless*” (Isaiah 40:29 NLT). If you have been feeling a little down, a little anxious, a little fatigued, a little worried, come home to God. He is the one who made you, who created you, who watched every moment of your life, who knows everything about you and still loves you, who forgives you and says, “Come home to my power and strength.” When you do that, you will have real peace of mind.

### **Talk It Over**

*What do you need to surrender to God during this season so that you can find rest?*

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## 2. Never stop learning.

If you want to be a mentally fit person for the rest of your life, you never stop learning. We have been invited or witness various graduation in and outside our country. For those of us who have graduated, do you remember the feeling you felt the day you walked across the stage and graduated? I remember. I walked across the stage, grabbed my degree, walked off the stage, threw away my hat and the thought that went through my mind was "I have completed my education." Little did I know! If that is your attitude, if you think you have completed your education when you got your degree, there is no way you can live in today's world and ever complete your education. Life is a learning process. It is an ongoing thing. Proverbs 19:8 *"The one who gets wisdom loves life; the one who cherishes understanding will soon prosper"* *"The heart of the discerning acquires knowledge, for the ears of the wise seek it out"* (Proverbs 18:15 NIV). All leaders are learners. There are no exceptions. If you are teaching in a classroom, caring for kids as a stay-at-home parent, or serving in a customer service role, you are leading someone. And to do that more effectively, you need to keep learning. When you stop learning, you start dying. It is that simple. No matter how old you are and no matter what kind of career you are in, you need to be learning. Pick up a new skill. Study a fresh topic. Read a new book. Start a new Bible study.

One of the most important roles you have in life is as a student. Jesus wants us to be *disciples*. That is just another word for learner. *You are learning what it means to follow Christ*. Disciples of Jesus keep learning. They never stop. You will do yourself a favor when you keep learning. If you are continually growing and learning and developing, you are doing the best thing you can for yourself. You love yourself. That is proof of it. The fact that you want to learn means that you love your own soul. The problem is if you are not learning, you are not living. Scientists say that about the time we reach our mid-thirties, we stop acquiring new skills. When was the last time you learned a new skill, a new truth, a new thought, a new attitude? It is sad to see people who stopped thinking ten or fifteen years ago. They become a vegetable and start growing duller and duller. Never stop learning.

What does this have to do with being a Christian? Being a Christian means a lifelong learning process. We talk about the term disciple. The word "disciple" literally means "learner". If you are not learning, you are not a disciple. Jesus said, *"Take my yoke upon you and learn of me."*

You never stop learning. You are continually growing, expanding, developing and learning new insights. If you are going to stay sharp for the rest of your life mentally you need three attitudes.

- i. **The attitude of openness.** A sign of intelligence is intelligent people look for new ideas. They are open to them. Who can you learn from? Can you learn from somebody who is younger than you are? Can you learn from somebody who is less educated than you are? Can you learn from somebody who is a different nationality? Are you open? Can you learn from somebody who is of a different religion? Being open is the key. Openness to say "I can learn from anybody, any place, any time," will keep you mentally fit for the rest of your life. You can learn from anybody, I have discovered, if you just know the right questions. Openness is a problem as we get older. I found in a book, "Sixty excuses for a closed mind."

- We tried that before.
- Our place is different.
- It cost too much.
- We don't have the time.
- We have never done it that way before.
- It is against company policy.
- That is not our problem.
- You are right, but...
- We are not ready for that.
- It is not in the budget.
- You can't teach an old dog new trick.
- Let us form a committee.
- Let us sleep on it.
- It is too much trouble to change.
- It is impossible.
- We have always done it that way.

Excuses for a closed mind. Learn from anybody. Be open.

- ii. **An attitude of humility.** Proverbs 11:2 *"When pride comes then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom."* If you want to be mentally sharp, you have to have a humble attitude that says, "I don't know it all." One of the major roadblocks to learning is this attitude of "I have got it all together. I already know it all." Pride is a stumbling block to learning. Winston Churchill said, "I love to learn but I hate to be taught." Ego gets in the way. I love to learn if I don't have somebody pretending like they know more than I do. Do you know why children learn so much? They are not afraid to ask questions. They are humble. They know they don't know it all, so they are inquisitive. They are alert. They love to learn. Jesus said in Mathew 18:3 (NIV) *"truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven."* Children have this attitude of curiosity.

As we get older, adults get too worried about appearing dumb. They would rather not appear dumb than learn. When you were in school and got older and older, you learned "I don't want to raise my hand for that because everybody will look around and think I don't know the answer." It happens in Sunday school and Bible study. If you are in a Bible study and say, "I really don't understand this verse or I have no idea who Nebuchadnezzar is, but I don't want to raise my hand because what will other people think?" To grow in life, you have to have an attitude of openness and of humility. One day, I was talking to a good friend of mine. He said, "This experience I have been through is very humbling but I have learned a lot from it." That is it. Whenever we are humbled, we always learn. The Bible says proverbs 11:2 (NIV) *"When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom"*.

- iii. **Enthusiasm attitude.** Colossians 3:23 says *"Whatever you do, do it heartily [with all your heart] as unto the Lord and not as unto men."* When you have a task, something you are going to do, put your mind to it. Be enthusiastic about it. Which classes did you learn the most from when you were in school? The ones you were the most enthusiastic about. You liked them. We learn faster when we are enthusiastic, when we participate, and when we are not just spectators. We don't sit on the sidelines but we get involved. We learn faster and more when we are enthusiastic. If you want to be mentally fit you wake up in the morning with the attitude, "Lord, teach me something new today. Help me to be mentally alert. Lord, I realize that there are some tremendous experiences in life that you are going to create and design just for me today. Help me to learn from those things."

Guard the access to your mind. Never stop learning.

#### **Talk it over**

1. What are some of the excuses you have given that have stopped you learning?

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2. What is one thing you desire today to learn from the Lord? \_\_\_\_\_

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### **PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS TO KEEP MENTALLY SHARP.**

#### **1. SCHEDULE SOME THINK TIMES EACH WEEK.**

Sit down, get alone, get quiet, and think. You don't read, you don't talk, you don't listen to the radio, and you don't watch TV. You just think. Nothing is easier than thinking and nothing is more difficult than serious thinking, and nothing is more rewarding than thinking under the power of the Holy Spirit. 1 Thessalonians 4:11 *"Make it your ambition to be quiet."* A lot of times we are just too busy to think. "I don't have time to think!" Have you ever thought about that? If you are a leader in your home, business, if you have that responsibility, you ought to be spending a minimum of ten percent of your time thinking about your job. Not working at it, but thinking about it; how to do it better and ways to improve. Somebody said, "Five percent of our world really thinks. Twenty percent of our people think they think. Seventy-five percent of our people would rather die than think because they want all of the thinking done for them". People say, "I am just not a creative person." Yes, you are. You just don't know it. You have tremendous potential and tremendous abilities. Everybody is creative. Everybody has a creative thought every now and then. It is just that you don't cultivate it. You can cultivate your creativity.

Howard Hendricks has a friend who is a brain surgeon in Dallas. He asked him, "In twenty years of brain surgery, have you ever seen an overused brain?" The surgeon said, "No, but I have seen a lot of underused ones." Most of us just barely tap the potential that God has given to us. We never take time to sit down and think. *"to be made new in the attitude of your minds;"* (Ephesians 4:23 NIV) The human brain is arguably one of the most complex organisms that God has ever designed. Did you know the human brain is composed of approximately 78% water, 10% lipids, 8% protein, 1% carbohydrates, 2% soluble organics, 1% inorganic salt? Did you know from the time of birth, a baby's brain will grow three times in the course of year? And did you know the brain generates 25 watts of power while we are awake and that is enough to illuminate a light bulb? Amazingly, the left side of our brain controls the right side of our body, and vice versa. There are about 100 billion neurons in the human brain, which equates to the same number of stars in our galaxy.

And if that is not enough to boggle your mind it is estimated that number of thoughts a person has on an average day is estimated to be 70,000! God designed us to think. But our thoughts aren't always the most God-honoring on a day-to-day basis. As a believer, my desire is to think like Jesus, despite knowing that Scripture tells me, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" (Isaiah 55:8). It is not easy to think like Jesus using my own mental capacity. However, I have learned that the older I get, the simpler my thoughts in terms of subject matter and depth, as I try to focus my mental energy on eternity with Jesus. No matter how I think there are times where I enter into seasons of what I call "stinking' thinking'." If I leave this type of thinking unchecked, it could very easily lead me to a hardened heart and eventually down the destructive road to sin. Believer, when temptation is your constant companion, sin is not far behind.

God warns us in Genesis 4:7, "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, *sin is crouching at the door*. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it." Sin is crouching at my door, and it is crouching at yours as well. So what do we do when a poor thought enters the mind? God's Word has the answer. *Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.* (Philippians 4:8). One of the many things that I love about Philippians 4:8 is that it is a great teaching moment from Apostle Paul. The very things that Paul is asking me to think about actually *turn me back to God*, helping me realize all over again how great he truly is and how much work he has left to do in me. It also helps me realize that I am a sinner saved by God's grace and that, no matter how hard I try; I will continue to struggle with a thought-life that is not glorifying to God. While this might sound a bit discouraging, we should remember that *we have Christ in us*. And because we have Christ in us, we have the mind of Christ as well. 1 Corinthians 2:16 encourages us, *"For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?"* But we have the mind of Christ." Please note that it does not say, "We have the *same* mind as Christ."

So what does it mean to “have the mind of Christ?” To have the mind of Christ means we share the plan, purpose, and perspective of Christ. What does this look like?

- **Plan** – We understand God’s plan for mankind—to bring glory to himself and provide salvation for sinners.
- **Purpose** – We share the same purpose as Jesus by **sharing the gospel with the lost** (Luke 19:10).
- **Perspective** – We share the same perspective of humility and obedience (Philippians 2:5-8), compassion (Matthew 9:36), and prayerful dependence on God (Luke 5:16) as Jesus displayed while here on earth.

In Philippians 2:1, the Apostle Paul encourages and exhorts the faithful in Philippi that their life is in Christ. Jesus Christ lived, died, and rose for all so that we could have his mind (2:5). In Philippians 4:9 he states, “What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.” Thinking differently takes desire, practice, and our unending love for the Lord. In closing, Paul’s instruction on thinking translates very well to modern times. Our thoughts are vitally important to our spiritual development and, in turn, our growing relationship with the Lord. No doubt, you have heard the computer term “garbage in, garbage out.” Believer, your thought life will function like that if you take in things opposed to the mind of Christ. It is fortunate that we have a helper in the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, giving us wisdom and working in us his mind. Our part to thinking differently is being responsible to yield to the Holy Spirit’s promptings (Ephesians 4:30), thereby allowing the Holy Spirit to transform and renew our minds.

### **Talk it over**

In what practical ways can you change the way you think? \_\_\_\_\_

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## **2. DEVELOP A PERSONAL READING PLAN**

When was the last time you read a book? When was the last time you visited a library? Paul did this. 2 Timothy 4:13 Paul is in prison in Rome and he tells Timothy, "Don't forget the books and the parchment. Bring them to me, I need them. I am going to study." Paul was making the most of his time. He was a bookaholic. Develop a reading plan. Have balance. You can literally read yourself out of a rut if you read the right things. Fill your home with good Christian literature, books and magazines, articles and things like that. There are some things I think every Christian needs to have under their belt. People ask how I come up with this stuff week after week. I read constantly, several books a week, continually reading and filling my mind. It is important to note that when reading you may encounter every imaginable distraction from lack of motivation, inability to concentrate, and outright laziness to barking dogs and making the mistake of checking your email just before you planned to read! There have been times of emotional weariness, physical tiredness, and spiritual warfare. Nevertheless, you will succeed when you have a plan. If you already have a plan then that is great. But if you don't and even if you do here are seven tips to help you make the most of reading.

- i. **A Purpose for Reading.** First, what is your purpose for reading the Bible? When I attend a meeting I like to ask, "What is the purpose of our meeting today?" That way, we tend to stay on target. First and foremost, Christianity is a relationship with the Father who lavishes His love on us. When you read the Bible or Christian literature, you literally spend time with the living God who delights in you. The Bible, along with prayer, allows us to experience the holy presence of God for a few moments. Communion is what keeps you coming back.
- ii. **A Fixed Routine.** Second, what is the best time of day, frequency, place, and amount of time for you to read? The best time to read is early in the morning, because that's when you are fresh. If it fits your personality, it is a good idea to have a set schedule. Daily reading or having personal devotions makes sense for the same reasons we recharge our cell phones. Of course, things come up like an argument with your spouse, an alarm that doesn't go off, early meetings, or cranky kids.
- iii. **Pray Before Reading.** It is a good idea to pray when you read. How you pray connects to your purpose: communion and discipleship. I start by bringing myself into the presence and power of God.
- iv. **It is Always Good to Have a Goal.** What is your goal for reading? Tom Skinner said, "When you set a goal, you are literally writing history in advance." Don't micromanage your reading. Instead, set one annual goal each year.
- v. **Increase Your Comprehension.** What can you do to increase your learning and retention? Mark up what you are reading. From a learning theory perspective, writing things down improves your comprehension. You need to have a margin notes, underlines, arrows, check marks and asterisks. You can also journal in a notebook, on a computer, or on scraps of paper.
- vi. **What to Do When Your Mind Wanders.** Your mind can wander all the time. There are four possibilities why mind wanders: the world, the flesh, the devil, or the Spirit. When your mind wanders, you have to figure out which one it is. If it is the world, the flesh or the devil, then of course you want to reel it back in. However, if you read a text and your mind goes racing to a relationship that is not right, or you are convicted of a sin, or prompted to some good deed, then that is the Spirit and you let that happen. When you read a phrase or sentence that impacts you, you linger awhile, letting the Word soak into your soul. What if your mind wanders because you are tired and exhausted? When you get that way, try to read out loud. If you still can't concentrate just stop and live to read another day!
- vii. **Know What Keeps You Coming Back for More.** Figure out what keeps you coming back for more. Your commitment is to stay at it each day until you have a moment of humility, an overwhelming sense of God. It could be an insight, a sense of awe, or feeling completely and totally loved. It is a moment when you feel the power and presence of God washing over you. Read to find the truth. The truth is what is relevant and applicable. That is what keeps you coming back for more.

### **Talk it over**

What do you need to change about your schedule or the time of day you so that you have time to read? \_\_\_\_\_

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### 3. SPEND TIME WITH WISE PEOPLE

Proverbs 13:20 *"He who walks with the wise will be wise."* There is power of association. You can't fly with the eagles if you are going to run with the turkeys. You have to get next to people who will build you up, who know about the things that you want to know about. If you want to know about the Christian life, get around some Christians who have been there for a long time. If you want to know about the skill that you need in your business, get around people who have been there. Find out and spend time with them. In my life, I've had six different mentors, disciplers, people who have invested their lives into me. I spend time with these 'Paul's' in a Paul-Timothy relationship, as they give me their insights. It is wise to learn from experience, but it is wiser to learn from the experience of others. You don't have time to make all the mistakes yourself. Spend time with wise people. Proverbs 23:19 *"He who listens will be wise."* If you are going to be wise, you have to get some wise people in your life. You don't need a lot of friends in life. You don't need to be popular. You just need a few good friends who build you up, not tear you down, who are wise, not fools.

If you hang around with fools, that is what you become. We always grow in community. You cannot grow to spiritual maturity by yourself. You could become a monk and move to the top of a mountain and spend your life in silence and reading books. You would grow in knowledge, but you wouldn't grow in wisdom. Why? Because wisdom is all about love. Wisdom shows up primarily in relationships. That is why a lot of people have educational degrees, but their marriages are falling apart. They are educated, but they are not wise. The Bible says in Proverbs 13:20, *"Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm"* If I stand on the edge of a stage, and I'm trying to pull you up while you are trying to pull me down, which is easier to do? It is always easier for somebody to pull you down than pull you up. People who pull you down are not your friends. Friends pull you up. Friends encourage you in your pursuit of godly wisdom by offering their own. Do you have anybody in your life who is giving input for good on a regular basis? You need that kind of encouragement in your life if you want to be a wise person.

#### Talk It Over

Who are the people who are closest to you? And how are those people encouraging you in spiritual growth and wisdom? Or, how are they distracting you from learning to live wisely? \_\_\_\_\_

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### 4. LEARN TO ASK QUESTIONS

One of my favorite verses is Proverbs 20:5. It talks about the importance of asking questions. You can learn from anybody if you just learn the right kind of questions to ask. *"The purposes of a man's heart are deep water but a man of understanding draws them out."* In the heart of everybody there is something you can learn, there are some insights you can use because we have all had different experiences. A lot of times they are not there on the surface, you have to draw them out like drawing water out of a well. How do you draw people out?

How do you draw the insights you could use out of people? Ask questions. Learn to ask questions. It is a wise thing. Once a month I have what we call a Pastor's Day. We allow pastors who want to come in and study our church come in and just talk. I take about a half a day and spend time with them. It never ceases to surprise me how some people will travel five or six hours to get to our church and then sit down and I will say, "I'm open to any questions you would like to ask" and they haven't really thought out what they want to ask. Draw it out of people. When I was in college I made a list of standard questions that I would ask whenever I got around somebody I thought could teach me something. Questions like, "What has been your greatest success in life?", "What has been your greatest failure in life?", "How could I learn from that?", "How do you manage your home?", "What are some things you do with your kids?", "What are the books that have changed your life?", "Who are the people who have influenced your life?", "How do you plan your time?", "How do you relax?" Make up questions that are important to you and whenever you get around somebody like that, you can ask those questions. How do you draw the wisdom out of every person? It is by learning to ask smart questions.

As I have traveled around the world, I have asked questions of taxi cab drivers and prime ministers, and they have both taught me. You can learn from anybody if you know the right questions to ask! One of the things I have learned is that I have never learned anything while I am talking. If my mouth is moving, I am not learning. You don't learn when you are talking. You learn when you are listening. So you have to learn to listen. I have done an awful lot of interviews over the years, and I have noticed that the interview shows have changed. They are no longer about the guest. They are about the interviewer. The whole goal of the interviewer is to draw attention to himself. I long for the old Larry King days. I didn't always agree with Larry King, but I liked that he would ask a question and then let you talk. He realized that people weren't going to listen to Larry King. They tuned in to listen to all the fascinating guests that he had and learn from them. Larry King once said that in an interview show, if the host is talking 50 percent of the time, something is terribly wrong. The host should listen the most and talk the least. A good TV host sets up the question and then just listens. You can learn from anybody, but you have to be willing to ask questions and then listen. That is the mark of a wise man or woman.

### **Talk It Over**

What would be an example of wise question? \_\_\_\_\_  
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## **5. WRITE YOUR IDEAS DOWN.**

Hebrews 2:1 *"We must pay careful attention to what we hear so that we don't let it slip."* ... so that we don't drift away. The problem is we don't remember things. Every person here will have tremendous ideas throughout their life but we let them slip by. Think of all the good ideas you thought up but you don't have today because you didn't write them down. The difference between success and failure, the difference between being a high achiever and mediocre, is the management of ideas that is how you handle good ideas.

Everybody has a good idea every now and then. Successful people know how to manage them. They take advantage of them. They write them down so that they don't forget them. How does this apply to your spiritual life? For thirteen years I was a Christian and my spiritual life was up and down, up and down. I would get real close to God and then I would backslide far away from God. I was a spiritual yo-yo. Vance Habner calls them Malaria Christians; you get a fever, then a chill, a fever, then a chill. That is the way I was. It was back and forth. Finally, I was getting seasick. I said, "Lord, I will just live down here in the valley if I can't stay close to you." What was my problem? That I was not dedicated enough? That I just needed to be more committed? No. The problem was I would learn all these great truths and apply them in my life for a while but pretty soon I would forget those truths.

How many of you were born with good forgetters? We forget things so easily. As a result we don't apply them. How many of you would say, "I have had to have God teach me a lesson more than once because I forgot it." You learned a lesson but then you forgot it. I have discovered that the problem in most Christian's lives is not dedication, it is retention. It is the fact that we just don't remember the things that we learned because we don't write them down. The U.S. Air Force did a study and they discovered that we forget 90-95% of everything we hear within 72 hours. That is a depressing statistic for a pastor. I work real hard to get these insights and truths from God's word and put them in a simple outline so it will be easy to remember and then I realize that by Wednesday you have already forgotten all of it except 5%. If you can't remember it, you can't work on it. That is why you need to take notes, write things down. For a long time I would sit in church and never take notes. I just sat there looking real spiritual. The pastor would throw out these little pearls of wisdom and it would come at me and bounce off. It was going in one ear and out the other.

I was sitting there saying, "This is great! This is going to change my life!" Then I would walk out the door and I would already forgotten half of it. By Wednesday, I had forgotten 95% of it. So I began doing something that changed my spiritual life and got me off the roller coaster. I began to keep a notebook, a spiritual journal. Everywhere I went I began to take notes and write things down so I could go back and review it. The only way you can continually keep growing is to write things down, take notes, so you don't keep forgetting it. Hebrews says pay careful attention to what you learn so you don't let it slip. *"I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint. Then the Lord replied: 'Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald[b] may run with it.'"* (Habakkuk 2:1-2 NIV)

Because Habakkuk wrote down what the Lord said to him, we have the book called Habakkuk. Because David wrote down what God spoke to him, we have the book of Psalms. They asked God a question, God gave them an answer, and they wrote it down. If your prayer life is stuck in a rut and you feel like you are saying the same prayers over and over, one of the best things you can do is start writing down your prayers. It makes it more personal, and it helps you be more serious about your prayers. This is called the spiritual habit of journaling. It is a habit that will help you refresh your prayer life. But don't make it too complicated! Simply write down what you are saying to God, and write down what God's saying to you. After you get your notebook, remember these two practical suggestions to help make your journaling more effective.

- a. **Put a vertical line down the center of the page.** On one side, write what you say to God. On the other side, write what God says to you. As you write down what you say to God, don't expect him to always say something to you immediately. Sometimes he will answer later in the day, or he may even wake you up in the middle of the night.
- b. **On the same sheet of paper, draw a horizontal line,** and above the line, write "Yesterday" and record the events of your day. Underneath the line, write "Life Lessons." The next day, look back on the events of the day before and ask, "What lesson was God trying to teach me through those events?" God is trying to teach us lessons through the everyday events of our lives, but we miss them all the time. When you take time to write them out in this way, it will help you focus on hearing God's voice and what he wants you to learn from him.

Journaling is a very powerful habit. It helps you focus your thoughts. It helps you remember what you said and what God said. It helps you test the impressions that you get from God. It also helps you worship as you thank God for speaking to you. *"Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, Lord. Repeat them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy"* (Habakkuk 3:2 NIV).

### **Talk It Over**

How does recording the events of your day and lessons you learned help you test an impression to see whether or not it is from God? \_\_\_\_\_

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## **6. TAKE ADVANTAGE OF TRANSITION TIMES.**

There are times that you are driving to and from work, times when you are getting ready in the morning, time when you are waiting for food, when you are waiting in the waiting room at the doctor's office, when you are exercising; when you are awake and alert but your mind is not in gear. You could memorize scripture. If you are sitting in an office, carry a paperback book with you. Use those spare minutes, snatch those fragments of time, and make use of them. Read a book. Listen to audio recording. I think one of the greatest technological tools that Christians can use to grow is technology. One of the best investments you can make is to put a CD deck in your car. Just think of all of the hours that you spend driving that you could be using to listen to messages or Bible studies. They even have the Bible on CD and you could listen to that over and over while you are driving. I have taken many courses without ever leaving my car. I have taken two courses on management, one course on creativity, a course on public speaking, a course on vocabulary, all kinds of Bible studies, and I never got out of my car. Your car actually becomes a college on wheels. You get in the car and you automatically have a CD you can use to inspire you, motivate you, and train you. Take advantage of the time to keep alert. I found a joke and I thought I should share with you. It is a Psalm called the New Twenty-third Psalm.

"The TV is my shepherd  
 My spiritual growth shall want  
 It makes me to sit down and do nothing for His name's sake  
 Because it presenteth so many good shows, I must see  
 It restores my knowledge of the things of the world and keeps me from studying  
 God's word  
 It leads me in the paths of failing to attend worship service and doing nothing for  
 the kingdom of God  
 Yea, though I live to be a hundred, I shall keep on viewing my TV  
 As long as it will work, for it is my closest companion.  
 Its sound and its pictures, they comfort me  
 It presenteth entertainment before me and keepeth me from doing important  
 things with my family  
 It fills my head with ideas which are contrary to God's word  
 Surely, no good thing will come of my life because my TV causeth me to  
 backslide  
 And I shall be ashamed before Him at His coming forever.

It used to be people said, "You are what you eat." Now it is, "You are what you watch". If I came over to your house tonight and said, "I want you to get your whole family in the living room. I want to entertain you. I want to tell you about five murders that I heard of, three rapes, a case of incest and all kinds of violence. Won't that be an entertaining evening?" If you put those things in a little box (the TV) all of a sudden it becomes entertainment. God, when He gave you your mind, gave you one of your greatest gifts. You are responsible to use it and develop it and keep it sharp and you have never touched the capacity of your mind. It is literally limitless in what you can do if you will simply begin to use it and develop it and begin to think. You can develop creativity.

## CONCLUSION.

One last warning: Can you overdo intellectual pursuit? 2 Timothy 3:7 is talking about people who learn and learn but can never know God. They never make that commitment to Him. *"These people are always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth."* That is a tragedy. The greatest knowledge is to know God. Paul said, *"I want to know Him and the power of His resurrection."* That is the important thing. When we invite Jesus Christ into our lives, "Lord, come into my heart," does He come literally into your heart? No. "Come into my spirit. Lord, put Your Spirit into my life." He comes into our minds. He gives us thoughts. When we get a thought from God we call it an inspiration. Some of you have allowed over the years all kinds of material into your mind indiscriminately; things from magazines, books, shows, billboards, and all kinds of things. Your mind has literally been a freeway and all things have come zooming through it. As a result you are having problems with a habitual pattern of thinking. You just can't get a thought out of your mind. Maybe it is worry; you are habitual worrying. Maybe it is anger and you tend to be an angry person. Maybe it is lust; maybe it is jealousy, or bitterness. I have done a lot of studies that show that the more television you watch the more fearful you become. It produces a fearful society. Maybe it is guilt. How do you do it? Let God give you a brainwashing.

Let Him wash out the garbage and give you a clean slate to start over. Romans 12:2 *"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will"* Put on the mind of Christ. Some of you are under a lot of stress and you think you are cracking up, going crazy. You are not balanced, you are imbalanced. 2 Timothy 1:7 *"God has not given to us a spirit of fear but a Spirit of power and of love and of a sound mind."* You have a right to a sound mind. Give your life to Christ. Give Him your mind, your thought life and begin to develop it the way He wants you to.

### **TALK IT OVER**

1. Share together things parents have let their children watch and the impact it has cost?  
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2. What is one thing you will do today to guard what goes to your mind? \_\_\_\_\_  
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3. Look for a prayer partner in your group and share to her/him on the thought in your mind that haunts you.

### **A VERSE TO REMEMBER**

"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" Romans 12:2

### **PRAYER FOR THE DAY**

Heavenly Father, I thank you for your word and that it is practical and that it helps me even in these areas. I know that you have said that *"as a man thinks in his heart, so is he."* As I seek to be balanced in every area, help me to use the gift that you have given me -- my mind. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen

**LET'S GET PHYSICAL**  
**Balancing Your Personal Life - Part 3 of 6**  
**1 Cor. 6:20**

**INTRODUCTION.**

We have been talking about balancing your personal life. Today we are going to look at a number of verses. 3 John 2 says *"I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you even as your soul is getting along well."* God wants you to be healthy. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were in perfect health. The Old Testament is full of rules and regulations about health. Jesus spent much of His ministry healing people. He was concerned about physical health. 1 Corinthians 6:20 *"Therefore honor God with your body."* How do you honor God? The King James Version says, *"Glorify God with your body."* How do you do that? Wear a bikini so men will say, "Praise the Lord!" No, I don't think that is what glorifying God with your body means. It means you use your body for God's glory and you honor Him, and you take care of it. Your physical health is an important part of making your life count. I want to look at the right motivation for getting healthy that is what God's says about the importance of your body in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. Keeping your body in shape is a spiritual discipline. It is not just about losing a few pounds, wanting to live longer, or trying to look nicer. God created your body, Jesus died for it, the Holy Spirit lives in it, your body is connected to Christ, and it is going to be resurrected one day. When it is, God is going to hold you accountable for how you managed what he gave you.

**Talk It Over**

When you reject your body, you are essentially saying, "God, you made a mistake!" What would be a better way to talk to God about your body?\_\_\_\_\_

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**HOW TO FEEL BETTER PHYSICALLY.**

**I. DEVELOP A HEALTHY ATTITUDE TOWARD YOUR BODY.**

The strategy is Proverbs 23:7 *"As a man thinks in his heart, so is he."* If you think healthy thoughts, you are going to move toward being a healthy person. Three unhealthy thoughts you ought to eliminate from your mindset. What do you think about when you think about your body? You can reject your body. You can perfect your body. You can neglect your body.

- a. Rejecting your body.** Some of you are doing this -- Send it back! It is a mistake! God, you goofed! You look in the mirror and think, "No thanks!" You reject it. People like Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers have made a million making fun of their own bodies.
- b. Perfect your body.** This is the opposite extreme. These are the body-builders and the models. They are constantly striving to be a "10". They are always working at total perfection. They worship and idolize their body.

- c. **Neglect your body.** Most of us do number three. You ignore your health, you are careless about your condition and you drag through life tired most of the time. As a result you have the wrong attitude.

Some of you have the wrong attitude toward your body. You neglect it, you reject it (“God, I want a different one!”), or you perfect it (the way a narcissistic body builder worships his body). Instead, God wants you to respect your body and protect it. What is the right attitude toward your body? Don't reject it. Don't perfect it. Don't neglect it. The healthy attitude is to respect it and protect it. When you fully embrace a healthy attitude from God's Word about your body, you are ready for your body's brand new. Knowing the truth about your body makes acting on that truth a step of faith. It means you are no longer getting healthy just to live a few more years, fit into a particular item of clothing in your closet, or look more physically attractive. You are getting healthy as a way to worship God.

### **Talk It Over**

God gave you the body that you will need to complete your mission here on Earth. How does that change the way you look at your body? \_\_\_\_\_

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## **II. MOTIVATE YOURSELF TO CHANGE**

God wants you to be healthy. Why should I take care of my body? A lot of people think if God wants me to be healthy, He will make me healthy. No, He expects you to take care of it. He expects you to follow the proper plan. There are some reasons that you can motivate yourself to change. There are some physical reasons that everybody probably understands, and there are spiritual reasons that probably only Christians would understand.

### **Physical Reasons:**

1. **I will feel better.** If you take care of your body, you will feel better. You will have more energy and fewer pains. You will be more alert, less depressed. Somebody said, “Health is what makes today feel like the best day of the year”.
2. **I will look better.** Better complexion. More attractive. Stronger self-esteem and more confidence. If you feel better, you will look better. A lot of us men get furniture problems: Our chest drops into our drawers.
3. **I will live longer.** There are countless studies that show people in shape live longer. There are physical reasons to get in shape. There are physical reasons to take care of your body.

### **Spiritual Reasons:**

1. **God made your body.** In Psalm 139:13ff *"You have created me in my mother's womb and I am fearfully and wonderfully made."* It is an attitude of respect.



The Bible says in 1 Corinthians 3 that whatever God creates we should not destroy. God made my body so I ought to take care of it since He made it. Our culture teaches us, "My body is mine to do whatever I want to with it." But God says, "No, you are wrong. It is not your body, because you didn't create it. I made it, and I loaned it to you to live in while I put you on earth, and I expect you to take care of my creation." The fact is, everything you can see on earth was created by God. He made it, and He owns it. What you think you own is really on loan. *The Bible says, "The body... is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body."* — 1 Corinthians 6:13.

Today we make the same common mistake Greek philosophers did thousands of years ago. Aristotle, Socrates, and Plato believed in dualism, which included the idea that your mind (or spirit) is important, but your body isn't important spiritually. They devalued the body. In fact, some Greek philosophers taught that your body is evil, so it really didn't matter if you messed it up. The Bible tells us the exact opposite. Your body is holy because God made it, and everything God makes has a purpose. We are to bring glory to God with our bodies, so we can't compartmentalize our lives and think that we can divorce our bodies and live as if only our spirit matters. God owns your body!

2. **Jesus paid for your body.** 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 *"Do you not know that your own body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have received from God. You are not your own. You are bought with a price. Therefore honor God with your body."* Jesus Christ, when He died on the cross, paid for you. That includes not only your soul but your body. He bought you. In a sense, physical fitness is a stewardship issue. Your body is really on loan. Jesus paid for it and died for it and God created it. As we saw earlier, 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 tells us that our bodies have been bought! Millions of TV viewers love watching *American Pickers* and *Pawn Stars* because it's fun to guess how much old items are worth. The owners often think something they own is more valuable than it really is.

But the reality is that something is only worth whatever someone is willing to pay for it! You may think your house is worth more, but it is really only worth what a buyer is willing to pay for it. God has never made a person He didn't love. If you want to know how valuable your life is to God, just look at the cross. With His arms outstretched, nailed to the cross, Jesus was saying, "This is how valuable you are to me. I love you this much! I'd rather die than live without you." You are priceless. Now, if you are worth dying for, don't you think God wants you to take better care of yourself? If you bought a million-dollar racehorse, would you feed it junk food and keep it up all night? Of course not! You would protect your investment. The fact is, Jesus has made an investment in you. He paid for your life with His life, and He expects you to take care of His investment.

3. **The Holy Spirit lives in it.** If you are a Christian, the Bible says in 1 Corinthians 3:16 *"Don't you know you are God's temple and that the Holy Spirit lives in you?"*

If God made my body and Jesus died for my body and the Holy Spirit lives in my body, then I better do the best I can to make it a worthy temple. A temple is not an object of worship; it is a place of worship. A lot of people worship their bodies and always try to look good. But the Bible says a temple is a place of worship not an object of worship. How do you get in shape? How do you have more health? You get the right attitude. Then you motivate yourself to change and you realize these things. When you say yes to God, accepting by faith what Jesus did for you and trusting His grace and forgiveness to save you, and then God puts His Spirit inside you as a guarantee of your salvation. The Bible says it is like this: *Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?* — 1 Corinthians 6:19. When God puts His Spirit inside you, your body becomes a temple of God, a residence for His love. So let me ask you this: If you saw someone vandalizing or damaging a church dedicated to God, wouldn't you consider that a crime? Of course! But you abuse and vandalize God's temple, your body, when you deprive it of rest and sleep, overeat, put too much stress on it, and fail to take care of it.

- 4. God expects you to take care of your body.** You are not the owner of your body, but you are the caretaker, or manager, of it. The word for manager in the Bible is steward. Taking care of your body is an issue of spiritual stewardship. In fact, God tells you that one day you will have to give an account for how well you managed everything He gave to you, including your body. You will stand before God and have to answer the question, "What did you do with what I gave you?" In *The Purpose Driven Life* I explain how your life on earth is a test, a trust, and a temporary assignment. This life is preparation for our next life, which will last forever in eternity. God is testing you on earth to see what He can trust you with in eternity. He is watching how you use your time, your money, your talents, your opportunities, your mind, and yes, even your body. Are you making the most of what you have been given? God isn't going to evaluate you on the basis of the bodies He gave to other people, but He will judge what you did with what you have been given.

**Talk it over.**

When you reject your body, you are essentially saying, "God, you made a mistake!" What would be a better way to talk to God about your body? \_\_\_\_\_

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### **III. FOLLOW GOD'S LAWS OF HEALTH.**

God's Word is full of commands that are meant to protect you and give life. If God says to do something, he means for you to do it, and if he says not to do something, you shouldn't do it. So why should you follow God's Word? Why should you make this book your standard? The Bible is dependable because it doesn't change. Fashions change, opinions change and even science changes. By the time a science textbook is in print, it is already out of date! A few weeks ago I threw out a thick stack of computer books because they are all worthless and irrelevant; wrong operating systems and wrong programs.

Everything changes, but God's Word doesn't change, because the truth never changes. During an interview, Alan Shepherd, the first American astronaut in space, was asked, "What are you depending on?" Shepherd replied, "That God's laws will not change." That is a pretty good answer! What if gravity worked every other day? God's laws are immutable. They are unchanging. If you want to get healthy again emotionally, relationally, physically, or any other way, you need to make Jesus Christ the manager of your life and you need to make God's Word the authority of your life. And, you need to make the commitments David did in Psalm 119:112 — *"I have made up my mind to obey your laws forever, no matter what"* and in Psalm 119:93: *"I will never lay aside your laws, for you have used them to restore my joy and health"* (TLB). Have you made the commitment to obey God's laws forever no matter what? God promises to restore your joy and health if you will just do what he says to do and exhibit true meekness, where you let go and let God. Proverbs 4:20-22 Solomon says *"Pay attention to my words for they are health to a man's whole body."* The principles in God's word are put there not only for spiritual health but for emotional health and physical health. When you follow the principles of God's word, you are going to be a healthier person. The Bible is full of health rules and guidelines. I want us to look at six principles from God's word on building a healthy body. Why do we spend time on this? It is part of life. When you feel bad physically it affects everything else. Shakespeare said it is hard to be a philosopher with a toothache. I would say it is hard to be spiritually alert when you are physically dull, when you are tired, fatigued, and out of shape.

## **PRINCIPLES FROM GOD'S WORD ON BUILDING A HEALTHY BODY.**

### **1. Maintain your ideal weight.**

Scientists know that you have an ideal weight based on your bone structure and your height. You can find it in any number of different books. 1 Thessalonians 4:4 *"Each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable."* Circle "learn". *"Each of you should learn to control his own body."* That is saying that self-discipline can be learned and that includes maintaining our ideal weight. I read that fifty million Americans are one billion pounds overweight. When they rebuilt Yankee Stadium in New York City a few years ago they lost nine thousand seats. They had to add three inches to every chair because the posterior of Americans has grown out in the last thirty years. I realize there are many medical and glandular reasons for overweight and weight problems, but the fact is for many of us, we just simply eat too much. You cannot eat everything you want to eat and still maintain your weight. Ecclesiastes 6:7 *"All the labor of man is for the mouth and yet the appetite is never filled."* Maintaining ideal weight is like every other battle we face. We must have a battle plan that we work faithfully each day, and that plan must include accountability to others and God. We aren't strong enough to get and maintain victory on our own. We need to have others in our life to hold us accountable and to keep us where we need to be in our day to day actions. I realize that this is an issue with many who are reading this right now. Know today that there is hope, there is victory waiting you! Exercise, pay attention to what you eat, have people in your life who will hold you accountable to your exercise routine and what you eat, and pray daily for God to give you the strength and resolve to stick to the plan. This is an important issue because the better you feel, the better shape you are in, the more fit you are, the better you will be able to serve and glorify God with your life. After all, that is our ultimate purpose in this life.

**Talk it over.**

Discuss what you will do to maintain ideal faith. \_\_\_\_\_

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**2. Balance your diet.**

I am talking about controlling the quality and the quantity. Do you eat a balanced diet? A hamburger in both hands? I was on a seafood diet; if I see it, I get to eat it. We need to balance. This is the principle we are talking about in this whole series; balancing your exercise, balancing your life, balancing your spiritual life, your emotions, your relationships and your eating habits. 1 Corinthians 6:12-13 *"Everything is permissible for me but I will not be mastered by anything. Food is for the stomach and the stomach for food, but God will eventually destroy them both."* The point that Paul is making is that eating is not an end in itself. We eat to live we don't live to eat. It is a means not an end in itself. The Bible is so full of nutritional advice. Leviticus 3:17 warns, *"Do not eat animal fat."* That was written B.C. before cholesterol. We didn't know about it then but God knew about cholesterol and He said don't eat animal fat! It will raise your cholesterol. God knew it. There are all kinds of sanitation laws in the Old Testament that the Jews were to obey long before they discovered what bacteria was all about. Proverbs 25:27 *"Don't eat too much sugar."* All through the Scripture you read this nutritional advice and it is so up to date. They are contemporary. The Scripture is a buffet where we get to choose what we want on our plate. But sometimes, in choosing, we might forget to choose a healthy balanced diet.

When Daniel refused to be defiled by eating the food of King Nebuchadnezzar's court, he presented the guard with another option: *"Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see."* 14 *So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days. At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food."* (Daniel 1:12-15 NIV). Daniel didn't just eat haphazardly, accepting whatever was placed in front of him. He was intentional about what he ate. When you think clearly about what you eat, God empowers you to continue to make good choices. Clear thinking leads to self-control. By thinking ahead of time, you can prepare so that you won't have a "food emergency." This enables you to eat healthy meals and snacks that you packed ahead of time and you won't crash in the afternoon because you ate a greasy fast-food lunch. Instead, you will be on top of your game, energized and ready to do whatever it is that God calls you to do. Being intentional, thinking clearly, and exercising self-control, will help you achieve your health goals and serve God well.

**Talk it over.**

Do you eat to live or live to eat? How do you think your eating habits affect your spiritual health? \_\_\_\_\_

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### 3. Commit yourself to a regular exercise program.

I have discovered that most of us are convinced but not committed. You know that exercise would be good for you. We all know it would be good for us. But it is being committed to it. 1 Timothy 4:8 *"Physical exercise has some value."* In those days they were very active. If Paul wrote that today, he would change it to say it has great value. In New Testament times they all did physical labor. Today we live sedentary lives. In the New Testament times, they walked everywhere. Today we drive everywhere. In the New Testament times, they ate natural foods. Today, we eat processed junk food. In the New Testament times, they had a tension free society. Today, we live in a stressed society. Exercise would have great value. How do you know when you are out of shape?

- When you feel like the morning after and you didn't go anywhere the night before.
- When your knees buckle and your belt won't.
- When you see your friends running and you hope they twist an ankle.
- When you breathe harder walking up a set of stairs than you do when you hold your sweetheart's hand.

Commit yourself to a regular exercise program. What is the common excuse? "I don't have the time." Do you have time to be sick? If you don't make time for exercise, you will probably find time to be sick. It is how you want to spend your time. What is the common mistake? Overdo it at the start. I imagine some of you will go out of the service saying, "I am going to get in shape if it kills me" and tomorrow you are going to kill yourself! We have the philosophy that if something is good, a lot is better. We try to get in shape and do it in one session. We go out and work ourselves to death and get totally exhausted and wear out quickly and as a result we give up. The key is training not straining. If you want to get in shape fast, exercise longer, not harder. Commit yourself to a regular exercise program. Did you know that exercise can be an act of worship? When you begin to look at exercise in that light, it will bless both your body and your soul like never before. For some people, choosing regular exercise is not a problem, it comes naturally and they actually enjoy it. But for many, making exercise part of their ongoing, long-term lifestyle is a real challenge.

The world has taught us that exercise is something we "should" do and generally focuses solely on our body. Really, exercise is something we get to do and can be all about our spirit! Our experience changes completely when we renew our minds with a new attitude, and shift our thoughts about exercise! Remind yourself what a gift it is that your body is able to move like that! Thank God that your feet and legs, and arms are strong and functional. That you are blessed to live in a part of the world that makes moving easy and accessible! If you exercise at a gym, thank God that He is providing the financial means to enjoy a place where you can improve your health and help your body to be its best. Enjoy the ability to breathe deeply. Thank Him for the endorphins that exercise provides to help elevate your mood! Then, worship!!! I ONLY listen to worship music during my workouts and just sing and praise Him, and pray. I ask Him to speak truth and revelation to me during that time, and PRAISE Him for time set apart for that! When you know that you are going into a time of praise and worship, you will actually find that you look forward to your workout times because you know that you will walk away from it with a fuller spirit and a healthier body!!!

Finally, seek Gods direction for the best form of exercise for you. Trust Him to lead you into His perfect will, what is good and acceptable in His sight for you and your body.

### **Talk It Over**

How can you adjust your schedule so that you make time for exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

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## **4. GET ENOUGH SLEEP AND REST**

Psalm 127:2 *"In vain you rise up early and stay up late."* The Living Bible says, *"God wants His loved ones to get their rest."* Rest is so important that God put it in the Ten Commandments. He said every seventh day you rest. Jesus, in Mark 6:30-32, insisted that His disciples take a vacation. He took them to the desert. He said, "Come apart for a while. We are going to go out to the desert." There you have a Biblical justification for a Palm Springs vacation. Get the rest that you need. Don't rise up early and stay up late. I think one of the real enemies of health is late night television. It leaves you worn out the next day. An article in the paper recently said, "Study ties too much tube to tubby teens. Heavy doses of television make children fat and youngsters addicted to the tube early in life grow to be overweight teenagers a new study has found. Obesity increases by two percent for each additional hour they average in front of the television each day." Make sure you are budgeting your time wisely. Make sure you get enough rest and sleep. (If you are a sleepwalker you can get your rest and exercise at the same time.)

When you sleep, your heavenly Father watches over you in love because sleep is God's gift; to accept that gift is an act of trust. He restores your body and energy through sleep. One of the hidden triggers to over-eating is lack of rest. When we are overtired, we often try to boost our energy with caffeine or sugar or carbs, which ultimately leaves us more tired than before. Trusting God enough to sleep builds your faith. Why does sleep require trust? Because we tend to overload our schedules and think that we don't have time to get the proper amount of sleep. Jesus relaxed, and he never felt guilty about it. Even God took a day off after Creation. Who are we to think we are too busy to get the proper rest! I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the Lord sustains me. —Psalm 3:5 NIV. Sleep is the ultimate form of trusting God. Going to sleep means letting go of control over the world, trusting God to take care of things while we are unconscious. We trust God to sustain us while we sleep and when we wake. We need sleep to be effective and focused when we are awake. People who get less than six or seven hours of sleep at night have lower blood flow to the brain, which leads to more bad decisions. Getting inadequate sleep turns off seven hundred health-promoting genes.

Therefore, sometimes the healthiest and most spiritual thing you can do is to put aside evening work and get to bed. If you are not getting enough sleep, consider asking God what activities or worries you need to turn over to him. He won't ask you to do more in a day than your body is designed to handle. Sleep is a blessing God gives to refresh and replenish us as we acknowledge that he has the whole world under his loving care. Issues such as anxiety and depression lessen with proper rest. We are a society that gives props to the person that stays awake longer, spends time working more, or puts their well-being on the back burner. We must change this mentality!

If you have ever flown on an airplane, you know that if there is an emergency, the first person you put the mask on is yourself! If you are not getting oxygen then you will be useless to anyone else that you want to care for. The same goes for rest. It isn't always easy to find time to replenish ourselves. However, it is necessary. We each have the same 24 hours in a day and budgeting the time for rest might take practice. Taking quiet time to rest, reflect, replenish, and spend time with God might seem selfish at first but the benefits for your health and being present for the people you love will be worth it.

### **Talk it over**

What needs to change about your schedule and priorities so that you can make more time for rest?

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## **5. AVOID DRINKING ALCOHOL.**

Ephesians 5:18 *"Don't get drunk with wine, which will ruin you. Instead be filled with the Spirit."* In the US Cover article of *Newsweek* some days back. "Alcohol on the Rocks." Health conscious consumers are sobering up America. There has been a dramatic change in America's drinking habits. A growing number of Americans are beginning to view alcohol as unhealthy or downright dangerous. It is not surprising industry wide sales are dropping. Per capita consumption of liquor has dropped by more than 11% and sales this year will probably fall another 2%. These are not religious people. These are just people who are concerned about their health. *Orange County Register*: "Orange County's drinking problem is stimulated by affluence and it is higher than the national average. The figures indicate that Orange County has a bigger than average problem. As incomes rise so does the drinking level." Alcoholism is now the third greatest health problem in America, next to heart disease and cancer according to U.S. Department of Health. Cirrhosis of the liver is the number one, fastest growing disease in America according to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

*I will not be brought under the power of anything."* 1 Corinthians 6:12. Today, possibly because the Word of God is not obeyed and is considered not relevant, many Christians have no conviction about what the Bible says about many things, including the drinking of alcohol. Much is said in the Bible about the dangers and effects that alcohol will have on one and his Christian testimony. Indulgence in alcohol is never recommended in God's Word. Its use is usually negatively spoken about. Here are some reasons why a Christian should avoid alcoholic beverages:

- a. Alcohol is dangerous. Even wine is likened to a poison that will ruin one's life! *"Do not gaze at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it goes down smoothly! In the end it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper. Your eyes will see strange sights and your mind will imagine confusing things. You will be like one sleeping on the high seas, lying on top of the rigging. "They hit me," you will say, "but I'm not hurt! They beat me, but I don't feel it! When will I wake up so I can find another drink?"* Pro. 23:31-32

- b. Alcohol should not be drunk by a wise person. *“Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise.” Prov. 20:1* Wine’s influence will make one mock, or deride others. Strong drink will often make one loud and show one’s anger.
- c. Alcohol will increase one’s problems and affect one’s health and mental stability. *“Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaints? Who has needless bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes? Those who linger over wine, who go to sample bowls of mixed wine.” Pro. 23:29-30*
- d. Alcohol will control a person, and affect one’s thinking and discernment. *“But they also have erred through wine, and through strong drink are out of the way; the priest and the prophet have erred through strong drink, they are swallowed up of wine, they are out of the way through strong drink; they err in vision, they stumble in judgment.” Isa. 28:7*
- e. Alcohol will affect one’s will. *“Whoredom and wine and new wine take away the heart.” Hos. 4:11* Notice that there are two types of wine: new, unfermented wine, and alcoholic (fermented) wine.
- f. Alcohol will affect one’s desire to do something for the Lord and the desire to be industrious. *“Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that continue until night, till wine inflames them! 12 And the harp, and the viol, the tabret, and pipe, and wine, are in their feasts: but they regard not the work of the LORD, neither consider the operation of his hands.” Isa. 5:11-12 “Be not among winebibbers; among riotous eaters of flesh: 21 For the drunkard and the glutton shall come to poverty: and drowsiness shall clothe a man with rags. We are not to even be around drinking, so certainly the Saviour would not have broken this commandment.” Pro. 23:20*
- g. Alcohol is often a gateway to other sins. One sin usually leads to others, and alcohol is no exception. *“Thine eyes shall behold strange women, and thine heart shall utter perverse things.” Pro. 23:33*

These verses, and many more, show we should not drink, especially if we are concerned about keeping the “temple” that God gave us clean (I Cor. 6:19) from temptations and sin. However, what confuses many, and is often used as a way to justify drinking, is the Bible’s usage of the word “wine”. In the New Testament, that one word is used to describe both alcoholic and non-alcoholic wine. The Greek word “oinos” is used to reference fermented and unfermented “wines”. The context of the verse usually reveals which type of “wine” it is referring to. What is non-alcoholic “wine”? We call it grape juice. Sometimes the Bible refers to it as “new wine” (Mat. 9:17, Luke 5:39). Understand that in biblical days there was no refrigeration, and that it was hot, which would quickly ferment the “new wine”. To keep this from happening, the new “wine” was often simmered, so that the water would leave the “wine”. What would result would be thick, grape syrup that would keep for a long time. It also was called “wine”. Before it was drunk, water would be added to it again. An ancient shipwreck was recovered that had a cargo of containers of this grape syrup, and it was found to still be preserved. Many justify drinking because Jesus turned water into wine (John 2:9-10). It was not alcoholic wine he changed from water, because if he did that he would have been serving alcohol that would have earned him God’s “woe”, rather than God’s approval on His life (Mat. 3:17).



Jesus' conversion was also not an example of biblical doctrine on drinking, but it was clearly a miracle to show Jesus was God in the flesh. *"Woe unto him that giveth his neighbour drink, that puttest thy bottle to him, and makest him drunken also, that thou mayest look on their nakedness! If one is not to give it to others, than he should not be drinking it himself."* Hab. 2:15. Some twist I Tim. 5:23 around that it is okay to drink wine for health. Any drunk or doctor will tell you that alcohol will tear up anyone's stomach. Alcohol irritates one's digestive system, including the stomach, causing it to produce too much acid. This can lead to gastritis, stomach pain, vomiting, diarrhea and even bleeding. Look at the beer belly of a beer guzzler for proof. God of course knows all this, so alcohol consumption cannot be what I Tim. 5:23 is referring to. *"Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities."* I Tim 5:23 I read that to get the "good" chemical in wine that is supposed to help one's health that many, many bottles of wine each day should be drunk. Drinking that much would qualify one as a drunkard that the Bible condemns. A better choice for a stomach's health would be to eat grapes.

What is "drunk"? How many drinks does it take to be "drunk". A good answer to this question is from Jim Jorgenson in Should I where he wrote, "Perhaps you would say, 'It would take six beers to make me drunk.' If you only drink one beer, then you are one-sixth drunk. You are one-sixth less able to serve God than you are before drinking." We are not to have the appearance to doing anything wrong. We are to have an upright testimony. Drinking would give an appearance to others that we were drunkards. *"Abstain from all appearance of evil."* I Thes. 5:22. Christians are to be led and guided by the Spirit of God, not the spirit of drunkenness. It is interesting that the old time drunkards knew that drinking was not of God, and users of it were influenced by the wrong spirits. To prove that look at a bottle of booze, and it will still be identified as 50% (or another number) Spirits. Drinking it leads one to follow the wrong spirit, and it will not be the Spirit of God. A Christian should be "Christ-like", as the name implies. He should not be, or even be close to the edge of the godless world, from which he was saved from. He should be as far from temptation and sin as he can get! *"And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit;"* Eph. 5:18.

As you grow in your faith, you discern that you make choices not because of what is best for you, but by what is best for others. The Christian life is not all about you; what you can handle, what you can control, what's nice for you. The Christian life is for others. We don't live to ourselves. Romans 14:15 says, *"Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died. Therefore do not let your good be evil spoken of; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."* You would never want to defend what you are doing on the basis of what is best for you. You would always want to make a loving choice and realize that if I drink this commodity, it might destroy someone else. Perhaps you have heard the saying, "Kids embrace what parents tolerate." That should concern you. Any youth pastor will tell you that the primary place where kids begin to experiment with drinking is from their parent's supply. Total abstinence is a loving choice. Abstinence is also an edifying choice. Romans 14:19 challenges us, *"Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things with which one may edify another."*

The application of this is: "I'm going to do the things with my life that will help you be a better follower of Jesus." Lastly, it's a *supportive* choice. Romans 14:21 says, "*It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine, nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak.*" One of the big problems with alcohol is that it can end up being bondage for many. Like any bondage, God is able to deliver you whenever you are serious about quitting and ready to let Him help you. I will be in prayer today for you or anyone you know who is in bondage to alcohol. GOD IS STILL IN THE DELIVERANCE BUSINESS!

**Talk it over.**

Alcoholic drinks are a big factor in causing immoral thoughts, adulteries, and resulting divorces. Discuss. \_\_\_\_\_

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## **6. LIVE IN HARMONY WITH GOD**

Proverbs 14:30 "*A heart at peace is life to the body.*" Our emotions have a tremendous effect on our physical health just like our physical health has a tremendous effect on our emotions. You cannot fill your life with guilt and worry and bitterness and anger and fear and expect to be in optimum health. A heart at peace gives life to the body. What is peace of mind? It comes from two things. Peace of mind comes from a clear conscience and a purpose for living. When you have those two things your health is going to improve. "*A heart at peace is life to the body.*" You can never have optimum physical health until you begin to pay attention to the emotional and spiritual dimensions of your life. That's what salvation is all about. "Salvation" means "wholeness". It means you are whole physically, emotionally, spiritually, mentally, and socially. The starting point is when you invite Jesus Christ into your life and say, "Jesus Christ, help me to get it together in every area. I want to live in harmony with you."

Everybody thinks they have the key to peace of mind or at least they want you to think so, so you will buy their product. I saw an ad for a perfume the other day called "Peace" perfume. The ad promised, "Wear it to feel serenity." Now, folks, if it were that easy, it would be great; just put on a little perfume, and you will have peace of mind. Peace of mind is such an important concept in life that people will do almost anything to find it. They will travel to exotic places at great expense. They will sniff a brain-destroying drug up their nose. They will experiment with New Age rituals. They will try all kinds of things. But the truth is, very few people in this world are at peace with themselves. Most people carry a high degree of stress, anxiety, or tension in their lives. As a pastor, I have noticed that there are three things that tend to rob our peace:

- a. **When circumstances are uncontrollable, we often lose our peace.** Much of life is beyond your control. You sit in gridlock traffic for hours and miss an important event. A couple keeps trying desperately for a baby, and it just isn't happening. When these things big or small happen, we get frustrated and lose our peace of mind.
- b. **When people are unchangeable, we tend to lose our peace.** People naturally resist change. And they resent it when we try to change them.  
The quickest way to lose our peace of mind is to try to change somebody else, because most people are just not going to change.

- c. **When problems are unexplainable, is easy to lose our peace.** We know that life is not fair. Not everybody has a happy ending. Things don't always turn out right. What makes it more difficult is that we are not always going to know why. And when we don't know why, we tend to get anxious, nervous, and stressed, and we lose our peace.

God has promised peace of mind, because it is a fundamental need of your life. One of the Hebrew names of God is Jehovah Shalom. "Shalom" means peace. "Jehovah Shalom" means "I am the God of peace." Jesus says in John 14:27, *"I am leaving you with a gift — peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid"* (NLT). If God says, "I am offering you a gift of peace," he means it. It is not something you work for. It is not something you deserve. It is not something you try for. You don't beg for peace. You don't plead for peace. Peace has nothing to do with problem-free living. It is simply a gift that you must accept, and it's available to you today.

### **Talk It Over**

What are the uncontrollable circumstances that have robbed your peace lately?

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### **CONCLUSION.**

Why a message on physical fitness? If you feel bad, it affects every area of your life. It is a part of stewardship. Your body is a gift from God. What are you going to do with it? How do you get started? Accept responsibility for your own feelings. The fact is, there are things beyond your control. You didn't choose your genes, your genetic makeup which gave you your basic body type. You didn't choose that. You didn't choose the circumstances by which you were fed or nutritionally enhanced as a kid. There are factors we cannot control. But there are some things in our life that we can control. You ask God to help you change. Some of you say you are having a hard time with the battle of self-control. Galatians 6:7 *"When you walk in the Spirit you will not fulfill the desires of the flesh."* Ask God's Spirit to help you out and help you have self-control.

Make a decisive dedication of your bodies as a living sacrifice, devoted and well-pleasing to God. The Bible says we can offer our bodies to God as a gift, as a dedication to Him. And it is well pleasing to God. For change to happen in any area of your life, whether it is financial, vocational, educational, mental, or relational, you have to begin with the physical. Why? Because your body affects your behavior. Your muscles affect your moods and your motivation. Your physiology can actually affect your psychology. Romans 12:1 says, *"Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God — this is your true and proper worship"* (NIV). The problem with a living sacrifice is that it can choose to crawl off the altar. We do this all the time. We offer ourselves to God, and then we take ourselves back. This is not a once-for-all offer.

You have to do it four, five, or maybe 10 times a day! So what is “your true and proper worship”? There are three things you can do with your body that the Bible says are acts of worship:

- a. **Cleanse your body.** The Bible says in 2 Corinthians 7:1, “*Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God*” (NIV). You cleanse your body by controlling what you allow in your mind through what you watch and listen to, and in your body by what you eat and drink.
- b. **Care for your body.** Ephesians 5:29 says, “*No one hates his own body but feeds and cares for it, just as Christ cares for the church*” (NLT, second edition). Keeping your body in shape is an act of worship to God.
- c. **Control your body.** “*Each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable*” (1 Thessalonians 4:4 NIV). Control your body so that it doesn’t control you. There is no reason to say, “I couldn’t help myself!”

No matter what kind of change you want to make in your life, it will require energy. To have the energy to meet your goals, change has to start with your body.

### TALK IT OVER

1. What are practical ways you can honor God through your body today?

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2. What are the small ways you need to work on controlling your body? What are the big ways?

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3. How does Christ “feed and care for the church”? Why do you think God wants you to do the same with your body?

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### A VERSE TO REMEMBER

Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; 1 Corinthians 6:19.

### PRAYER FOR THE DAY.

Jesus Christ, help me to get it together in this area. Help me to take care of the temple that you want to live in. Jesus Christ, give me the strength to not only be convinced but committed to taking care of this gift that you have given to me.

**EXERCISES FOR SPIRITUAL FITNESS**  
**Balancing Your Personal Life - Part 4 of 6**  
**1 Timothy 1:7-8**

**INTRODUCTION.**

We have been in a series on Balancing Your Personal Life. We have looked at mental fitness and physical fitness and today we are going to look at spiritual fitness. 1 Timothy 4:7-8 (Living Bible) *"Spend your time and energy in the exercise of keeping spiritually fit. Bodily exercise is all right, but spiritual exercise is much more important."* In our last study, we talked about physical fitness and today we will look at spiritual fitness. *"...it's a tonic for all you do. So exercise yourself spiritually and practice being a better Christian, because that will help you not only in this life but in the next life too."* Paul understood this when he wrote to a young church pastor, Timothy, to encourage him and give him guidelines for strong spiritual leadership. Paul had learned the importance of staying spiritually strong and the benefit of developing spiritual habits in his life like spending time in the Scriptures, prayer and daily worship. He knew this would be good advice to a young man like Timothy who had little experience leading a church. Paul understood the importance of staying spiritually fit, especially in the face of opposition, and he wanted to make sure Timothy understood that as well.

We all know it is crucial for healthy living to eat nutritious foods and exercise, but today's verse reminds us it is even more important we stay spiritually healthy. We benefit from a healthy body during our time on earth, but staying spiritually fit offers benefits now *and* for eternity. There are many mornings when I simply don't feel like exercising, and I bet you can relate. There are days when my to-do list screams, my phone rings continually, or I just feel lazy, tired or unmotivated. So I have learned if I don't intentionally make it a priority and form habits to help purposefully add exercise into my day, I won't make the time. We are the only ones who have control over setting priorities in our lives and if we don't intentionally make staying spiritually fit and spending time with God of utmost importance, then it won't happen. And without habitual spiritual nourishment, we will never be spiritually fit and strong. When we form habits in our spiritual lives that help us stay strong, we will have the inner motivation to live outward actions that glorify God. When hearts and spirits are ready to go, our bodies will be too. The Bible says that in order to be spiritually fit we need to exercise ourselves spiritually. How do you do that?

When a person begins an exercise program to improve their cardiovascular or aerobic fitness level, several things are going on physiologically in the body. The cardiovascular system – the oxygen transport system – has to get used to carrying oxygen in the blood through the blood vessels and deliver it as fuel for the muscles. Once the blood and oxygen arrives at the cellular level, the membranes of the cells must become 'trained' to allow the oxygen in so it can be used by the muscles. The more a person exercises, the more efficient this oxygen transport system becomes. As these pathways are used more and more, the person's cardiovascular fitness will improve. In a similar way, as we exercise aspects of our faith, we improve our level of spiritual fitness. I will give you one example. Our beliefs shape our attitudes, which shape our thinking patterns, which shape our behaviors. As we read the Bible our beliefs begin to align with the truths we read. If we are serious about growing in our faith, we will be intentional about meditating on these biblical truths. Our repeated thoughts will grow our neural pathways.

These repeated thoughts become our attitudes which will permeate our mind and our emotions and end up shaping our will and its corresponding choices. This will determine our behaviors. Recently I have been reading about what it means to be ‘in Christ,’ and for Christ to be ‘in me.’ The Apostle Paul knew that, “I myself no longer live, but *Christ lives in me*. So I live my life in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20) This is true for all of us who have genuinely accepted Jesus into our heart. As a branch of a grapevine is connected to its vine, I am connected to Jesus, the Son of God. That is what the Word of God tells me. This is a supernatural or spiritual truth. And I believe it. I embrace it. The more I dwell on this truth, the more my attitude aligns with this truth. This enables me to ‘rest’ in my union with Jesus. I have gained confidence that Jesus is living His life through me. His Spirit is prompting me throughout the day to write, call someone, speak encouraging words, and pray to God in Heaven.

My life is bearing the fruit that Jesus’ life is having through me. What I have briefly outlined is a form of spiritual training or exercise. The more I dwell on these truths, believe them, think them and trust that God’s Son is living in and through me, my life is changed. This is what Paul meant when he wrote: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, *he is a new creation*; the old has gone, the new has come!” 2 Corinthians 5:17. In Christ, I am a new creation! We certainly live in a health-conscious world. Everywhere we turn we see advertisements for fitness equipment, nutritional supplements, health food, gym memberships, and more. Many people are obsessed with taking care of their bodies and it is for a good reason, because our lives depend on it! But even though our physical health is important, Paul reminds us in the above passage that our spiritual fitness is even more important than our physical fitness. We don’t want to neglect our bodies. But even more so, we must not neglect our spirits. Here are four reasons why your spiritual fitness is such a crazy-big deal:

### **1. Your eternal life depends on it.**

The life we spend on this earth is nothing compared to the eternal life we will enjoy with God in heaven someday. At least this applies to those of us who have put our faith in Jesus, the Son of God, and have called on God to rescue us (Romans 10:13). If you have not yet turned your life over to God and committed to following Him, I plead with you to make that commitment in your heart right now. We must not lose sight of the fact that life on this earth is temporary, but life after death is permanent. God never promised that this life would be fair. We live on a broken planet. Heaven is where everything is done God’s way. Life on Earth just doesn’t work like that. But what happens on this earth is not all there is to life. You will spend 60, 80, or maybe 100 years on Earth. You will spend trillions of years in eternity. If you have placed your faith in Jesus, the Bible says you will spend eternity with God in Heaven. That is one of the most important reasons Christians should work on their spiritual fitness. God has given us eternal life!

### **2. Your current happiness depends on it.**

When I was young, I used to think that Christianity was all about the “next life.” But over time, I came to learn that the Christian faith also has everything to do with enjoying a joyful, meaningful, happy life NOW. There is no greater life than a life that is lived walking with God, TODAY! If we want to live a happy life, the way God intended, here are three things we can do.

- i. We must **stop complaining and blaming others**. We are never the best version of who God created us to be when we spend our time being negative and complaining. Instead, we need to make a habit of being grateful. We are as grateful as we choose to be.
- ii. We need to choose to **generously serve and bless others**. The most unhappy, miserable people are not the ones who have the least. They are the people who live self-consumed lives. If your life is all about you, then you will spend the majority of your life unhappy. But if you will choose to spend your life serving and blessing others, you will find lasting happiness.
- iii. We need to **surround ourselves with people who share the same values of happiness with us**. Like it or not, we take on the attitudes either good or bad of the people we are surrounded by. So if you want to be happy, you need to surround yourself with people who are happy, who embrace God's version of happiness. It will rub off on you. Learn to be thankful, serve and bless others, and surround yourself with happy people, and you'll live happy.

Our inner desire for happiness is planted in us by God. Scripture doesn't pit holiness against happiness. In fact, Jesus gave us a beautiful picture of true happiness when he delivered the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). When he delivered that sermon, the first word out of his mouth was *happy*: "Happy are those who . . ." The word for "happy" in Scripture is the Greek *makarios*. Some translations use the English word "blessed" whenever *makarios* appears in the New Testament. But other translators—aware that *makarios* comes from the word *makar* (which means "happy" or "blessed")—translate the word to "happiness" instead. When we desire happiness, we are not heretics. In important ways, we are seeking after God's own heart.

### 3. Your family depends on it.

If you are not willing to take care of yourself spiritually for your own sake, I would still implore you to take care of your spirit for your family's sake. Your kids need to see you walking with God. So many parents spin out spiritually in front of their kids, and their kids end up suffering greatly as a result. Your siblings need to see you walking with the Lord. Your parents will benefit when you are doing well spiritually. Your cousins and grandparents and nieces and nephews will be blessed when you are well spiritually. And it could be that you will be the only "Bible" that they will ever "read." So do not neglect your spirit.

Awesome families encourage growth. They create an atmosphere of lifelong learning. They help each other develop. They encourage the discovery of each person's spiritual gifts and abilities. If you are not growing, your family is boring. You are just stuck in a rut. If you haven't learned anything new or developed any new interest in a long time, you are not growing! There are some things that you are never going to learn if you don't learn them in your family. You can't learn them at school. You can't learn them at work. You only can learn them in your family. In fact, most of your problems as an adult come from the fact that you didn't learn certain things correctly as a child. Here are five things you must learn in your family that will help your family to grow spiritually:

- a. **What to do with feelings.** In a healthy family, you learn how to recognize, identify, own up to, express, and deal with your feelings. Awesome families should let everyone be honest and let kids express their emotions.
- b. **How to handle conflict.** Kids need to see their parents working problems out in front of them and showing how you deal with differences in a healthy way.
- c. **How to handle loss.** You don't want your kids to win all the time. Because when they get out in the real world and they face the inevitable losses, it will be devastating. They need to learn that failure won't destroy them, that a loss isn't the end of life.
- d. **What values matter most?** It is important to teach our kids the three basic temptations of life so they are not swayed by what the world values. Those temptations have to do with how you feel, what you do, and what you get in life basically sex, salary, and status.
- e. **Good habits.** Habits determine our character. Families should help each other grow so that everyone's character is more like Jesus Christ.

One of the marks of an awesome family is that we help each other grow. Your kids don't want to hear a sermon. They want to see Jesus' example in your life. Take time for conversation with your kids. The critical conversations with your kids should be about real issues. Unfortunately most conversations we have with kids are about schedule, eating, or homework and not about the stuff that really matters in life.

#### 4. The world depends on it.

I often wonder how many unbelievers trip over unhealthy Christians when they are stumbling away from God. This world needs to see Christians who are healthy, passionate, and genuine. We are God's vehicle for His message of love to those who are lost. But we must be healthy if we are going to effectively deliver that message in a way that will change lives forever. Physical fitness is important. But spiritual fitness is even more important. So make plans to strengthen your spirit today! *Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe.* 1 Timothy 4:12. Has there ever been a time in your life when you felt like you had nothing to offer or that your contributions didn't matter? Ever had to prove yourself to others in order to gain their respect? Think back to your childhood, maybe you experienced this in a classroom or on a sports team.

It is easy to be intimidated or overshadowed by those who are older, smarter, more talented or more experienced than we are. In 1 Timothy 4:12, Paul is writing to Timothy, a young believer. He encourages him not to give anyone an excuse to write him off as immature or undeserving of their attention, but instead to confidently set an excellent example of the Christian life. Of course, Paul's message here doesn't apply only to Timothy, but to us as well. Even if we sometimes feel useless, God has a plan to use us for His glory in every situation. He enables us to live in a way that exalts Him and to bless others with our example. In this verse, Paul names five specific areas in our lives that should be representative of a changed heart:

- i. **Speech.** This is probably one of the most difficult aspects of our character to keep in check; as James 3:6 says, "the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness."



Although there is no denying that it is challenging, it is vital that we learn to control what we say since it often has a huge effect on others. Thoughtful and loving words can establish relationships, but just a few angry or careless words can destroy years of friendship.

- ii. **Conduct.** In his letter to the Philippians, he encourages them: “conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” As believers, we have a responsibility to represent Christ to the world through our actions. If we wear the label of “Christian,” we must be willing to live our lives to that standard.
- iii. **Love.** This is the most essential aspect that must also be characteristic of our lives. As Jesus says in John 13:35, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” More than anything else, our love distinguishes us from unbelievers. Christians are called to exhibit a kind of love that others would see as crazy, the same kind that Jesus showed us: unconditional, undeserved, and often unrequited, the type of love that makes people do a double take.
- iv. **Faith.** As believers, “we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). We trust that the Bible is true, that Jesus was who He said He was, and that God has the ability to keep the promises He has made to us. This faith should give us courage to live boldly for Christ because we know God will love, protect, and provide for us no matter what.
- v. **Purity.** We are called to be an example of purity. In the Beatitudes in Matthew 5: 8, Jesus says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” Because of our fallen nature, we can’t reach perfection in this life, but nevertheless, we are to strive to keep God’s commands as a demonstration of our love for Him and gratefulness for the saving work He has done in our lives. As we grow in our walk with Him, He promises to purify us and make us more like Himself.

The characteristics outlined in this verse aren’t easy to perfect by any stretch of the imagination. That doesn’t give us a free pass not to work towards that goal, though. Paul challenges us to reach for a higher standard, not only to set an example for other believers, but also to make unbelievers wonder what we have that is so special that it changes everything about our lives.

## **PRINCIPLES OF SPIRITUAL FITNESS.**

### **I. RENEW YOUR STRENGTH THROUGH WORSHIP.**

The Bible says in Isaiah 40:31 *"They that wait upon the Lord ..." that is what worship is focusing on God. "... shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint."* As you go through the week you get run down and tired emotionally, mentally, spiritually from all the activities of the week. You get worn out. Worship is a spiritual tune-up. It is a filling station that restores, renews, and reinvigorates your energy. Even back in the Ten Commandments, God said six days you work and on the seventh day you rest and worship. Why? Because worship is focusing on God.

When you focus on God, it gets your eyes off yourself. It gets your eyes off your problems, and you can relax realizing that God is bigger than your problems. The alternative to worship is worry. When you focus on yourself, you are going to worry. When you focus on the Lord, you are going to worship. It will renew your strength. To strengthen your faith; you must unite with others in worship. Worship is for God, but it also has benefits for you. Here are two of the biggest benefits of corporate worship: It renews your faith, and it restores your joy. How many times have you gotten up on a Sunday morning and said, "I am so tired. I really don't have any energy to go to church," but then you went to church and worshipped and afterward you were more energized? That happens because worship renews you. It strengthens you. It strengthens your faith. You are not going to get your strength renewed by watching golf on TV. That is just going to make you lazier and lazier. You get renewed by worshipping God with other believers.

As a pastor, sometimes I think of myself like the coach in the boxing movie "Rocky." Rocky is out there in the fight, and he is pouring his heart out and just getting beat to a pulp. The bell rings and he goes, "Thank God." He comes to the corner, and the coach says, "You are doing a good job." The coach throws some water on him, pats him on the back, and says, "Now get back out there." Sometimes I feel like that is what I'm doing on Sunday for my church. I'm telling them, "You are doing a good job. Now get back out there. You can do this!" But that is not me renewing people's strength. It is the Word of God. It is music and praying and worshipping together with other believers. The Bible also says in Psalm 100:2 *"Worship the Lord with gladness. Come before him, singing with joy"* (NLT, second edition). I think it ought to be fun to go to church. That may seem strange to you because it is not how you were raised or how you felt about a certain church you have attended. But the Bible says to worship the Lord with gladness; not boredom, sadness, anger, or out of duty. You should be singing for joy in church! Church should have that effect on you. Worship should renew your faith and restore your joy.

### **Talk it over.**

If you have a complaint about the worship at your church, how do you think God wants you to respond?

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## **II. DEEPEN YOUR PEACE OF MIND THROUGH PRAYER.**

The Bible says, *"Don't worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer present your requests to God and the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."* In life, in response to stress there are two options. You can either pray or you can panic. When life gets tough, what are you going to do? Pray or panic? Over twenty times in the New Testament, the Bible says "Pray" and "Ask". It says, *"Ask and it shall be given..."*, *"You have not because you ask not..."* C.H. Spurgeon said, "God never shuts His storehouse until you shut your mouth." Pray and you will find peace of mind replacing the panic in your life. If you want to have deep, personal, satisfying peace of mind in heart and soul, you have to surrender control of your life totally to God. How do you know if you have done that? Evidence of a surrendered life is always obedience; when God says, "Do it!" I do it. I don't care if I don't understand it, if anybody else is doing it, if it is possible or not, if it is hard or easy.

I just do it. When you listen to God's Word and follow his direction, the result is always the same: peace. Today, you may be in an uncontrollable circumstance. You may be married to an unchangeable person. You may be experiencing an unexplainable problem. The good news is you can have the peace of God in your life. But first, you have to make peace with God. You can't have the peace *of* God until you first make peace *with* God. How do you do that? By surrendering your entire life in faith to Jesus Christ. "*Since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us*" (Romans 5:1 NLT). Aren't you tired of being at war with God? Don't you realize that is the single greatest source of stress in your life? What is the result of being in control of your life? Worry, guilt, bitterness, resentment, anxiety, fear, fatigue, depression, and despair. What is the result of putting Jesus Christ first in your life and being fully surrendered to whatever he wants? Peace, power, strength, wisdom, purpose, meaning, eternal life, significance, and joy.

When you go through the delays in life, don't get discouraged. Don't lose heart. Don't give up! Don't settle for less than God's best for your life. If that means going through a tunnel of conflict, take the tunnel. In the middle of the tunnel, it will be dark, and you will want to run back to the light. But you have to keep going until you come out on the other side into the light. Instead of getting discouraged, be persistent and pray. Galatians 6:9 says, "*Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up*" (NIV). This is the law of the harvest: There is always a delay between sowing and reaping. You plant in one season, and you reap in another. God wants to see if you are going to keep cultivating, planting, and sowing. If he sees consistency in your life, then the harvest will come.

It will not come immediately, because it proves nothing if he does it immediately, no character development or stretching your faith. Luke 18:1 tells us that we "*must always pray and never lose heart*" (Phillips). Those are the two options you have in life: Pray continually, or lose heart. You will always be doing one or the other. If you pray continually, you will not be discouraged. If you don't pray continually, you will lose heart. You will get discouraged by the problems you are facing in your life whether it is at work or at school or in your family. You have to keep on praying! What do you pray during the delay phases of life? Pray, "Help me hold on and not give up." God will hear you, and he will help. You are not alone, so you don't have to get discouraged, even when you are delayed.

### **Talk it over.**

How does your prayer life reveal the depth of your spiritual maturity?\_\_\_\_\_

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## **III. STRENGTHEN YOUR COMMITMENT THROUGH FELLOWSHIP**

Hebrews 10:24-25 "*Do not give up the habit of meeting together but let us encourage one another.*" You cannot be a spiritually fit Christian without some Christian friends. That is the bottom line. You need support. You need enthusiasm. Just like a bit of charcoal put in the fire gets very hot with those other coals, but if you take it off by itself it loses its heat. When you take a Christian away from other Christians, they lose their enthusiasm. They lose their joy.

The Bible says we need each other. *"Bear one another's burdens."* We strengthen each other. There is no such thing as Lone Ranger Christianity. I see people all the time who say, "I don't need to go to church because it is not big deal. I just have my relationship to God." I say yes, you can worship God by yourself but you cannot fellowship by yourself. You need that relationship with other people. I can go to the beach, the lake, the river and worship God there. No doubt about that. I don't have to come into a church. But you need more than worship in your life. You need prayer and you need fellowship, getting together with other Christians. In the New Testament, the Christians were alive, vivacious, contagious and enthusiastic. Acts 2 tells us they met together daily. Because they got together daily, they encouraged each other. The person who separates himself from other Christians will eventually begin to dry up. It is an exercise. God intends for us to experience life together. The Bible calls this shared experience fellowship.

Today, however, the word has lost most of its biblical meaning. "Fellowship" now usually refers to casual conversation, socializing, food, and fun. The question, "Where do you fellowship?" means, "Where do you attend church?" "Stay after for fellowship" usually means, "Wait for refreshments." Real fellowship is so much more than just showing up at services. It is experiencing life together. It includes unselfish loving, honest sharing, practical serving, sacrificial giving, sympathetic comforting, and all the other "one another" commands found in the New Testament. When it comes to fellowship, size matters: Smaller is better. You can worship with a crowd, but you can't fellowship with one. Once a group becomes larger than about 10 people, someone stops participating usually the quietest person and a few people will dominate the group.

Jesus ministered in the context of a small group of disciples. He could have chosen more, but he knew 12 is about the maximum size you can have in a small group if everyone is to participate. The Body of Christ, like your own body, is really a collection of many small cells. The life of the Body of Christ, like your body, is contained in the cells. For this reason, every Christian needs to be involved in a small group within their church, whether it is a home fellowship group, a Sunday school class, or a Bible study. This is where real community takes place, not in the big gatherings. If you think of your church as a ship, the small groups are the lifeboats attached to it. God has made an incredible promise about small groups of believers: "For where two or three have gathered together in my name, I am there in their midst" (Matthew 18:20 NASB).

### **Talk it over**

Does our fellowship include "unselfish loving, honest sharing, practical serving, sacrificial giving, and sympathetic comforting? Discuss. \_\_\_\_\_

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## **IV. EXPAND YOUR PERSPECTIVE THROUGH BIBLE STUDY**

Stop looking at things from a narrow way, from your own point of view, but get a larger picture, the whole ballgame, a global view. The Bible says that personal Bible study helps me to see from God's perspective. Jesus said, *"If you continue in my word, then you are really my disciples."* I take this to mean if you don't continue in His word, you are not His disciples.

John 8:32 says, *"And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* Freedom comes from seeing the whole picture. You don't focus just on your problems, but you see that God is bigger than all of those things. If you want to know why you ought to read the Bible, read Psalm 119 the entire chapter. This is the longest chapter in the Bible. It gives all the benefits of studying the Bible. Actually you ought to do three things with God's word: read it, study it, and memorize it. Fill your mind with God's word. Just like in our last study we talked about how you need a balanced diet for physical health; you need a regular intake of God's word. It is food for your spirit, it is soul food. If you go a day without it, you get a little hungry. If you go three days without it, your soul starts to fast. If you go weeks without the word of God in your life, you will shrivel up. It is your nourishment.

What if I wrote a book on dieting and it hit the bestseller list? The diet went like this: For six days you fast and on the seventh day you pig out. Would that be a good diet? It would probably produce a lot of indigestion in your life, fast for six days and on the seventh pig out. A lot of Christians do that spiritually. They go all through the week without ever picking up a Bible and reading, listening to a Christian program on the radio or listening to a CD. They fast spiritually all week and then on Sunday they pig out. They come to church and get all this food. They wonder why they have spiritual gas. To be spiritually fit, you need a balanced diet which means daily intake of God's word. It fills your mind. You need to establish a place to have your Bible study, a time and a plan.

Studying the Bible in a way that changes your life doesn't take a bunch of expensive tools. You don't need commentaries or Bible study software. In fact, if you were stuck on a desert island with just a Bible, you could simply use the method you will learn about in this devotional to study God's Word. God says that if we meditate on his Word, we will be successful. Here is a method you can use to meditate on God's Word in a way that will please God. The "pronounce it" method of biblical meditation is an easy method for meditating on Scripture and getting every ounce of spiritual nutrition you can out of it. You start with a verse and read it over and over again. Each time you read the verse, you emphasize a different word. It is the simplest way to start unlocking Scripture. You can do it even if it is the first time you have ever opened up a Bible. It is simple but amazingly powerful! Each time you emphasize a different word, you get a different perspective.

Take the first part of Colossians 3:16 for example. The verse says, *"Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts."* (NIV). The first time you read the verse, emphasize the word **"let."** What does it mean to *let*? It means "give permission." *You* open the door; it is your choice. You have to choose to let the Word of God dwell in you richly. Then, read the verse again and emphasize **"message."** It stresses that you need to get God's Word in your mind. Then, emphasize the word **"Christ."** You are not filling your life with what some philosopher, guru, or talk show host has to say. You are dwelling on the words of Christ! You may not want to let the word of the world fill you, but you do just that when you spend your time watching TV instead of reading God's Word. Then you focus on the word **"richly."** "Richly" means lavishness, extravagance, and abundance. God doesn't want his Word to be a poor substitute in your life. He wants it to create beauty in your life.

Then, emphasize the word **“fill.”** Don’t rush through God’s Word so you can get on with the rest of your day. To let the Word of Christ fill you is to let it live within you. Finally; focus on the words **“your lives.”** The Bible isn’t just God’s Word for your pastor, a seminary professor, or your Sunday school teacher; it is God’s Word for *you*! The Bible is instruction for every single believer. See all the great jewels you discovered in this passage just by focusing on one word at a time? You didn’t need a seminary degree or a great library of reference tools. You can do this!

### **Talk It Over**

Does your life reflect the richness of God’s Word and his grace? How would it look different to other people if you allowed God’s Word to make a difference in your life? \_\_\_\_\_

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## **V. INCREASE YOUR JOY THROUGH WITNESSING.**

When you see the word "witnessing", what naturally comes to your mind? Witnessing is a great word. It simply means telling your story. Every Christian is a witness; you tell your story. When you go to court and you are called to be a witness, does that mean it is your job to convince the jury? No. Does that mean it is your job to prosecute the defense? No. Does that mean it is your job to solve the case? No. It means you say, "I saw this guy hit the other guy. I saw the red car hit the blue car." You tell what you know. Witnessing simply means, "This is what happened to me when I became a Christian. I don't understand it all. I can't explain it all. I don't know all the doctrines and truths and Bible verses but I know something happened to me when I decided to make Jesus Christ number one in my life." The Bible says that is important and it is a spiritual exercise. It brings joy. One of the greatest things you can do is help other people come to Christ. It is like having babies. There is nothing like the joy of a new baby in your home. It is exciting. When you see your friends come to know Christ, to be born again, there is a new joy. Anytime I see a Christian who is spiritually dull, dried up, no enthusiasm, I have a solution. Start sharing your faith.

I hear people say, "When I first became a Christian, everything was so exciting. I was happy. I was enthusiastic. I was full of joy. It was great! Everything was new. But now I'm just kind of blah. I look like a Pepto-Bismol ad. I'm worn out, so tired, sick and tired of being sick and tired." My solution is always, "Start sharing your faith." Get a prayer list. Write it inside of your Bible. Say, "Lord, these are four friends (at work) that I want to know Jesus Christ." You don't have to be pushy. You don't have to plan it or scheme it. If you are available, God will make the most natural times for you to share what Christ has done for you. It will be so natural. The Bible says, *"Do it with gentleness and respect."* There are two lakes in Israel. One of them is the Sea of Galilee, which is a beautiful sea at the top of Israel. It is alive, full of fish. There is grass and trees. It is very much a live lake. Then at the bottom of Israel is another sea called the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea is literally that it is dead. It is full of brine and salt and nothing can live in it. The Jordan River connects those two lakes. Why is it that one is alive and one is dead? The Sea of Galilee takes in waters from the mountains but it gives them out through the Jordan River. The Dead Sea only takes in. It never gives out. As a result, it dies. When you are always taking in and never giving out, you are going to dry up spiritually.

Expand or increase your joy through witnessing. The most positive people I know are those who know how to share their faith. Some people say, "My witness is my life. I don't tell anybody about it; I just live the Christian life." Let me tell you how egotistical that is. That is saying, "I am such a perfect Christian that I can walk in the room and people automatically become believers. I'm such a genuine person that when I walk into the room, people automatically know how to become Christians." Even Jesus Christ had to tell them, and He was perfect. We need to share our faith. There are two types of witnessing. One is by our lifestyle, by example and our attitudes. We are an example. But the other way is by sharing verbally; telling other people how we became a Christian. I think we need both in balances. You need to walk the walk and you need to talk the talk. God wants audiovisual Christians.

What is the easiest thing for you to lose? Your glasses? Your keys? Your mind? The easiest thing of all to lose is your joy. You can lose it with one phone call or email, a letter or conversation. You can watch a commercial on TV and lose your joy. It is the easiest thing in the world to lose. And a lot of people in a lot of circumstances are conspiring to rob it from you. When God's children are not filled with joy, it makes God look bad. Cranky Christians are bad witnesses. They look like they have been baptized in vinegar because they are never really smiling. And that makes God look bad. Why? It is because God wants us to be witnesses with our countenance. The Bible tells us that the Christian life can be summed up in three words: goodness, peace, and joy. Romans 14:17 says, "*The Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, but of living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit*" (NLT).

The reality is, though, that you can lose your joy so quickly, and there are thousands of ways to lose it. There are thousands of killjoys in life that will rob you of your joy, even to the point that somebody like Jeremiah, a prophet of God, could say this in Lamentations 5:15, "*Joy is gone from our hearts; our dancing has turned to mourning.*" (NIV). I don't know if that is where you are today, but if you have ever gone through that period where you feel like you have lost the spark and you are not as close to God as you used to be and you are just going through the motions of life, you need to know that it is quite easy to get your joy back, too. So, how do you get your joy back? The first step you need to do is admit you have lost it. You simply look at your past and ask yourself a couple of questions: Has there ever been a time in your life when you were closer to God than you are right now? Has there ever been a time in your life when you were more joyful in the Lord than you are right now? Now is the time to make the change.

But you have to start by admitting that you have lost what you have had in the past. You could ask God about it; he is waiting to help you. David prayed this in Psalm 51:12: "*Restore to me the joy of your salvation*" (NIV). Everybody you see this week has a hidden hurt. And everybody you meet this week needs a massive dose of hope. When you share hope, you will have a willing audience. The hope that best helps people is the hope from somebody who says, "Been there, done that." That is how God wants to use you. God wants you to be a hope dispenser by sharing your experiences and what God has done for you. The Bible says in 1 Peter 3:15, "*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have*" (NIV). God wants you to be his witness. Most people are scared to death to be a witness. They think a witness means they have to explain why Jesus died on the cross, quote Scripture verses from memory, and know a bunch of theology and doctrine.

How does God want you to be a witness this week to the unbelievers in your life who are hurting and need hope? He wants you to say, "Pain really got my attention. Let me tell you what I learned. I learned that I need people in my life when I'm going through pain. I learned that God is all I need. You don't know God is all you need until God is all you have got. I learned that God is going to hang with me no matter what." You share the lessons you have learned through your pain. You say, "Let me tell you about a time that something bad happened to me but God brought good out of it." That's what God commands you to do pass on your hope.

### **Talk It Over**

What are the things that rob you of your joy? Do those things change anything about God? Should they change anything about how much you love him, trust him and how you witness? Discuss: \_\_\_\_\_

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## **VI. PRACTICE YOUR LOVE THROUGH GIVING**

The Bible says that you cannot separate love and giving. 2 Corinthians 8 *"See that you excel in the grace of giving to prove the sincerity of your love."* They go together. You can give without loving. But you cannot love without giving. When I first fell in love with my wife, I was continually broke. I could not keep money in my pocket. I was so much in love with her. I wanted to buy her everything I saw. When you love, you want to give. *"God so loved the world that he gave."* The Bible says that your giving is a test of how much you love the Lord. It is a test of how much you love Christ. Practice your love through giving. Giving and faith go together. In fact, God uses finances to test your faith all the time. Have you ever had to decide between paying a bill and tithing? This is a test of your priorities. It is a test of your love. But most importantly, it is a test of your faith. Do you really trust God to provide for you if you put him first in your life?

It is interesting that in Hebrews 11, the "Hall of Fame" of biblical heroes and the first person who gets mentioned is Abel, one of Adam and Eve's sons. What did Abel do that caused him to get in the Hall of Fame along with Moses and Abraham and all these other big shots? He never did anything great. He never accomplished much. Never took any major risks. You know what made Abel great? He gave an offering in faith. The Bible says, *"By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings"* (Hebrews 11:4 NIV). Abel is not listed in the Hall of Fame because of *what* he gave but because of *how* he gave it. God couldn't care less about the amount you give. What he cares about is the attitude with which you give it. If you are not giving in faith, don't give, because you don't get any credit for it. The Bible also says, *"Without faith it is impossible to please God"* (Hebrews 11:6 NIV). God doesn't need your money. What he wants is your heart. There are two ways to give: You can give by reason, or you can give by revelation. To give by reason is to figure out reasonably what you think you can give, and that doesn't require any faith at all. Even an atheist can do it. When you give by revelation, you let God reveal to you what he wants you to give in faith. It means you pray and ask, "God, how much do you want me to trust you for this time?" Then you do whatever he tells you to do.



This is giving by faith and it helps you grow, mature, and become more like Christ! Giving is the aerobics of the Christian life. It is spiritual aerobics, because it strengthens your heart. The Bible says in Mathew 6:21 *"Where your treasure is your heart will be also."* I used to think that the most spiritual kind of giving was what I call impulsive giving. I would wait for some service to move me. I would pull out my wallet because "It is time to give." Or I would see something on TV and get emotionally stirred and give to that. I thought I was being real spiritual by giving impulsively. Yet the Bible says that it is more mature to give systematically. Not based on impulse but systematically. 1 Corinthians 6:2 *"On the first day of every week, each of you should set aside a sum of money you have earned and give it as an offering."* That says three things about the exercise of giving:

- i. It ought to be systematic. *"On the first day of every week."* What day is that? Sunday. Every Sunday like clockwork, systematic.
- ii. *"Each of you should set aside..."* That means you have to plan it. You don't just wait until Sunday comes up. You think it out. Budget it. Plan it.
- iii. *"... a sum of money you have earned and give it as an offering."* It ought to be in proportion to what you have earned. It is percentage giving. You make a lot, you give a lot. You make a little, you give a little. You make nothing this week; you don't give anything this week. It is in proportion to what you have earned.

It is easy to give your time, energy, or money when you have a lot to spare. But the true test of generosity comes when you don't have a surplus. Do you still give what little you have to help somebody else? If you do, congratulations! You have passed God's test of generosity. Why does God test your generosity? Because you were made in his image, so if you are going to become like Jesus, you need to learn how to be generous. If you don't, you will never grow to maturity, and you will never have the blessing of God in your life. What if you are in a recession and things aren't going well; you are out of work or you are out of money, and you feel like you have no more time or energy to give. How can you be generous when you are stretched thin?

A good example for us is in 2 Corinthians 8. Paul says this about the churches in Macedonia: *"In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity."* (2 Corinthians 8:2 NIV). Joy and generosity always go together. An acid test of how much you trust God is the way you handle your money, because it shows what is important to you. As a pastor, I want you to succeed financially so you can be generous, help other people, and do good in the world. So here are four principles to help you thrive.

- 1. Obeying God's vision will bring God's provision.** When you say, "God, I'm going to do what you want me to do regardless of whether I have the money or resources to do it," God will provide everything you need to get it done. Sometimes the needs in our lives seem to mount up high. Maybe you are waiting, or have been praying, for help, for a breakthrough. Maybe you feel like it has been slow in coming, or that you can't see a way out of your current situation. Maybe the needs seem to far outweigh the reality you are living in. You have lost hope, feel alone in the struggle, and the weight of stress seems too hard to keep shouldering. Whatever the need be it physical, spiritual, financial, emotional or relational, His Truth reminds us that He has "this thing," whatever it is, that concerns you.

He is able fully to provide what you need. Our God who created the entire world and designed you and I with such purpose and intent can provide, will provide, out of His richness, fullness, wealth and treasure, for every single need we have. He gives favor. He lines up our pathways to be in the right place at the right time. He miraculously accomplishes so many things for us every day that we may not even be aware of. And He will bend over backwards just to give to you out of His riches. Whether we realize it or not he will provide because He loves us. We will never out give the richness of God for us because His provision is really not based on us. It is based on His character, and He is Jehovah-Jireh, the God who provides.

2. **When you do all God tells you to do, he does what you can't do.** Give God whatever you have, however small it may be, and God will multiply it to do more than you imagined, just like he did with the five loaves and two fish. God is a competent Father. He can handle any problem you give him. Nothing is beyond his ability or his resources. No request is too big or too small.” Nothing is beyond his ability. He is a competent Father. But nobody can beat up your heavenly Father. “Nothing is impossible with God.” I cut the word “impossible” out of my dictionary because it is not in God’s vocabulary. Nothing is impossible with God.

It is amazing to me when my kids were little what they expected me to fix. My kids expected me to know all, to fix anything, and to afford everything. As they grew up, they learned that their father had limited knowledge, limited energy, limited resources, limited skills and limited in everything. But your heavenly Father really can do anything. Ephesians 3:20 says, “*Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within u*” (NIV). I’m a big dreamer. I have a lot of big dreams in my life. I have seen God fulfill a lot of big dreams in my life. God says, “I don’t care how much you dream, I can still top it. I’m bigger. I can dream bigger than you can dream.” Yesterday’s impossibilities are today’s miracles. God specializes in the impossible! He is a competent Father

3. **God gives to generous people.** The more generous you are the more God will give you. As followers of Christ, we need to remember to be generous. Why is it so important to remember to be generous? Here are three ways it makes an impact on our lives.
  - i. **It makes you happy.** Acts 20:35 says, “*In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’*” (NIV). Notice Jesus didn’t say it is not a blessed thing to receive. It does make you happy to receive. But the world will tell you that you will be happiest when you receive. Jesus turned that idea around and said that you will be happier when you give than when you receive.
  - ii. **It just makes sense.** The Bible says in 2 Corinthians 9:6, “*Remember this, whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously*” (NIV). Every one of us wants others to be generous with us.

Do you think that by sowing miserly selfishness you are going to reap a generosity from God and others? God says that is not the way life works. There is a law of sowing and reaping. So if you want to reap generosity, you have to sow generosity.

- iii. It shows the world what God is like.** The Bible says, *“Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.”* (2 Corinthians 9:13 NIV). When it comes to generosity, what encourages me is to remember the incredible generosity of God. Look at the world we get to live in. Look at the life he gave us. Look at the way he meets our needs. God is the perfect model of generosity. And when we are generous with others because of God’s generosity toward us, it points others to God.
- 4. There is always a delay between sowing and reaping.** A harvest is not automatic. It takes time and patience. *“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.”* (Galatians 6:9 NIV). The time to start planting is now. I talk to people all the time who say, “One of these days, I’m going to ...” They are going to serve more one of these days. Or when they retire, or when they get a raise. They are going to increase their giving one of these days. “One of these days” is none of these days. You don’t wait for things to get better; you start planting now. Why? Because the sooner you plant, the longer you are going to enjoy the harvest in your life. But the harvest is not always going to come in your time. There is always a delay between sowing and reaping. You plant in one season, and you harvest in another. You have to be patient and not give up! This is one of the principles that the Kingdom of God operates on. Mark 4:26-29 says, *“This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain — first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head”* (NIV).

The results will come, but they will come slowly and as part of a process. Some of you have to forget about last year’s crop failure. Instead, start focusing on the long-term harvest in your life. You didn’t get the way you are financially overnight. You took years to mess things up, and it is going to take a while to put things back together. There is a time of delay between sowing and reaping. The Bible says in Psalm 126:5-6, *“Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.”* (NIV). What need have you been grieving over? Maybe you have lost your job. Maybe you have lost your health. Maybe you have lost a loved one. Maybe you have lost your savings. Maybe you have lost half of your retirement in the last few years. Maybe you have lost your dream. Moaning is not ok. Instead of moaning, you need to plant a seed; because whatever you need more of you need to give away.

## Talk It Over

Discuss how might you approach your giving differently and how might you change the way you view your money? \_\_\_\_\_

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## VII. DEVELOP YOUR TALENTS THROUGH SERVICE

The Bible says in Colossians 3:23 *"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men."* Be enthusiastic about it. When you have a job, do it as if you were doing it for Jesus Christ. The heart of Christian living is helping other people. Jesus said, "I didn't come to be served. I came to serve. I didn't come to be ministered to. I came to minister." God didn't bless you with your talents just to use them all on yourself. God gave you your talents, not only to bless your own life but to bless other people's lives. You need to know these three important things that every church should practice:

1. ***Every Christian is a minister.*** God did not put you on Earth just to live for yourself. He wants you to make the world a better place! Every time I hear somebody say, "I live for the weekends," I want to say, "Then why should God keep you alive?" If you are not fulfilling your purpose, you are missing the whole point of life. Ephesians 2:10 says, *"For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."* (NIV). There is a word for this: ministry. Every Christian is a minister. Not every Christian is a pastor, but every Christian is to be a minister. That means you use your talents and gifts to make a contribution in life, to be a giver, not a taker. The Bible says 58 times, "Love one another. Care for one another. Pray for one another. Encourage one another. Help one another. Counsel one another. Support one another" and on and on.

It is the mutual ministry of every believer in the family of God to every other believer in the family of God. That is the way God meant for it to be. The truth is serving God by serving others is not always easy. Sometimes you are going to get discouraged. So what do you do when you start to get discouraged? You remember two things. First, you remember that you are going to receive a reward that is going to go on for eternity. The Bible says *"God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them"* (Hebrews 6:10 NIV). You are going to be rewarded in eternity. The second thing to remember is that God uses every little thing. Nothing is insignificant when you serve God. None of it is in vain. *"Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."* (1 Corinthians 15:58 NIV).

### Talk it over.

How does your calling as a bi-vocational minister impact how you look at your work?

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2. **Every Christian has a spiritual gift, a talent, ability; a gift God gives you that you can use to help other people.** A roman 12:6 says *"We all have different gifts according to the grace given us. Use them in proportion to your faith."* How are you using your gift? How are you using the ability, the talent that you have? The Bible says in 1 Peter 4:10-11, *"God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another"* (NLT). When you use your abilities to help each other, God is glorified. God wired you to make a contribution. God did not give you your talents and abilities for your benefit. They are for the benefit of other people, and their talents are for the benefit of you. I am so grateful for people who are talented in areas that I am not good at. For instance, I am grateful for accountants because I stink at accounting! I am grateful for people who know how to do taxes. I am grateful for people who have mechanical ability. I couldn't fix a carburetor if I had to. I wouldn't even know where it is! Everybody has different talents. God has given me some talents. One of my talents is taking the Word of God and making it clear for other people to understand. When I use that ability, you get blessed. My talent is for you. It is to help you. But here is the point: You have a talent too. When are you going to start blessing others? When are you going to start helping others? If you don't use your talent that God gave you, other people get cheated. The way you bring glory to God is by using your talent. "Use your gifts well to serve one another." God is glorified when you use your abilities to serve others.

**Talk it over.**

What's a task in your life that you struggle to think about in terms of helping others and honoring God? Why do you think that's so? \_\_\_\_\_

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3. **Every Christian needs a specific place to serve, a place to give out.** Somebody said a lot of churches are like football games. Twenty-two people on the field desperately in need of rest. Twenty-two thousand people in the stands desperately in need of exercise. That is the way it is in a lot of churches. A few people do all of the stuff. Why do we want people in service? To build a church? No. To develop your talents? Yes. It is like if I am always eating and never giving out, I don't have any muscle. If you go to Bible study after Bible study and church after church and get bigger and bigger, pretty soon you are so big and you have not got any muscle, they kind of have to roll you down the aisle. Find a place where you can give out, where you can serve. Look at these exercises: Renew your strength through worship. Deepen your peace of mind through prayer. Strengthen your commitment through fellowship. Expand your perspective through Bible study. Increase your joy through witnessing. Practice your love through giving. Develop your talents through service and. If you want to live a successful life, the Bible offers some countercultural instruction. How could serving help us be successful? I have seen this in my own life. Some of you know my story.

When I wrote *The Purpose Driven Life*, the book became a huge global success. It has been translated into 137 languages. And when you write a book with the first line of “It is not about you,” it is pretty easy to realize that any money or influence that came from it wasn’t meant for me. So, among other decisions Kay and I made at the time, we started Acts of Mercy, a foundation to help the poor and the vulnerable suffering with AIDS. The book’s success was not about me; it was all about God. That is what successful people do. They stand up for those who can’t stand up for themselves. There are three things you can do with your life: You can waste it, you can spend it, or you can invest it. The best use of your life is to invest your life in something that will outlast it. The worst thing you can do is to live simply for today and to live for yourself. God did not put you on earth to live for yourself. He created you to be like Christ. We know that Christ came to earth to do two things according to Mark 10:45: *“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”* (Mark 10:45 NIV). As we seek to grow and become more like Christ, we need to learn how to live a life of service. This will help us create a lasting spiritual legacy.

Today I want you to take time to meditate on the following verses about God's call to service in our lives. Pray over them and ask God to reveal new ways you can give yourself in service to those around you. *“Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness.”* (Romans 6:13NIV). *“My life is worth nothing unless I use it for doing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus - the work of telling others the good news about God's wonderful kindness and love.”* (Acts 20:24 NLT) *“For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.”* (Mark 8:35 NIV). You will never enjoy life fully the way God intended for you to live it until you learn it is not about you. So go, and live a life of service. God shaped you to serve him. Before you were born, God decided in advance what contribution he wanted you to make with your life. God didn’t put you on this planet just to take up space, to use resources, and to die. No! He put you here to serve him by serving others. And nobody else can be you. If you don’t serve God the way he intended for you to serve him, then the world misses that part of the jigsaw puzzle. Another name for “good works” is “ministry.” Any time you use your talents and abilities to help somebody else; you are actually ministering to them. The Bible says in 1 Peter 4:10 (NIV), *“Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.”* You know the talents that you have? That is why nobody’s got it all together. God wired the universe so that we would need each other. You serve God by serving others.

### **Talk It Over**

In what unique ways has God shaped you so that you can serve others well? How are you using your talents and abilities to serve others?

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## VIII. STRETCH YOUR FAITH BY RISKING.

Is risking part of the Christian life? You bet it is! It is absolutely essential. Mark 9:23 *"Everything is possible to him who believes."* But you have to stretch. Matthew 9:29 *"According to your faith it will be done unto you."* God says "You get to choose how much you want in your life. According to your faith it will be done unto you." Hebrews 11:6 *"Without faith it is impossible to please God."* I don't know about you, but there were some things I did this week that didn't please God. It is because without faith it is impossible to please God. Romans 14:23 says *"Whatsoever is not of faith is sin."* That means I should be continually stretching. Faith is like a muscle. It must be stretched. It is the bottom line of the Christian life. If you want to be a healthy, spiritually fit person then you must take risks on a regular basis. Attempt something that can't be done on your own power. Set a goal that you know can't be done except by God's help.

Believe and expect a miracle. Don't sit on the sidelines, but get involved. Start that new business you have thought about doing. Ask God to help. Go out on a limb. Develop that new habit. Get involved in a ministry. Make a step of faith. Too many Christians live in the shallows of life, just barely getting wet. God says, "Dive in!" Never be afraid to go out on a limb. That is where the fruit is. It is not back close to the trunk. Never be afraid to rock the boat if Christ is the captain. Take that step, make the move, and go out! The problem is, too often we are asking the wrong questions. We say things like, "What will other people think?" or "What if I fail?" There is something worse than failure. It is the fear of failure. Much worse because you live with it continually. Failure you can just go on from. Or worst of all "How much will it cost?" Do you recognize these names from the Bible? Shammua, Igal, Palti, Gaddiel, Gaddi, Sethur, Nahbi, Geuel, Joshua, Caleb. These were the spies that went in to spy out the Promised Land. Ten of the spies came back and said, "There is no way we can do it. It cannot be done. It's impossible." Nobody remembers them. There were two people who came back and said, "Let's go for it! Let's make the move. We can do it in God's power." Their names were Joshua and Caleb.

The fact is, nobody remembers the people who say, "It can't be done!" But everybody remembers the person who says, "Let's go for it! Let's do it! Let's take the risk. Let's make the step. Let's lay it on the line. Let's put our money where our mouth is." I'm challenging you this week to find some way that you can take a step of faith, that you can take a risk. Those are the people that we remember. All of these eight exercises will produce tremendous benefits in your life. They are good for you, but they take time. Some of you are saying, "I don't have the time" and I say, "You are right!" You don't have the time. You must make time. We make time for the things that are important in life. Let me share with you two suggestions:

1. **Schedule these exercises.** Write them down. Put them in your calendar. If you keep a daily planner, write them down. When do you want to have a prayer time? When do you want to read your Bible? Write them into your schedule.
2. **Develop a spiritual notebook.** Put tabs in it. Put a tab for each one of these. Under the worship tab, keep your sermon notes from Sunday. Under the prayer tab, write your prayer list down. Under your witnessing tab, put the names of people that you're praying about who will become Christians. When you go through that on a regular basis, it will remind you about these different exercises.

All of these are good and they will make you a spiritually fit person, but they cannot save you. You cannot earn your way to heaven. You cannot become a Christian by a bunch of rules or principles. The Bible says you have a relationship to Christ by faith. It is a free gift. The first step of faith in the journey of the Christian life is to say, "Jesus Christ, I don't understand it all, but as much as I know how, I want you to come into my life." That's the starting point. You need a life before there can be growth. Faith always means risk. Everything in life is a risk. Ecclesiastes 10:8 says, "*When you work in a quarry, stones might fall and crush you! When you chop wood, there is danger with each stroke of your ax! Such are the risks of life*" (NLT). There's nothing we can do that doesn't have some element of risk in it. But the greatest risk of all is how we relate to other people and how we relate to God; the risk to do something about those relationships. Mark 12:30 says, "*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength*" (NLT). You take a risk when you love with all your heart. Is it worth it? Absolutely. Jesus reminded us that one of the greatest mistakes we can make is to play it safe with our lives. He said, "*If you try to keep your life for yourself, you will lose it.*"

You probably remember the part in the third *Indiana Jones* movie where Indiana Jones came to the edge of a cliff. He was challenged to step out over the cliff even though he couldn't see a bridge beforehand. That is not a bad picture of genuine faith. Faith is stepping out and doing what God has asked you to do when you can't see what will happen in the end. You don't know exactly what God is going to do in the end, but you know he is asking you to step out in faith. Many times we will come to the edge of faith in our own lives. We are not sure where things are headed. Maybe it is a decision to start a relationship with Jesus for the first time. Maybe you need to trust him with a business decision or something related to a relationship. There is a risk in stepping out in faith. Who will you trust? Will you trust in the Lord with all your heart? What if you are wrong? Is it really God telling you to take the step of faith? You need to Practice the 80/20 principle. If you will do the 80 percent of God's will that is clear in the Bible, he will show you the 20 percent that is not clear.

In other words, love your neighbor. Spend time in God's Word. Talk to God in prayer. Spend time with God's people. Love your family. Love your kids. Protect the way that you speak to people. Be kind in your relationships. Be patient. Do the 80 percent that is clear and God will show you the rest. So take the risk. Trust God with everything you have. Do what God has told you to do in His Word, then, when God challenges you with a risk of faith, you will be more confident to do what God tells you to do. As uncomfortable as it was for Joseph to move his family to Egypt, imagine how scary it would be for him to obey God's command to return to Israel. It was like going back into the jaws of the lion. He was going to take Mary and Jesus back to where his son's life had been in danger. But because Joseph trusted God and what he was saying, Joseph took the risk and went there because he knew that was the right place to be. The Bible says, "*When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.*" (Psalm 56:3 NIV). Notice this verse says, "*When I am afraid,*" not "*if I am afraid.*" We may want a life of no fears in this world, but that only happens in Heaven. In this life, we are all going to face fears of one kind or another. We have some big fears and some little fears. We fear the future, we fear what is going to happen with our jobs and our family, and we fear little things like whether we said the right thing to someone, whether that presentation went well, or even making a phone call.



In all of these situations, you have a choice to make. Are you going to let the fear control you, or are you going to take a risk of faith because you know you have a God who loves you? That risk of faith could mean going someplace you have never been before or forgiving someone you thought you couldn't forgive. It could mean leaving your job. A risk of faith could also be praying about something or deciding to trust God with a situation or a relationship you have held tight in your hand. What Christ-like risk is God telling you to take in faith? Jesus once told the story of a master who asked three servants to handle his money while he was away. He gave each of them a sum of money, and when he returned, the first servant told the master he had doubled the money through investments, and the second said he had made fifty percent profit for the master. But the third servant, in essence, said he had been afraid the master would punish him for making mistakes so he hid the money in the cellar until the master returned.

The master rewarded the first two servants, saying those who handle small matters well will be given greater responsibility. But he rebuked the third servant, saying, *"He replied, 'I tell you that to everyone who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what they have will be taken away.'"* (Luke 19:26 NIV). We move forward in faith when we take risks, not just any kind of risk, but ones that are specifically directed by God. These God-nudges push us beyond living life by sight so that we will live life by faith. When we do not live by faith, we live faithlessly. Any decision independent of God is a faithless decision. Jesus expressed his faith when he said: *"I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does"* (John 5:19 NIV).

### **Talk It Over**

What have you learned about God by taking a risk in the past? How does it encourage you now?

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### **CONCLUSION.**

In 1 Corinthians, Paul compares being spiritually fit in his walk with God to the process of an athlete in training. This really gives us some insight into understanding that we all have a spiritual make-up. We have to develop our spiritual muscles so that we can compete and fight against the enemy and the temptations that come our way. The dumbbells of FAITH and DISCIPLINE are essential to any spiritual workout, because we must have faith in God and discipline to keep His commandments. In addition to any physical workout we may do daily, we should set aside some time to grow stronger spiritually. Through growing stronger spiritually, we are able to allow God to use us as He used Paul. Paul before becoming an advocate for Christ was a prosecutor of Christians (who would have ever thought). Many of us might be in a similar position as Paul where we are so far from living a life that is pleasing to God that we don't know where to start with becoming spiritually fit, but just know it is never too late or too early to be whoever God wants us to be in life. Paul understood that through maintaining his spiritual fitness that he would have the strength to do God's will. For many of us it is easy to do bad things, but we have a difficulty in doing what is right.

Paul knew if he did not have discipline to fight temptation that he could ultimately weaken his testimony. How committed are we to our walk with God? Are we willing to live a life that is pleasing to Him? Are we willing to surrender to God's will so that we can impact the lives of others? If so, being spiritually fit is important, because we should be allowing others to see God through us in all that we do. We might not know where to start with our spiritual workout, but don't worry, instead just ask God because He doesn't mind spotting for us! A healthy relationship with God requires effort. The question is: How much are we willing to put into it? Paul writes, *"Train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come"* (1 Timothy 4:7-8). If our goal is to maintain general spiritual health, we can stretch our prayer muscles casually, like a walk in the park. But if we want to grow strong and then stronger we need a rigorous workout every day. To *"run with perseverance the race marked out for us"* (Hebrews 12:1), we need to be in top shape. But how do we accomplish this? If we are to *"run in such a way as to get the prize"* (1 Corinthians 9:24), how are we to build our strength? These five steps can help you grow spiritually stronger:

### **1. Find encouragement.**

Christian community is important because we are *"mutually encouraged by each other's faith"* (Romans 1:12). Being around other believers and worshipping with them challenges us to *"strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else"* (1 Thessalonians 5:15). Jesus encouraged people, and he told those who are strong in faith to make a point of encouraging others in their faith. You should encourage the people around you too. We all need confidence. When you know that someone believes in you, it brings out your best. Jesus did this with the Apostle Peter. Peter's name, *Petros*, meant pebble. But Jesus said, "Pebble, you are going to be a rock. I'm giving you a new name." When Jesus said that to Peter the apostle was anything but a rock. He was Mr. Impulsive and Mr. Foot-in-Mouth, but Jesus didn't tell Peter what he was. Jesus told him what he could be. Jesus encouraged Peter to live up to his potential. When you give encouragement, it needs to be genuine. Give it from the heart and with sincerity. Encouragement also needs to be regular. Don't be stingy with your encouragement. In addition, encouragement needs to be specific. For instance, instead of saying, "I enjoyed the meal," say, "I can tell you put a lot of effort into this meal and the seasoning you chose was perfect." Who will you encourage today? What specific thing will you say?

### **2. Let your light shines before others.**

If our entire world consists of people just like us, chances are that we are more focused on feeling safe than on spreading the Gospel. Our light can only *"shine before others"* (Matthew 5:16) if we interact, on a significant level, with people who are different than we are. One way to overcome our fear of stepping out in faith is to pray for the courage to *"consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 3:8). *"You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house."*

*In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*” (Matthew 5:14-16 NIV) You cannot make yourself the light of the world. Jesus says you are the light of the world because of your relationship with him. *“For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” [a] made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ.”* (2 Corinthians 4:6 NIV). God speaks the light of Jesus into our hearts, and his light shines so powerfully through us that we are like stars in the universe that point the whole human race toward real life (Philippians 2:15-16). This is a portrait of discipleship. Jesus, who is the light of the world, re-creates us into the light of the world.

We are light, not because of anything in ourselves, but because we are in a supernatural union with the light of the world. He calls us to follow after him, and he says, *“When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”* (John 8:12b NIV). Our focus must always be on the light, humbly trusting Jesus to reveal the light through us. Prayerfully remember: Your influence and visibility is a result of who lives in you, not because of what you do. It is God who puts you in a place of influence and visibility. You are merely a steward of your influence and visibility, so it is important you get out of the way and let Jesus work through you. Only God can measure the significance of your influence and visibility. You may influence one person who will then influence the world. Your focus is on following Jesus wherever he leads.

### **3. Warm up your faith muscles.**

To be on fire for God requires stoking our spirit with the fuel of daily prayer, intense knowledge of Scripture and generous giving. Ask God to wrap you *“in zeal as in a cloak”* (Isaiah 59:17) and to give you love that *“burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame”* (Song of Solomon 8:6). In order to reach your goals, you have to figure out how to maintain your enthusiasm over the long haul. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Nothing great is ever accomplished without enthusiasm.” I believe that with all of my heart. I have found it to be true in my life. You have to have passion, you have got to have enthusiasm, or you are never going to make it to the finish line. Most people would consider me an enthusiastic person, and I am. But I haven’t been an enthusiastic person for a week or a month. My enthusiasm has not waned over a year or five or 10 years. I have been consistently enthusiastic about the goals that I have set for more than 30 years.

How do you do that? How do you stay enthusiastic day after day in spite of delays, difficulties, dead ends, problems, pressures and criticisms? How do you stay enthusiastic for more than 30 years? Positive thinking is not enough. Pulling yourself up by your psychological bootstraps is not enough. Talking yourself into optimism is not enough. The way you stay enthusiastic for a lifetime is found in the word “enthusiasm.” The word “enthusiasm” comes from the Greek word *en theos*. *En* is the Greek word for the English word “in.” *Theos* is the Greek word for “God.” So *en theos* means to be “in God.” When you have God, you will be enthusiastic. It is the kind of enthusiasm that is not affected by the economy or the weather or your circumstances. It is eternal because you are tied to the eternal God. You are in Christ.

Paul tells us how to do this in Romans 12:11-12. He says, “*Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer*” (NIV). If you want to reach your goals this year, you need to get God’s power by being joyful in hope, patient in affliction, and faithful in prayer.

#### 4. Get moving!

Vibrant faith doesn’t come to those who wait complacently, expecting God to turn up the flame. It happens when we live our love of Christ. James tells us, “*Do not merely listen to the word.... Do what it says*” (James 1:22). Somewhere in our lives there is a person who is hungry and needs to eat, or thirsty and in need of drink; there is a stranger Christ wants us to care for or clothe; a sick person to serve, or a prisoner to visit (Matthew 25:35-36). God does not want us to be backward looking, going through life looking in the rear vision mirror. But we so often can’t help ourselves. We remember the hurts of the past and the mistakes we made. It is time now to look ahead and focus on what is before us. God wants to do a new thing in our lives. He wants us to rise up to our full potential in Him. He has called us to do mighty things. He will even make a way when we feel lost, and refresh us when we are burning in the heat. We have got to keep on moving forward. It is only in moving forward that we ever accomplish what God has called us to. We can’t stay where we are at, nor can we go backwards. The only direction we can go is forward. Yes, it can be hard but it is the only way if we want to move on in God and grow. Don’t be afraid to keep moving on, for what was before, now has gone. God wants to accomplish so much more, but we need to move forward in the Lord.

#### 5. Turn setbacks into renewed determination.

No one’s life is an unbroken chain of victories. We all experience setbacks, defeats, losses and failures. Consider the example of baseball, not even the greatest of players’ bats 100%. The same is true in ministry we all make mistakes, even as we seek to serve God. Since failure is something every one of us at some time, experience, one of the most important skills you can acquire is the ability to respond to it in a godly fashion. It has been my observation that **successful ministers know how to turn every failure into a learning experience** – creating a stepping stone for future success. The first thing to do when you are faced with any failure is to analyze why it happened. Although there may be a variety of reasons, many out of your control here are five common causes of failure:

##### i. When you don’t plan ahead.

As the old saying goes, “If you fail to plan, then you are planning to fail.” Proverbs 27:12 says, “*The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty*” (NIV). Moving your church towards greater growth and health requires a lot of planning. You not only need to plan how to attract new people to your church, but also what you are going to do with them once they arrive: Are there enough seats to accommodate visitors? Is there adequate and safe childcare?

How will they get plugged into a small group Bible study? Remember, Noah began building the Ark long before it started to rain!

**ii. When you think you have “arrived”**

Remember the lesson of the whale: Just when you get to the top, and you start to blow that is when you get harpooned! Proverbs 18:18 says, “*Casting the lot settles disputes and keeps strong opponents apart*” (NIV). My friend John Maxwell once said, “When Jesus walked through New Testament times, people had trouble seeing him as God; when some pastors walk through their churches, people have trouble seeing them as human.”

**iii. When you are afraid to take necessary risks.**

The fear of failure can cause failure. We worry about what others will think of us if we fail, so we don’t even try. Fran Tarkenton says, “Fear sets you up to be a loser.” We fail to take advantage of golden opportunities. “*Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe.*” According to Proverbs 29:25 (NIV). One way I encourage my staff to try new things is I tell them they are allowed to make one mistake a week, as long as it is not the same mistake over and over!

**iv. When you give up too soon.**

Many times, success is just around the corner. The Prophet Daniel tells of a time when he prayed for days and days, never getting an answer to his requests before God. Then one day, in a vision, he sees a mighty angel. “*Do not be afraid, Daniel,*” said the angel. “*Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them.*” Although God heard Daniel’s prayer and dispatched an angel immediately, that angel was delayed 21 days due to a great spiritual battle: “*Now I have come to explain to you what will happen to your people in the future, for the vision concerns a time yet to come*” (Daniel 10:12-14, NIV). I have often thought, what would have happened if Daniel had stopped praying on the 10th day, or the 15th or the 20th? We must always remember the game is often won in the final seconds. **If at first you don’t succeed, you are normal!** Keep on keeping on!

**v. When you ignore God’s advice.**

The Bible is the owner’s manual on *life*. It is filled with practical instructions and guidelines for work, home, finances, relationships and health. When we fail to follow these directions from God, we are only asking for trouble. How many times have you run face first into failure simply because you ignored the Word of God? “*There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death*” (Proverbs 14:12, NIV).

If you have experienced failure in your ministry or work, here are some steps for starting over:

**i. Accept responsibility for your own failure.**

If you have made a mistake, admit it! Welcome to the human race and don't blame others. To blame is to "be-lame." Losers love to blame the economy, the boss, their spouse, their congregation, their deacons or even God for their misfortune. Taking responsibility frees you from a defensive posture and gives you the clear-headed vision necessary to determine what went wrong.

**ii. Recognize the benefits of failure.**

Thomas Edison, commenting on one of his many failed experiments, said, "Don't call it a failure. Call it an education!" At the very least, *failure shows you what doesn't work*. Failure forces you to be more creative; you look for new ways to do things. Failure prevents arrogance and egotism. If everything you did was a stunning success, no one could live with you! Failure causes you to re-evaluate what is important in life. Failure is one way God gets us to reflect on the direction of our lives. "*Blows and wounds scrub away evil, and beatings purge the inmost being.*" (Prov. 20:30, NIV). Ask God for wisdom to understand the cause for your failure. Ask, "Why did I fail? Is there any reason I might have set myself up to fail?"

**iii. Forget the past and focus on the future.**

Your past is past! It is water under the bridge. You can't change it so you may as well stop worrying about it. "*Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus*" (Phil. 3:13-14, NIV). We serve a God of second chances – failure is never *final* unless you let it be!

Peter denied the Lord three times, and yet Christ commanded him three times to tend his flock (John 21:15-17). Saul persecuted Christians, and Christ chose him as witness to the Gentiles. The cross is proof that Christ can transform even the worst things into good. Our job is to pick ourselves up after we fail and to ask for renewed vigor to follow Christ. "*For though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again*" (Proverbs 24:16). With Christ beside us, there is no such thing as failure.

## TALK IT OVER

1. What spiritual exercises, principles, beliefs or practices of the Christian faith require attention in your own life

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2. When was the last time you asked God to help you look deep inside yourself and took a snapshot of the spiritual dimension of your life? \_\_\_\_\_

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3. Can you think of some character qualities in your own life that by now should be further developed but are not?

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4. Share a skill or gift God has given you. \_\_\_\_\_

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## A VERSE TO REMEMBER.

But those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. Isaiah 40:31

## PRAYER FOR THE DAY.

Lord, I want to thank you for this exercises you have given to me. I know that they will produce great benefits in my life, that I will feel better, I will act better, I will look better, I will live closer to You, I will enjoy life more, I will become more what You want me to be because I am not only physically fit but spiritually fit. Thank You. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen

**GOD'S REMEDY FOR BURNOUT**  
**Balancing Your Personal Life - Part 5 of 6**  
**1 Kings 19:1-18**

**INTRODUCTION.**

We have been going through the series for the last few weeks about Balancing Your Personal Life. We have talked about physical balance. We have talked about mental balance. We have talked about spiritual balance. This morning we are going to look at emotional balance. With today's high-pressure lifestyle it is easy to run out of emotional energy. You can call it depression, burnout or the blahs. It is a warning light that something is out of balance in our lives. Today we are going to look at the example of Elijah. He was a great man of God. He had just had a very high spiritual experience on Mt. Carmel. It was a mountaintop experience, a great time in the Lord. He was feeling very high. Yet with every mountaintop there is inevitably a valley, a low. Elijah got depressed. He ran off to the other side of the mountain and hid under a tree, then later hid in a cave and said, "God, I'm so depressed I want you to kill me." What causes that kind of burnout? A number of things.

**1. *Fear causes it.***

V. 3 "*Elijah was afraid and ran for his life.*" Fear can cause burnout. Psychologists have discovered something like 645 different known fears that people can have. Fear is a universal problem and it takes away our joy. Satan uses all of these fears to rob you of joy. He knows what will make you joyful, so he creates a fear to oppose it.

**2. *Resentment can cause burnout.***

V. 4 he said, "I'm fed up. Lord, I've had enough. I don't want any more." If you hang on to resentment, it always hurts you more than anyone else. Resentment is self-destructive and counterproductive. Resentment just makes no sense. It makes us miserable in the process. It never ends with us getting what we want.

**3. *Low self-esteem.***

He said, "*I'm no better than my ancestors.*" He was comparing himself. He said, "I'm no good." If you are typical, you are your own worst critic. You are always putting yourself down. You could walk into a room smiling, but inside you are saying, "I'm fat. I'm not smart enough. I'm ugly. And I'm always late." Most of this dialogue is unconscious.

**4. *Anger can cause burnout.***

V. 10 he complains to God. "God, I've been serving you yet none of these people want to follow your will."

**5. *Loneliness.***

You become lonely. Then you start feeling bad about it and have a pity party. Then you become bitter. Your bitterness makes you even lonelier, which makes you more bitter. Soon, you're a hardhearted, depressed person that nobody can get close to.



## 6. **Worry.**

*"Now they're trying to kill me too."* The number one source of stress in your life is not work. It is worry. Work doesn't keep you up at night; worry does. Worry exaggerates the problem. Have you noticed if somebody says something bad about you, the more you think about it, the bigger it gets?

Elijah was an emotional fruit basket at this point in his life. He had fear, resentment, low self-esteem, anger, loneliness and worry. Do you think that would cause depression? I think so. How do people get themselves in such an emotional mess? The answer is faulty thinking. The Bible says that our thinking controls our emotions and our emotions control the way we act. *"as a man thinks in his heart, so is he."* The problem is, when we are at an emotional low, we typically make four common mistakes. This morning I want to give you four mistakes we make and then look at how God helped Elijah overcome his burnout.

## **MISTAKES WE MAKE WHEN WE ARE WHEN WE ARE EMOTIONALLY DRAINED.**

### **1. We focus on our feelings rather than the facts.**

4 *"... he prayed that he might die, 'I've had enough, Lord!'"* He said, "I've had enough, Lord. I am wasting my life. I'm fed up. It is no use trying. I am going to give up." This is what I call emotional reasoning. Emotional reasoning says, "If I feel it, it must be so." I feel like a failure, therefore I am a failure. I don't feel close to God; therefore I must not be close to God. I feel like a lousy husband, therefore I am a lousy husband. The fact is, feelings are not always facts. Feelings can lie. They can be totally irrational. People say "I don't always feel God's presence." That doesn't mean you are far away from Him. People say about their problem, "I feel it is hopeless. I feel overwhelmed. Therefore it is hopeless and overwhelming." No, feelings lie. When you allow yourself to be manipulated by your moods, you are living your life according to your feelings. God wants you to live a different kind of life. He wants you to live a life of faith, not a life of feelings. Let me give you three questions to ask about your emotions when you are trying to figure out how to deal with how you feel. When you are angry or upset or frustrated whatever you are feeling, ask these three questions:

- i. **"What is the real reason I am feeling this?"** Maybe the answer is fear or worry. Maybe it relates to something your dad said to you years ago, and when your husband said it to you, he got all the anger against your dad that you pent up.
- ii. **"Is it true?"** Is what you are feeling at that moment true? Elijah gets so discouraged that he went to God and complained, "God, I am the only one in the entire nation of Israel left serving you." And God challenged him, saying, "Are you kidding me? I have all these people who are still serving me! You are acting like you are the only one trying to do the right thing in the whole world! No. That is not true."

- iii. **“Is what I am feeling helping me or hurting me?”** Will you get what you want by continuing to feel this way? A lot of feelings we have feel natural, but they are actually self-defeating.

Let us say you go to a restaurant, and the service is extremely slow. You wait a long time to be served, and then a couple comes in 15 minutes after you and gets their meal before you do. You get increasingly more irritated until you feel something welling up inside you. What is the real reason you are feeling that way? You are hungry! Is it true? Yes. You are frustrated because the service is slow. But is your emotion helping or hurting? Do you get better service by getting angry at the server? Absolutely not. Does nagging work? Has it ever worked? When somebody tells you all the things you are doing wrong, does it make you want to change? No! All it does is make you defensive. When you ask yourself these three questions, you get a better grip on why you feel the way you do and what you need to do to help the situation.

### **Talk It Over**

*What is the danger in living your life according to your feelings?* \_\_\_\_\_

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## **2. We compare ourselves to others.**

When we are emotionally drained, we start comparing ourselves. This is what Elijah did. He said in v. 4b, *"Take my life. I am no better than my ancestors!"* He starts comparing himself to his family tree. The Bible warns against this over and over again. It says, "Do not compare!" When you start comparing yourself to other people you are setting yourself up for depression. Everybody is different. Everybody is unique. Only you can be you. If you don't be you, who is going to be you. Isn't that profound? When you get to heaven, God is not going to say, "How come you were not more like Billy Graham?" or "How come you were not more like Moses?" or "How come you were not more like...?" He is going to say, "How come you were not more like you." That is who He made you to be. We get emotionally burnt out because we start comparing ourselves. When we compare ourselves we compare our weaknesses with other people's strengths. We ignore the fact that they have weaknesses that we may be strong in. We make comparisons that get us into all kinds of trouble. We motivate ourselves through criticism. We compare ourselves and then say, "I should be able to read my Bible like that person" or "I should be a better Christian like that person" or "I should witness like that person". I should or I must or I ought to. The moment you start using the word "should" in your vocabulary, you are guaranteeing procrastination. It is human nature that we resist what is forced against us. How do you get motivated for those things you know that are important in life? You change them from "ought to's" to "want to's". Paul didn't say, "I should be all things through Christ who strengthens me." He said, *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."* That changes the motivation. We compare ourselves and try to motivate ourselves through criticism. We tend to label. We give ourselves harmful names. Instead of saying things like "I made a mistake" we say "I'm a failure." Instead of saying, "I tripped" we say "I'm a klutz". Instead of saying, "I overate" we say "I'm a pig". We label ourselves.

Labeling only reinforces what you don't want. If you were to say to me, "Rick, you are a lazy person." Then I would say, "Yeah, just watch how lazy I can be!" I would tend to perform up to your expectation. If I were to say to you, "You are always a late person." You would say, "Yeah, just watch! Watch how late I can be!" If somebody comes and says, "You are a cruddy father!" You would say, "Right! I know it!" Labeling only reinforces things. But if somebody says to you, "You could be a great Christian. You could be a great mother... You could be a dynamic father..." Then all of a sudden you get excited, you begin to visualize the potential. You begin to see yourself in a new light. You start moving towards what you focus on. That is why we don't use guilt manipulation in this church. I could stand up here every week and say, "You guys are a bunch of sinners." You would say, "Yep!" You know you are not perfect. You are like me. I just want to know the answers. How do I change those habits I don't like in my life? How do I turn it around?

To change your perspective, the first thing you have to do is stop comparing yourself to others. The Bible says satisfaction comes from doing your best, not comparing yourself to others: "*Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else,*" (Galatians 6:4 NIV). Do you compare your life, your home, your husband, your kids even your lawn to other people? This exam may reveal some surprises and show you that there are more important things to do than compare yourself or what you have to others. When you strive to be the person God made you to be, you will find real meaning, purpose, fulfillment, and satisfaction. You can't focus on *your* purpose while looking at other people. When the apostle Paul wrote his second epistle to the Corinthians, he told them, "Comparing yourselves among yourselves is not wise" (see 2 Corinthians 10:12). The word "wise" in this verse was translated from the Greek word *sophos*, which means *especially enlightened, wise, sharp, or bright*. This verse could be interpreted: "*Comparing yourselves among yourselves is not the wisest, sharpest, or brightest thing to do!*" I can attest from personal experience that comparing yourself to others is not the brightest thing to do! It can be a fruitless endeavor that makes you feel worse and even more inferior and insecure than you ever felt before.

The word "comparing" in Second Corinthians 10:12 is the Greek word *sunkrino*, and it paints the picture of two or more people standing side by side to thoroughly examine themselves in comparison to one another and then critically judging to see who is superior among the candidates. One group would be classified as superior, while the other group would be classified as inferior relative to that other group. The simple truth is that such comparing is a fleshly endeavor that produces no spiritual fruit! It puts one up, puts another down, and fails to recognize the manifold, diverse graces of God that exist in the Christian community. The Corinthian believers were fighting among themselves to prove who was the greatest among them. When Paul wrote this verse, he wrote it to rebuke them for making such comparisons. They didn't have a problem with feelings of inferiority, as I struggled with earlier in life. Instead, they had an issue with feelings of *superiority* and were in fierce competition with each other to prove who the best of the best among them was! Paul wrote this verse to rebuke the Corinthian believers for making comparisons, exhorting them to stop their infighting as they tried to prove who was the most spiritual among them.

However, there is a principle in this verse that the Holy Spirit used to help set me free from the spirit of inferiority that tried to plague me as I stepped out to obey God's call on my life. And it is exactly the point I want to get across to you today. *God intentionally made you different from others.* You are actually a result of His divine design. Your mannerisms, insights, and style that is different from others may be the very qualities that make you uniquely positioned to fulfill a specific need. Of course, we all have areas in our lives that need to be changed, and God will show those areas one at a time. But if you will simply quit comparing yourself to others *today*; if you will stop disparaging the very qualities that cause you to stand out from those around you, you will open the door to freedom from a spirit of inferiority so that your unique gifts can begin to shine brightly as God intended.

In my own case, what I thought was something negative; having a different teaching style than others was the very thing that made me uniquely qualified to fulfill my call. When I finally understood that *God* was the One who made me different, I began to see that I could shine His light in ways that others could not. What I thought would hold me back was actually what gave me my place in His plan! When I began to accept who God made me to be, I was freed from the devil's mental assault and began to step out of the shadows so God could use me in a greater way. I was finally able to *embrace* the uniqueness that made me shine differently from others. That can be your story too! You can make the decision *today* that you won't go down that bumpy, twisted road by comparing yourself to others and always coming up short ever again. Today you are going to start *celebrating* the differences that make you *uniquely you*!

### **Talk it over.**

How can you maximize your uniqueness? Every product is known because it has something to offer that other products don't offer. What do *you* have to offer that distinguishes you from other people? \_\_\_\_\_

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### **3. We blame ourselves for the things that are not our fault. T**

Elijah did this just like he did these other things. v. 10 *"I have been zealous for God..."* He is been preaching and praying and doing all these dynamic things that a prophet is supposed to do but *"they have rejected your covenant and broken down your alters and put your prophets to death with a sword."* In his depression, Elijah blames himself for failing to convert the entire nation of Israel. He takes this big load upon his shoulders and says, "It is my entire fault. I have been working like crazy and yet nobody is changed." He took it personally. That is a heavy responsibility. When you start trying to assume responsibility for other people you are going to get depressed. You can be responsible to someone without being responsible for someone. I am talking about adults. Obviously little babies, you have to take care of them. But as children begin to grow they begin to make their own choices, which you are not responsible for. You do the best you can to train them. The fact is, you raise your children as best you know how and you make mistakes. But as they grow up, they begin to make their own choices.

No matter what my parents had done for me or through me or prayed for me or done to me, I begin to make my own choices. I can't blame my parents for responsibilities that I have taken and choices I have made. As a child gets older and older there are things you cannot control. You cannot control the material that they read. You cannot control the friends that they make. You cannot control the choices that they make. Even in the story of the prodigal son in the Bible, the Father was perfect yet the son still said, "I am going to go off and do my own thing." We take a lot of blame on ourselves that is not always our fault. When you take responsibility for someone, you are in essence taking it away from them. A lot of times I have seen husbands who smother their wives. They assume responsibility for their wife. What it does is leave an immature wife. It is like the child who is smothered and mothered all of life, they grow up to be a big baby because they never learn to take responsibility for themselves.

We tend to blame ourselves and when we are feeling emotionally low we tend to blame all of the world's problems on ourselves. If you get in a helping profession like counseling or pastoring or social work, you are going to discover real quickly that the people don't always respond the way you would like them to respond. This is what Elijah did. He said the whole world hasn't converted; therefore it is my fault. You are not responsible for other people's response. When I first became a Christian, every time I shared my faith with somebody, witnessed to them and they didn't accept Christ, I thought I had failed. What did I do wrong? They didn't become a Christian. Then I realized that in planting seeds, some of it is going to fall on hard ground. No matter how you plant it, some of it is not going to sprout. We blame ourselves for things that are not our fault. You can influence people but you cannot control them. They have a free will.

### **Talk it over.**

Is it possible to focus on the future without blaming ourselves in the things that are not our fault? Why or why not? \_\_\_\_\_

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### **4. We exaggerate the negative.**

We blow it out of proportion. All of a sudden "everything is going wrong!" Elijah says in the last part of verse 10 *"... I'm the only one left! And now they are trying to kill me, too, Lord."* This guy is having one giant pity party. He is having a great time feeling sorry for himself. "Everybody is against me! Everybody hates me. Nobody loves me. I am going to go eat worms!" The fact is there was only one person who was fighting him. That was the queen Jezebel. She had gotten jealous of Elijah's popularity and power in the nation. So the queen of the nation sent him a messenger and said, "If you don't get out of the country, I'm going to have you killed within a few hours." Elijah ran across the desert and hid in a cave and has a pity party. There was only one person against him, but he says, "Everybody is against me!" If he had really thought it out, if Elijah had not listened to his feelings but looked at the facts he would have thought, "Jezebel sent a messenger to warn me that she was going to kill me." If Jezebel had really intended to kill him, she wouldn't have sent a messenger to warn him. She would have just sent a hit man. Why warn him? Just go knock him off! But Jezebel was clever enough to know that if she killed Elijah that would only make matters worse.

That would make him a martyr. Pretty soon he would be a hero in the nation and might even cause a revolt among the people. On top of that, Jezebel worried about what God would do to her if she touched God's man. So instead, she just thought, "I won't kill him. I will just embarrass him." So she threatened him and let him run away. And then he runs off to be remembered as a coward. One minute he is the hero and the next minute he is a zero. Have you noticed the fact that when you are depressed everything seems to go wrong? Not just the thing you are depressed about. Everything goes wrong. It is like the wino on the street asleep. Somebody went up and rubbed Limburger cheese on his mustache and when he woke up he started running around and sniffing. People thought he was going crazy. They said, "What is the matter?" He said, "The whole world stinks!" That is the way it is with our attitudes. Anytime you say the whole world stinks, check your own nose! Check your own attitude.

The whole world does not stink. There is a lot of good going on in the world, but when we have a bad attitude, we get this pessimistic outlook that everything is going to the dogs. Elijah said "I am the only one," and God said, "No, you are not. I have reserved 7000 in Israel who has not bowed their knees to Baal. There are 7000 people in this nation that have not followed this false god, this idol. They are still true to me. They are still faithful. They are living the right way. You are not the only one. There are 7000 people." But that is typical. When your life becomes filled with fear, resentment, low self-esteem, anger, loneliness and worry, you are headed for burnout. The thing I like about the Bible is that it doesn't just give us the causes of our problems in life, but it gives us the cures. God helped Elijah do four things that are just as applicable to our lives 2000 years later.

### **Talk it over.**

How do you think exaggeration makes something that is difficult seem even worse? \_\_\_\_\_

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## **CURE FOR BURNT OUT**

### **1. Rest your body. V. 5-8**

Relax. Take care of your physical needs. That is the first thing you do when you are getting emotionally burned out. This deals with the physical side of burnout. This is God's first step; His prescription. 1 Kings 19 (NIV) Elijah had just said, "Lord, take my life. I'm no better than my ancestors. I've had enough." Then, "He laid down under the tree and fell asleep. All at once the angel touched him and said, 'Get up and eat.' He looked around and there by his head was a cake of bread over hot coals and a jar of water. He ate and he drank and he lay down again to go to sleep. Then the angel came back a second time and touched him and said, 'Get up and eat again.'" I like this. This is God's first step in getting over burnout. He said sleep and eats, sleep and eat. He is saying you have to take care of these physical issues here. Notice it does not say, "When you are depressed go shopping."

I love this about God. When Elijah burned out, God didn't give him a lecture. God didn't scold him. God didn't say, "Get a life, Elijah! Remember what happened two days ago? The greatest victory of your whole life! Buck up! Get it together. Whip yourself into shape. Pick yourself up by your own bootstraps. Get rid of that mood!" He didn't preach at him. He didn't yell at him. His first antidote was sleep and eats. God understands your body better than you do. Psalm 127:2 (Living Bible) *"God wants his loved ones to get their proper rest."* Sometimes in life the most spiritual thing you can do is go to sleep. When you are tired you just can't handle a whole lot. When you are worn out, beat, you can't handle stresses and pressures that normally wouldn't bother you. Sometimes, one good night's rest changes your perspective overnight. Never make a major decision when you are depressed. It will almost always be wrong.

Never make a major decision when you are tired. It will almost always be wrong. Wait until you have enough good night's sleep and gotten yourself recharged a little bit. That is a given, a no-brainer. Rest your body. It is interesting to me that when Elijah started having a pity party and started contemplating suicide and started saying, "God, I just want to die!" that God did not scold Elijah. He did not give him a sermon (which would have only added to his guilt). God's remedy, step one, and was simply eat, sleep, and eat sleep. Sometimes the most spiritual thing you can do is go to bed. It is amazing how a good night's rest will do wonders for your attitude. Weariness and fatigue promotes depression and getting in shape is an excellent preventative to emotional burnout. You will be a lot stronger if you are physically strong. Relax. Rest your body.

### **Talk it over.**

If you were to look honestly at your life are you satisfied with the amount of work you do and the amount of rest you have? \_\_\_\_\_

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## **2. Release your frustrations.**

This deals with the emotional side of burnout. Revealing your feeling is the beginning of healing. You are not going to get well and you are not going to get feeling good again until you learn to express those feelings in your heart that you have been holding in. Any area of your life that you can't talk about is out of control. If you can't talk about it, you can't manage it. So the second step in burnout is to face your frustrations and talk to God about it. Don't complain to other people, talk to God. Just say, "God, this is the way I feel." Express your feelings by lay them all out. 1 Kings 19:9-10 says "Then he went into a cave and spent the night. God said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'" and he replied, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, but..." What he says is, "God, I have been living for you.

I have been trying to do the right thing. I have been a good person, following your plan for my life ... but..." Then he unloads in the next verses. God knew that Elijah in his burnout was a basketful of emotions. So He said, "Elijah, spill your guts! Blow off some steam. Tell me what you are really thinking. Tell me what you are really feeling. What is bugging you? Get it off your chest." And in the next few verses of chapter 19, Elijah does. He says, "There are six things that bug me, God. In the first place, I'm afraid. I'm bitter. I'm angry. On top of that I'm lonely. On top of that I'm worried. And on top of it all, I'm depressed." No wonder he was burning out!

You get those six emotions churning up inside and not sharing them with anybody obviously you are going to burn out. Whenever you swallow your emotions, your stomach keeps score. If you don't talk it out, you are going to take it out on yourself in some way. You say, "That person is a pain in the..." and the reason they are because you are not talking to God about it. So God says, "Ventilate". God was not shocked with Elijah's griping. He was not shocked with the way he felt. When he said, "God, I'm angry, I'm bitter, I'm depressed and I'm lonely." God was not surprised. God didn't say, "You shouldn't feel that way." He listened. God knows your feelings better than you do. He wired you up. He just wants you to understand them and by talking them out it helps you get in touch with what you are feeling and thinking. God just says, "I will listen as long as you want to, until you run out of words."

Have you ever wondered why some of the Psalms got into the Holy Bible? Some of them are pretty vindictive. In some of them, David is really spouting off, blowing off steam. "God, I hate my enemies! I can't stand them. I want to see them all dead. I want to see their whole families slaughtered. I want to kick their teeth in!" How did that get into the Holy Bible? God allowed those Psalms in because David was blowing off steam, but he was doing it with the right person. God put them in the Bible so you could know it is ok. There is no emotion that you could express to God that is going to make Him stop loving you or make Him mad. You can come to him as a child and say, "God, sometimes I doubt that you even exist. God, I am worried.... God, I'm lonely.... God. Who do you think gave you your glands? You can talk to God about anything and everything and He's not going to be blown away by it.

He says if you want to get well, first you rest your body and then you release your frustrations and your emotions. So are you feeling down today? A little stressed out, uptight and overloaded? Do what the Bible says to do. "Cast all your cares on Him, because He cares for you." He is talking about Jesus. He says tell God how you feel. Pour out your heart to Jesus. Dump the load on Him. God never meant for you to carry that load. Having talked with people for many years, I have discovered it is often helpful to tell a friend too. Tell somebody in a small group. Tell a counselor. Not only tell God but ventilate with somebody else. That is why I keep harping on you needing to be in a small group for your own health. God didn't mean for you to go through life just on your own. That is why we emphasize small groups so much around here. When I am on the patio, people come to talk to me, they say, "I have never told this to anybody else," and they will start sharing a pain or hurt that they have.

One of my first questions is almost always, "Are you part of a small group? Have you joined a group anywhere?" God never meant for you to go through life on your own. You need the support of other people who have a perspective different from you, because when you are down, you don't see things straight. You need to get good advice from other people who are trying to do the right thing following Christ. Pray about it. Tell it to God. Get it off your chest. Complain to the Lord. Confess it to God. Spill your guts. Share with God what you don't like. God said to Elijah in v. 9 "What is bugging you? What are you bothered about?" Elijah let him have it. *"Then he went into a cave and spent the night and the word of the Lord came to him, 'What are you doing here Elijah?' Elijah replied, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord ...'"* He is telling God how he feels. The thing I like about this is that God let him complain until he was out of words. God did not interrupt him.



God did not criticize him. God is not shocked when you complain, when you say, "God, I think my job stinks!" God is listening. "God, I don't like the fact that I have had poor health." Rest your body and release those emotions of worry, fear, anger, and resentment and tell God how you feel.

### **Talk it over.**

When you are frustrated, do you shut down or do you become determined to work it out through your relationship with God? \_\_\_\_\_

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### **3. Refocus on God.**

Get your eyes off your problem and start looking at Jesus. Get a fresh awareness of God's power and presence in your life. This is the third key to Elijah's overcoming his burnout. 1 Kings 19:11 "Go out and stand before me on the mountain," the Lord told him." God said, "Elijah, I want you to get alone with me for a while. There is something I want you to see." In the next few verses, God puts on this massive, spectacular, incredible, pyrotechnic and multi media event for Elijah. "Go out and stand on the mountain in my presence and watch this. A powerful wind, pouring through the mountain, tore the mountain apart, shattered the rocks before the Lord. The Lord was not in the hurricane wind. After the wind, there was an earthquake. But the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake there came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. It was some kind of firestorm. And after the fire came a gentle whisper, a still small voice. After Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face, and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, 'what are you doing here, Elijah?'"

Why did God do this? First He gives this spectacular hurricane wind. Then he gives an earthquake. Then he gives a firestorm. Then He speaks in a still, small voice. What was God doing? He was reminding Elijah of His power. "I am in control," God says. "I am sovereign. You think things are bad but my power is far greater than any problem you will face. I am in control." He was saying focus on me, not your problem. He was reminding Elijah of His power. Why? Because the root of all burnout is playing God. When you start playing God, when you start acting as if God doesn't matter, like you have to make it all work, that you are in charge, you are in control, you are the manager of your life. You are setting yourself up for burnout. God never meant for you to be the manager of your life. He wants to manage your life. He made you.

God made you. You were made by Him and for Him. Until you understand that life is not going to make sense. He is saying, "Let me be God and quit trying to be God yourself." That is why you are so tired. You were not wired to be God. You are human and you are not a super human and you are certainly not God. The late Frank Sinatra who is famous for his song, "I Did It My Way" said this last word before he died, "I'm losing it." Why? Because even Frank didn't have the power over life and death. He was not God and he couldn't control the timing of his own death. God says "I want you to focus on me. I have the power." When I get stressed out, I get alone with God. When I feel I'm on the edge of a burnout, I get alone with God.

I focus on God's power, not my problems. And I focus on God's grace, not my failures. And I focus on God's unconditional love for me, not my critics. That is the secret of endurance. "Reverence for God gives a man deep strength." I want you to hear the story of a woman who went through burnout and came out stronger for God.

Melissa:

I would like to share how Jesus Christ helped me recover from the pain of personal burnout several years ago. My first experience at Saddleback church was a service where Debbie Boone sang. I was a weary, burned out Christian who was rather disillusioned with life. I remember carrying my aching heart into hearing Debbie and letting my soul cry for a while during Rick's sermon. As I left, I told the Lord I needed to know that he cared about me but I didn't know how the God of the universe who died for me could come down and give me a much needed hug. The answer lay in a cheery hello I heard as I stumbled away from the service at Saddleback. I turned and saw Pastor Rick holding his youngest son and realized he had said hello to me. It may sound corny but I felt like that hello was God's answer to my prayer. It was a small sign that God cared about my burnout.

Let me explain some of the events that led up to my burnout. In 1970, I was a college student at Ohio State. Life on campus at that time was filled with a lot of unrest. That spring was a time of campus violence. Although we did not experience it as they did at Kent state, we did have campus riots that brought out state police. That year I decided to live for Jesus wholeheartedly. I got involved with Christian ministry. It was then I moved to a Christian conference ground 60 miles from campus and started my full time ministry cooking breakfast and lunch for as many as 35 people. It was truly by faith because I had really never cooked before. But I was sold on Christian service and ready to do whatever the Lord had told me to do. This is where my husband Ed came in. He was looking for a clerk and we decided I was it. So he imported me from Ohio to California. As I was waiting on the Lord for His direction for Christian service, four children came along. Jason, my twins, Amy and Keith, and then Christopher all born within four years.

Only God knows what you can bear. Each was a joy to me but I wanted to serve the Lord in other ways besides parenting. I kept wondering when Ed would get the divine message from God and go on to full time service. This is what I expected to happen. Instead Ed went to work as much as he could so I could stay home with the kids. Searching for that open door of ministry, I found a church that had an open door for my talents and became a volunteer minister. I figured if I couldn't serve full time then I would serve part time. Over the next two year my schedule was filled with Bible study, choir and vacation Bible School while I was caring for my wee ones. Those were fun years, full of hugs. And even more opportunities opened, like a children's musical. I had danced in my background so I volunteered to do choreography. I just kept wondering when Ed was going to get the big message about full time ministry. Does this sound like we had a communication gap? It was a warning of things to come. I just kept volunteering for one thing after another without thinking. I went full speed ahead with the Lord. Finally, I led a small group and got involved as a leader of junior high. But with the strain of business, my life started falling apart. I juggled as much as I could possibly handle and loved it, but it was an unrealistic life style and a deep weary disillusionment.

I began to show all the signs of burnout that Pastor Rick talked about. I noticed the feeling of resentment growing in my life. I had given 110% to the church and felt very let down by them and not valued for my contribution. Also I was worried about our financial difficulties. I was serving God whole heartedly but we still weren't making it financially. All I could see was my failure to provide what I thought the Lord wanted for my children especially in their schooling. I could not help but compare myself and Ed with other couples. They had more, could do more, and I couldn't help but partly blame my husband. It was hard not to look at Ed and ask what was wrong with him spiritually because after all, he was the head of the household. I was angry, hurt and afraid to let anyone know. But I felt that Christians couldn't possibly feel this way and be true believers. I held it all inside. I set myself up for the big burnout. Nothing made sense anymore. There was nothing more to give and I was all used up. All those feelings of rejection I felt as a child came back to haunt me at this time. Everything became overwhelming. I was filled with self-doubt.

How could I be a mom with teenagers? How could I make a difference with Ed and get our differences resolved? I felt worthless and afraid to let anyone know how I felt. It was really bad with no hope, or so I thought. I had a classic case of burnout. Then our family moved to Saddleback church. It was just what we needed. When we first began attending, it was time to be quiet and let God work on us. Our marriage needed work and ministry was not the place to be. Even my attempt at ministry reminded me that I was in no shape to be involved like I had been for three years. I was too tired to minister. My marriage was strained and my children were turning into teenagers. For some time I sat quietly as a church member just soaking up God's healing grace. These years were full of marital ups and downs; holding onto commitments when that was all there was to hold on to. The only thing that kept me from running away was my commitment to Jesus and His word and a vague remembrance of the love I once had for Ed.

I thank God that in my burnout I didn't walk out. It took many lonely walks, arguments, counseling appointments and communication work for me to finally express what was going on inside of me without fear of rejection. I came to realize that being a Christian does not exempt you from having disappointments, times of failure and angry moments. That is only part of being human. As soon as I could possibly allow myself to be human I could feel myself breathe again. Not that I was holding my breath, but I had put my soul on hold. My Lord was teaching me to rest in Him, to learn from Him and what He loved about me. Those quiet years gave the Lord a lot of time to speak. It was during this time that He helped me to find how He truly gifted me in the area of encouragement. This would definitely help the body of Christ and yet keep my time commitment in balance. Out of my discouraged heart came encouragement for others to see their value as God has seen it. The most important key in my recovery from burnout has been the time I have spent getting to know the Lord from His word. In my quiet times, I was able to read through the Bible three times. This was very healing for me. Reading the Bible filled my heart with hope. The Sunday sermons gave me application of God's word. The more time I spent focusing on God's word, the more I began to feel a strength I did not have before. Knowing God's love and His word restored my heart for service. Now I am back serving in ministry and I am much more careful to nurture my friendship with Jesus. My kids are grown and now they are starting to leave the nest. Ed and I have found our love has returned, stronger and deeper than ever. We read the Bible every day and pray for our kids. We are looking forward to what the Lord has for us in His time and in His way.

If you have struggled with burnout, let me encourage you not to give up. I have found that there is hope and healing and help when you commit your entire soul to Jesus Christ. Get your eyes off the problem and get a fresh awareness of what God wants to do in your life. I like what God did. He took Elijah outside. "Come outside the cave, Elijah. I have something I want you to see." And God put on a production. It was unbelievable. v. 11 *"God said, 'Go out and stand in the mountain in the presence of the Lord for I'm about to pass by.' Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord. But the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake there was a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave."*

God put on one fantastic light show. There is thunder and lightning, earthquakes and rocks are splitting apart. It is unbelievable. But it said God was not in all of those big things. God spoke to him in a whisper. Isn't that typical? God rarely speaks to us in the dramatic ways; all of a sudden you feel the Lord's presence and get a word from God. No, most of the time God speaks to us is in the quietness, sitting still, praying, reading the Bible, sitting out by a quiet lake and just being quiet before the Lord and He will plant an idea, an inspiration. God reminded Elijah that he was right there, that He had not gone away, that He was there beside him, and He said, "Just be quiet. Realize I am here with you." Rest your body, release your frustrations and refocus on God.

#### **Talk it over.**

Determine to take spiritual inventory of your life! Step back from your routine; zoom out to get an overall picture of how well you are fulfilling your calling. See the big picture and analyze every major category of your life. Evaluate your relationship with God, family, work and future goals. How well are you doing? Where can you do better? \_\_\_\_\_

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#### **4. Resume serving others**

Recommit your life to God's purpose. Let God give you a new direction, a new purpose, a new job, a new career if need be, or a new ministry. v. 15 *"Then the Lord said to Elijah, 'Go back the way you came.'"* He said, "Get back to work Elijah, go to this city and anoint this man to be the king". He gave him a project, a job. The quickest way to defeat your depression is to get involved in the needs of other people. Get a ministry. Get a place to give yourself away. As you give yourself away, God gives to you and you become a channel. You stop sitting around in self-pity, contemplating your navel, saying, "Poor me!" and you begin to say, "How can I help others?" The happiest people in the world are those who help other people. Let God give you a ministry. You lose your life to find it. God gave Elijah a new job to do which would help other people. Some of you are struggling with depression. You look like you have iron poor blood. Maybe you didn't feel like getting up and out of bed this morning and possibly you were laying in bed and you prayed, "Lord, I really don't want to go to church today. Something come up." and He said, "Yeah, it is big and white. It is called a sheet."

Maybe some of you are having a hard time making decisions. You just don't know what to do. That is a symptom of burnout when you can't make decisions anymore. Maybe you feel like everybody is against you and you are gloomy and it seems like the world is falling apart. Maybe you are trapped in a job you don't like or trapped in a relationship you can't stand and you don't know what to do. You are constantly tired. You have no energy. Maybe you feel like running away like Elijah did. You want to split, forget it all. I have good news for you that Jesus Christ says there is hope. A number of years ago I went through a dramatic period of depression in my life, major depression. I was too proud to kill myself and I said, "Lord, You just kill me." That would be the nice, easy way out. I can identify with Elijah. Maybe some of you have been that way. There is a way out. You don't have to stay depressed. God can help you through it if you will take these steps. You are not alone. God cares about you and so do the people in this church.

You can change with God's help. Stop thinking about yourself introspection all the time but start thinking about others who are less fortunate than you. I know when you are in pain all you can see is yourself. If you look around you will find somebody who is in more pain than you are. I know that is hard to believe. But no matter what you are going through, you can always find somebody less fortunate. One of the ways of getting out of burnout is to start giving your life away again in helping somebody else. The more you give your life away, the more God blesses you. Why? Because God never meant for you to come out of burnout so you could be a selfish little clod. He didn't put you on this earth just to live for yourself. The way you come out of burnout is again, by start giving away, not by being this dead cesspool where you take but you begin to focus on the outside and begin to help others. 1 Kings 19, God gave Elijah a new assignment. He said, *"Go back the way you came to the desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael and Jehu and Elisha."* He said you are going to do ministry with buddies now because you were never meant to do it all alone. You serve in the context of the community of other believers.

God gives Elijah a new assignment to help him get out of his funk that he is in. He wanted Elijah to realize that God wasn't through with him. Elijah thought it was over. He said, "It is over. I am ready to die. Take my life." God said, "No, I have a lot more to do. I am not through with you." God brought some of you to this church so He could say to you, "In spite of the depression, in spite of the problems, in spite of the hurt, in spite of the burnout I am not through with you." He has a lot more to do. This is not the end. If you will take these steps, you will move on. The quickest way to defeat depression is to get your eyes off yourself and start focusing on helping others. Jesus said, "In giving your life away, you find it." Elijah needed to get his eyes off himself. Today you may be burned out and you may be depressed. You are never going to get well by introspection alone. You have to get outside of yourself. You have to find a ministry, find a place to serve. Use your talents. Stop just focusing on yourself and start focusing on helping others and that will bring the joy back. Joy comes from service. Satisfaction comes from service. Significance comes from service. Self-esteem comes from service.

### **Talk it over.**

What are some simple ways you could adjust your schedule so you are not overloaded and "too busy" to see the needs of people around you? \_\_\_\_\_

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## CONCLUSION.

I am sure there are people here today who feel like Elijah did. There are many days you just want to pull up the covers saying, "I don't even want to get out of bed today. I want to go to sleep and not wake up." You feel like your pile is so high over your head, you are never going to get to the top of it. You may feel emotionally or physically exhausted. Bare bones tired. I have no doubt that you have considered this last week about checking out. I want to say to you, there is hope. Don't give up. God cares. This church cares. There are people sitting around you that care and who will help you. This is God's recovery plan. But you have to work on all four dimensions; physical, spiritual, emotional, and relational. First, get the physical act together. Maybe you need to rearrange your schedule. Get more rest. You have been trying to burn the candle at both ends. Then you do the emotional. You unplug and talk about what you are feeling and you tell God what you really feel. Maybe you tell it to a friend or counselor or someone in your small group. Then you refocus the center of your life around Jesus Christ because He is God and you are not.

The more you try to play God the more frustrated you are going to get. Then you get involved in helping somebody else. Get your eyes off yourself. This works. It is in the Bible. It works. I know this from personal experience because seventeen years ago I went through burnout. At the end of the first year of this church I just collapsed. You have no idea the energy it takes to get a church off the ground in its first year. It requires enormous amount of work. I was working 18-20 hours a day. I was a workaholic, loving every minute of it. But by the end of the year, I was frazzled emotionally, spiritually, physically, I was drained. Through all of 1981, I was depressed. That was my burned out year. God slowly brought me back. All during '81 my goal was not, "God, build a great church!" My goal was "God, get me through the week end." I am so glad I didn't give up when I thought it was all over in '81. I am more than glad that God didn't give up on me because God wasn't through with me. But He is not through with you either.

History books are filled with stories of people who failed again and again, but they did not give up until they succeeded. General George Washington lost two-thirds of all the battles he fought against the British in the American Revolution. He kept retreating because he didn't have the manpower to take on the British army. But he didn't give up! He eventually won the war, became the first president of the United States, and is considered the father of the country. Napoleon dominated continental Europe as Emperor of France. But earlier in his life he had graduated 42nd in a class of 43 people. He wasn't the smartest student, but he is regarded as a military genius and his methods are still studied in many schools. Albert Einstein, one of the greatest scientists of all time, didn't say a single word until he was more than four years old. He did so poorly in school that, at age 16, he failed to pass the entrance exam for the Swiss Polytechnic School. Still, he went on to reinvent science and math. Babe Ruth was one of the best baseball players ever. He hit 714 home runs in his career, a record that stood for almost 40 years. But he also struck out 1,330 times. For years, Ruth held the records both for most home runs and for the most strike outs. I don't hold up any of these men as examples for godly living. But they accomplished much in the eyes of the world because they didn't give up. Imagine what God can do with righteous women and men who keep moving forward and working for whatever God has called them to. Keep going, and don't let your failure be final. You never know what God can do through you!

## TALK IT OVER

1. How do you normally react to stress in your life? How do you think God wants you to respond? \_\_\_\_\_  
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2. What is the result — physical, emotional, and spiritual — when you surrender to God the things you want to control? \_\_\_\_\_  
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3. What practical steps do you need to take today to overcome burnt out in your life? \_\_\_\_\_  
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## A VERSE TO REMEMBER

1 Peter 4:2, *“From now on, then, you must live the rest of your earthly lives controlled by God’s will and not by human desires”* (TEV).

## PRAYER FOR THE DAY

Heavenly Father, I thank you for your word. I thank you that when I live in harmony with you, I find blessing rather than burnout. I find strength rather than stress. I experience peace rather than pressure, as I give my life to you. I thank you in Jesus' name. Amen.

**A FORMULA FOR FRIENDSHIPS**  
**Balancing Your Personal Life - Part 6 of 6**  
**Genesis 2:18**

We have been in a series on “Balancing Your Personal Life”. We have been looking at physical balance, mental balance and spiritual balance. Today we are going to wrap up this series and look at social balance. The Bible says, *"It is not good for man to be alone."* Loneliness is not part of God's plan. We are social beings. God made us for relationships. We were meant to have friends. There are basically two different kinds of friends. There are casual friends and there are close friends. Casual friends are the result of circumstances. You happen to be in the same circumstance together. You go to church together, play golf together, work together and live next door to somebody. But close friends are the result of choice. You can't be close friends with everybody so you have to be selective. The closer I am to a person the greater their impact on my life. The more I get close to a person, the more they can influence me. Therefore, I must choose my close friends carefully. That is very important.

The Bible says don't get your close friends by default. Choose them carefully. The Bible has a lot to say about the kinds of friends we are to choose. Proverbs 27:19 (Good News) *"A mirror reflects a man's face but what he is really like is shown by the kind of friends he chooses."* The Bible says that the kind of friends that you choose helps show what kind of person you are really like. Proverbs 12:26 *"A righteous man is cautious in friendship."* You need to avoid some types of people for your closest friends. You need to select some types of people for your closest friends. The Bible talks about some people we need to avoid as our closest friends:

- i. **Lazy people.** They should not be your closest friends. *"Lazy people want much but get little, while the diligent are prospering."* (Proverbs 13:4 LB) One of the most popular words in America is "easy." If it is easy, we like it. If it is hard, we don't like it. Can you imagine a best seller titled, "Ten Difficult Steps to Change Your Life" or "Fifteen Difficult Ways to Get in Shape"? If it is easy, we like it. If it is hard, we don't like it. Laziness prevents us from being loving.
- ii. **Angry people.** The Bible says don't make friends with a hot tempered person because you may learn his habits and not be able to change.
- iii. **Immoral people.** People who have chosen that lifestyle.
- iv. **Greedy people.** Ecclesiastes talks about that and Proverbs.
- v. **Unbelieving people.** People who have chosen not to believe in God. Atheists, etc. It's always easier to pull people down than pull them up. That's why you must make sure the people you hang out with the most are moving you in the right direction. They should be building you up rather than tearing you down.



So what do you do with these people? Act like a snob and don't pay them attention? Of course not. The Bible says we are to love everybody, but you don't have these people as your closest friends if that is their predominant lifestyle because it will influence you.

**Talk it over.**

Look at your key friendships in life. How do your closest friends help you with your spiritual commitments or do they help? \_\_\_\_\_

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**FRIENDS THAT YOU NEED TO HAVE.**

The starting point of building great friendships is investing your time and energy. There are some kinds of people you should select. Deep friendships are not accidental. They are not instant and they are not cheap. The key to establishing friendships is to start getting interested in other people's lives. Three types of friends you ought to select according to the Bible. Select close friends who will...

**1. Inspire you mentally.**

The Bible says in Proverbs 13:20 *"He who walks with wise will grow wise"* and *"As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another."* (Proverbs 27:17) Friends are part of your education. Do your friends make you think? Or do your friends put you to sleep? The Bible says choose friends that stimulate you, motivate you, that bring out the best in your life. Emerson said, "A friend is someone who makes you do what you can do." Choose people who stimulate you mentally. That is why you must make sure the people you hang out with the most are moving you in the right direction. They should be building you up rather than tearing you down.

Where do you want to be in 10 years? What kind of person do you want to be? Tell me two things about you and I can tell you where you'll be without even knowing you. Tell me the people you're spending your time with and what you're reading. Those two factors will determine your future. Your friends are too important to pick by chance. You must be intentional. That is why you need a church home. Get to know people at church. Build relationships. Join a small group. Or start a group! Gather some Christian friends from your office or your neighborhood to study the Bible together during lunch. You need Christian friends. Do what it takes to build those relationships.

**Talk it over.**

We all have different strengths when it comes to encouraging others. What are some ways you can encourage people around you in their life mission? \_\_\_\_\_

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## 2. Support you emotionally.

A friend is somebody who walks in when everybody else walks out. A friend is somebody who sees you through when other people see through you. A friend is somebody who is there. They are with you when the going gets tough. They will stand by you through thick and thin. Galatians 6:2 says, *"Bear one another's burdens."* A friend can be counted on in a crisis. They support you emotionally. Real friends show up when you are in a crisis. Real friends walk into your life when everybody else walks out. It is in a crisis that you learn pretty quickly the difference between acquaintances and friends. You have a lot of acquaintances. Who is the friend that is going to show up in the crisis in your life? Did you know that the Bible says that even when people turn their back on God, they still deserve to have friends? Job 6:14 says, *"Anyone who withholds kindness from a friend forsakes the fear of the Almighty."* (NIV).

The first thing everybody needs in a crisis is other people. You need a support group, some mature Christian brothers and sisters who will love you, who will care for you, who will comfort you, who will encourage you, who will support you, who will meet your needs and who will counsel you. That is why I never stop talking about the importance of being in a small group. Build a safety network in your life so when the rogue winds come you have genuine friends who will be there for you. You say, "But wait a minute! Don't you need to pray first in a crisis?" Well yeah, if you can. But the truth is, in a crisis we are often in so much stress and shock that we don't even know what to pray. It is at that point that you need other people praying for you. You need other people to say, "It is OK. We will pray for you. We will believe for you. We will be there for you." *"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds"* (Hebrews 10:24 NIV).

Real friends bring out the best in each other. They encourage and motivate one another to reach their goals. Friends who will cheer you on to success are a critical part of getting healthy. There is an old Zambian proverb that says, "When you run alone, you run fast. But when you run together, you run far." The lifetime of healthy habits ahead of you is not a 50-yard dash. It is a marathon. Marathon runners know there comes a point when you start getting a pain in your side that makes you want to give up. But if you have other people running with you, you can find the strength to continue to the finish line. The same is true in your journey to a healthier you. The only way you will achieve your God-given health goals is to have others involved in your life. God formed you for fellowship and for friendship. Friends help us to grow spiritually by holding us up and supporting us when we suffer.

### Talk it over.

Think of a recent experience where you felt angry or frustrated in life. How do you having friends who support you emotionally would have or changed the outcome of the incident?

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### 3. Strengthen you spiritually.

1 Thessalonians 5:11 *"Encourage one another and build each other up."* Hebrews 10:24 *"Spur one another on toward love and good works."* We all have a deep need for fellowship. There is a difference between fellowship and friendship. Friendship is based on your mind and your emotions. Fellowship is a function of your spirit. You can be friends with an unbeliever but you can only fellowship with other Christians. To fellowship, you have to be going in the same direction. The Bible says everybody needs a spiritual encourager, somebody you can share your struggles with, somebody who can pray with you, somebody who really lifts you up and is an encouragement not a discouragement to your spiritual life. Friends help you develop spiritual muscle. You will never grow to maturity just by attending worship services and being a passive spectator. Only participation in the full life of a local church builds spiritual muscle.

The Bible says, *"As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love"* (Ephesians 4:16b NLT, second edition). The phrase "one another" or "each other" is used more than 50 times in the New Testament. We are commanded to love each other, pray for each other, encourage each other, admonish each other, greet each other, serve each other, teach each other, accept each other, honor each other, bear each other's burdens, forgive each other, submit to each other, be devoted to each other, and many other mutual tasks. This is biblical membership! It may seem easier to be holy when no one else is around, but that is a false, untested holiness. Isolation breeds deceitfulness; it is easy to fool ourselves into thinking we are mature if there is no one to challenge us. Real spiritual maturity shows up in relationships. We need more than the Bible in order to grow; we need other believers. We grow faster and stronger by learning from each other and being accountable to each other. When others share what God is teaching them, you learn and grow, too.

#### **Talk it over.**

Look at your key friendships in life. How do your closest friends help you with your spiritual commitments or do they help? \_\_\_\_\_

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### **HOW TO BUILD FRIENDSHIPS FOR LIFE.**

God designed you for friendship. Strong friends are essential to helping you endure the stresses and pressures in life. You need to have someone who can spur you on to reach your goals whether those goals are spiritual, health, career, family and so on. These are the friends you need:

#### **1. Get interested in other people.**

Proverbs 18:24 *"He who wants to have friends must show himself friendly."* To have friends you must be a friend. The starting point is get interested in other people. *"An unfriendly man pursues selfish ends."* (Proverbs 18:1, NIV) In the Good News version it says, *"People who don't get along with others are interested only in themselves."* Selfishness is a guarantee for loneliness.

If you just look at yourself and you are just concerned with your needs, your aches, your pains, your desires and your goals then you are not going to have very many friends. You need to get interested in other people. The New York telephone company did a survey. They monitored phone calls to find out what is the most used word in a conversation "I". When you see a group picture, the first thing you do is look for your picture. If you look good it is a great picture. If you look bad it is a lousy photograph. We are built that way. All we see is ourselves. If you want friends, get interested in other people. That is the starting point. Don't be selfish. Get interested in their needs. Philippians 2:4 says *"Each of you should look not only after his own interest but also the interest of others."* That's the starting point. Get interested in others. By the way, friendships must be built, they are not automatic. They don't just happen. Your close friends you choose and you cultivate. If all you think about is yourself, you are going to be a pretty miserable person. If you truly want to be happy in life, you have to care about the needs of those around you. Paul gives Timothy as an example of this in Philippians 2:20-21: *"I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare. For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ"* (NIV).

Most people are worrying about their own plans and are not looking out for the interests of others. Most people don't get up in the morning and give their first thought to how someone else is doing. Most people are concerned with their own problems. And, that is why most people are unhappy with their lives! If you want to be one of those rare, unselfish people, change your focus. You have to shift your focus away from yourself to other people. That is not something that comes naturally, so it is something you have to learn to do. I have to admit that it saddens me how many times I have missed the needs of people around me that I love because I wasn't paying attention. I was not taking an interest in them. I had not shifted the focus from me to the others in the room. Because I was not looking out for their needs, I missed their needs. And that grieves me a lot. Instead of grieving missed opportunities, be intentional about looking away from yourself and to the needs of others, where you will find happiness in serving God through serving others. *"..Not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."* (Philippians 2:4 NIV).

### **Talk it over.**

Describe the relationship you have with your best friend. How does it compare to the relationship you have with God? \_\_\_\_\_

## **2. Smile.**

Proverbs 15:13 *"A happy heart makes the face cheerful!"* There is enormous power in a smile. It is the universal language. It is understood in every culture. You smile at somebody and they will smile back at you. It is automatic. Somebody said, "A smile is the shortest distance between two people." It costs nothing but it gives tremendous benefits. It is a powerful weapon in relationships, a tool. It breaks the ice when you smile at people. I think that a sourpuss Christian is an embarrassment to God. A sourpuss Christian is an insult and an embarrassment to God. The Bible says in 2 Corinthians 3:18 that our faces are to reflect the glory of the Lord. Yet, for a lot of Christians, the room lights up when they walk out.

How many of you are glad you are here today? How many of you are glad to live in this area? How many of you are looking forward to this next week? Notify your face! It takes six muscles to smile. It takes forty-two to frown. If you are frowning, you are wasting a lot of energy. Relax. Smile. Save energy. Smile. There is power in smiling. God meant for you to enjoy your life, not just endure it. He formed your body in a way that illustrates that truth. God's Word is clear: Enjoying your life will lead to a healthier year. The Bible teaches in Proverbs 17:22, "*A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones*" (NIV). In other words, he who smiles lasts. Science is beginning to catch on, too. Studies prove that when you smile, it is a great sign that you are enjoying life; your number of T-cells and your immunity to illness goes up. Humor is God's gift to you. Accept the gift! The Bible says in Matthew 11:19 that "*The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'* But wisdom is proved right by her deeds." (NIV).

While Jesus was the most intensive, ministry-oriented person who ever lived, he also lived life to the fullest and loved life with every fiber of his being. For him, this was no contradiction. So that means that if one of the great purposes of your life is to become more like Jesus Christ and it is, then you can't fulfill God's purpose unless you know how to enjoy life like he did. To enjoy life to the fullest, we need activities that recharge our emotions. We need activities that literally *re-create* us. Since God made each of us different, we all have different ways that he does that in our lives. Since I do a lot of "brain work" throughout the day, I enjoy "re-creating" myself by working with my hands. If you work with your hands all day, you may enjoy working with your mind, like reading or doing crossword puzzles, as a break.

### Talk It Over

Describe a time in your life where a smile helped you through a difficult situation.

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### 3. Don't be a chronic complainer.

There are people no matter what happens, no matter how good or bad a situation, they are going to find a way to be upset about something. They are good at tearing people down, discouraging an entire team, and slowing growth. Here is the reality: ***there is always something to complain about.*** Life is often exceedingly difficult. Organizations are often in decline. Things seemingly couldn't get worse. If we are honest with ourselves, "complainers" put words to the thoughts racing through our heads. Somebody who is always griping, always complaining, always has got an ache, a pain, something is always wrong with everything. They are not going to have very many friends because nobody likes to be around a crank. Philippians 2:14-15 "*Do all things without complaining and arguing (without murmuring and disputing) that you may be harmless and blameless, the sons of God without rebuke in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world.*" The person who is not a complainer is so unique and different than everybody else that they stand out like a star at night.

The person who is not a crank, who is not continually complaining and griping, that person is so unusual and different from the crowd that they stand out like a bright star in a pitch black night. If you want to have friends, smile, get interested in other people and stop being a chronic complainer. I heard about a man who went into a florist shop, complaining and chewing the florist up and down because the florist had gotten the wrong flowers to the wrong place. He said, "I came in and ordered a beautiful bouquet for my best friend for his housewarming. And I got to the housewarming and went inside and the bouquet said, 'Rest in peace.'" The florist said, "You think you should complain! You are lucky. Do you realize at some graveside there is a bouquet that says, 'Good luck in your new location!'" There is always something to gripe about. But if you want to have friends, get interested in other people, smile, and don't be a complainer. Now, there is a difference between someone who is genuinely talking about a problem and someone who is a chronic complainer.

There are a couple of ways you can tell a chronic complainer from someone with a problem. One way you can tell the difference is in the desire for a solution. When someone has a genuine problem they desire a solution to this problem and will listen and evaluate the solutions you offer. When someone is a chronic complainer they really don't want a solution. All they really want to do is whine, complain and play the martyr. So they will reject any solution you offer immediately. Another way you can tell the difference between someone with a problem and a chronic complainer is in the frequency of the complaints. I know that people go through periods of time where problems pile up and that is one thing. But it is something totally different when every time you see someone they have a complaint about something. Chances are some of us know people like this. You have known them for 10 years and in 10 years they haven't gotten a decent night's sleep, had a decent meal at a restaurant, went a day without a problem on their job or had a decent vacation. For the chronic complainer there is always something to complain about.

A last way I think you can tell the difference between someone with a problem and a chronic complainer is the way you feel after talking to them. When you talk to someone with a problem, their problem(s) may be so overwhelming that they drain you physically, spiritually and emotionally, but they don't suck the life out of you. On the other hand after you have talked to a chronic complainer you feel like the life force has been sucked right out of your life. You usually leave a discussion with a chronic complainer feeling discouraged and depleted because of their chronic complaining. Complaining has become so common in our culture that we really don't think anything about it. We dismiss it by saying that is just how some people are, or that is just the way it is and we go on. We really don't see it as much of a problem.

But what does the Bible say? "**Do all things without complaining and disputing**, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world," Philippians 2:14-15 (NKJV) We are commanded to do **everything** without complaining and arguing. Here is what is crazy about this. It says **everything**. The best I can tell there are no qualifiers for this. This isn't, do everything for God without complaining. It is not, do everything in church without complaining. It is not, do everything for your family without complaining. That would be tough, but not nearly as tough as what it actually says. Because what it says is do **EVERYTHING** without complaining. What we are being commanded here is not to complain about anything.

As followers of Christ we really are to do everything without griping and complaining. We are given the reasons for this here. The first is so that no one can criticize us. But the second and maybe most important reason is that we will stand out from the world. We are to do all things without murmuring and complaining so that it will shine like lights in the midst of a dark world and it will be obvious we are the children of God. The picture here is that those who don't know Jesus and live in spiritual darkness will be chronic complainers. When believers aren't chronic complainers like everyone else it will make us stand out from everyone else.

### **Talk it over.**

How do you think complaining makes something that is difficult seem even worse? \_\_\_\_\_

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### **4. Be a good listener.**

James 1:19 *"Be quick to listen and slow to speak."* If ever you wanted a formula for friendship, there it is. Be quick to listen and slow to speak. Experiment: Next time you get invited to a party find a total stranger, somebody you have never met before, and go up to that person and get them talking about themselves for twenty minutes. Don't say anything about yourself. Just draw them out, get them talking about themselves for twenty minutes. Then walk away. They will think you are the most intelligent person at the party. They will think you know so much and are so friendly and nice. Why? Because you didn't talk about you. You let them talk about their favorite subject; themselves. You don't have to be profound to influence people. You just have to listen and they will automatically like you.

Questions are to friendship what food is to the body. Proverbs 20:4 *"Counsel is in the heart of a man like a deep well but a man of understanding will draw it out."* It is wise to ask questions. You can learn from anyone if you just know the right questions to ask. I can learn from any person sitting here if I know how to draw it out. Like water out of a well. Learn to ask questions. Be a good listener. There is a big difference between hearing and listening. Hearing is simply the vibrations that take place in your ear. Listening is how you decode those vibrations in your brain. Many times I have heard my wife, my kids, or someone at my church say something but I didn't listen. Listening is a skill that is developed through practice, attention, and the desire to learn. Here are four tips to become a better listener.

- i. **Withhold judgment and criticism from the start.** Don't evaluate until you have heard and comprehended it all. I will admit that this is not natural. When someone else is talking and you hear something you disagree with, you are tempted to say, "Time out! Stop right there! Let us deal with this." And you never get any further. But you need to hear the person out. Many times people just need to unload. Take the time to understand what they are saying, or any disagreement is your fault (Proverbs 18:13 NIV). When we answer before listening, we are usually basing our answer on faulty assumptions. Don't be distracted by mannerisms or personality. Whenever we listen to somebody who is not presenting what they are sharing very well, it is our responsibility to decode what they are saying. Stop and say to yourself, "What is the content and what can I learn from this?"

- ii. **Keep calm.** Don't become defensive. It is inevitable that you will be criticized. The only way to never be criticized is to never do, say, or be anything. Proverbs 19:11 says, "A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense." If you are patient, you are wise. You need to be patient with people who are less mature and who misjudge.
- iii. **Be an active listener.** You become a good listener by asking creative questions. Proverbs 20:5 says, "*The purposes of a man's heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out.*" You can grasp someone's meaning by listening to what they have to say, but to truly understand their views; you have to ask questions to draw those views out. How do you do that? Ask clarifying questions: Who? What? When? How? These questions will let those you are listening to know that you are paying attention and want to know what they have to say.
- iv. **Paraphrase and summarize.** To be a good listener you must be able to tell a person what they have just told you before you talk about what you need to talk about. Before you share your side of the story, you need to let the other person know you understand where he or she is coming from by paraphrasing what they have just said.

### Talk it over

Think about your time with a friend talking to you. How much time do you spend actually being quiet and waiting on her/him to speak to you without interrupting? \_\_\_\_\_

### 5. Accept people unconditionally.

Romans 15:7 "*Accept each other, just as Christ accepted you.*" You cannot build a true friendship until you first give up the impression in your mind of what that person ought to be. Until you give up trying to change that person, you can never really get close to them. Change comes after acceptance, not prior to acceptance. Accept people unconditionally. Biblical friendship is always unconditional. "*A friend loves at all times.*" That means even when you are a jerk. A friend loves you at all times. It is unconditional. It is not "I love you if..." It is not "I love you because..." It is "I love you -- no matter what!" That is friendship. It is unconditional acceptance. The Bible says that is a key; this attitude of even though I don't have it all together, you are going to be my friend. You are a good egg even though you are a little cracked. I like you in spite of the fact you are not perfect.

The same love that God gives to you, he wants you to offer to everybody else that you come in contact with. It is not an option or a suggestion. It is a command from Jesus himself: "*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*" (John 13:34 NIV). If you are a follower of Christ, you must love everybody whether you like them or not in the same way that Christ loves you. That means you are to accept them completely, love them unconditionally, forgive them totally, and consider them extremely valuable. Loving others in this way will transform your relationships! The Bible says in 1 Corinthians 13:7, "*love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres.*" (NIV). This is how God loves you. God never stops being patient with you. God never stops believing in you. God never stops hoping for the best in your life. God never gives up on you. And that is what God wants you to do with everybody else.



## Talk It Over

Think about the following:

- Who needs more patience from you?
- Who needs more time from you?
- Who do you need to forgive?
- Who needs your mercy and grace?
- What will you do about these things this week?

### 6. Help people to feel significant.

Make them feel important. Bring out the best in them. Romans 12:10 *"Honor one another above yourself."* There is a surefire guarantee for friendship. People blossom under approval. They expand and open up under affirmation. They grow under appreciation. You help people to feel significant and you treat your friends with respect. You treat them as equals. You make them feel important. Philippians 2:3 *"Don't think more highly of yourself but think more highly of the other person."* Does that mean you go around saying, "I'm lousy! I'm a bunch of junk! I'm a little worm!" No, it has nothing to do with your own self-esteem. It just says when you are around people, you treat them with respect. You honor them because they are God's creation, and God doesn't make any junk. It doesn't matter who they are, you help people feel significant. Selfishness destroys relationships. It is the number one cause of conflict, arguments, divorce, and even war.

It is very easy for selfishness to creep into relationships. When you start a relationship, you work really hard at being unselfish. But as time goes on, selfishness begins to creep in. We tend to put more energy into starting and building relationships than we do in maintaining them. If selfishness destroys relationships, then it is *selflessness* that makes them grow. What does *selflessness* mean? It means less of "me" and more of "you." It means thinking of others before you think of yourself and putting the other person's needs before your own (Philippians 2:4). *Selflessness* brings out the best in others. It builds trust in relationships. In fact, if you start acting selfless in a relationship, it forces the other person to change, because you are not the same person any more, and they have to relate to you in different way. I have actually seen it many times; some of the most unlovable people that nobody wants to be around are transformed when someone is kind and selfless toward them, when they are given what they need, not what they deserve.

The Bible says in Galatians 6:7-8, *"Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life."* This is the biblical principle of sowing and reaping. What you sow, you are going to reap. God rewards *selflessness* with eternal life. He has wired the universe so that the more unselfish you are, the more he blesses you. Why? Because he wants you to become like him, and God is unselfish. Everything you have in life is a gift from God, because he was unselfish with you. You are most fulfilled in this life when you give yourself away. Jesus said, *"For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it."* (Mark 8:35b NIV).

## Talk It Over

In what ways do you think God blesses you when you are unselfish? \_\_\_\_\_

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### 7. Sympathize. Show your emotions.

If you want friends, reveal your emotions. The Bible says in Romans 12:15 *"Rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn."* Get involved emotionally. Be sensitive to people's needs. Listen to people and tune in to them. When they are hurting, you hurt with them. When they are happy, you are happy. One of the ways you can know who your real friends are is when you are successful; do they get jealous or excited? Your best friends, when you do something great, they go "Right on! Great!" They are not jealous. They are not uptight. They are not in competition with you. They are your fan section. They are cheering you on. If you want to be a friend, cheer people on when something good happens. I read a definition of a friend: A friend is somebody who laughs at your jokes even when they are not so good and sympathizes with your problems even when they are not so bad.

Jesus gives us a great model for demonstrating mercy in the story of the Good Samaritan. We can draw out at least four steps toward showing mercy from the Good Samaritan's actions. But we can't stop there. We must also **sympathize with people's pain**. The Bible says in Luke 10:33 says that when the Samaritan saw the wounded man, he had compassion on him. You see pain with your eyes, but you sympathize with your ears. Behind every need is a story. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the priest saw the man and his obvious need, but he had no clue about this man's journey. He could have assumed that the man brought this trouble on himself or that he shouldn't have been so careless. He could have thought up all kinds of stories or excuses to not help the man in need, because he didn't stop long enough to discover the truth.

But the Bible says in Galatians 6:2 *"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."* (NIV). What is Christ's law? Love God and love your neighbor. You may have never thought about this, but God has allowed certain struggles in your life so you can sympathize with and serve the people around you. The Bible says, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God (2 Corinthians 1:4 NIV).

## Talk it over

What does it mean to share one another's burdens? \_\_\_\_\_

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## 8. Stick with them in tough times.

Proverbs 18:24 *"There are 'friends' who pretend to be friends, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother."* He sticks with you. He is there in tough times. Friendship means commitment because it takes four things to make a friendship: time, togetherness, triumphs, trials. All of these things are important in building a friendship. All of those mean commitment. Stick with people. Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 talks about the value of friendship and says, *"Two are better than one because if one falls the other lifts him up. Pity the man who is all by himself when he falls."* Everybody needs at least one close friend. You don't need a lot of friends. A lot of friends can be a detriment. You can have so many acquaintances that you are always flitting around to social gatherings and parties but you don't have any one person you can depend on. Two tests of friendship:

- A friend is someone you can tell your most heretical idea to and they won't blow you away. You can lay it all out and they are going to be there for you.
- A friend is somebody who can confront you about a weakness and you won't get mad at them. They can point out a blind spot in your life and you will not retaliate or become defensive.

Based on that, how many close friends do you have? Everybody needs at least one, one friend who can say, "Warren, you are off base. You are getting off track here." They have the right to confront you and you will accept it because you know, more than anything else, they love you unconditionally. That is commitment. You stick with them in tough times. A friend is somebody who is in your corner when you are cornered. A friend is somebody who walks in when everybody else walks out. A close friend is kind of like toothpaste, they come through in a squeeze.

### Talk it over.

What needs have you neglected to address in someone's life because you were too busy? What can you do today to shift your focus toward standing with others in tough times? \_\_\_\_\_

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## 9. Share Christ with them.

Luke 8:39 Jesus told the man, *"Go back home, tell your friends, tell your family, tell them how much God has done for you."* The best thing you can do for your friend is share Christ with them. That is the greatest thing you can do. Share with them eternal life and the secret of real joy, the secret of purpose in life. When you share your faith with a friend, you are making a friend for life, not just here and now, but for eternity. Forever and ever. A number of years ago I went to a friend named Craig and said, "Craig, I need to apologize to you. I need to ask your forgiveness. You have been my friend for nearly five years and yet I have never told you about the most important thing in my life. I have never explained to you the greatest thing that ever happened to me. If I really thought of you as a friend, I would have told you." And I shared with him about how I had become a Christian and about the changes He had made in my life; how I used to have a lot of problems with worry and now I had a lot of peace; how I used to fear dying and now I'm not afraid of dying; how I used to feel like "What is the purpose of my life?"

And now I have a purpose for life; how I used to have a problem with impatience but God began to work on that. Craig didn't accept Christ. He didn't make a commitment at that time, but it opened the door and the seed was planted. A little while later, he became a believer too. Who of your best friends have you never told about the most important thing in your life? If they are really a friend that is the best thing you can do for them. They did a survey once and found that 90% of everybody who becomes a Christian becomes a believer because of a close friend or relative. For some of my friends, I'm the only way they are going to know. It is the same with you. When was the last time you invited somebody to church who is a friend, who needs to hear what you are hearing? Make friends for Christ.

## CONCLUSION.

A couple of years ago I bought a book. How To Win Friends and Influence People by Dale Carnegie. This is one of the greatest best sellers of all times. It is sold 27 million copies. On page 100 Dale Carnegie summarizes his entire book in one sentence. He spent years and years researching How To Win Friends and Influence People. He talked to literally thousands and thousands of people. He hired researchers to go into libraries and read entire libraries to find the key. They read every biography of all the major characters. He said that together he and his researchers read over 400 biographies of Theodore Roosevelt alone. It is Just one man trying to find out what are the keys to winning friends and influencing people. On page 99-100 he summarizes it in one sentence: "Philosophers have been speculating on the rules of human relationships for thousands of years and out of all that speculation has evolved only one principle. It is not new. It is as old as history."

Jesus taught it among the stony hills of Judea 19 centuries ago. Jesus summed it up in one thought, probably the most important rule in the world. *'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.'*" I knew that, but the key is applying it. Everything that we have just looked at all of those nine principles can be summed up in what Jesus said, treat other people the way you want to be treated and you can have all the friends that you can handle. How are you fixed for friends? Are you a friendly person? The Bible says in Proverbs if you want to have friends you must be friendly. I am spending time with this because it is part of balanced living. As God said in Genesis, He created man in a perfect environment in the Garden of Eden. Adam had everything he wanted and yet God said it is still not good enough. It is not good for man to be alone. Loneliness is not a part of God's will for your life.

God says you were made for relationships. Friends are important. You are not balanced unless you have friends, close friends, the right kind. How about your friends? Are your friends a help or a hindrance? Do they build you up or tear you down? Do you feel free to share your faith? Do they build you up spiritually, or are you hesitant to even talk about those things? What kind of friend is that if you can't even talk about the most important thing in your life? The greatest place to make friends is right here in church. Get involved in a Bible study or small group where you can get somebody who will pray for you and care for you and support you emotionally, stimulate you mentally and strengthen you spiritually. How many of you have had a friend or relative, maybe a brother or sister who went off the deep end because of the wrong friends? We have all seen it. The wrong kind of dating can ruin God's will for your life. Which of your friends do you need to talk to about the Lord?

This is an important area, just as important as Bible study, prayer, and church attendance having the right kind of friends. What does Jesus have to say about it? John 15:15 Jesus said, *"I no longer call you my servants but I call you my friends."* The God of the universe, the God who made the whole world comes down and says, "You can be my friend". That is good news! You don't have to be afraid of Him. You don't have to cower in fear. God says, "I want you to be my friend." That is why every week I say, "Jesus Christ came not to give us a religion but a relationship. Not to scare us but to save us." If you don't have that relationship, that is the one you start with today. Open up a friendship with Christ and ask Him to help put these principles in your life to make you a friendly person.

### **Talk It Over**

1. What keeps you from being able to show up for your friends when they need you? \_\_\_\_\_  
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2. Who in your life needs your presence right now? How will you show up for him or her today? \_\_\_\_\_  
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3. With whom do you have deep friendships? What did it take to get to that point of friendship? \_\_\_\_\_  
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\_\_\_\_\_
4. What do you need to do in order to learn what God is teaching other people and help hold them accountable? \_\_\_\_\_  
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### **A VERSE TO REMEMBER**

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.  
Ecclesiastes 4:9-10

### **PRAYER FOR THE DAY**

Dear Lord, teach me to love others the way you first loved me. As I build relationships with others, let them see you in the extent of my generosity, the authenticity of my kindness, and the depths of my love. All of those things are only possible through you, the God who abides with me and calls me friend.

## YOUR PLAN OF ACTION

### INTRODUCTION.

Luke 2:52 we see an example of Jesus Christ. Jesus was the most perfectly balanced person. *"And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and favor with man."* Jesus Christ grew in these areas. He grew in wisdom. That means He grew intellectually. He grew in stature. That means He grew physically. He grew in favor with God. That means He developed spiritually. He grew in favor with man. That means He developed socially. He was a perfect picture of balanced humanity. We need to personalize and apply this principle of living a balanced life because the more specific we are about our destination, the more likely we will arrive where we want to go. We are a work in progress and God is not finished with us yet (Eph. 2:10). In the Bible, health is viewed as completeness or wholeness. It is only when individuals are in good physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual condition that they can be said to be balanced and healthy.

If you want to live a truly balanced life, you can only look at one person in all of history as a model: Jesus. If you put him at the center of your life, your life will be more balanced. Think of your life like a wheel. The center of the wheel is a hub. All of the spokes of your life (which represent your relationships, your family, your career, your goals, etc.) come from that hub. We all build our lives around some sort of hub. The question is what will be your hub? Will it be your family? Will it be your career? Will it be money? The center of your life is critical to developing a balanced life. A solid center leads to a solid life. A weak, flimsy center leads to a weak life. When I hear people tell me that their lives are coming unglued, it usually means one thing: They have a faulty center. Something other than God has taken priority in their lives. Not only does the hub create stability, but it also controls and influences everything else about your life. Whatever you put at the center of your life will also be your source of power. The power of a wheel always emanates from the center outward never the other way around. How do you get started in balancing your life?

#### **i. Take inventory.**

Look at your life. Say, "Where am I in balance? Where am I out of balance?" Look at yourself. Evaluate it. Do self-examination. Have a spiritual, mental, emotional check-up and evaluate your lifestyle. Proverbs is saying it is wise to analyze. Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Edgar Guest wrote a poem called "Myself". It went something like this:

I have to live with myself  
And so I want to be fit for myself to know.  
I don't want to stand with the setting sun  
And hate myself for the things I have done.

How do you avoid that? How do you avoid coming to the end of your life saying, "If only..." Do it by stopping in the middle of life and analyzing it, looking at it, evaluating and saying, "Where am I out of balance? What is missing?" Do you remember the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15?

The prodigal son went out and spent all of his money, had a good time with wine, women and song, but he ran out of his inheritance and ends up living in a pigsty eating pig food. In Luke 15:17 there is the turning point in his life. It says this: "*He came to his senses.*" He said, "What am I doing here? I am going to go home." Have you done that? Have you come to your senses? Have you said, "I am not going to waste the rest of my life? I am going to make it count. I am going to get my life in balance." This is the time to get in balance; socially, mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally all of these areas. I challenge you, as homework this week, go home and do a personal check-up, an emotional mental check-up. Ask yourself:

- a. Mental balance.* Am I mentally sharper than I was five years ago? If not, why not? What am I going to do about it?" I know a lot of Christians who are mentally flabby. They turn on the TV, put their mind in neutral and watch the boob tube.
- b. Physical balance.* "Am I always complaining of a lack of energy?" And I am always fatigued. I pay no regard to what I eat or how I exercise or how much sleep I get. I disregard my physical condition totally. Am I going to do anything about it? Am I a workaholic or do I take time off for physical restoration?
- c. Spiritual balance?* Is my first reaction to a problem to pray, or do I usually use that as a last resort? Do I take time for God? Do I trust Him? Do I really know Him? Do I read the Bible on a regular basis? Am I choosing to grow spiritually?
- d. Emotional balance.* Do I worry a lot? Am I a moody person? Am I mastered by my moods? Do I lose my temper at the slightest little thing? Am I irritable? Do I get depressed easily?
- e. Social balance.* Who can I count on as a genuine friend? Who can count on me as a genuine friend?

If you are really serious about getting your life in balance this week, I encourage you to ask your mate to evaluate. Now we are getting serious! The fact is, all of us have blind spots. I think I am in balance. You think you are in balance. We all do. But other people say, "That guy is out of balance!" The Bible says there is safety and wisdom in a multitude of counselors. So when in doubt, check it out. Ask your spouse/friend how you are doing emotionally, physically, spiritually, and mentally. Seek second opinion.

### **Talk it over.**

What keeps you too busy to take a personal inventory?\_\_\_\_\_

### **ii. Write down a plan of action.**

We plan every other area of our lives except our personal life. Balance does not come by accident. You have to work at it. It is not automatic. You plan and set goals and say specifically what you are going to do. Ephesians 5:15 "*Be very careful then how you live not as unwise but as wise.*" Don't be foolish in the way you use your time. Be careful. Analyze it. "*Make the most of every opportunity.*" How do you make the most of every opportunity? It is by planning for it and by preparing for it. When opportunity comes, you are ready for it. You develop a plan of action. One of the things that make balance in your life is habits. We are creatures of habit.

**Talk it over.**

How do you break bad habits and start new ones in order to get a balanced life? \_\_\_\_\_

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**iii. Establish Christ in the center of your life.**

Just like a wheel has to have a hub, your life has to have something to center on. You will always be out of balance until you get something -- one thing -- that your life centers on. You can center it on making money, but that will get you out of balance. You can center it on retiring and recreation, but that will get you out of balance. In a wheel, all the power comes through at the point of the hub and then it is distributed out to the spokes that turn the wheel. Likewise, in your life, when you put Christ in the center of your life, the power comes through that and goes out to all of these other areas and gives you balance. That is why the Bible says, "*Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness...*" and all of these things will be brought into focus, into balance.

I had a person come to me recently and say, "I have a problem. My life is falling apart." How do you put a life that is falling apart back together? What holds it together? I asked the person, "Would you like to know the glue that would put your life together?" Colossians 1:15 talks about Jesus Christ. "*He is the image of the invisible God.*" You don't see God. That is why He sent Jesus to earth so you could see Him. "*... the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things are created, things in heaven and on the earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities, all things were created by Him and for Him. He is before all things and in Him all things pull together.*"

If your life is falling apart, it is because Jesus Christ is not at the center to hold all things together. Put Him at the center and watch Him pull it back together. Think about an atom with a nucleus of protons and neutrons swirling around and on the outside electrons swirling around it. What holds the atom together? Jesus Christ. He holds all things together in the world and in your life. The bottom line is in starting for balance; Jesus Christ wants to be the center of your life. You can start over, you can have a new beginning, you can have a clean slate and this time can be the time that you get your personal life in balance.

**Talk it over.**

Why do you think you bounce back faster from adversity when your life is centered on Jesus?

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## **CONCLUSION.**

What are the benefits of being balanced in life? They are innumerable. If you get your personal life in balance, you will have more contentment. You will be more confident. You will have fewer aches and pains. You will have more energy. You won't wear out as easily because your life is in balance and you're not creating a rough spot in your life. You will enjoy life more. You will be more mentally alert. You will be deeper spiritually. You will be more emotionally stable. You will feel better physically. You will enjoy your friendships and relationships much, much more. I think imbalance is the number one problem I see in people's lives. It shows itself in many different forms because we get imbalanced in different areas. But it is the same root and it is what we are going to work on together. We are not talking about a self-help program where you go out and change your life on your own willpower. We are going to look at how Jesus Christ can make a difference. The starting point is put Him at the center.

Would you pray a prayer in your heart right now and ask Him to be the center of your life? Whether you have ever done it before or if this is the fiftieth time, would you ask Him to become the focal point of your life so that everything else will be brought into balance? If your life is falling apart, would you say, "Jesus Christ, would you take the pieces and put it back together?" He loves you, He wants to help you, and He is waiting on you.