

GOD'S PLAN FOR CHRISTIAN SERVICE

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I. INTRODUCTION

God wants *every* believer to be fruitful and useful to Him. There are no exceptions. The Father has not called for only *some* believers to reach maturity, leaving the rest of the Body of Christ to remain immature, spiritual babes. The call to maturity is to every member of the Church. The writer of Hebrews exhorts us to leave behind the elementary principles of Christ (the "basics") and to "press on toward maturity" (Hebrews 6:1,2). This does not mean that we are to cast aside such basic principles as repentance, faith, baptisms, etc. On the contrary, these must be firmly rooted in our hearts and minds and consistently put into practice in our lives. All through our Christian walk, we will have to remind ourselves of these basics. But the fact remains that **God wants us to move on toward maturity!**

Paul describes the process of maturing as growing up in all aspects into Christ, so that we can all ". . . attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ . . ." (Ephesians 4:13-15). The outcome of our maturing is that we are no longer children. While it is true that we are to retain a child-like dependence on the Lord and remain innocent toward evil, we are *not* to remain children in our knowledge of God and His ways. "*Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be babes, but in your thinking be mature*" (I Corinthians 14:20).

Having laid down the basics, there are certain things we must add to our walk with the Lord in order for us to become spiritually mature adults. It is to mature believers that God will entrust the great things He's proclaimed He'll do in these last days. Let's be diligent to press on toward maturity, so that we too can be useful and fruitful Christians, fit for the Master's use!

Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of instruction about washings, and laying on of hands and the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.

Hebrews 6:1,2

Until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ.

Ephesians 4:13-15

Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be babes, but in your thinking be mature.

I Corinthians 14:20

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Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence.

For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, in order that by them you might become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge; and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness; and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love.

For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins.

Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble; for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you.

II Peter 1:2-11

Read II Peter 1:2-11. This passage of scripture is addressed to us who are in Christ. We have been given everything pertaining to life and godliness. We have been made partakers of the divine nature. And yet with all this, the Bible tells us that there are still some things that we must add to our faith. *“For this very reason, make every effort to **add to your faith** goodness . . .”* (II Peter 1:5-7 NIV). The qualities that we must add are:

- Moral Excellence
- Knowledge
- Self-control
- Perseverance *
- Godliness
- Brotherly Kindness *
- Love *

If these qualities are ours *and increasing*, then we will be neither useless nor unfruitful. Furthermore, if we practice these qualities, **we will never stumble!** Here is a picture of spiritual maturity: a person who is fruitful and useful to God, one who never stumbles about in confusion or dismay.

The scriptures point out, however, that we have a responsibility in this process of maturing. The Bible does not say that *God* will add these qualities to our faith. It plainly states that *we* are to add them, and that we are to be *diligent* in doing so. It is a maturing Christian who understands his responsibility and acts accordingly. Whether or not these qualities are added is up to us. If we want to be fruitful and useful, then *we* must diligently add to our faith the qualities which the apostle Peter lists.

*The subject of perseverance (steadfastness, patience) was covered in Lesson 10 of Session One (*Foundations For Christian Growth*); Brotherly Kindness and Love will be discussed in Lessons 2 and 3 of this session.

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In this lesson we will discuss the qualities:

- Moral Excellence
- Knowledge
- Self-control
- Godliness

II. MORAL EXCELLENCE

It is interesting to note that **moral excellence** (or moral purity) is at the top of the list. There is little that is quicker to destroy our effectiveness as Christians and hamper our spiritual growth than *loose morals!* The Word of God lays down a standard of holiness and righteous living which every believer must take heed to, if he desires to grow in God.

No Christian should feel that he is "above" immorality, or that it is something in which he could never become involved. The apostle Paul pointed to the unrighteous behavior of the children of Israel as a **warning to us!** "*Now these things happened as examples for us, that we should not crave evil things, as they also craved*" (I Corinthians 10:6). The children of Israel practiced idolatry and immorality; they tempted God and grumbled against Him (I Corinthians 10:7-10). "*Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for **our instruction** . . .*" (I Corinthians 10:11). Paul would hardly have spoken such an austere warning if he had felt that Christians were completely immune to immorality.

Every Christian needs to add moral excellence and purity to his faith. What's more, it should be *increasing* in those who have already started to do so. Certain patterns of behavior which are acceptable in the world become *unacceptable* when a person renounces sin and is born again. For example, for a man and a woman to live together without being married is acceptable in today's society. Yet the Word of God tells us that fornication is sin, from which we should run away (I Corinthians 6:18). **A person will not grow in the Lord while openly living in direct violation to the holy standard established in the Bible.** If a believer wants to grow up into Christ, then he will have to grow in holiness,

Now these things happened as examples for us, that we should not crave evil things, as they also craved.

I Corinthians 10:6

And do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, "THE PEOPLE SAT DOWN TO EAT AND DRINK, AND STOOD UP TO PLAY." Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day. Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents. Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.

I Corinthians 10:7-10

Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

I Corinthians 10:11

Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body.

I Corinthians 6:18

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"Therefore, COME OUT FROM THEIR MIDST AND BE SEPARATE," says the Lord. "AND DO NOT TOUCH WHAT IS UNCLEAR; And I will welcome you."

II Corinthians 6:17

Behold, listen! The cry of the daughter of my people from a distant land: "Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not within her? Why have they provoked Me with their graven images, with foreign idols?"
Jeremiah 8:19

"Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'Thus says the Lord God, "Repent and turn away from your idols, and turn your faces away from all your abominations.'" "
Ezekiel 14:6

"When you offer your gifts, when you cause your sons to pass through the fire, you are defiling yourselves with all your idols to this day. And shall I be inquired of by you, O house of Israel? As I live," declares the Lord God, "I will not be inquired of by you."
Ezekiel 20:31

"For your husband is your Maker, whose name is the Lord of hosts; and your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel, who is called the God of all the earth."
Isaiah 54:5

"Not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the Lord.
Jeremiah 31:32

consistently adding moral excellence to his faith in God. God is holy; those who want to mature in God must mature in moral excellence. "*But like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, 'YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY'*" (I Peter 1:15,16).

A. LOVE NOT THE WORLD

"Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (I John 2:15). God has called His people to be separate from the world (II Corinthians 6:17), set apart from society's corrupt standards by their upright behavior. (The word "holy" or "sanctified" means to be separate or set apart.) Thus, anyone who wants to walk with God must make a choice between following God and His standards, or following the standards of the world. The world is at enmity with God because of sin; sin has corrupted every aspect of society. And so it is impossible for a believer to pattern his behavior after popular trends. The Bible is the only moral standard after which we can pattern our behavior.

1. Friendship with the world

Throughout the Old Testament, God cried out to the Israelites to come away from idol worship and the immoral actions that accompanied it (Jeremiah 8:19; Ezekiel 14:6; Ezekiel 20:31). God spoke of Israel as His "wife" (Isaiah 54:5; Jeremiah 31:32) and called the Israelites "adulteresses" for

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going after other gods (Jeremiah 2:20; 3:9). The apostle James picked up this same theme when addressing Christians whose moral standards are an image of the world's standards. "*You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God*" (James 4:4).

"Friendship with the world" refers to participating in the immoral practices that go on in the society around us. The believers to whom James spoke thought that they could walk with God, while simultaneously engaging in the greed and immorality that went on around them. But the Bible says that is an absolute impossibility. **No one can be a friend of God and a friend of the world at the same time.** Immoral behavior and spiritual growth cannot occur simultaneously in any Christian!

2. In the world/not of the world

The Biblical call to holiness and moral purity does not mean that we are to isolate ourselves physically from the rest of society. Jesus prayed to the Father and asked not that we would be taken out of the world, but that we would be kept safe from the evil one (John 17:15). Jesus sent us *into* the world just as the Father sent Him into the world (John 17:18). Thus it is that we as believers are to be **IN** the world but not **OF** the world. Being *in* the world refers to living in and among the rest of unsaved society. Being *of* the world refers to a person taking **the world's values and morals** as his own, completely identifying with the system under which the rest of society operates.

"For long ago I broke your yoke and tore off your bonds; but you said, 'I will not serve!' For on every high hill and under every green tree you have lain down as a harlot."

Jeremiah 2:20

"And it came about because of the lightness of her harlotry, that she polluted the land and committed adultery with stones and trees."

Jeremiah 3:9

You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

James 4:4

"I do not ask Thee to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one."

John 17:15

"As Thou didst send Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world."

John 17:18

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Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts, which wage war against the soul.

I Peter 2:11

Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may on account of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.

I Peter 2:12

Do all things without grumbling or disputing; that you may prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world.

Philippians 2:14,15

But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.

James 1:14,15

Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.

II Corinthians 5:17

For he who has died is freed from sin.

Romans 6:7

But Jesus said to him, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

Luke 9:62

A believer can be *in* the world, living and functioning in the midst of unregenerate men, while not sharing their values and moral standards. "*Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts, which wage war against the soul*" (I Peter 2:11). Peter calls us "aliens" and "strangers," referring to the fact that we are not of this world, even though we live in it. We are citizens of heaven — our true home. Peter goes on to urge us to keep our "*behavior excellent among the Gentiles,*" or the world (I Peter 2:12). Moral purity in our lives will stand out in a day when morals are steadily decaying. "*Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may prove yourselves to be **blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach** in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, **among whom you appear as lights in the world***" (Philippians 2:14,15).

B. FORSAKE SIN

No believer can afford to take a *neutral attitude* toward sin and immorality. One has to be aggressive against it, refusing even the *thought* of immorality. If a Christian *refuses* to give in to lust, he won't experience a problem with sin. But if he stays in sin's "gravitational pull," he'll doubtless fall into it. "*But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death*" (James 1:14,15). Lust is a desire for something forbidden. This verse points out that **temptation comes when we are carried away by desire for something which God has expressly prohibited**. But lust must be conceived in the heart and mind before sin takes place. This "conception" comes about through meditation and contemplation of the thing forbidden; only *then* does it result in sin.

Sin and immorality don't just "happen" to people. Sin has its roots in lustful thoughts that are meditated upon, rather than rejected. Christians must realize that they are new creatures and that they do not have to follow the carnal dictates of the flesh and mind (II Corinthians 5:17; Romans 6:7). The only way that a Christian can deal with sin as a new creation is to **forsake it as an act of the will**. That means one cannot look back to the "fun" that there was in sin. Jesus said, "*No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God*" (Luke 9:62). Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt because she cast longing looks

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back at the city of Sodom (Genesis 19:24-26). Every believer should make the quality decision to forsake sin and to renounce old behavior patterns once and for all (II Corinthians 4:2).

C. RESULTS OF IMMORALITY

After lust has conceived and brought forth sin, the result is always *death*. **Flabby moral standards have ruined the effectiveness of God's people in the past.** The destructive effects of immorality can be seen in a number of Old Testament figures. The mighty judge of Israel, Samson, experienced his downfall because of his lust for women (Judges 16:1,2,16,17,21). King David committed adultery with Bathsheba, and it resulted in the death of his child (II Samuel 12:13,14). Solomon's love for foreign women, which was strictly forbidden in the Law of Moses (Deuteronomy 7:3,4), proved to be his downfall; his foreign wives drew him into idolatry (I Kings 11:1-3).

Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven, and He overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. But his wife, from behind him, looked back; and she became a pillar of salt.

Genesis 19:24-26

But we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

II Corinthians 4:2

Now Samson went to Gaza and saw a harlot there, and went in to her. When it was told to the Gazites, saying, "Samson has come here," they surrounded the place and lay in wait for him all night at the gate of the city. And they kept silent all night, saying, "Let us wait until the morning light, then we will kill him."

And it came about when she pressed him daily with her words and urged him, that his soul was annoyed to death. So he told her all that was in his heart and said to her, "A razor has never come on my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If I am shaved, then my strength will leave me and I shall become weak and be like any other man."

Then the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes; and they brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze chains, and he was a grinder in the prison.

Judges 16:1,2,16,17,21

(over)

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Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan said to David, "The Lord also has taken away your sin; you shall not die. However, because by this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also that is born to you shall surely die."

II Samuel 12:13,14

"Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods; then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and He will quickly destroy you."

Deuteronomy 7:3,4

Now King Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the sons of Israel, "You shall not associate with them, neither shall they associate with you, for they will surely turn your heart away after their gods." Solomon held fast to these in love. And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines, and his wives turned his heart away.

I Kings 11:1-3

For you were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light.

Ephesians 5:8

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.

Hebrews 12:1

Even today, moral looseness in the Body of Christ is ruining both those who engage in it and those who are disillusioned by observing it. Christian homes and churches are destroyed and the work of God hindered because of immorality. Its effects may not be immediate; but if unrighteousness continues, they are inevitable. Judgment always follows close on the heels of unrighteousness.

D. ESTABLISH GOD'S STANDARD

Every believer needs to establish God's standard of moral excellence in his own mind. This standard is clear in the scriptures. "*Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God*" (I Corinthians 6:9,10). As long as a Christian tries to be on two sides of the fence, living for God while still dabbling in sinful practices, he'll never grow in God. Indeed, he will regress spiritually until the things of God and the Word become distant and dim.

But when God's standard of moral excellence becomes plain in a believer's heart and mind, he is on the way to spiritual maturity. We must add to our faith in God *moral excellence*, shining out as lights in a world of moral darkness, children of the light and of the day (Ephesians 5:8). Whenever a person decides to pattern his life after what God's Word says, and conforms his behavior to God's standard of purity, that obedience will always be rewarded by a deeper understanding of God and His ways. God is calling upon us as His children to remove from our lives any *hindrance of sin* that might beset us, so that we can mature into the full-grown new creatures He has intended us to be (Hebrews 12:1).

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III. KNOWLEDGE

To our moral excellence and faith, we are to add **knowledge**. Knowledge is essential to our growth as Christians. It is impossible for a believer to grow spiritually while remaining ignorant of what God has declared in His Word. We often hear the statement, "What you don't know can't hurt you!" This is not what the Bible says. The scriptures state that **ignorance is destructive and keeps people in bondage** (Hosea 4:6; Isaiah 5:13). Many believers today are devastated by the enemy because they don't realize what belongs to them in Christ Jesus. Their *ignorance* prevents them from taking a stand against the onslaughts of the adversary.

God does not want the Church to stumble about in ignorance, uninformed about the facts of her redemption. Doubtless, there are some things which we cannot know, and will not know, until Jesus returns. Paul said, "*For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known*" (I Corinthians 13:12; see also Psalm 131). But this does not mean that we are to remain completely uninformed. There are facts revealed in God's Word which we can know, indeed which we **MUST** know, if we are to progress spiritually.

Paul's prayer for the Ephesian church (a church of no low spiritual stature) is an eloquent statement of what God wants us to realize about our redemption (Ephesians 1:15-19). The apostle's prayer for the Colossians echoes his prayer for the Ephesians. ". . . *we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding*" (Colossians 1:9). God wants us to be **FILLED WITH KNOWLEDGE**, knowledge of Himself and His will (both of which are clearly revealed in His Word). Spiritual growth will never occur until this revelation of who God is and what He has done for us springs up and increases in our lives.

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being My priest. Since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.

Hosea 4:6

Therefore My people go into exile for their lack of knowledge; and their honorable men are famished, and their multitude is parched with thirst.

Isaiah 5:13

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known.

I Corinthians 13:12

O Lord, my heart is not proud, nor my eyes haughty; nor do I involve myself in great matters, or in things too difficult for me.

Surely I have composed and quieted my soul; like a weaned child rests against his mother, my soul is like a weaned child within me.

O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and forever.

Psalms 131

For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you, and your love for all the saints, do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers; that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him.

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might.

Ephesians 1:15-19

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A. TWO KINDS OF IGNORANCE

Ignorance is not God's plan for the Body of Christ. He wants all of His children to be grounded in the knowledge of what He has done for them. Ignorance of these realities falls into two main categories. The first is that ignorance which is simply *lack of information*. The second is that ignorance which arises out of a *hardened heart*.

1. A Lack of Information

Very often, believers are destroyed because they have never been taught the complete truth concerning their redemption through Christ. Because of misinformation, they are prey to the enemy's devices. Thus it is that many Christians live defeated lives, beaten down by adversity, even though the gospel to which they adhere proclaims complete release from every form of bondage. Because of their ignorance, they never avail themselves of what belongs to them.

But a person's ignorance does not in any way alter the reality and surety of what God has done. Whether we are aware of it or not, our redemption is an accomplished fact. Whether or not we know it, the reality of our freedom from bondage still stands firm. But ignorance hinders believers from acting upon and possessing what God has so freely given to all of His children.

This is strikingly illustrated in the story of Aram's siege of Samaria. **Read II Kings 6:24-7:20.** God supernaturally drove away the Aramean army, leaving the city of Samaria free from enemy onslaught. Israel's adversaries were completely defeated. And yet, for a time, the people of Samaria remained confined within the walls of the city, with no food. They stayed in the city, not because of the overwhelming might of the opposing army, but because of their ignorance of that army's defeat. **They were in bondage because of their own ignorance.** They didn't venture out until they were *informed* of Aram's defeat.

And there was a great famine in Samaria; and behold, they besieged it, until a donkey's head was sold for eighty shekels of silver, and a fourth of a kab of dove's dung for five shekels of silver.

For the Lord had caused the army of the Arameans to hear a sound of chariots and a sound of horses, even the sound of a great army, so that they said to one another, "Behold, the king of Israel has hired against us the kings of the Hittites and the kings of the Egyptians, to come upon us." Therefore they arose and fled in the twilight, and left their tents and their horses and their donkeys, even the camp just as it was, and fled for their life.

So they came and called to the gatekeepers of the city, and they told them, saying, "We came to the camp of the Arameans, and behold, there was no one there, nor the voice of man, only the horses tied and the donkeys tied, and the tents just as they were."

They took therefore two chariots with horses, and the king sent after the army of the Arameans, saying, "Go and see."

And they went after them to the Jordan, and behold, all the way was full of clothes and equipment, which the Arameans had thrown away in their haste. Then the messengers returned and told the king.

So the people went out and plundered the camp of the Arameans. Then a measure of fine flour was sold for a shekel and two measures of barley for a shekel, according to the word of the Lord.

II Kings 6:25; 7:6, 7, 10, 14-16

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All too often, much the same thing happens to believers today. Christians remain in bondage to an enemy whom Jesus defeated two thousand years ago on the cross. Their lack of knowledge about the full scope of redemption leaves an open door for Satan to lie and deceive them. Thus, they stay "in the city," hiding from a foe who has already been vanquished.

2. A Hardened Heart

There is a type of ignorance which is more than just lack of information. This ignorance involves a *choice* of complacency toward knowledge or a complete rejection of knowledge. Some people either can't be bothered to hear, or they don't like what they hear. Isaiah said of the Israelites, "*But they do not pay attention to the deeds of the Lord, nor do they consider the work of His hands. Therefore My people go into exile for their lack of knowledge*" (Isaiah 5:12,13). They were ignorant because of *complacency*. The prophet Hosea points out that the Israelites' lack of knowledge was also a result of their rejecting knowledge (Hosea 4:6). In either of these cases, a *moral choice* was made, a choice of *complacency* toward knowledge or one of *rejection* of knowledge. Very often, these attitudes are the result of a hardened heart (Ephesians 4:18).

And their banquets are accompanied by lyre and harp, by tambourine and flute, and by wine; but they do not pay attention to the deeds of the Lord, nor do they consider the work of His hands. Therefore My people go into exile for their lack of knowledge; and their honorable men are famished, and their multitude is parched with thirst.

Isaiah 5:12,13

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being My priest. Since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.

Hosea 4:6

Being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart.

Ephesians 4:18

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Wisdom shouts in the street, she lifts her voice in the square; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out; at the entrance of the gates in the city, she utters her sayings: "How long, O naive ones, will you love simplicity? And scoffers delight themselves in scoffing, and fools hate knowledge?"

"Turn to my reproof, behold, I will pour out my spirit on you; I will make my words known to you. Because I called, and you refused; I stretched out my hand, and no one paid attention; and you neglected all my counsel, and did not want my reproof; I will even laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your dread comes, when your dread comes like a storm, and your calamity comes on like a whirlwind, and distress and anguish come on you.

"Then they will call on me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently, but they shall not find me, because they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Lord. They would not accept my counsel, they spurned all my reproof.

"So they shall eat of the fruit of their own way, and be satiated with their own devices. For the waywardness of the naive shall kill them, and the complacency of fools shall destroy them. But he who listens to me shall live securely, and shall be at ease from the dread of evil."

Proverbs 1:20-33

"So they shall eat of the fruit of their own way, and be satiated with their own devices."

Proverbs 1:31

"Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you."

Matthew 7:7

Read Proverbs 1:20-33. This passage of scripture is addressed to those who are ignorant through complacency or because they have "hated knowledge." It is a stern warning to those who lack understanding simply because they couldn't be bothered to get it, or because they don't like what God has to say. Calamity is inevitable to them, if they don't turn around. They will eat the fruit of their own stupidity and stubbornness (Proverbs 1:31).

There is a difference between those who lack understanding because of inadequate teaching, and those who lack understanding through complacency or rejection. Those who are misinformed will rejoice upon hearing the truth about what God has done. But those who are indifferent or stubborn won't respond even when they hear the truth over and over again.

B. THE PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE

Our spiritual well-being is inseparably linked with knowledge being added to our faith. Recall, however, that WE are the ones who must add knowledge. God will not do this for us. This is not to say that we can gain knowledge independent of the Holy Spirit. But we do have a responsibility to diligently *pursue knowledge*. One has to **ask** before it is given; one must **seek** before he'll find; one has to **knock** before the door will be opened. It is God's responsibility to give, to reveal, and to open. But it is OUR responsibility to ask, to seek, and to knock (Matthew 7:7).

Lesson ONE SPIRITUAL MATURITY — USEFUL TO GOD

1. A correct attitude

Read Proverbs 2:1-5. This is perhaps one of the strongest statements in the Bible concerning what is required of us if we are going to gain wisdom and knowledge. At the heart of these requirements is a correct attitude toward the knowledge of God. One must be *hungry* for it and desire it more than great wealth. One cannot afford to be complacent about seeking after the knowledge of God. "*Crying out*" and "*lifting the voice*" for wisdom and understanding indicate an earnest desire and resolution to *find* what is being sought. Those who only half-heartedly or intermittently seek after understanding will not find it!

2. An example of spiritual hunger

Peter told us to *desire* the sincere milk of the Word, so that we might grow (I Peter 2:2). It is only when God sees this heart-felt desire for knowledge, which manifests itself in diligent attention to God's Word, that He will begin to reveal knowledge of Himself. God only reveals Himself to those who seek Him diligently.

This principle is illustrated in the teaching ministry of Jesus. Jesus always taught the general masses in parables, but He always expounded the meaning of the parables to His disciples, when He was alone with them (Mark 4:33,34). Those who stayed with Jesus showed that they were vitally interested in knowing the meaning of what He had to say. They showed, in the very fact that they followed Him and stayed with Him, that they were hungry for more knowledge of God the Father. They were not complacent in their seeking after the truth. To these followers Jesus said, "*To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God; but those who are outside get everything in parables*" (Mark 4:11).

C. THE EFFECT OF KNOWLEDGE

It is essential for every member of the Body of Christ to move out of ignorance and into a deeper understanding of who God is and what He has done. All that God has done for us will be of little avail if we remain ignorant of it. It is only as we begin to comprehend the full scope of our redemption that we will walk in more and more of the liberty and victory to which God has called us.

My son, if you will receive my sayings, and treasure my commandments within you. Make your ear attentive to wisdom, incline your heart to understanding; for if you cry for discernment, lift your voice for understanding; if you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will discern the fear of the Lord, and discover the knowledge of God.

Proverbs 2:1-5

Like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation.

I Peter 2:2

And with many such parables Jesus was speaking the word to them, but they were not able to hear it; and He was not speaking to them without parables; but He was explaining everything privately to His own disciples.

Mark 4:33,34

And He was saying to them, "you have been given the mystery of the kingdom of God; but those who are outside get everything in parables."

Mark 4:11

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“But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (II Peter 3:18 KJV). This is a growing process to which there is no end, because the depth of the wisdom and knowledge of God is infinite. A baby Christian has much to learn about his redemption. But the same is true of the most mature believer. No Christian will ever get so mature that he has nothing more to learn about God and Christ's redemption. The more a person knows, the stronger and freer he becomes.

1. The truth makes us free

Jesus said, *“If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free”* (John 8:31,32). Knowledge of what God has done (i.e. the truth) enables us to stand our ground in the face of adversity, in the full realization that we have been redeemed from oppression and called into marvelous liberty. The truth makes us free, because the truth shows us **who we are** and **what we have** in Christ, loosing us from the shackles of ignorance.

The knowledge of this truth is one of the most profound needs in the Body of Christ today. Believers need to be informed of the facts of their salvation, so that they can walk in the light of it. We don't need God to “come down”; we need knowledge of God's Word. The Word informs us of what has already been purchased for us.

- God defeated our enemy, Satan (Hebrews 2:14).
- God took all of our spiritual death (Hebrews 2:9,14,15).
- God took all of our sins away (I Peter 2:24; John 1:29).
- God purchased our physical healing (Matthew 8:17; I Peter 2:24).
- God restored us to favor with Himself (II Corinthians 5:17-21).

(over)

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These are just a few of the many **facts** of our redemption which are given to us in the Bible. Knowledge of these truths will enable us to walk free from the bonds which once enslaved us. Ignorance of these facts, while not negating their reality, will result in a failure to appropriate them in our own lives.

2. Abide in the Word

We'll only know the truth, however, as we "abide" in the Word of God. The amount of spiritual knowledge in which we walk is directly related to how much we abide in the scriptures. If we abide in the Word but little, then we'll have limited revelation of the truth. We will experience limited liberty. But if we abide in the Word continually and consistently, then we will always be moving into new vistas of truth. We will experience ever increasing degrees of freedom and victory as the light dispels the darkness, and truth shatters the misconceptions of ignorance.

As long as a person is a babe in the Lord, God will help and bless him, without very much searching on that person's part. God will do this because a new believer has had little time to develop any knowledge of God. But the Lord expects more of older Christians, who have had time to search the scriptures. This means that we are responsible to give God's Word priority in our lives. Only when we do this, will we increase in the knowledge of God and come to an understanding of the truth that will make us free.

Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

II Corinthians 5:17-21

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IV. SELF-CONTROL

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If any one wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me."

Matthew 16:24

For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

II Peter 1:8

The next quality which we are told to add is **self-control**, or **self-discipline**. Self-discipline is the ability to do those things which one does not necessarily want to do or like to do. Often, the Bible calls upon us to do things for which we have no natural inclination. A self-disciplined person will *obey* the Bible, *despite conflicting thoughts or desires*. A disciplined individual can say "No!" to contrary desires and do the thing he doesn't particularly enjoy doing. This, of course, involves *self-denial*, denying what is immediately gratifying to the flesh or mind, in order to attain a higher goal. The Lord Jesus Himself said, "*If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me*" (Matthew 16:24).

It is essential for any Christian who wants to grow in God to develop this quality in his life. Peter said of this, and the other qualities which we are studying, "*For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (II Peter 1:8). In order to be fruitful and useful Christians, the believer must learn to discipline himself.

Poor discipline and lack of self-control are major hindrances to Christian growth. It is quite obvious how an undisciplined believer is open to the onslaughts of the enemy. Satan need only create a thought or feeling, and the undisciplined person will obediently follow in that direction. **This is a situation in which spiritual growth is impossible!** Not until this person begins to say "No!" to his desires, and "Yes!" to those scriptural commands he dislikes, will he be in a position to develop spiritually. When he denies himself and his selfish desires, and follows *Jesus*, then he is a disciple (a disciplined one) whom God can use. Discipline is an essential factor in becoming a useful instrument to God, one who is fit for the Master's use.

GOD'S PLAN FOR CHRISTIAN SERVICE

Lesson ONE SPIRITUAL MATURITY — USEFUL TO GOD

A. FOR THE PURPOSE OF GODLINESS

Whenever one deals with the subject of self-control, it is usually necessary to discuss its *purpose*. Many people practice self-denial and discipline for its own sake. They feel that because of their disciplined lives, they win God's favor. This is an unscriptural impression. Nowhere does the Bible teach that we can earn God's favor by denying ourselves. God's favor was, is, and always will be completely *unmerited*. No sinner could ever discipline himself enough to "earn" his way into God's presence. We are not saved by discipline; we are saved by **grace!**

The Bible teaches that we should discipline ourselves, but not because discipline is the aim, in and of itself. Discipline is simply a **tool** by which we can achieve a much higher goal. Paul said to Timothy, ". . . *discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness*" (I Timothy 4:7), and, "*Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth*" (II Timothy 2:15). The aim is **godliness**, and presenting ourselves approved unto God. To put discipline in proper perspective, one must view it as a *means* to an end, and not as the end itself. **The end is godliness; the goal is fruitfulness and usefulness to God.** That is why we should be disciplined. But these aims will never be achieved unless self-control is added to our Christian character.

B. IN ALL THINGS

The apostle Paul likened our discipline to that of an athlete. "*And everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable*" (I Corinthians 9:25). Athletes deny themselves certain luxuries in order to attain a certain level of physical strength, which enables them to participate in rigorous games. Notice that the athlete whom Paul describes exercises self-control in "*all things*"! There is no area of his training in which he is slack or undisciplined. If athletes can do all this, denying their bodies what they desire — for a fleeting moment of glory — how much more should we discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness, seeing that we will receive an *eternal* crown of glory.

But have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women. On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.

I Timothy 4:7

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.

II Timothy 2:15

And everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.

I Corinthians 9:25

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Lesson ONE SPIRITUAL MATURITY — USEFUL TO GOD

1. Make your body your slave

*"Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I buffet my body and **make it my slave**, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified"* (I Corinthians 9:26,27). The key to self-control is this: **make your body your slave!** A slave obeys his master in all things and fulfills his master's wishes and desires, not his own. In the same way, our bodies should be in complete subjection to our spirits. Paul "buffeted" his body to be sure that this remained the case at all times. This means saying "No!" to the desires of the flesh which arise within us, not allowing these desires to rule or direct us. Often, this will seem like buffeting, because the flesh resists being controlled and curbed.

It is imperative to our spiritual growth that we make our bodies our slaves, and always keep them under subjection. We have a responsibility to grow up in God and to become useful instruments for His use. If we master our bodies by the power of the Holy Spirit, then our race will not be aimless. Every blow which we deliver will hit the mark exactly. **We will be effective for God.** But if we are *body-ruled*, then we will not be fruitful to God. Our race will be aimless, and our blows will not count. A body-ruled Christian cannot be counted on to move at the impulse of God's Spirit, because he is too attentive to the impulse of his flesh.

2. A fruit of your spirit

Self-control is listed as one of the fruits of our reborn spirit (Galatians 5:22,23), because *every Christian* has within him the ability to control the desires of the flesh, and to bring those desires into subjection. This scripture gives hope to those who struggle with discipline and find it difficult to control the desires of the mind and body. Many become discouraged when faced with the prospect of self-discipline, because they think themselves incapable of it. But every born-again believer has within him the power of Almighty God to discipline himself for *the purpose of godliness*. This is the highest purpose for which a person can apply self-discipline.

Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified.

Corinthians 9:26,27

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Galatians 5:22,23

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This kind of self-control manifests itself in a person reading the Bible when he doesn't particularly "feel" like it that day. It is evident when a believer attends the prayer meeting at church, when he is not emotionally "up" for it. It shows itself when a Christian abstains from activities which are either not beneficial for him or are a stumbling block to fellow-believers. In every case in which this self-discipline is applied, one will find the subordination of the mind and/or body to the standard of the Word and to the impulse of the Holy Spirit.

Exercise *faith* in the fact that you have all the ability for self-discipline within you now. Remember, discipline for the purpose of godliness will only be possible when we put our trust in God's power within. To be sure, we have a distinct responsibility to deny the flesh and walk according to God's Word. But the power to live a disciplined life of *consistency* has been given to us in the new creation. If we will exercise our faith, confessing what the Word says about us, then our *determination* to be self-disciplined will be rewarded by success. What's more, our disciplined lives will be a testimony to God's power, and not to our *own* abilities.

V. GODLINESS

Peter tells us to add to self-control, **perseverance or steadfastness**. Since this subject was thoroughly discussed in Lesson 10 of *Foundations For Christian Growth*, we will not go into it here. It is enough to say that a self-disciplined person is better able to stand steadfast, since he is well-practiced in obeying the Spirit and the Word, rather than his mind or body (Psalm 94:12,13 Amplified).

Blessed — happy, fortunate [to be envied] — is the man whom You discipline and instruct, O Lord, and teach out of Your law; that You may give him power to hold himself calm in the days of adversity, until the [inevitable] pit of corruption is dug for the wicked.

Psalm 94:12,13 Amplified

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And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”
Deuteronomy 6:5

and He said to him, “‘YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.’ This is the great and foremost commandment.”
Matthew 22:37,38

He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will.
Ephesians 1:5

‘I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth.’”
Revelation 3:15,16

To our perseverance, we are to add **godliness**. Recall that Paul told Timothy to discipline himself for this purpose. Godliness means our attitude of love and reverence for the Lord. It could well be defined as devotion to God, or **godly devotion**. God longs for His people to be totally devoted to Him, above all else. This desire is at the root of His command to the Israelites: “*And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might*” (Deuteronomy 6:5). Jesus called this the greatest commandment in the Law (Matthew 22:37,38), and it remains so, just as much under the New Covenant as it was under the Old Covenant.

God created us and then redeemed us, for the purpose of fellowship. From the foundation of the world, God had desired a family with whom He could have fellowship. The Bible says that He predestined us to adoption as sons (Ephesians 1:5). This means that God foreordained a *family*, not a slave-gang or a business corporation. Thus, it grieves the heart of the Father when those whom He has brought into fellowship with Himself through the blood of His Son have only a shallow relationship with Him.

God desires full and rich fellowship with His children, but so often He finds only partial or intermittent devotion on their part. In reality, there is no such thing as partial devotion to God. If one is not totally committed to the Lord Jesus Christ, then he is not committed at all. Godliness means nothing less than wholehearted devotion to God. In the book of Revelation, Jesus said to the Laodiceans, “*I know your deeds, and that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth*” (Revelation 3:15,16). Little is more useless than lukewarm water. It has neither crispness to quench a thirst, nor warmth to soothe the body. So it is that those who are half-heartedly committed to Jesus are of very little use to Him.

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In order to be useful and fruitful to the Father, this godly devotion must then be growing in our lives. Godliness requires our being wholly dedicated to Jesus. This devotion is seen in our attitudes toward God. A godly attitude is one of **thankfulness and praise** for all of God's love and goodness. It is also an implicit understanding of our complete **dependence on God** and the presence of His Holy Spirit within us.

Those who acknowledge their utter dependence on God, and maintain an attitude of praise and thankfulness toward Him, are in fellowship with the Father and are growing daily in their godly devotion.

A. AN ATTITUDE OF PRAISE AND THANKFULNESS

One of the ways in which godliness is manifested is in our attitude of **praise and thanksgiving** to the Lord. All too often, God is viewed as a principle, a set of laws which, if correctly obeyed, will produce wonderful results in our lives. To be sure, the principles of faith, hope, and love given in God's Word are to be followed; indeed, they *must* be followed. But just to know a principle or a law, while leaving out the "*person*" of God, is to miss the entire point of creation and redemption. God is not a principle, or a formula, or a "force." God is a **Person!** One is not thankful to a principle when it operates, or to a law when it functions. But one is thankful to a *person*, when that person acts in kindness and grace toward him. And so it is that when God responds to our requests and gives us good and perfect gifts, our response should not so much be "Ah! I worked the principle," but more "Thank You, Father, for your goodness and love!"

This attitude of thanksgiving is a measure of a person's relationship with the Lord. Those who see God as a principle which must be "worked" have only a shallow relationship with God. They know *about* God; their relationship is a collection of information and principles. That is very different from actually *knowing* a person. Those who *know God* as a person, One who is intimately concerned with all that occurs in their lives, have a deep relationship with Him.

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1. The example of David

God called David “. . . a man after My heart. . .” (Acts 13:22). One of the reasons for this was that David’s heart was filled with thanksgiving to the Lord. The Psalms he wrote attest to this fact. “*I will bless the Lord at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth*” (Psalm 34:1). “*Bless the Lord, O my soul; And all that is within me, bless His holy name*” (Psalm 103:1). “*My heart is steadfast, O God; I will sing, I will sing praises, even with my soul*” (Psalm 108:1). These are just a few of the many psalms of praise which David wrote to the Lord. See also Psalms 9:1,2; 30:1; 138:1-3.

These Psalms tell us something of David’s heart toward the Lord. David was constantly aware that all his success and prosperity had come directly from God’s hand. He never let any of God’s blessings go by without acknowledging — in praise and thanksgiving — God’s goodness in granting them. “*Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits; Who pardons all your iniquities; Who heals all your diseases*” (Psalm 103:2,3). These kinds of statements come from the heart of a *godly man*, one who *knows God*, whose heart is fully and completely His.

“And after He had removed him, He raised up David to be their king, concerning whom He also testified and said, ‘I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My heart, who will do all My will.’ ”

Acts 13:22

I will bless the Lord at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth.

Psalm 34:1

Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name.

Psalm 103:1

My heart is steadfast, O God; I will sing, I will sing praises, even with my soul.

Psalm 108:1

I will give thanks to the Lord with every heart; I will tell of all Thy wonders. I will be glad and exult in Thee; I will sing praise to Thy name, O Most High.

Psalm 9:1,2

I will extol Thee, O Lord, for Thou hast lifted me up, and hast not let my enemies rejoice over me.

Psalm 30:1

I will give Thee thanks with all my heart; I will sing praises to Thee before the gods.

I will bow down toward Thy holy temple, and give thanks to Thy name for Thy lovingkindness and Thy truth; for Thou hast magnified Thy word according to all Thy name.

On the day I called Thou didst answer me; Thou didst make me bold with strength in my soul.

Psalm 138:1-3

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits; Who pardons all your iniquities; Who heals all your diseases.

Psalm 103:2,3

Lesson ONE SPIRITUAL MATURITY — USEFUL TO GOD

2. An admonition to us

If we desire to be men and women “*after God’s heart,*” then we must do as David did. God’s praise must be continually in our mouths. “*Oh that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men*” (Psalm 107:8 KJV). This is the cry of the Father: for men to turn their hearts so fully toward Him, that they’re always filled with thanksgiving for His goodness.

The New Testament is not without comment on this subject. “*Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name*” (Hebrews 13:15). As David affirmed that the praises of God would be in his mouth *continually*, so the New Testament exhorts us to the same.

Godly devotion is exercised when we offer these sacrifices of praise to God. “*And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord*” (Ephesians 5:18,19). One of the keys to staying in the flow of God’s Spirit is “*making melody with your heart to the Lord.*” Not only is this an exercise of godly devotion, but continual practice of this will deepen our relationship with the Father. **Devotion to God, then, means spending time in worship and praise to the Lord,** fellowshiping with Him, and thus developing a deeper and deeper relationship with Him.

B. AN ATTITUDE OF DEPENDENCE

Another attitude of godliness is that of **utter dependence on God, and His power, and His life.** Jesus said, “*I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing*” (John 15:5). It is obvious that while a vine can live without one of its many branches, no branch can, of itself, live apart from the vine. In the same way, we are connected to and completely dependent on Jesus — the Vine — for our spiritual existence. Independence and self-reliance are admirable and sometimes necessary qualities in many occupations and pursuits. **But they have no place in our relationship with God.**

Let them give thanks to the Lord
His lovingkindness, and for
wonders to the sons of men!
Psalm 107:8

Through Him then, let us continually
offer up a sacrifice of praise
to God, that is, the fruit of lips that
give thanks to His name.
Hebrews 13:15

And do not get drunk with wine,
that is dissipation, but be filled with
the Spirit, speaking to one another
in psalms and hymns and spiritual
songs, singing and making melody
with your heart to the Lord.
Ephesians 5:18,19

“I am the vine, you are the
branches; he who abides in Me, and
I in him, he bears much fruit;
apart from Me you can do nothing.”
John 15:5

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Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God.

II Corinthians 3:5

For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God.

But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, that just as it is written, "LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD."

I Corinthians 1:26-31

And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

II Corinthians 12:9

1. Strength from weakness

Paul repeatedly affirmed his complete dependence on God's power and ability: "*Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God*" (II Corinthians 3:5). Often, God finds it difficult to use those who are strong and mighty in themselves, because they are prone to rely on their own ability to accomplish things for Him. But the Bible says that no man will be able to boast before God (Read I Corinthians 1:26-31). It is plain from this passage that God chooses weak and foolish things to accomplish His will, so that no man can ever boast, except in the Lord and His might.

Paul, in entreating the Lord to remove a "*thorn in the flesh,*" received this answer from God: "*My grace is sufficient for you, for [My] power is perfected in weakness*" (II Corinthians 12:9). God's power and ability are perfected in our *inability*. When a Christian understands his own limitations, then any great thing done for God by that believer will be attributed to God's power, and not to man's.

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2. The example of Gideon

Read Judges 7.

The children of Israel faced an innumerable host of Midianites who had come out to destroy their land (Judges 6:3-5). But God chose a man named Gideon to deliver Israel from Midian's hand. Gideon was the youngest in a family that was least in the tribe of Manasseh, not the obvious choice for a mighty general (Judges 6:14-16). When Gideon's army gathered around him, God weeded out 22,000 men, leaving only 10,000 (Judges 7:3). Then, once again, God thinned out the ranks to a mere 300 men (Judges 7:5-7), leaving Gideon with only a handful against an innumerable host of Midianites and Amalekites. The story concludes with Gideon's army of 300 putting to flight the enemy's entire army. In this way, God assured that there would be no mistaking whose power had accomplished this great victory (Judges 7:2).

For it was when Israel had sown, that the Midianites would come up with the Amalekites and the sons of the east and go against them.

So they would camp against them and destroy the produce of the earth as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel as well as no sheep, ox, or donkey.

For they would come up with their livestock and their tents, they would come in like locusts for number, both they and their camels were innumerable; and they came into the land to devastate it.

Judges 6:3-5

And the Lord looked at him and said, "Go in this your strength and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian. Have I not sent you?"

And he said to Him, "O Lord, how shall I deliver Israel? Behold, my family is the least in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father's house."

But the Lord said to him, "Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat Midian as one man."

Judges 6:14-16

"Now therefore come, proclaim in the hearing of the people, saying, 'Whoever is afraid and trembling, let him return and depart from Mount Gilead.' " So 22,000 people returned, but 10,000 remained.

Judges 7:3

So he brought the people down to the water. And the Lord said to Gideon, "You shall separate everyone who laps the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, as well as everyone who kneels to drink."

Now the number of those who lapped, putting their hand to their mouth, was 300 men; but all the rest of the people kneeled to drink water.

(over)

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And the Lord said to Gideon, "I will deliver you with the 300 men who lapped and will give the Midianites into your hands; so let all the other people go, each man to his home."
Judges 7:5-7

And the Lord said to Gideon, "The people who are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hands, lest Israel become boastful, saying, 'My own power has delivered me.'"
Judges 7:2

And what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might.
Ephesians 1:19

And He called the twelve together, gave them power and authority over all the demons, and to heal diseases.
Luke 9:1

I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.
Philippians 4:13

God's strength was perfected in Gideon's weakness. With only 300 men against thousands, there was no way in which Gideon could rely on his own ability; he had to trust in the living God. He had to put his full dependence on God's power and ability. God chose something as weak and foolish as a 300-man "army" to defeat all the might and power that the world could muster.

3. Recognize God's power within you

Godly devotion is not self-reliant; it recognizes its own inability. But at the same time, it also recognizes the power of God within. Dependence on the Holy Spirit means more than just acknowledging your inability. It also involves your acknowledging daily that God's power is *within* (Ephesians 1:19), and relying on that power. It involves your constantly reaffirming in your heart and mind your position of authority *in Christ* (Luke 9:1), and using that authority when the need arises. Dependence on God's power doesn't mean inactivity. On the contrary, it means that we can do all the things that God tells us to do (Philippians 4:13), because we have a source of strength within that far surpasses anything we have in the natural.

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VI. SUMMARY — GROWING UP IN THE LORD

We have discussed here four vital steps to growing in God, four areas of major importance to our spiritual development. While these areas are not all that there is to growing in the Lord, lack in any one of these areas discussed (moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, and godliness) will be a considerable hindrance to a Christian's spiritual progress. Bear in mind what Peter said about those who come short in these qualities. "*For he who lacks these qualities is **blind or short-sighted**, having forgotten his purification from his former sins*" (II Peter 1:9). This scripture alone should be enough to shake us out of complacency and prompt us to examine ourselves to see that these qualities are indeed a part of our Christian character.

We must also look at the benefits that these attributes bring. "*For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, **they render you neither useless nor unfruitful** in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for **as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble***" (II Peter 1:8,10). Every believer can be fruitful and useful to God, if he'll diligently add these qualities to his faith. The Christian who consistently practices moral excellence and self-control, the one who is knowledgeable about his redemption and godly in his devotion, is a **mature believer!** This is the Christian whom God can entrust with mighty things in His Kingdom.

VII. ASSIGNMENTS

- A. Listen to tape number 1.
- B. Complete the study questions (to be turned in to your cell leader).
- C. Suggested reading:
 - Faithfulness*
Ed Dufresne
 - Praise, Faith in Action*
Charles Trombley
 - The Disciplined Life*
Richard Shelley Taylor

For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins.

II Peter 1:9

For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble.

II Peter 1:8,10

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Lesson TWO THE LOVE NATURE — IMITATORS OF GOD

I. INTRODUCTION

The greatest attribute of God is love. In fact, love is so much a part of God's character that the Bible says, "*God is Love*"! (I John 4:8). Love describes the very essence of God's nature. This love is much more than what the world commonly calls "love." The "love" of the world is most often selfishly motivated, being dispensed only when a positive return is guaranteed. But the "love" that describes God is absolutely selfless, always seeking the good of others.

Every believer has this love of God within. This means that Christians have the ability to walk in God's love and manifest to the world what that love is really like. This is the way in which the world will know that we are Christ's disciples. When the Church shows the selfless love of God among its members, and toward those that are outside, the world takes note of the fact that these are followers of Jesus.

Of all the character qualities that we are exhorted to demonstrate, love is the greatest and by far the most important. "*But now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love*" (I Corinthians 13:13). No amount of mighty miracles can supplant walking in love, because without love, miracles are nothing. Even those with tremendous faith amount to nothing if they don't operate in love (I Corinthians 13:3). Thus, the importance of love is seen in the fact that without it, what we do as Christians has very little significance. If we want our lives to count for God, and if we want to be effective in His service, then we must learn to walk and operate in the love that God has placed within us.

II. THE NATURE OF GOD IN US

When a person is born again, **he is born out of spiritual death and into spiritual life.** Anyone who has made Jesus Christ the Lord of his life has been born into the family of God, and has God as a spiritual Father (I John 3:1). Natural children display the physical characteristics of their physical parents. In the same way, the children of God have the spiritual characteristics of their spiritual Father. These characteristics need not be "worked up" within believers.

The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

I John 4:8

But now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

I Corinthians 13:13

And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

I Corinthians 13:3

See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him.

I John 3:1

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They are imparted when a person is born again into God's family. The spiritual attributes of God are, therefore, resident within every Christian.

Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.

II Corinthians 5:17

And put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.

Ephesians 4:24

And we have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

I John 4:16

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:8

Thy lovingkindness, O Lord, extends to the heavens, Thy faithfulness reaches to the skies.

Psalms 36:5

For Thy lovingkindness is great to the heavens, and Thy truth to the clouds.

Psalms 57:10

For the Lord is good; His lovingkindness is everlasting, and His faithfulness to all generations.

Psalms 100:5

But the lovingkindness of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children.

Psalms 103:17

Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; For His lovingkindness is everlasting.

Psalms 136:1

But I have trusted in Thy lovingkindness; My heart shall rejoice in Thy salvation.

Psalms 13:5

"Therefore, if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come" (II Corinthians 5:17). The new creature — which God has made every Christian to be — is blameless, and able to stand without shame in the presence of God. The new man within has the spiritual characteristics of God Himself, because he has been created in the likeness of God, *"in righteousness and holiness of the truth"* (Ephesians 4:24).

A. GOD IS LOVE

God is a God of love. Love is the very substance of His character. It is the motivating factor in everything He does. The apostle John said that God and Love are one and the same thing. *"And we have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him"* (I John 4:16). The immensity of God's love for us is demonstrated in that He sent His only Son to die so He might redeem us to Himself. While we were still sinners and enemies of God, He sent Jesus to die for us (Romans 5:8).

The scriptures attest to the immensity of God's love and mercy (Psalm 36:5; 57:10; 100:5; 103:17; 136:1). David had confidence in God because he trusted in that infinite mercy (Psalm 13:5). God's love is so vast, that it can only be comprehended through revelation by the Holy Spirit. Paul prayed earnestly for the Ephesian church, that they would begin to understand this love. *"... that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fulness of God"* (Ephesians 3:17-19).

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1. Love defined/agape

Before going on, let us clearly define what "love" is. The word "love" is used today in various settings and sometimes with divergent meanings. People are heard to say: "I love ice cream"; "I love my dog"; "I love my wife"; "I love God." Love has come to mean anything from mild affection to intense emotional attachment. But when the Bible says, "*God is Love*," it is not talking about a mild affection, nor is it referring to emotional attachment.

The Greek word used in the New Testament to describe God's love is "agape." Agape refers to that kind of love which is bestowed on those who don't deserve it. **Agape is unearned, unmerited love.** It gives, asking nothing in return. This is the love with which God loved us; God is agape! God loved us while we were still sinners. While we were alienated from Him and in complete rebellion, He loved us enough to send Jesus.

2. Natural vs. supernatural love

The world knows nothing of the agape love of God. It knows only of natural, human love, which is often selfish and egocentric. Natural, human love responds emotionally when it is gratified, but will not give when there is no promise of return. It is typified by the often used expression, "You scratch my back; I'll scratch yours." Jesus said that even the godless have this kind of love. The godless love those who love them, and greet those who greet them (Matthew 5:46,47). They invite to their feasts only those who will return the favor (Luke 14:12).

But the agape love of God is nothing like the love of the world. Agape love gives, requiring nothing in return. It is kind to ungrateful and evil men (Luke 6:35), even though they don't deserve it. The love of God is not of this world. It is completely supernatural, just as God is completely supernatural. The source of this love cannot be found in this world; the world cannot in any way emulate or counterfeit it. God is the only source of supernatural, agape love.

"For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?"
Matthew 5:46,47

And He also went on to say to the one who had invited Him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and repayment come to you."
Luke 14:12

"But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men."
Luke 6:35

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3. The ultimate gift of love

God is Love. He doesn't demand good works out of people before He acts in their behalf, because agape love bestows kindness on those who don't deserve it. At a time when the entire world deserved nothing less than eternal damnation, God gave to man the most precious thing that He had — His only begotten Son (John 3:16). Jesus was offered for the sins of *all* men (Romans 8:32; I John 2:2), even though God had no guarantee that all men would accept this provision. He didn't wait until man was good enough to merit His love before He bestowed it. He gave the gift of His Son, even though we deserved death, because **He is love!**

B. PARTAKERS OF GOD'S NATURE

The nature of God is love, and every believer became a partaker of that divine nature (love) when he was born again. *"For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, in order that by them you might become **partakers of the divine nature**, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust"* (II Peter 1:4). This means that the children of God have within them (i.e. in their spirits) the characteristics of Almighty God. God is love, and so the children that are born of God will be filled with love. The love of God has been poured out within our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). This love resides in the heart (i.e. in the inner man) of every believer, because the inner man has been created in the very likeness of God (Ephesians 4:24), complete with all of God's character traits.

1. The law of Genesis

It is a law of Genesis that all living things reproduce after their own kind (Genesis 1:11,21,24). Dogs give birth to dogs; cats give birth to cats; and humans give birth to humans. Thus, children are, by heredity, partakers of their parents' physical nature. Even in physical appearance, one can see that children take on the physiological characteristics of one or both parents. How absurd it would be for a child to be born with the physical characteristics of a dog or a cat! No, human beings give birth to human offspring that have the characteristics of their human parents.

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life."

John 3:16

He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?

Romans 8:32

and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.

John 2:2

And hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Romans 5:5

And put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.

Ephesians 4:24

Then God said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit after their kind, with seed in them, on the earth"; and it was so.

Genesis 1:11

And God created the great sea monsters, and every living creature that moves, with which the waters were warmed after their kind, and every winged bird after its kind; and God saw that it was good.

Genesis 1:21

Then God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth after their kind"; and it was so.

Genesis 1:24

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This same principle holds true with regard to the new birth. **Those who are born of God have the spiritual nature and characteristics of their heavenly Father.** The work of the Holy Spirit at new birth brings forth a *new creature*, which is just like the Father God — filled with love and compassion. God did not give birth to a brood of spiritual mutants; yet many Christians think this is the case. They don't realize they have the love nature of their Father. They often ask God to give them a heart that is filled with love, or to give them love for a particular person that they don't like. But those who are begotten of God have within them the attributes of God. God is love, so they too have the capability to love, because they have become partakers of God's love nature. The love of God was placed within them when they were born again into God's family.

2. The proof of birth

The apostle John said that the love which God has placed within us is the distinguishing factor which shows us to be the children of God. "*We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren*" (I John 3:14). The proof of a person's birth into the family of God is a demonstration of the character of God (i.e. love) in his life. If a Christian does not love, there is reason to question whether or not he really knows God. "*The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love*" (I John 4:8). Those who are born into God's family are filled with God's love, because they were born in His image. Believers are the offspring of love, and have that divine nature residing within.

III. THE LOVE COMMANDMENT

Jesus instituted a New Covenant between God and man through His life, death, and resurrection from the grave. This New Covenant was not like the Old Covenant which God had made with the children of Israel. "*But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord, 'I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people'*" (Jeremiah 31:33). Under the New Covenant, the law of God is written in the *hearts* of the people of God.

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death.

I John 3:14

The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

I John 4:8

"But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the Lord. "I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people."

Jeremiah 31:33

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With this New Covenant also came a new commandment. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (John 13:34). This is the commandment which God would write on His people's hearts. As God's offspring, we have the love of God poured out in our hearts. This is the way in which God wrote His commandment of LOVE in us. He recreated us to be love creatures, and wrote the Love commandment on our hearts.

The commandment of love is the commandment of the New Covenant and the kingdom of God. It is the rule by which the people of God are to walk, just as the Levitical laws of the Old Testament were the rules by which the Israelites were to walk. As New Covenant believers, we are not under the Law of Moses, because Christ has redeemed us; we are now under Grace (Romans 6:14). But this does not mean that we are to be lawless. Paul was the greatest proponent of our freedom from the Mosaic Law, but he said of himself, "I am 'under the law of Christ'" (I Corinthians 9:21). The Law of Christ is the command which Jesus left His disciples, that they "love one another." **Every believer is under the commandment of love.**

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another."

John 13:34

For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace.

Romans 6:14

To those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, that I might win those who are without law.

Corinthians 9:21

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A. LOVE FULFILLS THE LAW

Under the Old Covenant, the moral precepts which were to govern the lives of the children of Israel were enumerated in the ten commandments (Exodus 20:1-17). Although there were numerous other laws concerning social customs and religious rituals, the focal point of the moral code (law) was the decalogue (ten commandments) given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. These were the precepts of love, obedience, and integrity by which the Israelites were to live, and these were the precepts upon which their stand with God was based.

“You shall have no other gods before Me.

“You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.

“Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.

“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you.

“You shall not murder.

“You shall not commit adultery.

“You shall not steal.

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

“You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

Exodus 20:3-17

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Let him who steals steal no longer; but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who has need.

Ephesians 4:28

Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

1 John 3:15

And He said to them, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions."

Luke 12:15

If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law, according to the Scripture, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF," you are doing well.

James 2:8

Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law.

Romans 13:8

Love does no wrong to a neighbor; love therefore is the fulfillment of the law.

Romans 13:10

"But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the Lord, "I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people."

Jeremiah 31:33

Under the New Covenant, our stand with God is based upon faith in Jesus Christ and His sacrifice. Righteousness under the New Covenant is not based upon our keeping the ten commandments. This does *not* mean, however, that we are to cast away the moral principles of the Old Covenant and live lawlessly! It is just as much a sin to steal, or murder, or covet under the New Covenant as it was under the Old Covenant (Ephesians 4:28; 1 John 3:15; Luke 12:15). Far from being a license to sin, the commandment of Jesus (the Law of Christ) is the one command which encompasses and supercedes all the commands of the decalogue.

1. The law of Christ

As believers under the New Covenant, we are now under **the law of Christ**, the command He gave that we love one another. When a person fulfills this, the "royal law" of the New Covenant (James 2:8), he has fulfilled all the law of Moses. "*He who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law*" (Romans 13:8). If a person loves his neighbor, he won't steal from him; he won't lie about him; nor will he covet his goods. When you love someone, you'll do nothing that will hurt or injure them. "*Love does no wrong to a neighbor; love therefore is the fulfillment of the law*" (Romans 13:10).

"*For this, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET,' and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF'*" (Romans 13:9). The entire law of Moses (i.e. the moral commands of the decalogue) is summed up in the commandment of love. **Walking in love is the complete fulfillment of the moral law.** Thus, Jesus left us with the new commandment, and placed within us the love of God, so fulfilling the prophecy of Jeremiah: "*I will put My law **within** them, and on their heart I will write it*" (Jeremiah 31:33). The law of love is written in our hearts. If we will walk according to the love which He has placed within, we will fulfill all the moral principles of the law of Moses.

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2. The law of love

"Therefore, however you want people to treat you, so treat them, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12). Jesus affirmed that the real principle behind the Law was love. The commandments were to be kept from the heart, not out of mere compulsion. When asked what the greatest commandment was, Jesus responded that love for God and for one's neighbor were primary. *"On these two commandments depend the whole Law and Prophets"* (Matthew 22:40).

All the Law and Prophets (i.e. every written command which the Israelites had) hinged on the law of love.

Thus, when Jesus gave to His disciples a new commandment, it wasn't one which abolished the moral precepts of the Old Covenant commandments. On the contrary, it fulfilled all the commandments which Moses delivered to the Israelites in the wilderness. Jesus replaced all the moral commands of the Old Covenant with one, **the law of love**. That law fulfilled all that Moses had commanded.

B. A COMMAND — NOT AN OPTION

Some mistakenly believe that there are no commandments for those who are under the New Covenant. Since the New Testament declares that we are no longer under the law, but under grace (Romans 6:14), some feel that the New Covenant has no commandment. But there is indeed a command which all those under the New Covenant are obligated to obey. It was issued by the very One who instituted that covenant, the Lord Jesus Christ.

A commandment is an order about which there is no option and from which there is no reversal. When God issues a commandment, there is no more question or discussion on the matter. Staying in the will of God demands obedience to that command. When Jesus issued the commandment of love to His disciples, He wasn't making a suggestion. He wasn't saying that they could do this if they wanted to, or if they felt like it. Jesus *commanded* us to love one another, and He expects us to obey that order. The law of love is not the "suggestion" of the New Covenant; it is the *commandment* of the New Covenant!

"Therefore, however you want people to treat you, so treat them, this is the Law and the Prophets"
Matthew 7:12

"On these two commandments depend the whole Law and Prophets."
Matthew 22:40

For sin shall not be master over you for you are not under law, but under grace.
Romans 6:14

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"This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you."

John 15:12

But Jesus was saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves.

Luke 23:34

And hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Romans 5:5

And they went on stoning Stephen as he called upon the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" And falling on his knees, he cried with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" And having said this, he fell asleep.

Acts 7:59,60

For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome.

I John 5:3

"For My yoke is easy, and My load is light."

Matthew 11:30

Suggestions are followed, when it is expedient to do so. Commands are obeyed, even when it seems to one's disadvantage to obey. We are commanded to love, no matter what we may feel like, and no matter how badly others may treat us. By making love a command, Jesus was telling us that we are to rise above emotions and circumstances, and obey — no matter what is happening. That is the essence of a command: **you obey when it feels good, and you obey when it doesn't feel good.** We are to walk in love no matter what the circumstances, out of obedience to the command of our Lord and King.

1. Supernatural ability

Jesus commanded that we love one another with the same kind of love with which He loves us (John 15:12). Jesus loves us with **the supernatural agape of God.** This love Jesus demonstrated when hanging on the cross: He asked God to forgive the men who mocked and crucified Him (Luke 23:34). There was no hatred or bitterness toward those who had afflicted Him, only concern for their welfare. This was a *supernatural love*, and this is the kind of love which we are commanded to show toward others.

God is just, and He will not demand from us what we are not able to do. With the command to love one another, God has also given us the *ability* to love with the supernatural agape of God. The love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5), imparting to us that supernatural ability. The martyr Stephen displayed this same kind of love, when he prayed for his persecutors while they were putting him to death (Acts 7:59,60). His response arose out of the love which God had placed in his heart.

2. An easy yoke

"For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and **His commandments are not burdensome**" (I John 5:3). The commandment of love is not a burden to us, because God has already placed that capability within. Jesus didn't give us a command that is heavy and hard to bear. He said that His yoke was easy and His load light (Matthew 11:30). No believer, then, has any excuse for not walking in the love of God! The command has been given, and the ability to obey has been imparted. All that is left for the believer is to *obey* what God has said, and begin to walk like the love creature that God has made him to be.

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C. THE DISTINGUISHING FACTOR

Love is the identifying characteristic of the new birth and of the presence of the divine nature within. God is love, and those born of Him will manifest that love in their lives. Those who are born of God are born of love, and they will show (display) the characteristics of the One who brought them forth. *"We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death"* (I John 3:14). John's first epistle was written because false brethren had entered into the church, claiming that they knew God, when in actuality they were not saved. John wrote to the churches and told them how they could distinguish between those who were genuine, and those who were imposters. Those who are genuinely born of God, love the children of God (I John 5:1). There could be no mistaking the children of God and the children of the devil. *"The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love"* (I John 4:8).

1. Impossible to counterfeit

"By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). Jesus said that all men (i.e. the world) would know the disciples of Christ by the love which they display toward one another. The love of God is how the world will be able to tell who are the people of God. The love of God is the distinguishing characteristic of believers, because it is the one thing that the god of this world (i.e. the devil) cannot duplicate or counterfeit.

The devil has no love, nor does he even comprehend what love is. God's love is completely selfless, while the devil is completely selfish; the devil does not comprehend selflessness. He didn't understand that Jesus' act of giving up His life would free us from satanic bondage forever. Jesus was sent as a love gift from the Father, to give up His life for man's redemption. It was this selflessness, this agape love, which Satan knew nothing about. And because he was ignorant of God's love, he was ignorant of the wisdom behind Jesus' death, and so crucified Him (I Corinthians 2:7,8).

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death.

I John 3:14

Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God; and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him.

I John 5:1

The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

I John 4:8

"By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

John 13:35

But we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom, which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

I Corinthians 2:7,8

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“Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.”

Luke 6:28

“But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

Matthew 5:39

So Moses and Aaron came to Pharaoh, and thus they did just as the Lord had commanded; and Aaron threw his staff down before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent. Then Pharaoh also called for the wise men and the sorcerers, and they also, the magicians of Egypt, did the same with their secret arts. For each one threw down his staff and they turned into serpents. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs.

Exodus 7:10-12

So Moses and Aaron did even as the Lord had commanded. And he lifted up the staff and struck the water that was in the Nile, in the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants, and all the water that was in the Nile was turned to blood. And the fish that were in the Nile died, and the Nile became foul, so that the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile. And the blood was through all the land of Egypt. But the magicians of Egypt did the same with their secret arts; and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

Exodus 7:20-22

“For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect.”

Matthew 24:24

Thus, the genuine love of God will not be manifest in the devil's children, because the devil cannot duplicate that love. When a believer begins to walk in the love of God, the world takes note of it. It's not natural for a person to bless when he is cursed (Luke 6:28); it's supernatural! It's not natural for a person to turn the other cheek when struck (Matthew 5:39); it's supernatural! When the world sees the supernatural love of God in operation, it knows that it is witnessing something that it can't reproduce. In this way, the world will be able to determine who are the children of God.

2. Beyond miracles

Although God is a powerful God who performs miracles and signs at the hands of His servants, works of supernatural power and miracles are *not* the mark of a believer. The enemy understands power, and he knows how to use it. When Moses went before Pharaoh to perform supernatural wonders, Pharaoh's magicians were able to copy much of what Moses performed. When Aaron threw down his staff, and it became a snake, the magicians performed exactly the same work by their arts (Exodus 7:10-12). When Aaron turned water into blood, the magicians were able to copy that as well (Exodus 7:20-22).

God's power is infinitely greater than the devil's. But this does not take away from the fact that Satan is able to perform supernatural wonders. In the last days, the Bible says that he will use this ability to deceive men (Matthew 24:24; II Thessalonians 2:9,10). Satan is able to deceive with power, but he cannot deceive in the area of love. He cannot duplicate God's love like he did the signs of Moses, because he doesn't have it and doesn't understand it.

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Thus, just because a person is performing mighty miracles is no indication that he is born of God. Look for the fruit of love in a person's life, and not just for power. Paul made it very clear that a person who does great and mighty wonders is nothing and useless if he doesn't have love (I Corinthians 13:1,2). Jesus Himself spoke of those who would perform mighty miracles in His name, but who were not a part of God's family (Matthew 7:21-23).

3. One source

Agape love comes from only one source. Only God has it, and only God can impart it. The children of the devil can always be differentiated from the children of God by the fruit of love. The children of the devil do not walk in the love of God because they don't have that love within. But the children of God have become partakers of God's nature, which is love, and so have the love of God within. It is when this supernatural love is manifest in a believer's walk that he can clearly be identified as a son of God.

IV. DEMONSTRATING GOD'S LOVE

We are God's representatives in the earth today. What the world will see of God's character, they will see by watching us. We have been filled with the love of God, recreated in His image. We are like God because we are the children of God. "*As He is, so also are we in this world*" (I John 4:17). This verse doesn't say that we *will* be as He is, when we get to heaven. We are as He is right now, IN THIS WORLD. Thus, the world will see that God is love, unmerited mercy, because it sees these qualities in us, His offspring. God has left us on the earth to be a living demonstration of who He is and what He is like.

That is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.

II Thessalonians 2:9,10

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

I Corinthians 13:1,2

"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.' "

Matthew 7:21-23

By this, love is perfected with us, that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world.

I John 4:17

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A. FAITH IN GOD'S LOVE

Before a person can really begin to walk in God's love and display it in his life, he must start to put faith in the fact that God's love is already within him. Any of the commands God gives to us have to be fulfilled by faith. And so it is with the commandment of love. Focusing on what one's emotions say, or what the world says, will only cause a person to act or react according to the carnal principles of this world. But focusing on the love of God within will cause a believer to always act and respond out of his heart, which is filled with that supernatural love.

Love is patient, love is kind, and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.

I Corinthians 13:4-8

God's love is a supernatural force which will overcome a person's emotions, if he will allow it to. But one must renew his mind to that love, and begin to recognize that he has the ability to walk with the same kind of love and compassion that Jesus displayed during His earthly ministry. Faith for anything out of the Word comes by hearing what the Word of God has to say. As a believer reads and meditates on the scriptures which describe the love of God, and on those passages which declare that God's love is within, his mind will be renewed to that spiritual reality. Faith in the love of God will arise in his heart, and he will be able to respond to any situation in life with the kind of love that Jesus demonstrated.

1. Meditate and confess God's Word

Perhaps the best known and most quoted scripture about the love of God is found in I Corinthians 13:4-8. Here Paul describes what love is, what it does and does not do. Too often, this scripture is read wistfully, the reader longing for all the wonderful attributes that Paul describes. But a person who has faith in the love of God will understand that this is a description of all that God placed within us at the new birth. This is an image of the new creature which God has made us to be.

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Faith in the love of God within will grow as a believer meditates upon this scripture to the point that all his actions and reactions are governed by what is written there. If one is tempted to be bitter and unforgiving, he need only govern his actions according to the statement, "*Love . . . does not take into account a wrong suffered*" (I Corinthians 13:5). If he is prompted to become envious of another, he must respond with the Word of God, "*'Love . . . is not jealous'* (I Corinthians 13:4), therefore I am not jealous!" When one's emotions don't bear witness with the Word, standing in faith and confessing the scriptures concerning love will bring about a change in one's emotions.

2. Corresponding actions

Walking by faith in the area of love means that we cannot be moved by our emotions or feelings. Our actions must be prompted by faith in what the Word says concerning the nature that God has put within us. One cannot have faith in this love, and have no corresponding action accompanying it. It is not sufficient to simply say, "I love that person," but still act toward them in a way that displays anger or bitterness. We must *act* our faith, no matter what our emotions happen to be saying at that particular moment.

There will be times when, in order to walk in love, we will have to walk by faith. We will have to respond according to the Word, rather than according to our emotions (i.e. walk by faith and not by sight). "*While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal*" (II Corinthians 4:18). The love of God within us is an eternal, unchanging reality; our emotions, on the other hand, are fickle, changing from one day to the next. Walking in love means walking with our attention fixed firmly on what the Word says about the love of God, and responding according to what we see there, rather than according to what our emotions tell us.

While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

II Corinthians 4:18

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B. LOVING IN DEED AND IN TRUTH

"Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and in truth" (I John 3:18). One of the characteristics of the love of God is that it is more than just verbal. God's love for us was more than just words. He demonstrated His love towards us by sending His Son to die (Romans 5:8). *"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life"* (John 3:16). God's love was manifested in the fact that He gave. The love of God always gives. It is in this kind of selfless giving that the world will see the love of God within us toward them.

Love without action is not God's kind of love. Love that doesn't give, but seeks to promote its own interests is carnal, natural love, and is commonplace in the world today. The world is full of people who love those who love them, and who only give to those who give to them. That kind of love is self-seeking, interested in giving love only when it is expedient. God's kind of love gives when the recipient of the gift doesn't deserve it. God didn't wait until we were worthy enough to receive His grace and love; Jesus died for us while we were yet in our sins (Romans 5:8; Ephesians 2:5). This is the way in which God's love always works, and this is the way it is to work through us!

Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.

John 3:18

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:8

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life."

John 3:16

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:8

Even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).

Ephesians 2:5

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V. SUMMARY — THE INFINITE SUPPLY

No believer has any valid reason for not walking in God's love. As new creatures who are made in God's image, we have an infinite supply of love within us. We are the children of God, and are called upon to imitate our Father. God is love, and every one of His actions is motivated by love. Thus, in order to follow God, all of *our* actions must be motivated out of the love which God has poured out in our hearts.

When we acknowledge the mighty work of the new birth within, we will be able to comply with Jesus' "Commandment of Love." **Put faith in the fact that God's love has impregnated every part of your inner man**, and walk in that love. I Corinthians 13 should become more than wishful thinking; it must be a *reality* in every one of our lives. When we allow the man of love within, described in I Corinthians 13, to dominate us and to guide all our actions, then we will be imitators of God the Father, and Jesus, His Son.

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind, and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away.

For we know in part, and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.

When I was a child, I used to speak as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things.

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known.

But now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

I Corinthians 13