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Habits of Highly Effective Christians

Ron Meyers, PhD



A Publisher Driven by Vision and Purpose

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Introduction

On November 20, 1999, at age 55, I ran my first marathon in 3 hours, 56 minutes, and 23 seconds. The director told me that was good, but I soon learned I would have to reduce it by 21 minutes to qualify for the Boston marathon. I knew, as many people do, that there is a famous marathon race in Boston. But I did not know that the reason it is the most prestigious marathon is because you have to be "qualified" to enter. Those in my age bracket then had to run it in less than 3 hours and 35 minutes. As the months went by, my times got better, and I eventually qualified on my sixth marathon. I applied for the Boston the next week.

My wife, Char, and I went to Boston the weekend of April 15, 2001, on a flight nearly full of marathoners wearing T-shirts from various races. We were excited even before we arrived in Boston. Picking up the race packet and Boston marathon T-shirt and buying the official 2001 Boston marathon jacket got me more excited. The Monday morning of April 16 — Patriots Day in Massachusetts — I got on the rapid transit and soon joined 15,605 other racers boarding the buses to begin the trip to the countryside where the race would begin. In athletes village, we rested and waited. Helicopters buzzed overhead, airplanes pulled advertising streamers, two F-15s did two fly-bys; TV monitors showed what was happening at different sites along the 26.219 mile race course; TV cameras could be seen from time to time and excitement was in the air. To accommodate the thousands of participants, the runners are positioned in "stalls" of 1,000 runners each, lined up for blocks, with the faster runners closer to the starting line. My race number was 9259, which meant I was placed in the 9th stall. Six minutes and thirteen seconds after "gun time," my "chip time" began. That was when the electronic chip tied to my right foot crossed the starting line signaling the system that number 9259 had begun his race.

The first two miles were fairly congested, but by mile three, we were able to run unfettered. I never realized there would be so many things to encourage me up and down the hills and over the miles. The constant cheering of some 500,000 spectators stretched over the 26 miles, the cameras, bands, children, and adults at the water stations were all part of the story. Add to that the colorful mix of the runners' apparel and the occasional cheer when a spectator recognized my Oral Roberts University (ORU)

track uniform. Also, Char and our Boston friends cheered for me at miles 9, 19, and 25. The screaming of the female students at Wellesley College halfway through the race and the cheering crowds gathered at the last two miles helped create a sustained euphoric, highly emotional, and exciting experience. It made enduring the pain in my legs, chest, and arms that go with running marathons more endurable.

I have played in basketball games in college when there were moments of this kind of emotion and drive. On our wedding day, I was excited all day and experienced tears of joy when Char walked down the aisle on the arm of her brother, John. I was emotional at my first post-graduate graduation and at both graduation ceremonies when our sons graduated from the Air Force Academy and ORU. After the fast I describe in Chapters 5 and 6 of this book, I had several experiences of profound joy and intense intimate conversations with God. However, I did not know that a mere physical foot race could hold such excitement and joy this side of heaven.

How could a race do this to a person? Eighteen months earlier I had set myself a challenge, trained and disciplined my body, and now I was conquering it. When I was five and six years old, I lay on a bed unable to move because of rheumatic fever. Then 50 years later at age 56, with more than 15,000 of the world's best runners, I ran the miles, mounted the hills, faced the winds, and experienced the thrills of the Boston marathon.

I also understand Hebrews 12:1 better. "… Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders … and run with perseverance the race marked out for us." The day will come when God will bring us "into his glorious presence with mighty shouts of everlasting joy" (Jude 24 *Living Bible*). These truths give me good reason to want to run God's marathon well with you — the stakes are higher and the prize more enduring. You have the power to cheer me on, and I have the ability to do the same for you.

If the crowds in Boston have the ability to encourage, then surely it is worth each of us taking the time and thought to "… encourage one another and build each other up" (I Thessalonians 5:11). The encouragement received from others while running in a marathon is what makes marathons so much fun compared to the work of the long lonely training runs. "Atta boy! Keep up the good work! Looking good! Keep the pace! Finish strong! You are almost there! You can make it!" These are sounds I hear from

crowds and runners in marathons. They fit God's marathon, too. I am inviting you to join me in this study so it will encourage you through God's Word to establish habits that enable you to run your spiritual race effectively and finish well. You can make it!

Our generation is but a part of a large and sometimes thoughtful race. Wise men and women have come before us and we can learn much from their writings. As C. S. Lewis says in *God in the Dock*, "Every age has its own outlook. It is especially good at seeing certain truths and especially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means the old books." This principle also applies trans-culturally. We are members of a multicultural world family and can learn much from others. Living abroad, where I spent most of my adult years, is a way to become free from the narrow perspectives of our own culture. I learned from Canadians, Koreans, and Chinese during my 23 years in their countries. As with people in other generations, people of other cultures still make mistakes, but just not the same ones. Having my ideas tested in different cultural settings gives me a broader assortment of ideas from which to choose. It forces me to think beyond the culture in which I am living toward a wiser value system. The habits we will study together here are trans-cultural — a biblical value system. I invite you to explore Christian truth with me, without being bound by any one of the world's many cultures.

Both Koreans and Chinese have a proverb about a frog in the well — the frog thinks the whole world is just like its well. We all are frogs in a well, until stretched by ideas, values, and experiences from outside our well. The habits addressed in this study are not new, as a look at the table of contents will confirm, but their treatment is fresh insight on timeless biblical values.

Many of these biblical insights I got from someone else. I am indebted to professors, authors, and seminar speakers. When possible I give you my source. I hope my teachers will agree with my use of their ideas. With the exceptions of my wife, Char, our sons, Dan and Joel, and professors and authors referred to, the names in this study are fictitious. In the personal stories used to illustrate biblical ideas, my purpose is to illustrate how we can learn biblical principles from experiences in our own lives, not to point out others' deficiencies.

Each reader is unique. Some habits may be more interesting to you than others. There is progression from beginning to end and continuity between chapters. However, if you prefer, you may select only the parts most interesting to you. Most readers, however, will want to begin with the first chapter. You may use the companion volume, the *Habits of Highly Effective Christians Bible Study Guide,* as you read each chapter if you want to develop your own application. As you turn this page and begin reading, you will increase your growth in the habits of highly effective Christians.

HABIT ONE

Learn From Experience

"God does speak — now one way,
now another — though man may not perceive it."

Job 33:14

The Christian who has learned how to learn from experience has embarked on a never-ending adventure of growth, marked by increasing personal fruitfulness and usefulness to those around him. God has been in the business of developing His sons and daughters long before we even thought of "leadership development." To do this, He has used, among other things, each person's own experience. Here we consider the habit of learning from experience.

God communicates in many ways as suggested by the verse at the top of the page. You will find in the next pages a credible case that one of the ways God speaks — indeed, develops us — is through our experience. We may have missed some of our potential lessons because we failed to perceive this. An "insignificant" or "coincidental" experience could have been a meaningful growth event in our life history.

Validity of Experience

God speaks to us chiefly through the Bible with its poems and sermons, but, by far, the largest part of the Bible is a record of

human experience. The revelation of God through narrative in the Bible confirms that experience is a valid way to learn about God and ourselves. As importantly, the study of that biblical record of experience is an important tool in interpreting our own experience.

Some Christians, we should note, overemphasize personal experience. By taking verses out of their contexts, they use the Bible incorrectly to prove what they feel their experience "taught" them. They use experience to interpret Scripture, instead of using Scripture to interpret experience. Others, in a legitimate effort not to portray Christian faith as merely subjective and experience-oriented, have hesitated to study the way God develops us through experience. Yet Scripture says we should "consider" human experience. "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. *Consider the outcome of their way of life* and imitate their faith" (Hebrews 13:7 emphasis mine).

Not only the human experience recorded in the Bible, therefore, but all of human experience is a possible source of learning about God's dealings with us. Therefore, understanding how to learn from experience, whether your own or someone else's, becomes an important science — a research project with both objective and subjective elements. Some of us may need encouragement to learn from the experiences of others — we need to listen better or read more. Others may be out of balance the other way — willing to learn from the experience of others, but unwilling to recognize that our own experience, even while it is happening, is also one of God's teaching tools. In this and subsequent chapters, you will read some personal anecdotes revealing how I learned through my experiences so you can learn how to learn through yours.

Lord, what are you trying to teach me through the experience I am having right now?

When speaking of learning from experience, we are not talking only about what we learn by reflecting on the past, though learning from experience ought to include learning from past mistakes. It also involves staying aware of what God is saying at the time of the experience. If you can be alert to this dynamic, you will have an advantage over those who can only learn after the experience is over. Learning to ask and being willing to ask, "Lord, what are you trying to

teach me through the experience I am having right now?" is a vital exercise and discipline. Learning how to honestly ask that question is, in a sense, the goal of this chapter.

Changes in Our Perspective

When we are aware that God is continually teaching us, our perspective changes dramatically. We begin to seek God's purpose in everything, learning that in the profound sovereignty of God, at any juncture, He can show us what is best for us to do in view of unfolding circumstances. He is an excellent academic advisor, and the courses — situations developing around us — can be masterfully used by Him for our individual growth. Over time, we begin to notice the increased continuity between lessons He has already taught us, the ones He is presently teaching us, and our expectancy for the way God will train and develop us.

It is a mark of a mature Christian that he or she discerns whom God is selecting and processing and finds ways to advance the process and enhance their development.

This learning process occurs because God initiates it and we respond. When He calls us to Himself and to His service, He calls us into a process with the lofty intention of developing us into all He knows we can be. As a consequence, we often become more than we thought we could. At the same time, His goals for us are consistent with our true potential which helps us avoid wasted, dashed, and unrealistic dreams.

With a little effort, we can gradually become more deliberate in accepting training from God and finally become intentional in even helping others learn how to receive the same training. As effective Christians experience God's ongoing developmental process, they find themselves better able to help others develop their potential for growth as well. We learn to identify younger Christians in whom God is beginning this process. Actually, it is a mark of a mature Christian that he or she discerns whom God

is selecting and processing and finds ways to advance the process and enhance their development.

I changed my perspective on learning through experience over 20 years ago in Robert Clinton's *Leadership Perspectives* class in graduate school. Some of the ideas expressed here were learned then. If you want to know more on this subject, I recommend his book, *The Making of a Leader*. Since learning these things, I am no longer free to complain about circumstances. I now must analyze and evaluate what can be learned from them. It helps me handle problems cognitively instead of emotionally. In the process of disciplining myself to always ask, "What am I to learn from this?" I complain less and learn more.

It's the Finish That Counts

We sometime lament our personal "disadvantages" and regret that we began our "race" so poorly. There are two things essentially wrong with such a melancholy reflection. One, God was watching over our birth context and family influences and has been working a divine purpose even through that. It was God, not man, who "… determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live" (Acts 17:26). The setting of our birth and the families into which we are born are also a part of the personal growth process God has designed for each of us. If we complain about the "disadvantage" of where we were born, we are denying that God has the power to work in that situation — we are accusing God. If used correctly, our situation has advantages God prepared for us.

In the process of disciplining myself to always ask, "What am I to learn from this?" I complain less and learn more.

Two, how we start the race is not nearly as significant as how we finish it. In the introduction, I mentioned that at age 55, I ran my first marathon. I have run 29 more since then. In each race, throughout the first 10 or so miles, I was usually passed by person after person. My third race was the Andy Payne Memorial Marathon — three times around Lake Overholser just west of Oklahoma City. The race began in a drizzling rain at 6:30 a.m.

and ended in the heat of a sunny Oklahoma morning in May. At Mile 20, I began to count the people that passed me and how many I passed. To my surprise, no one passed me, and I passed 21 runners, most of whom were younger than I! Have you ever heard that a marathon race begins at Mile 20? I can well remember reflecting on the importance of the finish of the race, saying to myself during those last six and two-tenths miles as I passed those other runners, "The reason that I train is so I can do this." I stopped feeling apologetic every time I passed someone and began to enjoy passing other runners — winning late in the race — in spite of the pain. I placed second in my age group with my best time until then — 3 hours, 43 minutes and 15 seconds (8 minutes, 31 seconds per mile for that race). More to my point, a year later, I won first place in my age group in that same marathon. I passed the man who won second place in the last 200 yards! I admit it is disheartening to be passed by so many during the earlier part of the race, but even with a tired body and aching muscles, there is joy in my heart to finish well. Our race in life as growing Christians is much like that. If we learn to endure, we can finish well, even if we didn't start well.

At Mount Vernon Bible College, I had a gifted, prayerful, and zealous classmate. My wife, Char, and I knew him and his wife well. Char and his wife had been friends since childhood and during Bible college years. Char even traveled to youth camp one summer singing and ministering with them. Later, during our first years in Korea, Char and I worked under his supervision. He was intellectually talented, and there were numerous times his verbal and people skills impressed me. Nevertheless, years later and some years ago now, he divorced his wife and not too long after that married a wealthy lady 30 years older than himself. He did not leave his wife to marry the wealthy lady. However, having divorced then married one so much older than himself negatively affects his influence as an exemplary Christian leader. I grieve to think of his lost potential for meaningful Christian service. Receiving God-given material blessings is fine, but to manipulate circumstances in the pursuit of financial goals does not position him to finish well. He sprinted well earlier in the race — if only he were still pressing on to finish well.

On the other hand, most of us have observed some senior and seasoned believers doing very well, maturing further and further even late in life. Their spirits are strong and, as for the preachers among this group, their sermons are rich. To listen to such mature yet growing veterans is a joy; they speak from many years of continual growth with rich experience. We rejoice that

they have not stopped growing, and their examples encourage us to finish well, too.

There are many people that seem to have advantages over us at the beginning of our races. We all can think of examples. My cousins had advantages I wished I had: better educations, more financial resources, better connections, and, it seemed, more native talent. Never mind. If we set our minds to finish well, we will view our life experiences as learning opportunities and run better and better as the years go by.

Long-term development and service flows out of who we are. We must maintain integrity and spirituality if long-range good is to flow out from us. Development that has peaked, ceased growing, or is set aside — disciplined by God — usually can be traced back to problems in spirituality. We must not stop growing inwardly. It's the finish that counts.

It Takes Time — a Long Time

Be patient with yourself. The increase of our spiritual influence is a long process. Understanding God's developmental process assumes that, throughout a lifetime, a Christian continues to increase in godly influence and experiences God's continued involvement in his growth.

My father was a pastor with a vision for opening new churches. At various times throughout my junior and senior high school days, we would travel to nearby towns to paint and repair roofs on old church buildings. Then Dad would find someone with a pastor's heart to serve in that church. Dad's "hobby" had no income and considerable expenses. To finance this, he would brush-paint houses and buildings in our hometown and the neighboring countryside. As I look back on it now, Dad and I spent literally hundreds of hours painting, working, and talking together during those years. During the school year, I would help paint after I was through carrying papers on weekdays. I helped on Saturdays, too. During the summer, I would paint until it was time for me to go to the newspaper office.

At the time, I thought my foot-loose cousins had advantages. Now I realize that it was I who had the advantages. I learned to work without allowing myself to be distracted. I learned that no sacrifice was too great to help build God's kingdom. I learned that serving God brought greater satisfaction and certainly more

hope of reward in heaven than material gain. I learned to push myself, and my body and arms grew strong. I learned how to carry a ladder extended 40 feet into the air. I learned how to be safe in potentially dangerous places. I learned to deal with working in high places. I learned how to remain composed on the top of a 40-foot ladder when wasps did not welcome me in the vicinity of their home. I learned how to calmly destroy the whole nest without jumping off. Through these experiences, I learned how to focus and stay focused. I learned the value of work. I also learned the value of laughter and rest. There is, of course, another set of possible lessons that could be learned by economically privileged persons like my cousins. The point is not that you need difficulties or disadvantages in order to learn, but that you must have a teachable attitude so you learn from whatever circumstances or experiences come your way.

Two further benefits give me cause to appreciate what happened in those years. One is that I experienced no distance between my father and myself. We remained friends throughout those years. He called me "pal" until he died. Upon reflection, I now know why I sometimes call my sons that. Secondly, he passed on to me the ability to value "things above." Throughout this book, some of these values will resurface. The work ethic and spiritual values that I "inherited" from my dad during those years helped me work my way through Bible college and hold steady through the many years of public ministry since 1965. Some people do not appreciate the kingdom-related values Dad passed on to me, and this is their loss and my regret. In some vocations, supervisors help monitor our activities so we keep working. However, the ability to focus and monitor ourselves is something experience produces. How blessed I am to have learned how to do that during my high school years painting houses, barns, and churches.

Our growth process is more like a marathon than a sprint.

In the development of our potential, our growth process is more like a marathon than a sprint. What one thinks about, how one concentrates, how one remains focused and how one avoids listening to certain voices (aching muscles) all go into the hours of training for and running a marathon. In a sprint, it all happens much faster and is over in a moment. In the long process of our lifelong race, it helps if we learn to appreciate the adventure as it unfolds. The process of Christian development entails

adventure, suspense, waiting, expectation, surprises, growth, setbacks, and victories. One of the keys is to realize it is a process and settle in for the long haul.

Personal Growth and Influence

How does learning how to learn from experience and then finishing well impact us practically? Your life will have more and better influence on those near you when you have spiritual authority. Spiritual authority belongs to those who are yielding to God's hammer and chisel at work in their lives. Being a good influence has less to do with vocation, position, or full-time professional ministry versus volunteer service. It has more to do with being a growing and godly person of character. The perception that a paid professional Christian leader is automatically more dedicated or influential than non-professional volunteers is false. Every Christian, not just the paid professionals, should seek to grow as a spiritual person, become a person of character, and develop spiritual authority.

Here is my definition of a growing Christian. This definition allows equal recognition of all persons regardless of position: A growing Christian serves God with God-given capacity and responsibility by disciplining himself to think, speak, and act with strict consistency. He is willing to confront and be confronted, has a teachable spirit, and seeks to influence others for good, doing everything to the glory of God. Such a person, because he has integrity, character, and spiritual authority, increases in ability to influence others for God's purposes.

When God is the great center around which all else revolves, our perspective is healthy — we do all for His glory. The Bible says we are to do whatever we do wholeheartedly as unto the Lord and this thought is included in this definition. The definition also includes the healthy idea of service to others. That is to say, we do everything as a service. It includes influence — some of us have larger spheres of influence than others, but this is only a difference in sphere size, not significance. We all are expected to be an influence for God. As we learn from experience, we increase in spiritual authority. As Christians all over the earth become their best, the reputation of the Christian's God is enhanced. More people will be eager to know the One they see in us.

Christian character increases influence. Throughout the Bible and the history of the expansion of the Christian Church in the

world, we can see that godly people have served as people of influence. They have used God-given abilities to face God-given responsibilities and influence a group towards God's purposes for them. You can too, in your own God-given way. We all can learn how to be an influence to those around us. What are your God-given abilities? What are your responsibilities? Who is in your sphere of influence? Can you serve them by influencing them toward God's purpose? Will you? God is training you so you can. God's training program for you will help you grow and increase your influence in your world — your sphere of influence — which is a part of His world.

God and Your Increase of Influence

God is committed to developing your influence. His training program includes a broad variety of factors such as people, meetings, lessons, circumstances, and tests that He uses to develop his workers. God knows the strength of the steel He is testing. In each test or lesson, the Master Mentor is fully aware of your potential, present strength, and the amount of stress, heat, or pressure you can and must endure to realize all of your potential. Furthermore, God's tempering processes are perfect. We can always pass the test. "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. When you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (I Corinthians 10:13). This is our guarantee — we can pass every test. These statements have a sobering and logically necessary conclusion: it is our fault if we fail!

Each test is God's way of saying to us, "You can take this — you can handle this. I know you can. I can develop you through this."

We often underestimate ourselves. We think we cannot bear the pressures in life that God knows we can. We moan and complain to God in prayer, but He holds our feet to the fire. When the learning experience is over, we find that God was right; we were wrong. We could and did make it — and are better off for it. God's most severe tests are His greatest compliments to us. Each test is God's way of

saying to us, "You can take this — you can handle this. I know you can. I can develop you through this."

Spirituality — the Goal of Development

Spiritual formation is the development of the inner-life of a person of God so the person experiences more of Christ — and less of himself. Gradually, we reflect more Christ-like characteristics in our personality and everyday relationships. We increasingly experience the power and presence of Christ working through us to encourage others toward God's purpose.

How do you grow in spiritual authority? Every time you slay a giant in your life, you become more confident and others recognize you more and more as a giant-slayer. Sometimes you will be unaware that you have spiritual authority — you just know what to do in spiritual situations and others recognize the rightness of your methods and advice. The rightness of your method and advice is the "badge" of your spiritual authority. Spiritual authority is developed through tests and experiences. It should be the central means of power for influencing others.

When I was five and six years old, I had rheumatic fever and was bedfast most of the summer between kindergarten and first grade. All during the first grade, I was not as strong as my classmates. Sometime during that year, I remember coming home alone from the church where my father and mother were the pastors. I very deliberately pulled a dining room chair into the center of the living room and knelt down to pray. In my hometown of Keokuk, Iowa, the boys at the local YMCA went on hikes once each week on a certain day. I had to be seven years old to go on this exercise. I knelt at the chair and prayed that when I turned seven, I would be able to go on those hikes. That next summer of 1951, my birthday fell on the very day that the hike was scheduled for that week. The day I turned seven, I went on my first YMCA hike! Not only was I happy that I was gaining in strength so I could make such a hike, but I was greatly impressed by the fact that God answered my prayer so well that

God had answered my prayer better than I had prayed it!

the very day I turned seven, I went on that hike! The process of spiritual formation was beginning in my young heart. God had answered my prayer better than I had prayed it! As I look back on how God directed the affairs of my life, I can see that He began early to develop my respect for prayer.

The summer before, when I had been recovering from rheumatic fever, I was helping my grandmother fold the towels as we took them out of our new, electric clothes dryer. In the summer of 1950, that was quite a machine! I wrapped a towel around my head in what I thought a turban would look like. I announced to my grandmother that, when I grew up, I would go to Egypt, wear a turban like this, and tell the boys and girls there about Jesus. My grandmother responded immediately by saying, "Let's pray about that." Only my grandmother called me "Roland" — which is not my name. This is important because the line in the prayer that still stands out in my mind is, "Dear God, make our Roland to be the grandest missionary possible." From then on, it was my desire to be the best missionary I could possibly be.

In the mid-1970s, my responsibilities as a missionary in Korea included directing a youth camp each summer. One summer, rainy weather dampened both our sports program and spirits. The campers' clothes and our sleeping quarters wouldn't dry out. In the intense humidity, bickering broke out between the pastors and schoolteachers who served as counselors. These two factions — the pastors and teachers — each had different ideas about how the camp should be run and what to do with the present difficulties. When it became apparent that these problems had no human solution, I took a day to fast and pray. After I saw to it that breakfast for everyone was completed and the morning teaching sessions had begun, I walked up a mountain path to a crevice shaded by small trees to pray. I was moved to tears as I confessed, "Lord, I have wanted to be a missionary all my life. If I cannot pray my way through these problems, I don't deserve to be a missionary. If I can't be a missionary, I don't deserve to be in Korea." I wept before the Lord. My grandmother's prayer was very vivid before me: "the best missionary possible." These words did not mock me; they challenged me.

Hours of prayer, supplication, and pleading passed. By late afternoon, the sky cleared, a fresh dry breeze blew softly, and campers were enjoying the sports program. I overheard one of the pastors remark how much the day had changed between morning and afternoon. I smiled to myself. Once again the power of prayer was driven home to me. A six-year-old child's

dream, a grandmother's prayer, a six-year-old boy's prayer and a seven-year-old boy's hike were all part of the spiritual formation that prepared me for the challenge in those Korean hills and other even larger ones that followed in the cities. God still uses human experience to develop spirituality — the foundation of His workers' ability to serve and influence. Years after my grandmother had gone on to be with the Lord, her prayer was still influencing me.

Spirituality versus Skills

Let's compare spiritual development to skill development. Serving and influencing both flow out of who we are — out of "being" a spiritual person. Our being is the basis for our thoughts and actions and our doing flows out of that. Skill development, on the other hand, refers to development of any number of abilities that prepare you with the capabilities you need to do your trade well.

In my present line of work — training missionaries and pastors — it is comparatively easy to teach skills. It is possible to lead candidates through our program and equip them with conceptual tools for crosscultural ministry in the two years it takes to complete the program. A trained candidate is eight to ten years ahead of the untrained candidate who must learn his missiology by hard knocks and observation on the field. It is impossible, in two years, to develop a candidate spiritually so that he becomes a serving, compassionate, prayerful, patient, and kind person sensitive to God's voice, obedient to God's Word with a contrite heart and submissive spirit. It takes a lifetime to develop spiritually. Cognitive matters take only months to learn, but spiritual character takes years. The important spiritual issues flow more out of a lifetime of spiritual formation than from academic exercises. This is why God is at work through parents and other foundational influences, teaching obedience and developing character earlier. Later, God may use the Bible, Christian teacher, or seminary professor to

The important spiritual issues flow more out of a lifetime of spiritual formation than from academic exercises.

deliver some skill training. So, even as you add skills to your spirituality, keep spirituality as your first priority.

As you continue to pursue God's plan for serving Him, God forbid that you would relax in even the smallest way from pursuing spiritual formation. Pursue it with bulldog tenacity. Every opportunity, large or seemingly small, is important. "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much" (Luke 16:10). As we succeed in the basics, God knows He can trust us with public successes. There are no little assignments.

As we succeed in the basics, God knows He can trust us with public successes. There are no little assignments.

Seeking and loving God personally is fundamentally important. We must never be more enraptured with our vision than with our Lord. When we seek God for who He is rather than for the ministry He may give us, we are developing spiritually. Our service to the Lord does better when it is not the first issue. When we seek, love, and worship God first, God knows that down the long road, our reputations will not be our god. We can be trusted to obey Him. Most of our wonderful projects begin by being done for the Lord. It is only very gradually that God's projects become ours. Our challenge is to let each project remain His. The little things are important. Actually, they only appear to be little. How we handle them is a big indicator of our character.

A Continual Process

A learning experience refers to anything in our life history that God uses to train us for service, build our faith, establish integrity, or teach submission and the seriousness of obeying God. Throughout this process, God is the One who is in charge of the learning agenda. He is the recruiter, screener, registrar, academic dean, academic advisor, course planner, curriculum committee chairman, and the one in charge of evaluation, testing, and eventually graduation. It is a lifelong process.

This process is going on whether or not we are aware of it. Recognition of the process can help us discern the line along which God is leading and developing us. A heightened awareness of the process and its end can help us work more effectively with God instead of fighting against Him. To make this process work best, we must learn to live with and habitually ask, "What is God teaching me through this experience?"

In the spring of 1996, after sitting through several interviews at Oral Roberts University (ORU), I realized I might well be invited to become a professor in the Seminary. I wrestled with the decision of whether or not to leave the mission field in order to train missionaries in the United States. With a sense of awe at the vastness of our missionary opportunities in mainland China and having developed my Chinese writing ability, I was very content in Beijing. I therefore pondered the most difficult choice I have ever had to make — whether to remain a missionary or become a trainer of the next generation of missionaries. One day I confessed, "Lord, I would really rather stay on the field," at which time the Lord clearly replied, "And that is why I need you in the classroom!" From then on, I knew God wanted me at ORU. That experience taught me that the Lord of the harvest who sends also has the right to recall — I did not have the right to assume I would always be wherever I was at the time. I also learned again that ministry was not my god, God was — an important lesson relearned many times.

My hesitancy to leave the field and begin to serve in the classroom in my home country had nothing to do with the value I placed on training missionaries. Rather, it had to do with my great love for missions and my contentment to be involved abroad. I now live with the tension between knowing I am in the will of God in the classroom although I have a passion and preference for field work. Yet, I would rather live with that tension and give my students the opportunity to catch my zeal for fieldwork than to become too content in the classroom and produce insipid students.

I am academically oriented and require excellence from my students. Nevertheless, my experience on the field and love for the field is more important to me than academics. Accredited seminaries are known for academic, scholarly, educational, and intellectual attainment. These are things I, too, love and they ought to be maintained. However, they are not as important as spirituality and character. Without these, no Christian worker will succeed in God's eyes no matter how academically successful he or she is.

We thank God for what we can learn from teachers and books, but God's program is more comprehensive than just that. It includes many affirming experiences from which you will gain confidence. It includes some hard experiences where you will learn to depend more completely on Him. His perfect process for the development of your character and increase of your influence has been in operation since before you were born. As we learn how He works, each day we become more "… confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). When we learn how God uses our own experience to develop us, we are more apt to catch the message He has encoded in it. Our experiences are the "illustrations" in God's teaching scheme. Finding the "point" of each illustration is the challenge for us to discover, the quest of the attentive learner, and the prize for the skillful player.

The Bigger Picture

God's training program is designed to produce a corps of trusted statesmen — kings and priests — to administer the affairs of His eternal kingdom. To them He will delegate responsibilities as vice-regents, and they will be trustworthy under His authority forever. This is the ultimate purpose of God's training program on earth. However, there are two common misconceptions which confuse our thinking on this point, and therefore sidetrack some of us from full participation in the training.

The first is what might be called "process philosophy." Those who hold this view focus on the training process as process — they are preoccupied with the interaction between people and circumstances. They over-emphasize human autonomy and see God as rather uninvolved. They believe that life is just a process, and whatever meaning they see in it is only for the here and now. Because they lack the bigger picture, they fail to understand that this life is only the training ground for our responsibilities in God's eternal kingdom. They miss the double action of living an earthly life for God's glory and simultaneously being trained through it for the eternal one.

Others among us are "determinists" who believe God has every move planned. They only think they are making the decisions, but it's really God who controls everything, pulling all the strings of His puppets. Because they deny the role of the free will God has given us, they also misunderstand the training aspect of

earthly life. They fail to understand that their response to God's training program is a major part of the training. So neither the process philosophers nor the determinists have it right.

The balanced Christian position is a combination of both God's detailed involvement and human autonomy (free will). God is keenly interested in how we respond to Him, since the development of statesmen is a great concern of His. Refined kings and priests are His highest form of creativity, His most beautiful art, His best poem.

Without denying the drama of life in the training program, the greater drama to be eventually played out in our perfected role as statesmen in the Kingdom is infinitely more important. This perspective gives us the patience to go through the present discipline, joys, sorrows, highs, and lows. We know the experience is merely preparatory. We are happy to live each experience to its fullest and get all we can out of each one. This is because we know the process is ordered by a God who is very involved and yet trusts us to correctly exercise our free will. However, there is often a little bit of the process philosopher in us — we sometimes forget God is highly involved in the process and that to resist the process is to resist God. There is a little bit of the determinist in us, too. We sometimes forget that we have a free will and that God is watching for our measured, positive response to the training He provides in the circumstances and people around us.

We have the deepest appreciation of life events because we know the purpose behind them.

The process philosophers miss the goal of the training program, and the determinists miss their responsibility in it. Those of us with a balanced view, however, are positioned to embrace our experiences with the greatest enthusiasm. We have the deepest appreciation of life events because we know the purpose behind them. For us, all experiences, even the ones that seem unimportant, are opportunities to grow. If we miss these opportunities to progress, they become occasions for regress. Each experience is a new opportunity to demonstrate submission, obedience, and understanding of delegated authority. We understand our Father, His goals for eternity and for us, the purpose of the training program, why we are in it, and the importance of delayed gratification. We can be patient

through the training process. We cultivate the habit of learning through experience, because we anticipate graduation — a truly glorious coronation.

HABIT TWO

Recognize Learning Opportunities

"... in all things God works for the good ..."

Romans 8:28

In this chapter, you will read about how God "parents" us. All parents like to be proud of the children they have birthed and carefully nurtured. Our heavenly Father is no exception.

As with earthly families, Satan likes to divide and conquer. By making us think we are experiencing a unique and exceptional difficulty, he hopes to weaken us. God has a good purpose in His training program. Knowing this encourages us to resolve to learn what we can through each experience. No matter how trying, we can move on as improved and enriched persons. Either we must *steel* this resolve or Satan will *steal* it. It strengthens us to know others have faced our problems and that life-enriching lessons await us. By examining types of experiences similar to ours, we can recognize important patterns and the way God uses them to develop us.

In this chapter, we will identify some additional kinds of learning experiences. Some of these experiences are my own, while other lessons were learned through observation and reading. This chapter is not intended to be an exhaustive list of all types, but rather a large enough sample for you to realize the many ways God can teach us. Reviewing these will help you be more

analytical and fruitful in evaluating your own experiences. Each experience falls under a different part of the magnifying glass of Scripture. For, in fact, it is Scripture that provides the standard by which our experiences are to be interpreted and evaluated.

A Sense of Destiny

You are very special to God. He really has a special plan for your life. An awareness of your destiny comes from experiences that lead you to believe that God is involved in your life in a personal and special way. Significant acts and people, providential experiences, or the unique timing of events can hint at some future or special significance to a life. When studied in retrospect, they add conviction to a growing awareness of our destiny. One's name and its meaning, a prophecy, family heritage, a parent's prayer, a significant contact, parents' sense of the child's destiny, a miracle related to one's birth, a mentor, or special preservation of life can all contribute to a sense of God's special purpose for your life. My recovery from sickness, plus input from grandparents who saw something spiritual in my young life, gave me a sense of destiny from an early age.

In Chapter 1, you read about my experience with rheumatic fever. During that sickness and recovery, the prayer to be a good missionary at age six, and going on that prayed-for hike on my seventh birthday, not only contributed to my strong childhood belief in the power of prayer, but also gave me a sense of destiny. Repeated affirmations from both grandmothers throughout my childhood further developed that belief. I began to look for whatever God had for me. I cannot remember a time when I didn't believe there was something special to anticipate.

Brushes with death can also confirm our sense of destiny. Each time David escaped Saul's angry spear, his sense of destiny may have been "pointedly" confirmed (I Samuel 19:10). Two times in my adult life, I could have died. When I was a young man, I was swimming alone in Lake Heritage near Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. I should have never gone swimming alone in such a deep, wide lake, but it was even more foolish to try to swim across it. When I became tired and abandoned hope to cross the lake, I turned around to return to shore and fought for my life for the next 20 minutes. I thought I was near heaven's gates although I focused all my efforts on taking another gasping breath and making more strokes with weary arms and legs. Finally, I reached very welcome mud and rocks. As I lay gasping and vomiting on the shore, life

took on a new meaning. I realized that God had spared me to continue my earthly phase for some purpose of His.

My second nearly deadly episode occurred in Taejon, Korea. While killing termites, I came into contact with lethal poison and became violently ill — one drop of that stuff can kill a cow! The doctor even told Char he thought I was dying. I miraculously lived through the hours of dry heaving and anti-poison medical treatments. As the seriousness of my near departure settled in on me, it revealed that God had a further purpose for my life. Paul may have had a similar sense each time he escaped death though his escapes were far nobler, it seems, than mine.

God has some special people in His army, and He signals to us that He has a divine plan through unique experiences — sometimes brushes with death.

In the summer of 2000 in Northeast India, a group of about 110 pastors, their wives, and Bible college students gathered from five states in India and neighboring Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Nepal for leadership training. When talking with them about a sense of destiny and the preservation of life, I asked how many of them had experienced close brushes with death — 22 of them had! It was my joy to encourage them to reinterpret the meaning of their experience in view of an eternal purpose. God allows these experiences to teach us that He has a purpose for our lives. Just knowing that gives us courage and expectancy. God has some special people in His army, and He signals to us that He has a divine plan through unique experiences — sometimes brushes with death.

Your interest in this book indicates that you want to discover habits that lead to the fulfillment of your destiny and potential. Assuming this desire was placed there by God, you may also understand your own divine destiny. You can find Bible characters whose experiences and the interpretations thereof give you clues for interpreting your own life. Samson's mother and father surely had told him of the supernatural visit by the angel that preceded his birth (Judges 13:3ff). Samuel's parents must have told him of Hannah's commitment before his conception that should she bear a son, she would give that son to

God's service (I Samuel 1:11ff). Didn't Sampson and Samuel have a clear sense of destiny as a result of birth-related revelations and God setting them apart from their siblings for a purpose? Do you suppose that sense of destiny gave them strength? Have a vision and humbly seek to fulfill it.

God is sovereign. He knits us together in our mother's womb (Psalm 139:13-16) and arranges for each of us to be born in the place and time of His choosing (Acts 17:26). If we believe that, we also believe that the skills he has placed in each of us, in the cultural and historical settings of His choice, are meaningful too. What can we learn from this? The local, regional, national, and international circumstances surrounding our births were of His making. What would happen if we habitually evaluated what we learned through those circumstances God controlled for our unique development? You are in no less a learning process than Daniel was. Daniel was a statesman; not full-time professional clergy *per se*. You may not have been born a Hebrew and carried to Babylon as a deportee to be trained to serve in a foreign court, but you have your own story. God has a dream for you and has unique plans to make it come true. Can you imagine the Master Craftsman smiling as He moves through His "workshop," leaning over His works of art, carefully and lovingly using His "tools" of lakes, termites, and "coincidences" to bring out the best colors and brightest shine from His precious ones — you are one of those precious ones!

Eventually, today's experiences integrate with your other life experiences so that they all fit together. This long-term convergence of accumulated lessons coupled with a sense of destiny prepares the mature believer to serve effectively later in life. Your sense of destiny ties all your other learning experiences together, giving them a common thread and overarching theme consistent with God's unique plan for you. Too many younger Christian workers don't realize this and never reach this more fruitful stage. Stay with it. It gets better — much better.

People Who Have Influenced You

Another tool God uses is the influences He has placed in our families. Family members are important for personal growth because, as C.S. Lewis points out in *The Four Loves,* we don't choose them; we must learn to love them. There are significant personalities, situations, and perspectives in our homes that play a part in our increasing influence as Christians. John the Baptist

had the influence of his godly parents and the Essenes (who were the holiness separatists of his day). Their combined influence on his life's work is a good example of how early influences shape a Christian worker.

What are you learning from your present social context? A neighbor? A roommate? A classmate? A colleague at work? Do you think that the people around you just happened to be there? What if God placed those people in your life to teach you something? If so, do we miss part of our training if we resist the lessons we could learn through these relationships? Spouses are usually the most significant other person in our lives, but other family members also play a significant role.

We can be selective about what and from whom we learn.

My grandmother visited us each summer and always did a massive housecleaning job. This is why she was there when I had rheumatic fever and during my recovery period. God used her encouragement, love for missions, and prayer to shape my life. I have also had to learn meekness, self-control, patience, and to not fight back from my relationships with other family members. Each of these was a part of my life and God used them to work on me. What if every likable and unlikable member of your family was placed there by God to be an instrument for your development? Are we yielding to the process or resisting it? When we commit ourselves to learn from every relationship, life becomes a continual practice field. Every relationship and conversation becomes an arena for developing the fruit of the Spirit.

What about abusive situations? How will the child or grandchild of abusive relatives react? Is there something to learn from the experience of escaping or avoiding abuse? These are hard questions, but our sense of the sovereignty of God forces us to draw some lessons from them. As a teenager, I appreciated the affirmation I received from my tennis coach in high school. However, being a victim of his inappropriate sexual advances provided several unique lessons. One was that though I learned tennis from him, I was free to reject his sexual orientation. Another took me years, but I did finally discover something very important — that I was not guilty of sexual sin just because I had been a victim. And, thirdly, I learned the need to strengthen my

own sons and other youth so they would be strong enough in spirit to resist unwelcome advances.

We can be selective about what and from whom we learn. Sometimes we learn what to do by the good examples in our lives. Sometimes we learn what not to do by the bad ones. There is evil at work in the world, and we must pray strongly against it. We are not to blame God for evil, whether in our relatives or in others. People make choices, and some of them are bad. Petition God to work against the evil that He, too, hates. In those cases, we need not submit unconditionally to the evil persons involved, but in submission to God. Seek to find His purpose in the circumstances and learn from them.

Skills

God gives us the skills we need to do the job He calls us to do. I am grateful for the fine language teachers who took pains beyond class time and the call of duty to hone my language skills. We experienced many ministry opportunities in Korea and China because we could speak the local language. An eternal and timeless God creates us in our mother's womb with certain native skills. He then calls us to work where those skills are needed. Our native skills themselves are therefore a hint at God's purpose for our lives. What about your basic skills? Some of them are native to you and others are acquired. Some of what you are as a person stems from the values you learned in developing those skills.

During the foundational phase of your life, what did you learn that God could use in a later period? God worked in Paul's life as he was learning the Old Testament at the feet of one of the best teachers of his time. This preparation took place before Paul was an obedient believer and illustrates how God may have worked in your past to develop your abilities before you knew Him. The skills you have can hint at what God wants you to do, whether in government, business, church, industry, or teaching.

Tests of Integrity

Every one of us occasionally has an experience in which we are morally tested without anyone else knowing about it. There are occasions when we could be dishonest or err where no one

would know. God deliberately gives us those kinds of experiences so we will grow in our integrity to make sure our values and actions are integrated.

I once accidentally double-scheduled myself. One appointment was with a lady who wanted to meet me to learn about ordination in a church organization. The other appointment was with a consultant of whom I wanted to ask several questions important to me. The first appointment I *accepted*, and the latter appointment I *initiated*. I had to decide which appointment to cancel. Failing to find the lady at home by phone, I left a message on her answering machine. I also left a packet of literature with a note explaining the ordination process at my office door and left to keep the appointment I preferred. When I returned to my office, she had taken the packet. I was relieved. I later spoke with her by phone and gave her some more details not included in my note I left with the packet. I was further relieved. My obligation to her was fulfilled. However, because I selfishly canceled the appointment I should have kept to keep the one I preferred, my conscience bothered me. In my heart, I know that I should have canceled my preferred appointment and kept the one less desirable to me — the one with her. From the outcome, I learned that to say I want to serve others and then act in a way that served me is inconsistent. In the future, I hope to be less selfish and more inclined to think, speak, and act with consistency.

Without integrity, our potential can never be realized because people will not trust us.

At the heart of any assessment of godly character lies the concept of integrity, the strict consistency between the thoughts, words, and actions of an individual. God uses integrity tests to evaluate our heart-intent and to integrate inner convictions and outward action. He uses all this as a foundation from which to expand the Christian's capacity to serve. Without integrity, our potential can never be realized because people will not trust us. Joseph had it. David could lead men because he had integrity. Men trusted him. Daniel and his three friends also demonstrated integrity. God wants to develop it in each of us.

Learning to Listen to the Still Small Voice

What about the ability to obey the voice of the Holy Spirit? This is a unique category of learning experience in which God tests a believer's response to revealed truth. Obedience is often learned early in life and then relearned from time to time. The result for those who respond positively is usually enlightenment with more truth. For example, we learn that some "opportunities" are interruptions and some "interruptions" are opportunities. Discerning the difference, seizing the opportunities, and not being side-tracked by interruptions are some part of the obedience-learning experience. I have about three seconds between the time someone knocks on my office door and the time I open the door. During these important three seconds, I usually quickly pray that God will help me kindly avoid an interruption or seize the opportunity that awaits me on the other side of the door. Sometimes He answers one way and sometimes the other way, but in either case, I want Him to be the One to decide. Thinking through these issues forces me to openly welcome opportunities to encourage students as they prepare for their life's work — even when they have not made an appointment.

A Ministry Task

When we recognize our assigned task as a God-given opportunity, we often need to intentionally stop viewing tasks as simply tasks. In the new perspective, you can learn something new about helping people. We are ultimately accountable to God, though accountability to people is also significant. A growing believer recognizes this fact and desires to please the Lord in every ministry task. On the human side, these tasks may appear to be natural, routine, or even boring assignments, but they are tasks from God. "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things" (Matthew 25:21). I was invited to speak to a missions club and was ready to speak to a room full of people. When I arrived, only two people were present. Even though I was disappointed with the turnout, I still did my best.

When I see trash on the floor or sidewalk, I try to remember this principle as well and pick it up. God does promote. The

successful completion of the former assignment is the criterion by which He gives us new assignments. Barnabas' trip to Antioch recorded in Acts 11 may have seemed like a mundane task, but he did it faithfully and well. He became the mentor of the Apostle Paul! Are you faithful in the small opportunities?

A Test of Our Faith

God often leads His children through a series of increasingly difficult tests of their faith. This involves some issue in which our awareness of God's reality and faithfulness are tested. These learning experiences build confidence for trusting God with even bigger issues later. Every time we pass through one of these experiences, we are better prepared for the next one.

Char and I served as pastors in a small church in a rural part of western Ontario, Canada for several years. During that time, I consented to allow a gentleman in the church to take the position he wanted as teacher of the adult Sunday school class. Several days later while in prayer, I realized I had made a mistake. He had not yet begun his new responsibilities. As kindly as I could, I apologized to him for my error and told him someone else would teach that class. As a result, his attitude toward me and my leadership changed entirely, and he began to oppose me. In the process of working out his bitterness, his family and three other families decided to leave our church. One afternoon after visiting one family that had been led astray, I parked my car in the garage under a wing of the church building and wept. How could an innocent newborn sheep we led to the Savior, whose life and family had gloriously changed, and whom we had so lovingly and carefully nurtured, be so suddenly alienated from us and destructively injured? Through an error of mine, the enemy had some victory. However, the setback did not cause us to quit.

Not too much later, our supervisor visited us and offered us another church. I felt it would only be escaping a problem. Until this was settled and the church was clean, we decided we should not leave. I had no idea that the tenacity and perseverance God was developing in me was preparing me to weather the storms we would face in Korea. As I look back on the tears of our Canada years, I realize they prepared us for the future. We toughened our ability to persevere by staying with that church and seeing it grow in spite of the families that defected. We would have never been able to hold steady through the Korean storms had we not come through "easier" ones in Canada. This

test of our faith was also a test of our commitment. Through it, we learned how committed we were to stay in the ministry. In Korea, we faced even more devastating defections, betrayals, and disappointments. We stayed the course through those, too. Tests like these can strengthen the developing worker's willingness to be used in whatever way God indicates. It involves an inward private agreement between the actively growing Christian and God. When something in us dies, something else lives even more vigorously. Yet we don't know this about ourselves until God has brought us successfully through a series of faith and commitment tests.

Formal Training

This book emphasizes the practical, experiential, and spiritual habits God wants us to develop to become highly effective Christians. It does not primarily champion book learning but nevertheless, book learning is a major part of traditional or formal training. It is one possible way God develops a person. Because God may direct us to study formally, we should also think about formal training in this chapter.

Book learning, classroom work, and academic degrees are not the only ways or even the best ways to learn how to minister. They will certainly not produce ministry on their own. They do, however, make good additions to spiritual qualities. Learning only by experience swings the pendulum too far away from intellectual development. The acquisition of ministry skills refers to learning skills that aid one in ministry — professional or nonprofessional. Taking a course in a school or attending a Christian leaders' seminar for training may help us develop new abilities that enlarge our Christian service potential. Learn how to handle conflict, prepare sermons, organize committees, or implement change, and then watch how God will use — or not use — your new skill.

When something in us dies, something else lives even more

In January of 1977, after only three and one half years into a five-year missionary term in Korea, I went on my annual January three-day fast. While walking through the frozen rice paddies just west of Taejon near the hot springs of Yusong on the second

morning, the Lord placed in my spirit a realization that I should return to school. At that time, I had a Bachelor of Theology degree. The idea of studying more was a new idea, but I knew it was from the Lord. I realized that the best thing for a missionary to study was missiology. The most likely place to do it was the School of World Missions, located about a 20-minute drive from the furlough home in which I was scheduled to stay for a year. That specific guidance from God changed the direction of my ministry. Studying missiology increased my effectiveness as a missionary and specifically influenced my subsequent career as a missiologist training missionaries. We should not learn *just* from books, teachers, and formal settings. However, our experience *can* be complemented by them. Your training should not be only experiential or only formal training. Both are needed.

Gift Discovery

The combination of gifts God gave you includes natural abilities, acquired skills, and spiritual gifts. During the course of your development as a useful Christian, you may discover a gift you did not realize you had. Over the years, I have thoroughly enjoyed graduate study programs, though I didn't discover this gift until age 33. The first 12 years of my ministry consisted of 8 years in pastorates in North America and 4 years training Korean pastors in an institute-level Bible school in Asia. When we went home to the U.S. for our first furlough, I began my first graduate studies. After 12 years of ministry, imagine the joy of discovering the excitement, stimulation, and usefulness of graduate studies.

The discovery of your giftedness and how you grow is a continuous and exciting adventure.

You may have gifts you have not yet discovered. Try a variety of service situations. If you have served only in the church, try serving outside of it. If you have never traveled abroad, consider contacting a missionary friend or organization, and visit the mission field. We don't completely fulfill the great commission by these visits. However, visits serve the broader interest of more permanent missionary service because they can be good missionary recruitment tools. The discovery of your gifts — especially the discovery and the confident use of your spiritual

gifts — is an important part of your development. The discovery of your giftedness and how you grow is a continuous and exciting adventure. You may surprise even yourself.

The Mentor

Have you ever met someone who lived and served in a way you wanted to duplicate? This was not a coincidence. A person with a serving, giving, encouraging attitude — the mentor — sees leadership potential in someone with similar gifts and potential yet to be developed — the protégé. The mentor leads the protégé toward the realization or even identification of her potential. Some people are exceptionally gifted at recognizing potential in others. They naturally take a personal interest in selecting and guiding their protégés. As I look back on the half dozen really important mentors in my life, I can see that some of them found me, and I found some of them. I subsequently read what my experience had already taught me — that the relationship can be initiated by either party.

In my senior year, the dean of students in the small Bible college from which I graduated asked me to serve on the yearbook staff. I listened rather uninterestedly, thinking of all the reasons why I could not serve. After all, I was a student pastor with pastoral responsibilities and couldn't be too involved in extracurricular activities. At the end of his sales pitch, he said he wanted me to be the editor — now that was challenging! At his recommendation, I served in this capacity and believe we produced a quality yearbook that year. It was all very exciting — chairing the committee meetings, meeting students from both day and night schools, meeting individually with each member to review their tasks and show how they all fit together, meeting the representative of the publishing company, and, probably most of all, working closely with the dean of students whom I admired. I believe it was a developmental opportunity determined by circumstances far beyond my control.

That experience led to further familiarity with the dean of students. Later, he asked me if I would serve the Bible college by going on a singing and preaching tour the summer after graduation. We were to promote the Bible college. As a result, I traveled all over the eastern part of the United States, preaching in churches and youth camps.

As the car owner, I learned the importance of communicating the financial details in advance of making a trip as a team. As the speaker for the group, I experienced confirmations of the need to pray with disciplined regularity. The dean of students has had a profound influence on my life then and over the years. I thank God for this mentor — a tool in God's hand — to correct and develop me. Now in his retirement, I still learn from his example of gracious mannerisms, self-deprecating humor, and patience in interpersonal relationships.

Contextual Issues

Some of the things the Lord uses to train us are more contextual — related to the cultural, political, economic, or social context in which we live — than relational. Providential factors in local, regional, national, and international situations affect spiritual growth and the increase of our influence. These are factors over which we have almost no control. We have a great learning advantage when we can recognize them, see the hand of God in them, and intentionally, positively, and constructively *use* them rather than merely react emotionally to them. Situations some people think are mere coincidental circumstances are actually disguised "tools" in the loving Master's skillful hand.

Situations some people think are mere coincidental circumstances are actually disguised "tools" in the loving Master's skillful hand.

In the summer of 1965, a small rural congregation just 70 miles north of our Bible college needed a pastor. I was asked if I would fill in several Sundays. This led to the invitation to serve there as a student pastor. During the year I served as their pastor, the monthly average attendance tripled — from 8 to 24 attendees on Sunday mornings. My whole senior year, I learned about depending on God, loving people, confronting people with extreme gentleness, as well as the difficulty of being unmarried in the ministry. The opportunity to serve as a student pastor complemented my classroom learning. It taught me more of the issues of leading a church such as keeping church financial records and loving without partiality.

Once again, the initiation was out of my own control, but God used it as a growing point in my life. My faithfulness there and my speaking tour during the summer after graduation led to other opportunities. I was invited to serve as associate pastor and youth leader in one of our denomination's larger churches in the East at the time. God was using an organizational, contextual situation to develop me. I was learning how to be faithful in whatever assignment He gave.

Now, what about you? What, in your circumstances, can you begin to look at in this new light? Do you believe God is in control, even when you are not? What are you to learn from it?

A Paradigm Shift

A paradigm is a mental framework in which we order our thoughts — a system for evaluating what goes on around us. Sometimes catastrophic events force us to enlarge or adjust our thinking so radically that we experience a "paradigm shift." These are changes so dramatic that to prepare us for them — or even make us willing to receive them — God has to use extreme measures. Paradigm shifts are often precipitated by a crisis — a turning point. In a crisis, the shift of paradigm is God's goal. Without this perspective, we see only the difficult part of the crisis, while they are actually God's means to God's end — our development and His glory. God uses one or more difficulties to reveal a major, new perspective on Him or our service to Him. The new perspective results in a sense of release as though we had been bound by narrow conceptual limits. The new perspective is a joyous discovery that enhances our learning ability although the process is usually quite difficult. Through the paradigm shift, we are freed to see things in a new way. We may experience a lesson that takes us considerable time to process. In time, we become cognitively aware of what we learned and can put it into words. An adult's conversion to Christianity is one kind of paradigm shift. Paul's conversion, as recorded in Acts Chapter 9, is probably the classic and best example.

My largest paradigm shift came through a major ministry crisis I experienced in the spring of 1979. A segment of our church in Korea rejected my leadership. Through my crisis and the fast connected with it, I learned discernment, relearned the power of prayer, and gained insights about spiritual warfare. I also learned that even when I am right, if my attitude is wrong, I am

wrong. I would never have been open to deeper truths had I not experienced such extreme circumstantial pressure at the time.

Learning through a crisis requires a correct response to the intense pressure God uses to test us and teach us dependence. The correct response requires a teachable spirit. A willful intent to move deeper into the heart of God in the early stages of a crisis can carry us through it. The end result is a stronger servant with a deeper experience of God's love and greater spiritual authority. How we respond to a crisis is key. In fact, our response *is* the issue — our response to the crisis is more important in God's plan than solving the crisis. How we grow in it is the central issue.

Involvement with the Unseen World

The unseen world impacts the visible world. Economic, political, social, family, ministry, and other life problems are deeper, more complex, and dramatic than what appears on the surface. A growing Christian will learn to discern the impact of the unseen on the visible. Our service has two levels of activity. The first depends on sensitivity to "behind the scenes activity" of the spirit world, which can enable a Christian to influence visible situations. People are not the enemy; Satan is. He uses people as "tools," but we should not fight against the tools. We are to fight against him and love the tools. In this case, the tools are also captives that need to be delivered. The second level of activity is carrying out in the physical arena what has already been dealt with in the spiritual realm through prayer. When the first is done well, the second is easy.

Our response to the crisis is more important in God's plan than solving the crisis.

In Elijah's day, there was a three-year famine. The famine appeared at the physical level, but there was a lot of dramatic activity going on in the unseen world. The clash of spiritual forces culminated in a showdown on Mount Carmel as Elijah, the prayer warrior, publicly called on God to send fire. That showdown was a "power encounter." Spiritual warfare and power encounters teach us to discern the root causes in the spirit world for problems

that appear in the natural world. The real battle is spiritual and is fought with spiritual weapons. When we win, not only is the battle won, the soldier is also developed. This could be restated: not only is the warrior developed, the battle is also won. These are two important results, and God is concerned about both.

Remember the four families that left our church in rural Canada? We continued to regularly fast and pray our way through those difficult months. We felt that the real battle was the invisible spiritual war which prompted the families to leave the church. We kept on praying and God answered! During this time, several influential young people were saved, and they became active evangelists among the youth in our community. A businessman and his wife began attending our church and added many fresh ideas. All this occurred during the same time we were experiencing terrible conflict and opposition. Because we kept praying, God rewarded our faithfulness and added increase.

He is the chief unseen player in all the drama of life.

Wrestling, as it were, in the spirit world, I discovered several things in my experience of strong intercession and prayer. Fasting weakens devils. We ourselves may feel weak, but in the Spirit, we gain a strength advantage. In addition, clapping hands while praying can help us focus on prayer at times. We concentrate better. It is often an aid to prayer as we symbolically beat the enemy and celebrate the power of God. Praising God is an offensive sound to devils, like the sound of sirens or church bells in the sensitive ears of our canine friends. Picture the scene in the spirit world where demons howl and run away at the sound of praise to God. Praying at the prompting of the Spirit enables us to pray according to the will of God, even at times when we do not consciously know the details about what we should be praying for (Romans 8:26, 27).

There are two possible imbalances in our attitudes regarding the impact of the spiritual world on the natural world. One is the tendency to blame all conflict and problems on spiritual warfare. We must remember that we live in a fallen world and that bad things happen to good people. Not everything is the devil's fault. The other imbalance is the tendency to see nothing of spiritual warfare in the conflict and problems of life and Christian work. We must remember that there is an unseen enemy who sometimes causes problems.

Even though we may not know which events the enemy initiates, God is at work growing us through all circumstances. He is the chief unseen player in all the drama of life. In other words, every single problem has a spiritual component; and we can learn something from all circumstances, even if just a simple lesson about life processes.

Professional Training or Assignment

Whatever your profession or career, God often works through employers and colleagues to develop your potential. Professional training, assignments, and career-related experiences may be a part of that plan and can serve as a means of promotion. Through your employer or business, God gives new insights to expand your influence and capacity for responsibility. During a given assignment, you learn new skills. You may also gain new insight about what it means to facilitate the work and growth of others. In short, professional assignments can be God's vehicle for making you more useful to both your employer and your Lord.

In college, I was preparing for pastoral ministry. The summer between my junior and senior year, I was asked to take a rural pastorate nearby. I see that assignment as a key part of God's training program for me. It taught me lessons on prayer, fasting, honesty, perseverance, self-denial, focus, discipline in sermon preparation, and ways to love people. Look back now on some assignment you fulfilled in your past, and list the lessons you learned. That helps us identify what God taught us. It is particularly interesting when we see a correlation between what He has taught us in the past and what He is teaching us now.

That year, I traveled to the famous Cathedral of Tomorrow in Akron, Ohio to attend Rex Humbard's annual New Year's Eve service. When I had discussed the trip with some people from the church, I indicated I probably would not go. Later, I changed my mind and went. What I didn't admit at the time—even to myself—was that I didn't want to go with them because they were common country people. While at the cathedral, I met the dean of the Bible college, his wife, and several other people I knew. It was a wonderful service, and I returned home to my rural pastorate. When my congregation learned that I had gone, but not with them, one of the parents of the youth directly confronted me: "You wanted to go; you just didn't want to go with us." I

regret that in my pride, I was unwilling to identify with the people to whom the Lord had assigned me. Six months later, some of my youth showed up at my graduation ceremony. Even though they seemed worlds apart from my academic environment, I was genuinely pleased and moved with joy that they were there.

It is better to ask than not to understand the point.

Remember the question: "What am I to learn through this?" In education, it is never wrong for a student to ask the teacher what the point of the illustration is. Our professional assignments are God's illustrations, and sometimes we need help getting the point. It is better to ask than not to understand the point. His training methods indicate what He plans to do with us. We may even discover patterns, repeats, and review lessons. These reveal what God is really working on in us. If the lesson is important to Him, it should also be important to us. Our pain is wasted if we don't get the point.

Isolation

Like doctors in hospitals who sometimes place special cases in isolation, God sometimes intentionally places his workers in times or circumstances of isolation. He may set a leader aside for an extended time, not because He is *through* with him, but because He is *not through* with him. God may have done everything He can through him unless he experiences further growth and stretching. The "set aside" period is a good time to ask, "What am I to learn from this?" or "What are you saying, Lord?" Then God's purpose for separating us from normal activities can be richly fulfilled. It could be a time of sickness, a suspension from public ministry, a surprise demotion, dismissal, a time of recuperation from an accident, or even a prison term. Recently, Char and I were captivated by a speaker who spoke with great depth for four hours. He shared wonderful insights that he had learned while studying the Bible in his recent prison term! Had his ministry continued with what *looked* like great success, he would have continued with mediocrity. Because he opened his heart during God's isolation process, he had gained much more spiritual insight.

We must not be afraid when God deliberately creates situations to facilitate a sustained conversation with Him. He wants, needs,

and deserves all our attention at these times. In fact, that is the whole point. The isolation removes distractions and helps us focus and listen. The Chairman of Human Resource Development in God's Kingdom is the sovereign God, and He will use isolation for His purposes. If you find yourself in isolation, don't interpret the event negatively. Take advantage of the opportunity to decide now, in advance, to flip it around to determine what God is saying. This habit will change your life. God is more interested in your development than your comfort. He needs our attention; that's the purpose of the isolation.

Accepting Closed Doors and Forgiving People

Earlier I mentioned my talented friend and colleague with whom Char and I worked when we first went to the mission field. He had the use of a car, and we rode bicycles. He had an expense account for handling guests, and we did not. He had a secretary who helped him all day and then lived with us! Yet, in spite of what we saw as inequities, we were handling our lot. We had heard that interpersonal relationships on the mission field were often problematic, and we were determined to serve faithfully. We prayed about it, lived with it, and were doing all right.

God is more interested in your development than your comfort.

One day, however, a visiting lecturer from our denomination came to our house. In pastoral kindness, he asked us if there were any problems we wanted to discuss. He told us he understood that often missionaries languish for lack of a sounding board. He offered his ear and heart for our release and comfort. We gradually slipped into telling him about our relationship with our colleague, the secretary who benefited the colleague but who lived in our home, the car he drove while we rode bicycles, his expense account while we entertained at our expense, etc. Our guest offered to pray with us about all these issues. We felt that his curiosity about the "inside story" regarding our lives as missionaries was satisfied and that was the end of that. We forgot about it.

As soon as that guest left the country, my colleague, who had all the perks, called me up and invited Char and me to his house. We

were told clearly that we had violated our mission's ethics by telling a guest about internal mission matters. We were never again to discuss mission business with guests. Even though Char and I felt we had been misunderstood, we once again lived with it. Over the years, we have learned to forgive and release. We continued serving fruitfully in Korea eight years after that colleague left the field. We, too, eventually returned to the United States but only after we had turned a nationalized church over to the Koreans.

When we returned to the United States, we founded a church in our denomination. During this time, I finished my education, and we helped our boys start their university and academy careers. After five years, we again sought to serve in our denomination's mission department. We then discovered we were not welcome. We never knew why, but I wondered if it was partially caused by the misunderstanding and awkward relationship mentioned above. Looking back, God has sometimes closed one door to motivate us to enter another door. Because of the closed denominational missions' door, we went to China independently. We learned profound things there about the body of Christ we could not have learned working in a single denomination. The church in China says it is living in the post-denominational era, which is largely true. Now, in an international and interdenominational setting, I train missionaries and pastors from many denominations and non-denominational churches from many countries including the United States. God works best wherever we *obey* Him — whether that is in or outside of denominations.

Misunderstandings do occur, and God uses them to close doors. Through the door-closing process, we must learn to recognize His handiwork and not be bitter toward the personalities involved. He closes some doors because He has others to open. If we whine and cry at the closed door, or worse yet, try to break it down, we will not be ready to cheerfully find and walk through the open doors God has down the hallway. Open doors are more fun to walk through. However, in forgiving those who closed doors, we learn lessons that prepare us to humbly serve in new opportunities. Any closed door could be a hint that God has something else. Bitterness and unforgiveness focus on the past and abort the growth process. Focus on finding that "something else" that God has. It is better to seek a positive interpretation for every closed door.

Any closed door could be a hint that God has something else.

Self-discipline helps us avoid complaining. While still in the experience, we should maintain a teachable attitude. We should constantly ask ourselves, "What am I to learn through this experience?" Controlling our attitudes in this area helps as we learn self-control in other areas of our lives. In the next chapter, we examine the important habit of regulating ourselves so we can be more effective and fruitful. Personal discipline and self-control help us become effective and fruitful in many different arenas — some of which are addressed in subsequent chapters.

HABIT THREE

Exercise Self-Control

"... make every effort to add ... self-control ... for if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive ..."

II Peter 1:5-9

This book draws from my experiences on three continents and important lessons from the Bible. We explore the theme of increased effectiveness in the vital areas of personal development, prayer, fasting, health, finances, marriage, parenting, leading people to Jesus, and obedience to and perseverance for God. We have already observed that disciplining ourselves to learn through our experiences produces personal growth. Now, this chapter more fully introduces the theme of self-control. And then throughout this study, we'll look at varied practical applications of self-control. Without self-control, we cannot become our best possible self.

Disciplining ourselves in our service to God requires us to supervise ourselves. Christians do not punch time cards, nor do they have a supervisor requiring daily records of time spent on projects. In Christian ministry, we need to be self-starters. It is easy to be undisciplined. If we grumble instead of learn, or sleep instead of pray, no one will "tell on us." No one needs to tell our "boss" — He already knows. However, in whatever culture you

live, those who are willing to discipline themselves are successful in the end.

In whatever culture you live, those who are willing to discipline themselves are successful in the end.

Self-discipline is a lifestyle. Discipline in one area of our lives enhances a desire for discipline in others. Striving to be our best for God's glory makes us aware of the interconnectedness of self-discipline from one area to another. Good habits in one area of our lives make other areas more peaceful and productive. Once we experience the benefits of routine and order in one part of our lives, we soon desire those benefits in other less effective areas.

Advantages of Routine

Aren't you glad you don't have to decide when, where, or how to fix your hair every day? Isn't it easier when you don't have to decide when, where, or how to shave or trim your beard every day? Just go on a camping trip that disrupts these normal routines and forces you to take time to think about how to even do them. It will remind you how much time is absorbed in making trivial decisions. Routines can serve good, timesaving purposes, and we should not hesitate to establish good ones. If routines are timesavers in the small issues of life, then they can be even greater timesavers in the larger issues.

With routines, you can think through, decide upon once, and then implement them daily, weekly, or annually. In deciding what habits to form, your value system moves into action. Once you choose a routine, it becomes a matter of following through. I used to hate trips to the dentist. I usually had a tooth or two that needed to be filled, and I disliked the lecture on flossing my teeth! In the spring of 1983 when we were on furlough, I had extensive cosmetic dental work done. After that, I decided to increase my tooth-brushing routine to twice a day and floss regularly. I did not have a cavity for 19 years after that. While I wish I had made that decision earlier in life, I am glad I made it as soon as I did. I never have to wrestle with the decision of whether to brush or floss. I do it regularly because of the decision I made one time. This may seem like a trite illustration of a simple truth, but it illustrates the value of routine.

Fundamentals are the foundation of good routines. Emotions and feelings are usually less dependable influencers of good decisions. This chapter offers several areas to thoughtfully evaluate. As you chart your course, make careful decisions based on fundamentals, not by simply flowing with your emotions. After you make each intentional, deliberate decision, make one more — choose to follow through. Good decisions enable us to fly on automatic pilot to our destination. For example, this is my typical routine: rise early in the morning, pray, read the Bible, fast one day a week, study, prepare for classes, maintain office hours, return phone calls, play basketball or run, workout, and rest on Sundays. This routine provides me a healthy and highly beneficial lifestyle.

Good decisions enable us to fly on automatic pilot to our destination.

On Thinking and Gazing

I decided once that I will not dwell on evil thoughts. I have applied this decision many times. The Scripture is clear that we should "demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (II Corinthians 10:5). I decided this ahead of time. Now, when I experience an evil thought, I activate my plan of prayer, self-control, spiritual discipline, and reliance upon God. Even during prayer — alone or in groups — I have evil or vulgar thoughts. I decided in advance that when they come to me, I will resist, fight against, and overcome them.

Some say that while demons cannot know all our thoughts, they can influence our thoughts. This means that demons may place some thoughts in our minds — probably the ones we don't want. We need to boot them out. Controlling our thoughts requires self-control. Demons probably do not have as much power or authority to tempt us with evil thoughts as some demon-fearing Christians suggest. However, demons seem to hitchhike on thoughts produced by fertile human and evil imaginations. They try to make the evil thoughts worse or more prolonged than we, in our desires for purity and righteousness, would have done on our own. We must oppose them.

With my own fertile imagination, I create enough evil thoughts on my own without the devil's help. He has the ability to hitchhike on my smallest evil contemplation and transform it into a major evil thought. I decided to strive to cast both the thought that gave him entry and the hitchhiker out of my mind. Our journey down life's highway is much smoother without undesirable traveling companions. As the devil overplays his hand, he increases the presence of evil. When I identify his evil, I push vigorously in the other direction. In the confusion of enjoying and hating the evil thought, we lose the ability to decide anything. I find it is easier to implement a decision I have chosen in advance than to make a good one under such pressure. My prior decision controls my thoughts — and my gaze.

My model in trying to control my gaze comes from a chapter in which Job declares his ethic: "I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl" (Job 31:1). What a great example! Sometimes the female students with whom I work at the university do not make this easy. I would like to think they would not wear low necklines or tight-fitting clothes if they knew what a problem this caused for men. Nevertheless, I am convicted to control my gaze and my thoughts. I decided some time ago that when speaking with women, I will keep my eyes on theirs and not look any lower. I have kicked the plan into action with a second's notice numerous times. At the same time, if lustful thoughts occur, I try to see the woman's spirit, love it, and pray for it as God would have me do. I also decided that if I have trouble doing that, I would tell my wife, Char, and ask her to pray with me about it. She has been most helpful during these times, and I am always glad I have been transparent with her.

In the emotion, excitement, or entertainment of the moment, we are in poor shape to make important decisions.

Here is an example of the value of making the decision ahead of time and merely disciplining ourselves to follow through when circumstances are beyond our control. In the university where I serve, we have a copy center with three lines where students and faculty wait for service. One time, I had reached the counter and was waiting for my copies when one of my former graduate students came up to speak with me. The level of her neckline made me glad I had decided ahead of time to keep my eyes on hers and

maintain a proper attitude toward God's daughters. I felt some comfort, too, during my prayer time with Char that evening. In the emotion, excitement, or entertainment of the moment, we are in poor shape to make important decisions. We can agree with Job. We can make a covenant with our eyes. That is our thoughtful decision. From then on, we will merely follow through which we can also decide in advance to do automatically.

Ready to Fast

Chapters 5 and 6 cover fasting more thoroughly and Chapter 12 goes into depth on eating habits and health issues. However, we address one aspect of eating habits here because it relates to self-discipline and affects our readiness to fast. It relates to the consumption of stimulants and chemicals.

Some people recommend avoiding coffee for several days before fasting. This enables the body to become less dependent on the stimulant of caffeine and eases the transition into going without food. Steering clear of coffee ahead of time is better than going off coffee, sugars, and food all at the same time. Headaches caused by caffeine withdrawal during the first day or two of the fast are uncomfortable and distracting. It is better, however, to prevent dependence on sugar or caffeine in the first place. That way, you are really free.

I recently did a three-day fast. Char was gone to visit our kids in Alaska to help welcome our new granddaughter into our family. I was on spring break and had complete control over my work schedule during that week. I woke up on that first Saturday and realized I was free to fast for the next three days if I chose. Because I do not eat sugar, there was no "sugar withdrawal" headache. Because I do not drink coffee or cola, I had no caffeine withdrawal either. I was ready to go on a three-day fast without the advance preparation of avoiding caffeine or sugar. By eating nourishing food and avoiding stimulants, it is easier to fast — whether it is a weekly one-day fast or annual three-day fast.

Some people do not fast because they have such a difficult time the first day getting off chemicals. Being on chemicals may not be such a good choice in the first place. It depends on how much value you place on the spiritual alertness that fasting provides. If it burdens you to live a lifestyle that makes fasting less difficult, the only excuse you need to remain unprepared is simply, "Fasting is not worth that much to me."

It may not be easy, but fasting produces marvelous results. Fasting makes focusing on prayer, understanding the Word, and hearing God's voice easier. Fasting takes discipline — making the decision to fast and following through takes discipline. However, fasting is not as difficult as we have made it. The problem is that regularly consuming chemicals and stimulants makes fasting more difficult. The problem shows up when we fast, but it is not essentially a fasting problem; it is a problem of poor eating habits.

Chapter 5 is devoted to fasting so we won't go into more detail here. Just remember that self-control and personal discipline exercised in one area of our lives positively affects other areas. I learned to discipline myself in regular prayer before I began to fast regularly each week. By the time I formed one habit, I was ready to form another good one. Disciplining myself to eat properly every day prepares me to fast when I am ready. A mind-over-matter — decision-over-appetite — mentality results from disciplining ourselves to eat correctly. Unfortunately, dependence on food sugars and caffeine robs some people of the joys and victories of fasting. Fasting is so important and beneficial that it is worth regulating our daily diet so we can do it more easily.

The self-control we exercise and the victory over appetite we gain through fasting, while significant itself, is only a part of the bigger victory: our spirits are in control; our bodies are not. Food will serve us; we will not let it control us. We can say, "It is worth that much to me."

Deciding How Much to Pray

Regularity of prayer is possibly the most important arena in which we need self-discipline. In my early years of Bible college, my parents gave me two books on prayer written by Leonard Ravenhill that influenced me tremendously. If you can find them, read them. One book was titled *Why Revival Tarries* and the other was *Meat for Men*. In a letter from my dad I received around the same time, he suggested that I make a habit of praying one hour each day. I have always thought it was interesting that God used that letter from my father to influence me so strongly. To my knowledge, my dad did not have that habit. My dad was a good man, but Mom had more spiritual power and insight than he did. Anyway, the combined influence of Ravenhill's books and Dad's suggestion inspired me to start a habit I have maintained since my sophomore year in Bible college (1963 to 1964).

I do not remember when I changed, but I soon jumped from one hour per day to two hours per day. I have maintained that level more or less over the years. I recommend determining how long you are going to pray each day. Do not pray only as long as you feel like it. There may be some exceptions among us, but most of us will pray more regularly if we commit to specific times for prayer. We will also pray longer than if we stopped when we felt like it.

Jesus invited his disciples to pray with him for an hour. Author David Wilkerson suggests we tithe our time — that would mean taking 2 hours and 24 minutes per day. I chose to pray two hours each morning. Decide what is best for you, and then all you have to do is discipline yourself to follow through on your decision.

Most of us will pray more regularly if we commit to specific times for prayer.

In order to do this, you may have to cut back on time spent on less valuable activities. I have never watched television much. When we were children, we didn't have one because Mom and Dad didn't feel we should. As a result, I have never had to wean myself off television, but I understand some people do. I decided the length of my daily prayer time at age 19, so I had the advantage of fewer unhealthy habits to break in order to establish this good one. It is easier to establish good habits earlier in life than later. Regular time for prayer is possibly the best habit I have. Out of it flows many other good habits that have also been a great blessing in my life. Of course, clocking so many hours in prayer is not the point; praying is.

During the time we set aside to pray, we must also exercise discipline to focus on what we are doing. This is true whether we pray with the special prompting of the Holy Spirit or pray through our normal routines. Keeping our minds focused on prayer the whole time takes self-control and discipline. In Chapter 5, we will notice that praying through the six parts of the Lord's Prayer according to Larry Lea's formula has been a great help to many. That keeps us focused and moving from subject to subject. Deciding how long we will pray encourages us to pray more because we become accustomed to fully using the time we set aside. The purpose of allotting time is to increase prayer. We will make the most of whatever aids us to pray more or better.

In deciding when and how much to pray and then disciplining yourself to follow through, allow yourself the freedom to reevaluate and modify your routine. I once decided that I needed to get up at about 5:30 a.m. to spend more time in prayer. After four days, I was so tired I was unable to pray or do anything else. I decided I needed to go back to getting a better night's rest so I could pray with a rested body and focused mind. Some great prayer warriors have been able to pray very early in the morning, but everyone needs to find out what works best for them in keeping with how God made us.

When I run marathons, I run as fast as I can at a pace I can maintain for the entire race. If I go any faster, my legs begin to cramp or some other indicator reminds me not to go so fast. If I lose focus and slow down too much, I know I am not doing my utmost and my time will not be good for that race. I have learned to listen to my body and go as fast as I can at a maintainable pace. I have disciplined myself not to run too fast during the first 20 miles of the race. Maintaining speed throughout the race is much more important than going fast. Regular prayer times and other disciplines in a Christian's life are, once again, more like a marathon than a sprint. Find the best pace that you can maintain and stay with it.

Bible Reading

Since the summer of 1963, I have made it a habit to read the Bible all the way through each year. I established that habit after reading *Through Gates of Splendor* by Elisabeth Elliot. In that book, she told of how her husband, Jim Elliot, loved the Bible and read it regularly. Actually, I established both my habit of reading the Bible all the way through each year and my habit of praying an hour each day about the same time. I went through a significant spiritual change that summer and decided that spiritual pursuits were more important than other things. Regular prayer and Bible-reading habits were the practical out workings of my positive shift in values. As a result, since the summer of 1963, I have enjoyed my daily sessions with the Lord. I don't have to decide each day to do this — I merely act on a previously made decision. I have often picked up something from that day's reading that was immediately helpful to me.

My Bible has 1,094 pages of Scripture text. If I read three pages per weekday and four pages on Sundays, I can read the whole Bible in 365 days. Consider dividing the number of pages in your Bible by 365 to determine your own plan. There are annual

Bible reading charts available and even a chronological Bible that is divided into daily reading portions that guide the reader through it each year. The important lesson is not about choosing the method. It is about disciplining ourselves to regularly submit to the teachings of Scripture. Some parts of the Bible are not as easy as others. That gives us even more reason to decide to read it all — not just the easy or favorite parts.

God's Spirit speaks through the "written Word" — the Bible. It repeatedly influences our value system personally, accurately, pointedly, and with great encouragement for godly living. Mentally, we are what we read. A routine of reading the Word of God is essential to the development of God's servants.

Avoiding Extremes

This book frequently includes personal anecdotes. They help us understand how to apply biblical principles to daily life. The following narratives, however, illustrate when *not* to apply self-discipline — times when God wants us to let go and have fun. Self-discipline is a good thing, but even it requires discerning applications, moderation, and balance.

God gave the human race a great gift in the pleasures of physical intimacy in marriage. However, some well-intended and good people, have exercised discipline — actually unnecessary austerity — by denying themselves a blessing God wants for us in our marriages. There is a place for mutually agreed abstention for a specific time and purpose, but that is not the point I am addressing here. Hebrews 13:4 says, "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure …" In most translations, this verse is rendered as a command, but according to Greek grammar, it could be a statement as well as a command. "Marriage is honored by all, and the marriage bed is pure," is, therefore, another possible translation. Morally, the marriage bed *should* be kept pure. On the other hand, in many Christian marriages, it simply *is* the case. That we *keep* it pure is also necessary, but that it *is* pure is an even more fundamental truth. There would be greater satisfaction in marriages, less adultery, and fewer divorces if partners would simply loosen up with greater freedom and creativity.

The graphic instructions in Proverbs and the Song of Solomon are very clear. Scripture encourages marriage partners to enjoy each other's bodies. God intended physical intimacy to be an

enjoyable, often-repeated experience. This gift is too wonderful to refuse and too valuable to allow Satan to steal. In physical intimacy, marriage partners should relax, be creative, and take their time as often as they both agree, and have fun.

When marriage is entered with purity and innocence, the experiment and discovery process that begins on the wedding night can continue many years. We should keep these secrets in our own marriages just like we should be chaste, proper, reserved, and strictly self-controlled in our behavior outside of marriage. A rendezvous outside marriage would be less tempting if partners were less reserved and planned more exciting things inside it. As mentioned above, the Bible says marriage is honorable, the bed is pure, and sex is blessed. There are many times and places where we should control our urges. However, physical intimacy is one God-blessed and God-given arena where we can enjoy whatever physical liberties both spouses feel comfortable with without any shame before God. My own years of marriage experience have confirmed this line of thought, and the following two sad stories will further reinforce it.

A rendezvous outside marriage would be less tempting if partners were less reserved and planned more exciting things inside it.

Once when we were home on furlough in the United States, we visited a church in the Midwest. The pastor's wife taught the adult Sunday School class. To illustrate the importance of dedication and prayer, she told the class that she and her husband had agreed to abstain from physical intimacy on Saturday evenings in order to give themselves to prayer for the services the next day. My own inner reaction was something like, "I'm glad we don't have that policy, but they must be really dedicated." Many years later, I learned that the pastor had had an adulterous affair that split the church. There are surely other factors I do not know, so I hesitate to make a judgment. However, I have always wondered if their self-control (which is acceptable to God) evolved into extreme self-denial and austerity — potentially a tool of the enemy. In our own endeavors to avoid that couple's tragedy in our marriages, it is better to enjoy many happy private parties.

During my youth, I sought the counsel of an esteemed and godly man I greatly respect. I was struggling with sexuality, a problem for most normal single young men who value sexual purity. My counselor assured me that self-control was still necessary even after marriage. One was not free to experience physical intimacy just any time of the day. He explained that work and responsibilities keep married people from physical intimacy even though they may be in the same work or living environment. I did not question his position on the matter for a long time.

A year and a half later while still single, by accident, I learned something that gave me a different perspective on his philosophy. That counselor's Christian wife shared heart-to-heart with me that she had had an affair subsequent to my counseling session with her husband. She told me how her new partner had been so gentle and caring in comparison to her husband's insensitivity to her physical needs. Although he was a godly and devoted husband, he was evidently preoccupied with his work. She felt neglected.

Unfortunately, the counselor's wife handled the situation poorly, but the clear lesson to me is that austerity — unnecessary self-denial — can make people more vulnerable. Because of this unsought first-hand information, I learned this important lesson. Seemingly wonderful and idealistic dedication to the Lord's work can contribute to if not produce a situation for moral tragedy. What I originally interpreted as godly self-control had evidently slipped across the line into my counselor's unnecessary austerity. I determined that I would follow that counselor's advice and godly example on all points except one — declining the joy of physical intimacy "just any time of the day." I understood from their sad experience the legitimacy of physical intimacy during the day. This perspective has added many happy experiences to the joys of my own marriage.

You might question the appropriateness of my exchange with my counselor's wife. Being a young man at the time, I did not realize that I was engaged in a risky dialogue. Single or married, a man should not have a lengthy discussion on sexual issues alone with anyone but his wife. If two people agree to discuss this topic, another woman should also be present. Here is why this type of conversation leaves us vulnerable. In discussing intimate things with members of the opposite sex, we mentally enter into an intimate, interpersonal zone. When that conversation involves people we are not married to, it makes

being alone together inappropriate. Christians must exercise self-discipline to avoid such a potentially destructive situation.

Most of us are exposed to temptation and work long hours. We often go to bed exhausted, having worked all evening after having worked all day. We should be at liberty to have some daytime secrets in our own houses with our spouses. God expects us to be dedicated and zealous for His causes. Nevertheless, our enemy is clever enough to use our dedication and zeal against us to rob us. The enemy targets some of the joys that help us serve God with contentment, satisfaction, and purity for a lifetime. God is, after all, the One who created our bodies with their fascinating parts, interesting functions, and capacities for joyous celebrations and private ecstatic escapes from heavy public responsibilities.

Potential, by definition, is something that we can achieve, and self-control makes the big difference.

My main emphasis in this chapter has been to encourage you to increase order and effectiveness as a Christian by making thoughtful and careful decisions. From then on, we merely act on previously made decisions; follow the plan; and fly on automatic pilot. However, we are not machines. We have emotions for which we must make allowances. Schedules and sleeping patterns are not always completely under our control. In those instances, we need to be flexible. There are times when people have needs that are simply more important than our well-organized plans and routines. Learning how to recognize when a situation is exceptional is a skill in itself. Knowing when we should set the routine aside and go with the flow is a challenge. In my own routine, there are probably a few times each month when I need to do that. We should be okay with exceptions, but the rule of thumb remains: an exception, in order to be an exception, must be an exception.

The fruit of the spirit of self-control is the key to a well-ordered, effective Christian life. God wants His servants to enjoy the benefits of order, so He teaches us to take captive of every thought and control ourselves. He wants us to enjoy growth, fruitfulness, contentment, peace, and increased opportunities to receive fresh insights from heaven. He knows self-control is the

key. We too often know more about what we should do than we are doing. As a result, we experience an unnecessary gap between our performance and our potential. The key to reducing or closing that gap is self-control. Potential, by definition, is something that we can achieve, and self-control makes the big difference. Our potential is what we could do. As stewards of our talents, what we could do we should do. In other words, we can do it if we will do it. That is why this fruit of the spirit is so valuable.

HABIT FOUR

Pray According to God's Agenda

"This is the confidence we have in approaching God; that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us — whatever we ask — we know that we have what we asked of Him."

1 John 5:14, 15

Direction is more important than speed. Regardless of the energy expended or speed achieved, if the direction is not right, we cannot reach our goal. If we listen, the direction for each day's decisions can come out of our times of prayer. In our prayer times, we are privileged to work through all the things that need to be done, both seeking God's direction and making petitions regarding appointments. Many days when the alarm goes off, I drag myself out of bed feeling there is nothing I can do that day. However, by the time I finish praying, I believe there is nothing I cannot do. The time I spend in prayer sets the tone for the day. After prayer, the rest of the day is merely an outworking of things previously handled at a spiritual level. Prayer is like the slow grind of the chain that pulls a roller coaster up the long, high track — the rest of the day is the

Direction is more important than speed.

adventure of the ride. Prayer is like booting up our computer. When the programs are all ready to go, work is much easier.

Speed is comparatively unimportant. I make progress if I head in the right direction, regardless of how slowly I work my way through the mail, e-mail, papers, reading, studying, classes, or appointments. God's agenda, therefore, is not only the needle on my compass during prayer but throughout the rest of the day. During and after prayer, it is He, not I, who is in charge of the agenda.

I learned this concept during the pastor's session of a youth camp in Canada in the summer of 1965. Since then, I have made it a serious matter to determine what God wanted, and pray accordingly. This includes not only the direction in which to pray but also the choice of the subject about which to pray.

The Sovereignty of God and Prayer

At summer camp, I learned about George Muller. He was the Englishman and legendary founder of orphanages who presented the operation's daily needs to God in prayer. Muller would spend a long time praying to understand the will of God. Then, he would pray a short time according to God's will to get the job done. That made a strong impression on me and has opened up possibilities far beyond what I could have imagined. I established my prayer habit soon after that. Every day since, I still want to know what God is up to and pray accordingly.

While Char and I lived in Beijing in the early 1990s, we determined that we would pray seriously and intentionally for the government of China. We chose to live in Beijing because, among other reasons, we wanted to pray effectively there in the capital city. In Beijing, national decisions affected a larger population than in any other capital of the world. One day, we went to Tiananmen Square in order to walk and pray our way around the Great Hall of the People on the west side of the square. This is the building where the Chinese National Congress meets and central government officials often receive foreign guests. As we walked and prayed our way around the Great Hall of the People, we tried to sense how the Lord was leading us to pray. We were ready to do spiritual battle against the unseen enemy. Instead, we ended up praising the Lord for what He was doing

in China. In retrospect, I believe it was more important for us to do what was consistent with the unseen spiritual realities — in this case praising God — than to tear into a battle motivated merely by our own perceptions of drama and warfare. Someone had interceded before us. Great battles had evidently been fought and won. We were ready to do spiritual warfare and we wanted to intercede. However, we felt it was more important to pray God's will than to proceed with the kind of prayer we thought China needed. We ended up praising God for His victories there.

A similar thing happened in the winter of our first year in China. We went to Qufu, where Confucius was born and buried and where a large Confucianism temple complex still stands. My heart had been drawn toward China during my Confucian family studies several years earlier. I was particularly moved by the plight of the women who the literature said were so mistreated in this system. The primary loyalty required towards parents and ancestors in families produced great difficulties between husbands and wives. (This is explained further in the first paragraphs of Chapter 8.) Once again, it was our intention to pray against the forces of darkness that had blinded the Chinese for centuries. Char and I each began to march around the interior of the walls surrounding the Confucian temple complex. We were ready to intercede, ready to "have at" the spiritual enemy in warfare prayer.

We each went in different directions praying and walking. No matter how I tried, I could not conjure up anything even close to heavy intercession or labor in a spiritual struggle against enemy spirits. Of course, I could have acted or pretended, but I had long since learned not to do that with God. For the duration of the entire "march," I just praised the Lord for what He was doing in China. Once again, it was more important to pray something that fit the spiritual reality than to pretend I knew better than God did about China's needs. Believers at a previous time, perhaps the millions of Chinese Christians in recent years, had been praying effectively. As a result, there had already been a spiritual change in China. Could this be why so many are coming to Christ throughout that land?

Sometimes we do the will of God — too long or in the wrong place.

God had a will and timing for each prayer. We needed to discover what God was doing in our years in China and pray accordingly. A previous generation had served God's purpose and won some significant victories that were needed then. In our generation, we need to do the same. To win the most momentous victories, we need to understand God's agenda for the time and pray according. Sometimes we do the will of God — too long or in the wrong place. God has moved on to another phase, but we are still working and praying according to the "old" need. Perhaps we are praying about the right need, but that "need" is in another place — not where we are. We must ask ourselves, "What does God want to do here and now through me?" To learn that very important answer, we must rigorously work to yield the prayer agenda to Him.

In both of the illustrations above, I prayed according to God's direction, but I chose the subject about which I prayed. What about the times when Spirit-led prayer takes us not only in another direction, but also to a different subject altogether? Many times, we simply do not know what we should pray for; the Holy Spirit always knows. He can help us pray according to a higher, better, more glorious plan. This has happened to me numerous times. You may have had these experiences, too.

It is good to find a regular time and place where you can pray freely and unhindered in whatever way works best for you. Praying aloud helps me focus. I regularly pray in either our garage or a wooded area near our home. On Sunday morning, August 27, 2000, I was walking, praying, and worshipping God. I was ready to work my way through my regular routine of prayer subjects when I felt gradually more and more clearly being called to pray about something else. I continued to pray with the prompting of the Spirit for well into the second hour. It progressively became clear I was praying about the chapters you are now reading. When I got out of bed on the morning of August 27, I had no concept of this project. However, by the time we left the house to go to church that Sunday morning, I had the list of chapter titles basically written.

Praying according to the will of God is essential for increased effectiveness in prayer. However, there is still another dynamic involved. God allows an enormous freedom. It is possible to pray a wrong prayer and consequently get a "wrong" answer that is not good for us. The Bible teaches us to pray according to God's will. Several examples illustrate the danger of praying amiss. If it were not possible to receive wrong answers to wrong prayers,

then the instruction to pray according to God's will becomes meaningless. If God canceled every prayer that was not His will, then we could pray carelessly, knowing that God would cancel the wrong prayers. However, this is not the case. We can and may pray amiss and suffer the consequences if we do.

Illustrations from Israel's History

Israel's behavior in the wilderness is the most obvious illustration of praying incorrectly and receiving something God did not originally intend. The Israelites were just days into their adventures on the east and free side of the Red Sea. They complained about not being able to "sit around pots of meat and eat all the food we wanted …" (Exodus 16:3). In the evening, quail came and filled the camp, and manna also appeared. Years later, the Israelites complained even more seriously about their food supply, and God again sent quail (Numbers 11:10-32). Judging from the consequences, their grumbling evidently greatly displeased the Lord. While the food was still between their teeth and not yet swallowed, God struck them in anger against their ingratitude with a plague (Numbers 11:33). Generations later, Hebrew literature records, "... they ... did not wait for his counsel ... gave in to their craving ... put God to the test. So he gave them what they asked for, but sent a wasting disease upon them" (Psalm 106:13-15). They rejected God's counsel and followed their craving. Sadly, God gave them what they wanted, but it was not good for them.

God gave them what they wanted, but it was not good for them.

A second and more subtle illustration is the story of Hezekiah in II Kings 20. Through Isaiah, God instructed Hezekiah to set his house in order and prepare to die. Instead of accepting this message, Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and listed the great things he had done for God — as though answers to prayer are a result of our good works. He wept bitterly. Some crying shows defiance; not submission. Eventually, God granted him a 15-year extension of his life. During this 15-year period, Hezekiah became more proud and self-centered. When he received messengers from Babylon, he boastfully showed them the treasury and the armory. He never showed them the temple where he had earlier prayerfully sought God's deliverance. Earlier when under attack,

Hezekiah humbly prayed at the temple. When congratulated for receiving the answer, he boasted of his economic and military strength. Isaiah informed Hezekiah that all those treasures and some of his own offspring would be taken to Babylon after he died. Hezekiah didn't seem to mind since these tragedies would occur after his death (II Kings 20:19). He lived out his additional years selfishly with little concern for the subsequent generation.

Hezekiah's son, Manasseh, was born 3 years after Isaiah said Hezekiah was to die. Manasseh became king at age 12 and had an evil 55-year reign. After that, Manasseh's evil son, Amon, began a 2-year evil reign. That means Israel experienced 72 years of ungodly administration after Hezekiah's healing because of Hezekiah's selfish prayer. Finally, three generations after Hezekiah, Josiah, the son of Amon, was able to bring some spiritual reform under the coaching of Hilkiah, the high priest. The people of God suffered loss and evil for three generations because Hezekiah did not accept God's will and insisted on praying his own plan. Israel and Hezekiah would have been better off if God had merely canceled out Hezekiah's wrong prayer. Mannaseh and Amon, presumably, would not have been born. You only need to read Hezekiah's earlier, God-centered, wonderful prayer, motivated by concern for God's reputation among the nations recorded in II Kings 19:15-19 to see how self-centered he had become.

By contrast, Jacob planned to return to his homeland and meet his brother, Esau. Jacob had good reason to fear Esau, and he wrestled with God in prayer the night before. When he met Esau the next day, things went well at the natural level. The estranged brothers established a mutually respectful relationship that allowed for their cohabitation in the same countryside. However, there had been some spiritual discernment and sincere praying on Jacob's part the night before. It is clear that Jacob was not totally in control of the agenda for prayer that night as he wrestled with the angel of the Lord. Not only did Jacob walk with a limp from then on, he also demonstrated a new level of humility and submission. He had lost his contentious spirit. Something ugly within him died. Something beautiful began to live in him instead. Submission to God's will and agenda alone with God in prayer makes us more submissive and cooperative with God and others.

In another example, not long after David became king, the Philistine army came up against Israel. David was a military man, king, and commander in chief. Without presumption, he could have gone straight into battle. However, he first inquired of the Lord, then fought and won the battle. The second time the

Philistines gathered, David could have easily coasted on the momentum of his earlier word from the Lord and success, but he didn't. Again, he inquired of the Lord. This time, he was instructed to go around behind the enemy and wait for the sound of wind in the balsam tree branches. The wind would indicate that the Lord's army had gone out ahead of Israel's army. David's victory in the visible sphere was due to his willingness to wait on the Lord, hear God's voice, pray according to God's plan, and wait for the troops in the invisible sphere. These are powerful stories illustrating great insights into effective praying. They give rise to the desire that the Lord will help us learn how to more perfectly find out what He is doing, pray accordingly, and do it with Him.

Elijah was so successful — "powerful and effective" (James 5:16) — in his prayer life because he cooperated with God in prayer and prayed according to God's plan. The New Testament tells us that Elijah was just like us. He was not a "special" man yet he knew how to pray according to God's plan. According to God's agenda, he prayed that it would not rain. When God's purpose in the drought was complete, the Canaanite rain-god, Baal, was defamed and God had Israel's attention. Then Elijah prayed according to the next phase of God's plan — that it *would* rain. The second stage required Elijah to completely reverse his direction in prayer to fulfill God's plan for the second phase. In each instance, he was merely following God's agenda for that specific time. The wisdom of God is, after all, far superior to the plans of men. This is why we should submit our wills to Him and seek His plan for each stage and phase throughout life and ministry.

The Cycle of Partnership with God in Prayer

Partnership prayer begins in the heart of God. Through the Holy Spirit, God prompts us regarding His will, and we pray to Him, in the name of Jesus, for Him to act. When God hears this kind of prayer, He is not hearing it for the first time. He recognizes it as the very same thought He Himself gave us. Seeing His idea accepted by a willing human on earth, He moves according to the plan. Through the Holy Spirit, He works through human agencies — sometimes the same person who prayed the prayer in Jesus' name. The result is that praise for the answer comes back to God. The idea starts with God, is empowered by Him, and returns in praise to Him for its completion. That is the way

the cycle of partnership with God in prayer is supposed to work. We could plug any number of illustrations or examples into this cycle. God thought it, you caught it, you prayed it, God heard it, God answered it, we received it, and lastly God accepts our thanks and praise. Round and round it goes, and it is wonderful.

The problem is that some prayers do not begin in God's heart, but our hearts. God hears the idea presented to Him in Jesus' name. For the sake of Jesus, through whose name the prayer is prayed, God gives the answer, and we receive it. It stops there, however, because the answer is not good for us, does not bring glory to God, and He receives no praise. How many people have jobs they should not have, attend schools they should not have gone to, or marry people they should not have married? The fact that God gave these "answers" does not prove that it was God's will. It only shows that prayer is a mighty force.

Is God so weak that we can persuade Him to work against His own will? No. God is so strong that we do not intimidate Him. The freedom He gives teaches us responsibility to act under authority. After this life is over, God will fill many administrative positions of responsibility and authority with obedient, responsible vice-regents who have learned delegated authority. While we are on earth in this life, God is preparing us for the eternal state.

Our second son, Joel, and I were traveling together at night on the interstate highway system in Michigan during the summer of 1988. He was 16 years old and driving, but he was not yet navigating. I still watched for traffic, road signs, lane changes, exits, and turns. He and I agreed that night that he was ready for more responsibility. He would now also navigate. He was ready to advance from merely operating a vehicle to guiding it on course through the maze of highway complexities. We didn't go very many miles before he missed a turn. I waited a while then told him. Of course, we then had to travel to the next exit, turn around, navigate our way back to the point of our error, and pick up the right trail again. Did he learn more from that experience than if I had merely navigated for us from lane to lane and highway to highway? I think so.

The confident director allows actors to learn from mistakes. God is a confident director.

God is more concerned about our development than we realize. He allows tremendous freedoms. He does not stop our wrong praying because He is weak; He does not stop them for the good reason that He is the master teacher and developer of our potential. Prayer, too, is an arena of human experience where we learn how God is developing us. He lets us make mistakes so we can learn. It is similar to a drama in which God enjoys working with us. He is like the master director who, during rehearsal, allows his actors some liberties in trial and error with the script — it develops both the actors and the drama to make the fullest possible impact. The confident director allows actors to learn from mistakes. God is a confident director.

Submission and Prayer

My usual prayer pattern is to pray my way through the Lord's Prayer. Each of the six statements provides a great outline for praying about everything that I need to cover in a given day:

1. Praise and worship: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name."
2. Establish God's kingdom and submit to His will: "Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."
3. Provision: "Give us today our daily bread."
4. Interpersonal relationships: "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors."
5. Spiritual warfare: "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one,"
6. Praise and worship: "For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen."

This is just one daily prayer outline that will accommodate your prayer needs. Jesus Himself gave us the outline, and it is a good one to follow. There are other good systems, too. Use whatever works best for you. Systematizing prayer can greatly increase our effectiveness while remaining flexible and submissive.

Still, submission to the will of God in prayer is complicated by the fact that we also have a will. Unless we are willing to set our will aside in favor of God's, we have a serious problem. My favorite illustration of this involves the events surrounding my choice of my life's partner.

In August 1963, I was a sophomore in a Bible college in Ohio. I met Char Holmes, a freshman who had just arrived on campus. I was practicing the piano in a second-floor classroom, and she asked me if she could read her newspaper in the same classroom while I practiced. That was a real dilemma. A pretty girl reading a newspaper in the same room where I was trying to practice the piano was a distraction! Yet, how does one decline such a request?

Though I had dated others, Char was the first girl I wrote home about. My mother told me how she had introduced Vernon Holmes and Henrietta Barlow (Char's father and mother) to each other 25 years earlier! Char and I had two very happy months of dating and shared the stories of our childhood calls to foreign missions. However, I decided to discontinue the courtship. As you will see later, my reasons for doing this were very shallow. Meanwhile another romantic story evolved.

During my junior year of Bible college, I was very much in love with another beautiful freshman. Her father's prestigious position made dating her an even greater joy. Our courtship lasted several happy months, and then she dropped me. I wept privately and sorely. My heart was broken. For the remainder of my junior year, and all of my senior year, I continued to have very strong feelings for her, even though she had another serious boyfriend. During those long months, I fasted and prayed for her numerous times. It was not until they married just after I graduated that I gave up praying that she would come to her senses and care for me again.

With all my intensity in praying for her return, however, I always ended by saying something to the effect that I wanted God's will more than my dream fulfilled and asked God to do what He wanted to do. I recall that once I even prayed for her future husband — that the Lord would bless their relationship. I felt very righteous about that! She married the other guy — a better man than I — and they eventually served together as pastors of a church. Years later, when we returned to the United States on our first furlough from Korea in 1977-78, we visited their church and home. All seemed well.

Several more years later, however, after Char and I had had several terms in Korea, we heard that she had left her husband and children. We were told she left to "find out who she was." What if that had been my children and me she left? During the months of fasting and praying for her, I had looked on the exterior, but God knew her character. He protected me from a

grievous tragedy. If she left her fine husband who had a good church in the United States, she surely would have abandoned me and my missionary travels. I am so grateful that I prayed for God's will instead of my own. The matter of praying according to the will of God is not always easy — especially when matters of the heart or career ambitions are involved. When we add the safety clause — "nevertheless Your will, not mine, be done" — God knows if we are serious or not.

In February 1968, I was the associate pastor of a church in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The senior pastor informed me that the church was replacing me with a married couple. This was due partly because I was single in the ministry, and partly because I had dated most of the young ladies in the church but married none. It seemed unfair to lose my job merely because I was single. I was determined to seek God even more seriously than ever for a wife.

I wrote to the district supervisor's wife whom I felt I could trust with such delicate issues, moaning about this unfairness. She wrote me telling me that my old flame, Char Holmes, was applying for a passport to go to Guatemala as a missionary assistant. She added that Char should be applying for a marriage license to marry me instead. At graduation time a year and a half earlier, eight people in one week urged me to marry Char including this supervisor's wife who had told me not to leave Bible college without her. All this simply served to make me more resistant to the idea.

Several days passed. As I was fasting and praying on Friday, February 23, 1968, I lay down on the floor of my office late in the morning to entreat my heavenly Father. I must have dozed because I woke up about noon. I felt very embarrassed before the Lord that I had gone to sleep while trying so hard to be serious about seeking Him in prayer.

Some months before, I had made a list of seven girls in random order that I considered possible marital candidates. Beside each girl's name, I listed a one-word description of her strong point and most desirable characteristic. One had "organization" by her name. Another one's word was "friendship." Still another was "affection." One said "faith." Char's name had "ministry" beside it, and she was on the fourth line — now she likes to say "in the center" since there were seven.

As I woke up from my inadvertent nap on the office floor, I moved toward the desk to pull out my list of seven intending to

pray over each one of them. Before I even got to the desk to take out the list, I said, "Lord, all these people are always trying to tell me Char is the one. Are they right?" In my heart, I heard an answer as clear as I have ever heard from the Lord, "Yes." God then took charge of the agenda and I surrendered. God began to show me Char's spirit. The only way I can relate what I "saw" is to use words, but the words I use fall short of what I envisioned. Anyway, God showed me Char's compassion for the hurting, love for lost souls, desire to pray for people, passion for leading them to Jesus, and her gift of hospitality. For about 10 or 15 minutes, these impressions swept over me. I knew God was speaking to me. I also soaked up half a dozen tissues with tears. God knew better than I did what was in Char's personal value system.

He is willing, at any juncture, to show us how to pray according to His will from that point forward.

I mentioned previously that I had some immature and shallow reasons for breaking up with Char four and one half years earlier. Specifically, I thought she had poor taste in clothes because she wore rather plain things. The truth of the matter is that she has good taste, but was more conscientious about paying for school than wearing the latest fashions. The other girls who worked their way through school, some of them at the same supermarket where Char worked, used part of their earnings to buy stylish clothes while Char kept paying her school bill. They had the clothes; Char had character!

As I look back on the lessons I learned praying my way through these difficult experiences, I have come to the firm belief that nothing catches God off guard. He is willing, at any juncture, to show us how to pray according to His will from that point forward. My favorite answer to prayer — when I let God have the agenda — illustrates this.

Letting God Out of the Box

Here is another surprise God gave me when I let Him control the agenda. In the spring of 1996, I was minding my own business studying Chinese language and culture like a good missionary in Beijing. I received a call from a former classmate in graduate studies. He wanted to know if I was interested in his position in

the Graduate School of Theology and Missions at Oral Roberts University (ORU) in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I told him I did not think so, but that I would pray about it anyway.

I have wanted to be a missionary since age six. While recovering from rheumatic fever, I told my grandmother as I wrapped a towel around my head, "When I grow up, I am going to Egypt. I'll wear a turban like this and tell the boys and girls about Jesus." My grandmother's prayer that I would be the best missionary possible has been my guiding star throughout life. Those were the kinds of stories Char and I shared when we first started dating. As far as I was concerned, I was intended to be a missionary for life. I wept when we left Korea, so I was very glad to be back on the field five years later where I felt I belonged. We had some financial shortages during our China years, especially the last year, and prayed much in order to remain faithful to our assignment there. That was God's will for those five years, but that was about to change. I did not realize that in my prayer momentum and efforts to stay in China, I was unconsciously reluctant to leave China — I had put God in a box.

As it happened, our older son, Dan, was graduating from ORU that spring. I decided to make the trip from China to Tulsa to attend his graduation and investigate the ORU professorship possibility. It seemed I would have been like an ostrich hiding my head in the sand not to give it a chance, but I strongly preferred to remain on the field. I decided to go through the interview process, but my motive was to do it so I could get past it and on with my work in Beijing.

During the week of Dan's graduation, I visited with the dean, the search committee, and the faculty. To get to know the candidate, search committees usually ask about the applicant's present work. When asked about what I was doing in China, I evidently sounded too excited about China — so much so that one of the members asked me, "If you are so happy and fruitful in China, why are you here interviewing for this position?" I acknowledged, "I may not be your man. I am happy in China. I'm here just trying to know the will of God."

Being a missionary was a good thing, but I could see that being a trainer of missionaries was also a good thing. The decision was not an easy one. So I wrestled with the most difficult decision I have ever had to make — whether to remain on the field as a missionary or go to ORU to train missionaries. One day that week, I confessed, "Lord, I would really rather stay on the field," at which

time the Lord clearly replied, "That is why I need you in the classroom!" God and I were engaged in honest conversation, and having heard from Him, I was happy to yield the agenda to Him.

From then on, my prayer focus shifted from avoiding going to ORU to finding a way to get to ORU. Praying for the opportunity to remain in China had become a pattern. To stay in God's ever-evolving plan, I needed to make a 180-degree turn in my prayer. This was not unlike Elijah whose prayers we looked at earlier in this chapter. In I Kings 18, when Elijah prayed that it *would* rain, it was the opposite of his prayer for *no* rain in I Kings 17. Yet Elijah was right both times. I changed the direction of my prayers to conform to the next phase of God's unfolding plan. It resulted in a 180-degree turn in the direction of my career.

I do not claim to be batting 1,000, but I much prefer to submit the subject of the prayer and its direction to the Lord's agenda. That way, the outgrowth of the prayer fulfills God's plan and brings glory to Him. I am still learning to let God out of the box. I am confident that no one intentionally puts Him in one, but unconsciously we do. Because He is the Master Teacher, He sometimes lets us.

Discerning between Human Imagination and the Holy Spirit's Leading

It is not always immediately apparent what we are praying for when we pray according to the Spirit's prompting. Nevertheless, I am convinced that it is better to pray in tune with God's agenda without knowing what I am praying for, than to be in full control of the prayer and praying according to our narrow views. Discerning His will and His voice is a skill that we can develop over the years. In each of the illustrations I have given, I could have proceeded with my own prayer agenda. Instead, I chose to pray according to the Holy Spirit's prompting and seek God's agenda. I continued praying to know God's will so that I could eventually pray intelligently according to it.

Our imagination can take us down rabbit trails when we attempt to follow the Spirit's agenda. In trying to be open to what God is leading us to pray, we may follow our imagination instead of God's Spirit. This, again, is another reason why we should always add the safety submission clause — "nevertheless, not my will,

but Yours be done." We could be wrong, in which case we must pray that God negates our wrong prayer. God knows our hearts, and when we ask, is willing to cancel the prayer He knows needs to be canceled. Our job is to sincerely want His will.

On a recent three-day fast, I spent considerable time wrongly imagining myself in a different missions-related role at the university. It was not until I sought counsel and listened to my dean and my wife that I realized I was being carried away by my imagination instead of the Holy Spirit. My prayers were not wasted because I continued to pray for "both outcomes" even though I envisioned the incorrect outcome. No one perfectly develops this skill of discerning His will and His voice. There is safety in counsel, so I like to discuss my ideas with wise people around me in whom God's Spirit also dwells. They often see things I don't.

There are two levels for all of life's battles: the spiritual and the natural. Things are more easily worked out at the natural level when we first fight it out at the spiritual level. Prayer paves the way for accomplishments in the natural and visible world, so we must let God be in charge of the prayer agenda. Giving God the right to control the prayer agenda means we not only seek His will in the matters before us, but we also give Him control of what matters are before us. Our decisions are all under His management when we let Him — whom we marry, where we live, how we serve, what we intercede for, what we praise God for, where we work, what issues we concern ourselves with, and what we leave alone. To our advantage, these decisions can be worked through in the spiritual realm — at our invitation, with God first having command over the prayer agenda and then, secondly, having control of the results. God's children experience a powerful advantage when they pray according to His will. Intercessors can influence history. This is the heart of highly effective Christian living. Praying in God's will is, perhaps, the

God's children experience a powerful advantage when they pray according to His will. Intercessors can influence history. This is the heart of highly effective Christian living.

most important habit in this book. The other habits flow out of the attitude behind this habit.

Fervency, intensity, and accuracy are all important in prayer and each should be maintained. However, if you must choose between fervency and accuracy, it is more important and efficient to pray about the right things and pray correctly than to expend great amounts of energy. God is able to do "immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine" (Ephesians 3:20) and "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:9). We risk wasting His wisdom when we do not seek His counsel regarding what to pray for and how to pray. When we do not consult Him, our actions tell Him we think we know better than He does. This leads ultimately to inefficiency in prayer and inefficient prayer wastes energy. Efficient prayers do not waste energy and are more effective.

Praying in God's will is as important in the sick room as in other places. My aged father was weak and growing weaker when we visited him while home from China. Upon arrival at my brother's house where Dad was staying, we did not pray for Dad's healing. Instead, we sang a worship song and prayed that God would welcome him with joy into His heaven. Twelve hours later, Dad went to be with the Lord. When Char's aged mother was growing weaker, we did the same thing one evening. Before noon the next day, she had gone to be with the Lord. It is not God's will to heal in every case.

The lesson on submission to God's will in prayer protects us from *willfulness;* it need not work against *faith*.

On the other hand, as important as maintaining a submissive attitude in prayer is, we do not need to emphasize it in every prayer. When praying for the sick, it does not contribute to their sense of faith in God for a miracle to urge God, "if it is not Your will to heal this person, then don't." We want to build their faith in what we pray. In that case, our attitude remains one of submission, and our prayer remains one of faith. The two are not mutually exclusive; you just don't need to mention both every time. When you know what God wants to do, you can, and should, exercise

faith and persistence in prayer. The lesson on submission to God's will in prayer protects us from *willfulness;* it need not work against *faith*.

In the next chapter, you will read how I discovered some serious mistakes I was making at one juncture in my career. I was able to get back on track through an extended time of fasting and prayer. Because of that difficult yet valuable experience, my life falls into two parts — before and after the fast.

HABIT FIVE

Fast Systematically

"... and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Matthew 6:18

My freshman year of Bible college, I received some of the best advice regarding fasting from one of my teachers. She advised me to begin with regular short fasts rather than trying something long or heroic without adequate practice, discipline, and preparation. I followed her advice. During the following summer, I began the discipline of regular prayer and Bible reading. I was then ready to begin a more advanced level of regularly seeking God through fasting and prayer.

Some people joke about fasting. Others brag about it. Both of those attitudes cheapen fasting and negatively influence people who might consider it. Once in awhile, you will find someone who understands the power of fasting and prayer. When the subject comes up, their interest in the conversation increases, and they share their experience with strong conviction. They know the power of this marvelous tool.

The best book I ever read about fasting is *God's Chosen Fast* by Arthur Wallis. It is balanced, spiritual, and practical. The book was foundational in my own formation of a positive attitude

toward fasting and prayer. I heartily recommend it. Some of the following ideas are from Wallis' book.

Fasting is like any skill or task requiring development. If you are new to fasting, you may want to begin with short, regular fasts to improve your ability and confidence. With experience, you will be able lengthen your fasts gradually. Through the discipline of fasting, we gain spiritual power, ability to focus in prayer, and increased insight into God's Word. Many are afraid of fasting or have heard horror stories. Others don't realize that their regular eating patterns have programmed their bodies to reject fasting. Some simply have not heard positive testimonies on the advantages or the feasibility of fasting. Many just don't think it is doable — but it is. I conclude this chapter by recounting my 40-day fast in which I learned many valuable, practical, and spiritual lessons. My experience was a customized and highly personal tutorial designed by the Holy Spirit just for me in my situation at that time.

Fasting In the Bible

As good as fasting is for us, it is contrary to instinctive bodily desires. The Bible says, "No one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it" (Ephesians 5:29). We must make choices based on priorities. If you want food more than you want answers to prayer, then eat. While fasting goes against bodily appetites, it certainly does not go against spiritual appetites. Fasting is favorably presented in the Bible by both example and instruction. Part of the greatness of Moses, David, Elijah, Daniel, Hannah, Anna, Jesus, and the Apostles is attributed to fasting.

If you want food more than you want answers to prayer, then eat.

The "normal" fast consists of abstaining from both solid and liquid foods, but continuing to drink water. Throughout this chapter, we will refer to the normal fast. The Bible tells us that during Jesus' fast, he "ate nothing," and that "he was hungry," (Luke 4:2). It does not indicate that He drank nothing (as with Moses and Paul) or was thirsty. Drinking lots of water while eating nothing helps cleanse the body during the fast. The

normal fast is the type Scripture most frequently mentions and most often invites us to experience.

The "absolute" fast is illustrated by Paul, of whom it is said, "for three days he was blind and did not eat or drink anything" (Acts 9:9). In some desperate states, some would be willing to pay such a cost. Paul and Moses both had extenuating circumstances that may have provided a special motive.

The "partial" fast involves eating only certain foods and not others, or drinking juices but not eating solid foods. This is illustrated by Daniel as recorded in Daniel 10:3: "I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips and I used no lotions at all until the three weeks were over." Elijah and John the Baptist each did partial fasts. The partial fast was popularized recently by the late Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ. It allows certain conveniences, and more people seem willing to try it. The degree of fasting is, of course, your choice.

Jesus instructed his disciples regarding giving to the needy, praying, and fasting. He used the word "when," not "if": "*when* you give to the needy," "and *when* you pray," and "*when* you fast" (italics mine). The obvious implication is that Jesus expected us to do these things. Furthermore, these instructions conclude with the promise that "your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matthew 6:18). Jesus said that the time to fast is now, in our day, after the Bridegroom has been taken. During Jesus' day, the Bridegroom was present, and fasting was not appropriate. It is likely that Jesus and His disciples observed the usual annual fasts, along with other Jewish people, but did not do the regular twice-a-week fasts as the Pharisees did. At any rate, Jesus said, "The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; *then they will fast*" (Matthew 9:15, italics mine).

In circles where fasting is accepted, fasting is usually done for health benefits and for receiving spiritual insight and power. These are good results of a good practice, but it is possible that even in our spiritual desire and aspiration, self may still be enthroned. We must ask ourselves if our fasts are Christ-ward or self-ward. A wrong motive can ruin the whole thing. Jesus taught often about motives including motives for fasting. He spoke of the praying Pharisee: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men — robbers, evildoers, adulterers — or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get"

(Luke 18:11 and 12). The Bible says the Pharisee prayed either "about" himself or "to" himself. If it were "to" himself, that would mean that he was praying in secret, but even then his motive was wrong. He was proud. There is the remote possibility it meant the Pharisee set himself up as God which would be even more wrong. At any rate, fasting in secret can help rid us of the desire for praise from men and women as our motive, but doing it in secret is still not enough. Even then we must do it for Him.

If our life goal is to glorify God in all we do, our prayers and fasts should not be efforts to impose our will. Instead, they should be a means of laying hold of His wisdom, power, and will in every situation. Fasting is a strong tool, and such a force should remain submitted to the will of God, just as in the case of prayer. Fasting is not a magical way to manipulate the spirit world. It is a vehicle wherein believers arouse God to work in their behalf. Fasting is openness to God and requesting — not commanding. In this biblical study on the efficacy of fasting, we should not, at will, initiate fasts indiscriminately for just any purpose at any time. We can initiate a fast as we submit it to God, or God may initiate it as He calls us to a fast. In either case, the use of this mighty spiritual force must be submitted to God's will. We may think we want something badly enough to fast and pray for it, but God may even direct us not to fast. Obedience is still better than sacrifice.

Advantages of Fasting

Some people fast for non-spiritual reasons. Even in secular circles, many materials are available on the physical benefits of fasting. While fasting seems to conflict with bodily appetites, it is good for our health. Though I am writing about fasting because the discipline aids our spiritual life, it may encourage you to know that some fast primarily for their health.

Usually, we fast to facilitate prayer and intercession, but sometimes we could fast simply "unto God" — just because we love Him and want to

An empty stomach stimulates humility, awareness of dependency on God, and sensitivity to human weakness.

glorify Him. If you fast systematically, such as one time a week, you will have weeks when you have no particular "problem" you are seeking to solve. In these cases, we fast as unto Him just to seek Him, know Him, and experience intimate time with Him.

Pride is a spiritual matter. An empty stomach stimulates humility, awareness of dependency on God, and sensitivity to human weakness. On the other hand, when we are full, we are more prone to feel self-sufficient. Thus, pride and a full feeling can be a mutual pitfall. God dealt simultaneously with Israel's soul and stomach. "He humbled you causing you to hunger" (Deuteronomy 8:3). God knows the pride of the human heart. To save us from ourselves, He cautions us: "Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Deuteronomy 8:12-14). Fasting is a divine corrective for pride in the human heart, a discipline for the body, and a humbling to the soul. Ezra knew the advantages of humbling himself through fasting: "There by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God …" (Ezra 8:21).

Fasting also helps obtain answers to prayer, as Ezra's experience also illustrates: "So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer" (Ezra 8:23). It seems that there are degrees of difficulty in achieving some answers to prayer. Some copies of the New Testament add the words "and fasting" to the following phrase, speaking of casting out demons: "This kind does not go out except by prayer *and fasting*" (Matthew 17:21, italics mine). Some Bibles today contain a footnote stating that the entire verse is absent from many early manuscripts. The inclusion of this verse in later manuscripts, however, does attest to widespread recognition of fasting's value throughout most centuries of the Church. We pray to get answers while fasting, and we show the sincerity of our hearts because we want answers more than we want food. In fasting, our whole body prays. In *With Christ in the School of Prayer*, Andrew Murray says, "Fasting helps to express, to deepen, and to confirm the resolution that we are ready to sacrifice anything, to sacrifice ourselves to attain what we seek for the kingdom of God."

Prayer is warfare. Prayer is wrestling. There are opposing forces and spiritual cross-currents. When we plead our case in the court

of heaven, our adversary is also represented. We must overcome the opposition. Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it" (Matthew 11:12). In fasting, God has added a powerful weapon to our spiritual armory. Yet in our folly or ignorance, some consider it obsolete, so it lies rusting in the corner.

Fasting brings the supernatural into our situation of need. It frees the captives. "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free, and break every yoke?" (Isaiah 58:6). People are bound by habits, food, alcohol, drugs, sex, cults, witchcraft, spiritism, materialism, leisure, tradition, weak faith, pride, grudges, and bitterness. In such a setting, is our gospel weak? No, but we are.

It is possible to have our sins forgiven yet still need to be delivered. All Christians are saved from guilt, but not all are set free from sin's — temptation's — power. Simon of Samaria, for example, "believed and was baptized. And he followed Phillip everywhere," yet he tried to purchase the power to impart spiritual gifts (Acts 8:13). Peter told him, "For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin" (Acts 8:23). Forgiveness is a great blessing, but it is only part of Christ's ministry and message. Jesus also mentioned many forms of release, as in this well-known verse: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18, 19). The gospel message has the power to save, but on occasion we need to fast to receive power over temptation, illness, or other forms of bondage.

Another advantage of fasting is for revelation. Daniel discovered a prophecy of Jeremiah's and wanted to know God's plan. He wrote, "I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the Lord given to Jeremiah the prophet that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes" (Daniel 9:2, 3). Daniel's story does not end there. "He instructed me and said to me, 'Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding'" (Daniel 9:22). This is an important theme to which we will return in the last section of this chapter.

While in Joppa, Peter went up to the flat roof of his host's house to pray around noon. He then experienced an important revelation from God when his stomach was empty. "He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance" (Acts 10:10). Certainly, this change in Peter's prayer agenda led to a change in the expansion of the Christian church. Peter's Jewish paradigm began to change while hungry, praying, and waiting for a meal.

Paul writes of some intimate personal experiences in II Corinthians Chapters 11 and 12. Could it be that the fastings to which he referred in Chapter 11 were preparatory or conditional for the revelations recorded in Chapter 12? "I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food" (II Corinthians 11:27). "I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord" (II Corinthians 12:1).

We don't know how well Rome fed prisoners banished to Patmos. However, it's probably safe to conclude that John wasn't exactly feasting on Patmos when he received "The Revelation of Jesus Christ." When we need answers to prayer, when we need revelation, when what we have been doing seems inadequate in invoking the power, presence, and wisdom of God into our situation, we may need to go to the armory and dust off this old faithful weapon. Whatever we need to bring down — the walls of opposition or the showers of blessing — fasting will bring them down.

Habits of Fasting

We need a fresh voice or word from the Lord each week, but making the decision to fast is hard. I therefore prefer to make the decision once and implement it each week. The routine of fasting one day each week works well, since I don't have to decide, think, or wrestle with the issue. It helps me look forward to the day of fasting. Each week, we face challenges and problems we can

Our problems are dealt with by a stronger weapon than we might have chosen had we not been routinely fasting and praying.

pray about on fast day. These problems may not seem large enough that they would have caused us to fast and pray about them, but since we are fasting anyway, we handle those situations with fasting and prayer. In other words, our problems are dealt with by a stronger weapon than we might have chosen had we not been routinely fasting and praying. Fasting weekly also gives us confidence that longer fasts are doable.

In January 1965, my junior year in Bible college, I began to fast three days at the beginning of each year. Since then, it has become an annual recommitment to love and pursue God. Each year, we need new direction and insight. Around New Year's Day, everyone is aware of the passing of time and the continued unfolding of the future upon us. God is an ever-present help in time of need, so to turn fully to Him at New Year's seems like a practical as well as spiritual thing to do. It is true that times of fasting facilitate effective and concentrated prayer. However, they also provide another equally important advantage because they help us listen regularly to what He is saying if we let Him.

Regular fasting prepares us for longer fasts when they become necessary. Experiences of success in shorter, regular fasts help us realize that fasting is not as bad as we imagined. The strength our spirits learn to value compensates for the weakness the body temporarily feels. Muscles grow stronger from exercise. Likewise, our bodies learn to adjust to times when there is no food. As our spirits gain more influence in our inner decision-making processes, our bodies learn to do without. Our spirits learn to appreciate the advantages of the close spiritual relationship with God that grows in times of fasting. When bigger challenges and more difficult situations arise, we are ready — we are humble, confident, and cannot be easily intimidated. We are ready to fast for a longer period. In 1979, administrative difficulties were intensifying in our church work in Korea. By then, I had completed many annual, three-day fasts, and was ready for a week-long fast. That week-long fast gave me confidence so that several months later I was ready to plan a 40-day fast. My confidence had grown with experience.

Physical Issues

There are serious misconceptions about the effects of fasting on our bodies. Fasting is not hard on the healthy body — it is good

for it. Our bodies store up reserves of fat that enable us to go without food for weeks without any negative effect whatsoever. Air, water, and sleep are far more needful to the health and life of the body than food. Fatty tissue and decaying cells are consumed by merely using up what is stored in our "pantry." Camels can live for days in dry deserts without water. Humans can live for days without food. It is only after many days — from 21 to 40 or more, depending on the person — that the body consumes all the fat and begins to starve. Jesus was hungry after His fast.

Most of us in the West have never known the pangs of real hunger. Our parents took pains to make sure we ate well with a healthy diet. When we fast, our pampered bodies may give us signals of discomfort. This is no more than the craving for food resulting from years of habit. The same God who wants us to take care of our bodies and health would not require or encourage something that was injurious to our health. Fasting is a sort of "natural housecleaning" for our body. Usually our bodies tell our spirits, "I am in control, and I want to eat." Fasting is an opportunity for our spirits to say to our bodies, "I am in control, and I want to grow so much that I will deny you." There is more happening in a fast than mere mind over matter, but mind over matter is a part of the dynamic. If we want food more than spiritual growth, then we should eat. If we want spiritual growth more than food, then we should deny the body food and watch our spirit grow. We should make the choice to eat or not with spiritual considerations in mind, not just because we are in the habit of eating.

God wants His children to be physically healthy; a biblical lifestyle is healthy. It should be no surprise that fasting is a contribution to health, not a hindrance. It is possible both that the body gains health from the physical act of fasting and that God heals the body as an answer to the sincere prayer prayed while fasting. Both are possible and both could bring glory to God.

The Old Testament even tells of a Gentile who recovered from an illness during three days of starvation. A sick slave of an Amalekite was abandoned by his master. Three days later, when David and his men found and fed him, he was revived and clear-minded and able to lead David's men to the raiding band of Amalekites. Three days without food and water had healed this man. You may have heard of the adage, "Starve a cold and

stuff a fever." How many of us prefer to have a fever? Arthur Wallis, in *God's Chosen Fast*, quotes an ancient Egyptian doctor who said that mankind lives on one-fourth of what they eat and the doctors live on the rest. Is it possible that some of the diseases caused by overeating could be cured through better control and other diseases cured by fasting?

Fasting is a purging exercise — both spiritually and physically.

Fasting is a purging exercise — both spiritually and physically. We noted earlier that pride is related to fullness and self-sufficiency. During fasting, the spirit is purged of pride, self-will, independence, self-centeredness, and selfishness. Meanwhile the body is purged of surplus fat, decaying tissues, and other waste material. During fasting, the focus of the body is not on assimilation of new food. Instead, it focuses on eliminating unnecessary accumulations. Any discomfort our body may experience is actually a healthy housecleaning that favorably affects skin, mouth, lungs, kidneys, liver, and bowels. Breath odors, coated tongue, and unpleasant tastes in one's mouth during fasting are simply a part of the cleaning process.

After the earlier stages of a fast are over and the body has adjusted to having no food, a prolonged fast will produce bright eyes, keen minds, pure breath, clear skin, and a strong spirit. It also prepares us to receive profound insight into the meaning of Scripture. This thought will be revisited in a later section of its own called "God's Personalized Tutorial Program."

In Habit 3, we learned that avoiding coffee, tea, and sweet foods minimizes or eliminates a fasting headache. Few would go so far as to claim that fasting is pleasant. However, exercising control during the times we eat considerably reduces the downside of fasting. Naturally, there is some physical discomfort, but even this serves to create awareness of the prayer business at hand. It is an aid to focusing one's attention on prayer and Bible reading.

During fasting, our blood and energy are not so occupied delivering supplies to the liver to produce digestive juices and to the stomach and bowels to make the digestive process operate correctly. This frees the blood and energy to work in our brain.

Concentration on prayer is easier, the mind is clearer, and Scripture seems more alive.

God is delightfully practical and never requires excesses, extremes, or harmful exercises. If your body is not healthy, don't fast. God does not want us to ruin our bodies. If you have special health concerns, a partial fast may be the answer. For a six-year period, I wanted to fast but was unable due to esophagitus. God does not require what we cannot do, but I was very happy when I discovered I was well and could fast again.

The Big One

Longer fasts are wonderful opportunities. Shorter fasts prepare us for them. There are pastors, believers, and churches who do long fasts each year because they like the results — something any of us could learn by our own by experience.

Longer fasts are wonderful opportunities. Shorter fasts prepare us for them.

In 1978, we returned to Korea for our second term as missionaries. I was given the responsibilities of chairman of the national board and general supervisor, but only the title of "acting supervisor." The Koreans perceived it as a weak position. Furthermore, my vision was to encourage the younger ministers we had been training in our Bible school to start new churches. In a few months, it became apparent that my vision was in conflict with the vision of another segment of our organization. They desired to concentrate funds and efforts in a large central church. Soon thereafter, negative reports signed by 300 people regarding my administration reached our denomination's headquarters in the United States. I then realized that from both sides of the Pacific Ocean, I was being rejected by an organizational mechanism far beyond my control. The younger pastors, whose cause I was attempting to serve, simply did not have enough political power. The only thing I could do was appeal to the highest court — the court of heaven. It had become clear to me that good and honest people had simply misunderstood me.

Because of my previous experience with fasting and prayer, I decided to fast and pray for an extended time. Several years before, we had paid $700 for a small, genuinely rustic cabin built on mountain property leased by Seoul University to a group of us missionaries. This is where our family escaped the heat and vacationed a few weeks in August each year. Realizing I was facing a major crisis, and with Char's agreement, I went to the cabin to fast and pray for 40 days.

God's Personalized Tutorial Program

The name of our little cabin was Charon, a combination of Char's name and mine. The notebook in which I recorded my experience on the mountain contains the following entry on the first page which might serve to set the tone for sharing this experience with you. The references to the church in Korea are to the denominational organization with which I was working. The names of people in this book are not their real names.

Charon, Chiri San Mon, May 7, 1979

> It's 8:10 p.m. on the eve of my first 40-day fast. I have been preparing for three weeks and have known for four weeks that I was being invited by my heavenly Dad to appeal my case to a higher court. Though the arm of flesh (in this case, my organization) may fail me, He won't, and, in Hong Kong four weeks and one day ago, I believe He showed me I would not be able to depend on Jeff [the missions director] to free me or the Korean Church from the administrative bondage she is in, but I would have to appeal to a higher court, which I am now prepared to do.
>
> On my way up the mountain, I was excited to think that tomorrow preliminary hearings would begin, and, with the Heavenly Supreme Court in session, I would be able to present my case before the righteous Judge and expect fair correction for my unintentional wrong and also deliverance for the Church I am so eager to see set free to grow as I believe it could and should and by faith will.
>
> As I cleaned the cabin, dusted things, and wiped windows, I was impressed with what a privilege it is for me to be

> able to be alone with God for these days. The keeper came and connected the water and informed me his wife was scheduled to die soon of cancer of the liver. If God wants to heal her, I'm prepared to pray, but if not, I am willing to watch the camp here while he takes her down to the valley to be with family until she dies. I can watch things here and free him to be gone for about as long as he wants.
>
> A rat greeted me this afternoon as though to say, "Ah ha! We have a stranger moving in — and he surely is raising the dust and making a lot of racket." I will have to locate traps and get him tomorrow.

Throughout the 40 days of this fast, I felt as though God and I were alone together on the mountain. I am glad that I took the time to keep a daily record of what happened and what I learned. Space limitations make it inconvenient to relate the whole record, but I will share selections here and in the next chapter. My purpose is to illustrate from my personal experience how fasting and prayer are not only a time for urging God to do something, it is also a time for learning. I can testify, as others have, that through the fast, the situation changed for the better. However, I changed more than the situation did.

A few days into this project, I realized at a deeper level the importance of letting God have the agenda. On Day 5 (Saturday, May 12), I wrote:

> I have been impressed through reading and otherwise that fasts and prayers need to originate with God. Does God answer our prayers? Or does God share what He wants to do and release the prayer through us and then do what He intended at the first? I believe both are true, but the latter may need some emphasis. Anyway, I'm confident this fast is something the Lord laid on my heart. I have also been aware of the need to be careful to pray according to His leading. That's why recording these matters each day is important, because in each instance, the subject matter for the prayers has been given by the Spirit of God.
>
> Now, with that said, today I prayed for the first time during this fast for the release of the Church in Korea from the administrative bondage she now experiences because of attitudes held by those on her board. With malice toward no member of that board, I prayed with tears that the church might be released. Specifically, at one point I

> prayed that our church would be freed from the hampering, dampening, binding, and restricting influence of Rev. Mr. Park and that, in God's way, great release would come. I also prayed that God would give all of us patience until His release came. This is not to minimize what prayers the Lord has directed in the first four days, but I believe the prayers of Day 5 are the heartbeat of this fast. That's what I feel at this point, but of course, the Holy Spirit is in charge of the next 35 days, not I. Also, of course, I'm eager to pray about my own personal humiliation, softening, growth, and development. There's plenty of time yet. Ha!
>
> I laughed twice today. Once when I was thanking God for the good water and added — "That's all I need." Mm!

Layer after layer, deeper and deeper, I penetrated into this truth. On Day 10 (Thursday, May 17), I wrote:

> I decided that, to a finer degree, God needed to be in control of the agenda of prayer subjects — not that He hadn't — but that I had reached a stage of having expressed most of what I knew to pray for and that I wanted to launch out more into things unknown to me. As mentioned earlier in this diary, every day's prayers have been led by the Holy Spirit, but the time had come for a step into the unknown. So I agreed I'd read the Bible more and stop the other books at least for this day. After reading my regular readings (I'm in Numbers now and simultaneously reading five Psalms and one chapter of Proverbs per day for the next 30 days), I also read Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians.
>
> I am greatly encouraged that God will do more than we can imagine — and that we're to keep praying and to ask anything in keeping with the Holy Spirit's wishes. (All three thoughts came from the extra Bible reading.) I began to pray towards fulfillment of my vision of churches in central cities reaching out to their surrounding areas. This afternoon, I read I Corinthians and continued praying that the vision would be fulfilled — including the fact that I would be fulfilled as completing my course as a missionary personally. I was quite broken at that point and felt real release to pray and cry regarding my own personal fulfillment. (I could have breathed a sigh of relief when Jeff

> said he'd maybe send someone else to be the supervisor. We could go to Seoul, but my spirit continues to feel the responsibility to believe God and pray for release of this church and don't feel I could do that and simply wait for the next guy to handle the problems!) My body was extremely weak today, and, it being cold, I stayed inside by a fire. I would never put my body through such discomforts if I didn't believe I was responsible and wanted desperately to see God's victory in this country! (That's when I broke down and wept, for I really felt the fast today.) I feel better now, and can say that, though it's been a hard day, I believe it's been a good day and that God is listening. Praise Him!

Under the personalized tutelage of the Holy Spirit, I was learning to pray at a deeper level according to the will of God. Revelation concerning how to pray began to be even more specific. These many years after that fast in 1979, I can see that what the Lord led me to pray during the fast is largely what happened in the months and years that followed. Specifically, if I was not to be the supervisor, why go to all that trouble trying to be responsible for what I did not have authority to administrate at the human level? On Day 14 (Monday, May 21), I made the following lengthy entry addressing this issue:

> In an interesting way and through His Word, I believe God has shown me that I will continue to be responsible for the work here in Korea and one reason He showed me was so that I could pray confidently accordingly. This seems to be a confirmation of what He said to write in the letter to Jeff about a week ago. This is how it happened: … As I continued to pray for a fulfillment of the New Testament pattern for our church in the afternoon, I sort of ran down in my prayers. There seemed to be no Spirit-inspired prayers, and I didn't know whether to pray on, wait, listen, or what. (I really have committed myself to pray only for what He leads and to pray for all of what He leads — He has the agenda, not I. He called this court session, not I. I'm confident that's the way it should be, and it's been that way here.) Anyway, I finally decided to browse through the Bible at random and see what God might say — a custom I have seldom tried, almost never successfully. However, this time three passages had great bearing on me and my situation, and the others didn't seem to apply. The first one was the book of Ruth, which I read in its entirety.

> The word "Ruth" is written in Chinese with the same two characters as my Korean name. I felt I was Ruth. The points to be considered were that she was a foreigner, found favor, and was fruitful. When she married Boaz, the people wished her fruitfulness, like Leah and Rachael.
>
> The second one was I Samuel 11 where Saul did the right thing and helped defend Jabesh-Gilead and won a great victory over the Ammonites. As a result, he was "reconfirmed" as king. I have been appointed as "temporary" but a reconfirmation would change that. "All Israel were very happy," the chapter closes.
>
> The third passage was in II Chronicles. It begins: "King David's son Solomon was now the undisputed ruler of Israel, for the Lord His God had made him a powerful monarch" (II Chronicles 1:1 *Living Bible*). The chapter goes on to express God's pleasure at Solomon asking for wisdom to lead well, and God reminded me that just several days ago I had told the Lord, "I don't want fame; I don't want money or material things. I want wisdom to do well in the church work, and I want your blessing in and on this church." I believe God has received that prayer and is anointing and ordaining me for the job. It is humbling to have been rejected thus far by Jeff, Ann, and the Parks, but I would rather have God's anointing and ordination than man's. If I wait patiently, man's will come, too.

In the next chapter, we will look at how God uses crises to develop us. You will read more of the lessons I learned during my biggest crisis. Before we go there, however, please note that I went into my 40-day fast having been told that a replacement supervisor would probably be sent to Korea. During the fast, I tried to pray according to God's agenda. God showed me that I would remain the supervisor and be fruitful as a foreigner. I had been told one thing by my organization (to be ready for a change of position) but felt in my spirit there was another plan (I was to remain). Alone with God, I fasted and prayed according to what I felt the divine Source was saying. The divine plan was opposite of the human plan, but the divine plan is what was eventually fulfilled. I shudder to think what would have happened to me and the church in Korea if I had prayed according to the human plan. In the months that followed, no replacement was sent. I was officially appointed supervisor of the work in Korea. We had seven more years of fruitful administrative, teaching, and

church-planting ministry before the work was turned over to the nationals with whom we worked, and we returned to the United States.

If I had not been accustomed to fasting and praying regularly, I probably could not have fasted 40 days for the freedom of our church in Korea. Without that fast, I doubt I would have developed a personal brokenness of spirit. Through it, I gained the deep confidence that God can and will work in my situations as long as I don't get in His way. Also, I like to think that my fasting and prayer contributed in some small way to the survival and growth of the church through those years. Perhaps it made the growth and health possible that it continues to enjoy in the years since we missionaries left it in their capable leadership. They even have an accredited graduate Theological seminary due largely to Rev. Park's long-range vision.

I sincerely desire to illustrate the effectiveness of fasting as an aid to prayer. Undoubtedly, no other reason would have been strong enough to motivate me to disclose my heart and personal record to you. My journal entries from those six glorious yet difficult weeks on Chiri Mountain reveal what happened while I sat at Jesus' feet and learned of Him and His ways.

For 22 years, I never said anything to anyone about my fast. In March 2001, one of my Doctor of Ministry students who believes in and practices fasting encouraged me to share my story. He reminded me that Jesus' disciples knew about Jesus' fast. He must have told them. It became clearer to me then — teachers share intimate things with their students because they are teaching, not because they are bragging. It has not been my purpose just to tell you about my fast. My purpose is to use my fast to illustrate the insights, personal growth, and answers to prayer that fasting makes possible.

Teachers share intimate things with their students because they are teaching, not because they are bragging.

In recent years, there have been too few strong voices speaking out on this subject. Weigh what you read here, and compare it with the promises and record of Scripture. Perhaps you would like to step up to the new opportunities for

ministry made possible through this habit. Who knows what kinds of victories await us?

Without the crisis which led to the fast, I would not have been open to the radically new perspective I experienced by the time the fast was over. This leads to our discussion in the next chapter of how God plans and uses crisis in our lives for our good and His glory. The next chapter is a companion to this one.

HABIT SIX

Handle Crises Constructively

"If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses? If you stumble in safe country, how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan?"

Jeremiah 12:5

We experienced several personal relationship conflicts with fellow missionaries during our first term in Korea. Then, the next term I assumed the responsibilities of acting supervisor and chairman of the national board. The conflict of the first term was a picnic compared to the conflict of the second term. Yet we gained so very much valuable insight and personal and ministerial growth through the grief of that experience. It demonstrated how God teaches us and brings good out of tearful crises. However, at the time, the crisis seemed overwhelming and was based on such unfair misperceptions and misunderstandings!

Learning through Crises

In Habit 2, we learned that God tests and teaches dependence through intense pressure in human circumstances. A crisis is a time of increased pressure. God seeks our willful intent to move deeper into His heart in the early stages of a crisis so that He may carry us through it. The end result is a stronger, more influential Christian with a deeper experience of God and the spiritual authority that accompanies it.

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Experience with fasting and running marathons has taught me that much of the perseverance needed in times of testing stems from beginning with good, firm decisions. Once we make the decision, we can put our "decider" in neutral and our "doer" on automatic pilot. You can endure the inconvenience of fasting if you don't have to decide not to eat every day or hour. You can also endure the fatigue of the marathon race if you don't have to decide every mile that you are going to run to the end. Experience helps, but following through on the original decision is a major factor.

Even Jesus "resolutely set out for Jerusalem." This seems to suggest that He decided — perhaps we could even say *determined* — that he would endure the cross and then follow through, having set Himself to do it. I recall how I felt after reading Luke 9 and 10 on Day 35 of my fast (Monday, June 11, 1979). The impression of what Jesus must have felt — that "betrayal is hard to endure" — was very deep. The translation I was reading then said that Jesus, after having made His decision, "moved steadily onward towards Jerusalem with an *iron will*" (Luke 9:51 *Living Bible*, emphasis mine). Jesus, our Example, demonstrated how to react to crises with righteous determination. In our case, the pressure we endure is necessary to make us more like Him. Our reactions to suffering show a watching world that Christ is within. Crises provide the

increased pressure that makes such resolve and determination possible. They bring out the best or worst in us.

Yet, there is another element. Jesus "humbled himself and became obedient to death" (Philippians 2:8). The horrible death He endured demonstrated the submission of the divine and human Son to the Father's plan. We don't know how much refinement in learning obedience was still necessary in Jesus at that time; but in our case, refinement is certainly a possible outcome of crises. In the past, it was important to me to be right. I was too contentious and argumentative. More often than was prudent, I liked to let people know how correct I was. As I look back now on the old me — with a tough shell and a hard heart — I realize that I needed the crisis God allowed in 1979.

Why a Crisis is Necessary

Pressure on the individual experiencing a crisis is a necessary preparation that creates willingness, even eagerness, to change. God is not content to leave us as we are in our undeveloped or underdeveloped state. He allows crises so we can grow. When things continue as they are, we are not motivated to change. We usually like to stay with the comfortable pattern. In change theory, scholars refer to creating "dissonance" which causes people to become discontent with the status quo and therefore more willing to adopt an innovation. God, the greatest change agent, also seems willing to create some personal dissonance so that we are more willing to change. A crisis is necessary because we need it.

God, the greatest change agent, also seems willing to create some personal dissonance so that we are more willing to change.

In early spring of 1979, I attended an Asian area gathering for missionaries and national leaders of our denomination held in Hong Kong. It was not yet a year into our second term in Korea and I was there with the pastor we have been calling the Rev. Mr. Park from Korea. It became apparent that the divisions that

impaired our growth in Korea were not only grievous to us but also painfully obvious to others. I began praying even more seriously about these problems. That was when I decided to fast 40 days.

Just days later, our denominational missions leader visited us in Korea and attended a pastors' meeting. Afterwards, Char and I drove them to Seoul where they were to catch their plane for the U.S. During that two-hour trip, I shared with our director, Jeff, and his wife, Ann, my desire to fast and pray for 40 days to see the church in Korea set free. His comment was that when he had conducted a fast of the same length years earlier, he found that he changed more than the situation had changed. He was quite willing for me to go on the fast.

Upon arrival in Seoul and just before we got out of the car, Char and I shared the story of a vision that Mary, a pastor's wife in the U.S, had seen of us. That had been about a year earlier while we were in the U.S. on furlough. In the vision, Mary saw a long line of Asians marching out of bondage into freedom as we led them. In our minds, the fact that we were at the head of the line in the vision meant that our ministries were going to be effective and fruitful among Asians. As a result of our leadership, people were indeed going to be led into new things spiritually. The vision had been an encouragement to us for almost a year by the time we shared it in the car on that spring day in 1979. We were glad God was giving us a place in such a victory march.

Ann misinterpreted our discussion. She assumed we were grasping for position, prestige, and power at the head of the line. She scolded and we wept. By that time in our ministries in Korea, we had already shed enough tears for the freedom of the church. We understood our position was a responsibility before the Lord rather than something to be grasped. To be so severely misunderstood and criticized by the ones who had sent us to Korea was a shocking disappointment. I mention it here because this is the kind of pressure a crisis places on the servant of God. Fair or unfair is another question. My point is that the pressure on the individual can produce an intense desire toward God and a desperation that creates willingness to change.

How You React Is the Whole Point

God loves us and believes in us — often more than we do. He knows our potential; we don't. Moreover, He knows how to apply the right amount of pressure through a crisis. The crisis is not the issue; it only prepares us. Our need to change is the issue, and God uses a crisis to make us willing. Since God knows how much we can take and our potential for development, the intensity of the crisis is the depth of the compliment God is paying us. On the other hand, God also knows how thick our skulls, how dim our spirits, how dull our minds, and how prideful and resistant to His teachings each of us is. So He knows just how much pressure we need in order to finally become willing to change.

Our need to change is the issue, and God uses a crisis to make us willing.

How we react to a crisis is the key — in fact, our reaction *is* the issue. Our reaction to the crisis is more important in God's development process than solving the crisis. You and I both know of people who have experienced crises, learned nothing, and experienced no personal improvement. No one likes to pay for something and then not enjoy any benefits. With crises, to pay or not to pay is not the question — we will pay. But will we receive the benefit of improved character? If we react correctly — with a humble and teachable spirit — the promise of Scripture is great growth: "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up" (James 4:10). "These have come so that your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (I Peter 1:7).

The Certainty of Experiencing Crises

God is not willing to leave us in an undeveloped or underdeveloped state. I can name seven crises in the years since

leaving home in 1962. Each time, I humbled myself before the Lord — in most cases with fasting and prayer. Because each crisis accomplished its purpose, I can also identify the major lesson I learned through each, just as you may be able to identify yours.

It is helpful to determine ahead of time how you will respond when your crisis comes.

Sometimes Christians experience crises and feel that God or the devil is singling them out for especially bad treatment. However, the opposite is more likely. Everyone has crises. All go through this training program, but not all benefit equally from it. Every Christian who has any depth, resilience, fortitude, or wise counsel for those going through trials has himself been through some "training."

The intensity of crises varies. It seems that they become more intense over the years as God leads us to put our roots down deeper and deeper into Him and His Word. Not only do our crises seem to intensify over the years, one will likely stand out as the biggest. How we handle this one can really make or break us — or perhaps make us by breaking us. It is helpful to determine ahead of time how you will respond when your crisis comes. At the time of the crisis, our emotional response to the unfairness, circumstances, or persons involved is so intense in our minds, we don't know how to react. Count on a crisis coming sometime and be ready for it.

What I Learned Though My Big One

Crises often provide a watershed that divides life into "the before" and "the after" of his major crisis. What we learn through such a crisis makes such an impact that we are not the same person — thankfully. What I learned in my biggest crisis, and the time of fasting and prayer that went with it, has helped me throughout the many fruitful years of ministry since 1979. In Chapter 5, we looked at some of what led up to the 40-day fast. We observed that there were two different policies for administering the church in Korea: one was to develop a strong

central church — a view held by the Rev. Park; the other to assist our younger workers in their efforts to pioneer many churches nationwide — my view. In that chapter, we looked at several quotations from the record of my first days of prayer. My major concern, you will recall, was the freedom of the church to grow.

As the fast progressed, I stopped reading any other books except the Bible. God's Word became progressively more precious, alive, encouraging, and penetrating. The living Word of God had become powerfully real to me, and each verse seemed to be so rich in truth. This was so much the case that on Day 17 (Thursday, May 24), I made the following entry:

> I have really feasted on the Word. Never before has it ever been so alive and full of treasures to me in all my life. It has described to me a vision of power, abundance, victory, triumph, and blessing. If we can experience that in our work in Korea, all the weakness, hunger, and difficult times here will be worth it. I spent the afternoon praying for miracles of healing and total fulfillment of the triumphs that God's Word has caused me to envision. Prayer is wrestling. I spend from about 8:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. every day just in the Word and praying. I would guess that, in the course of a day, I spend about three hours in the Word and six and a half in prayer.

That pattern continued for the rest of the fast. I spent most of the time in prayer, and the remainder of the time in the Word. I carefully noted what I was learning. It seemed that the Lord Jesus Himself sat down on the bench next to me where I was reading and pointed out lesson after lesson. As the fast progressed, the lessons became more and more personal and pointed. Before it was over, I was much more concerned about humbling myself, repenting of my stubbornness, learning how to love and serve others, and becoming much more willing to let God take care of His church. My desire to fight for the liberty of the church gradually dissipated. It was replaced by an intense desire to love God and show that love for Him by loving and serving His people.

I also became increasingly dependent on the Lord. On Day 18 (Friday, May 25), I wrote:

> I came to a desperate point early this afternoon and admitted to the Lord I'd run out of steam and determination — that if He had more to happen in this fast (and I was sure He had because I am still certain He called

> the play), He'd have to take control in a more complete way — I was through. I think it was after this point that the events leading up to the revelation regarding Mr. Suh [another person who opposed me] came about. This wrestling cannot be described! I know that something very real is happening in the spirit world as I pray. It's not less fighting than if I had sword and shield and went to swinging — but, of course, it's all in the Spirit. I'm convinced that this is the arena where the real battle takes place and the real victories are won — how it all works out and how the answers materialize will be comparatively easy, I think.

I came to realize that the whole process of the contention between me and Mr. Park, the misunderstanding with Jeff, my trip to the mountain to pray, and my days of weakness and frailty alone with a mighty God, were a temporary state God was allowing. He would someday make some big changes. On Day 21 (Monday, May 28), I wrote:

> … the Lord brought me to Lamentations 3:27-33: "It is good for a young man to be under discipline, for it causes him to sit apart in silence beneath the Lord's demands, to lie face downward in the dust; then at last there is hope for him. Let him turn the other cheek to those who strike him and accept their awful insults for the Lord will not abandon him forever. Although God gives him grief, yet he will show compassion, too, according to the greatness of his loving kindness. For he does not enjoy afflicting men and causing sorrow" (*Living Bible*). I know that is just for me and read it over three or four times and read it to Him in the first person once. It is maybe a bit deflating to my ego to realize that He is the one who brought me here to fast, teach me obedience and patience, when all along I thought I was offering a sacrifice of fasting to the Lord. I certainly want to learn — and become very discouraged thinking about the length of time remaining. The Lord keeps saying, "one step (day) at a time."

During the last two weeks of the fast, God zeroed right in on my ego. He taught me about taking on the attitude of a servant. Whether I was being treated unfairly by Mr. Park or not was not the issue. This was a surprise to me — I thought that was the whole issue. No, the issue was that my attitude was wrong. I learned in those last two weeks of private tutorial guidance by the Holy Spirit that even if I was right, when my attitude was wrong, I was wrong. On Day 29 (Tuesday, June 5), I read and wrestled in prayer from 8:30 a.m. until 1:00 p.m. This was some of the most intense personal struggle of the whole six weeks. I knew that God was dealing with me, crucifying my flesh, taking the fight out of me, and developing a servant's heart. After describing various lessons from the Word with specific reference and application to my attitude toward Mr. Park, God said I should not judge him no matter how I had been mistreated or how unfair his policies were. I wrote:

I knew that God was dealing with me, crucifying my flesh, taking the fight out of me, and developing a servant's heart.

> The five points from Romans 14:3-4 have always been rich. They are five reasons why we should not judge others: 1) God has accepted them; 2) they are God's servants, not yours; 3) they are responsible to Him, not to you; 4) God is the One to tell them whether they are right or wrong; and 5) God is able to make them do as they should. So! Even though it's all so unfair from my point of view, I need to serve. A servant not only carries out certain actual duties, he also has to yield his will to that of the master's, and that is very hard for me with Mr. Park. But if this is what God is teaching me, I want to obey. Ouch! It was a very difficult four and one half hours, and I really came to the end of my spiritual and physical strength by 1:00 p.m.
>
> After that, I felt a little more peace about trying to submissively humble myself, because I was God's servant, to be Mr. Park's servant — as unto God. I don't know just how this fits in with prayers for release of the church, but His ways are not our ways. This is His way. It

> undoubtedly is better. I am glad anyhow to have what I feel is a little more clear direction from the Lord as to how to work with Mr. Park because I honestly didn't know. I felt I was doing what God wanted in representing the pastors' interests and my own interests for church expansion in confronting Mr. Park on behalf of several of our men and churches. Oh well, God will help me blend this together.

In those later days of the fast, I also learned of the strong reality of the spirit world. Even though I was not aware of specific movements or weapons the spiritual forces were using, I was still aware that something was happening in the invisible world. On Day 31 (Thursday, June 7), I wrote:

> … it's a battle! The enemy tries to oppose all that's good. I'm learning so much each day — it's sort of a bittersweet experience. It is hard on the flesh — very hard — but good for the spirit — very good. I'm obeying, and I know God would never ask something that wasn't for good, and I trust Him with my body.

Each day, the battle raged. My body grew weaker; my spirit stronger. On Day 33 (Saturday, June 9), I said:

> I need to say that this was a particularly difficult day — spiritually, physically, and emotionally. When I stop to think of the subject matter of the prayers — praying against the work of the enemy in our ranks — I think this is why. It is simply battling and that's work. Tomorrow is rest day. Praise the Lord.

Lasting Lifetime Benefits

In the months and years since my crisis, I find that my spirit is more tender. I cry more easily, I do not argue as much, and I am quieter. I complain less, pray more, judge much less, and feel much less obligation to right every wrong. I take criticism better, recognize my own failures more readily, and am generally quieter under pressure. Money cannot buy these things. Perhaps I would be unaware that I had even learned anything at all if I didn't occasionally observe people reacting to problems in the same way I used to. When I see that, it helps me realize the work of grace God used to change me.

I used to feel strong emotional attachment to each idea I placed on the table for discussion. Somehow, I was unable to separate myself from the idea. I took any criticism of the idea as a criticism of me. In my immaturity, I was unable to enjoy the objectivity necessary to discuss ideas on the basis of their merit alone. On Day 22 of the fast, I wrote:

> I have by lack of faith failed to enter into God's rest. What I mean is that when I present an idea for discussion, for example, I become emotionally involved in persuading whomever that it is a good idea, so I am not acting from faith, but from a sense of personal inadequacy. If I present my ideas in faith — and whatever is not of faith is sin — I can let the proposal stand or fall with no threat to me on the basis of the actual value of the idea itself, not my ability to sell it. Oh, for power to overcome this sin!

Years after writing those words, they still ring true. Since my students are adults, we use a lot of discussion in the classroom. Many ideas from the readings as well as the experiences of our graduate students are on the table for free discussion daily. By example and sometimes overtly, I teach my students to rationally discuss these ideas. When we learn to present ideas softly, the hearer is free to consider, reject, or accept the idea with personal freedom of choice. When our egos are attached to our ideas, our counterparts feel attacked. The normal reaction to an attack is defense. In a defensive mode, people are not open to our ideas. Our attack — not the idea itself — has "closed" them. Whether presenting an idea to graduate students or presenting Christ to an unbeliever, the softer presentations are more winsome. Leaven is better than dynamite in these cases.

Upon reflection on these ideas now, it was not until the spring of 1979 that I really began to get a handle on them. I had heard them with my head. However, on the mountain fasting, praying, and reading my Bible during the biggest crisis of my life, they got into my heart. Two years after the fast was over, the denomination moved us from Taejon to Seoul, where we had four more fruitful years of teaching, church-planting, and church administration ministry.

One evening, Char and I were attending a student Bible study in Seoul. We were seated on the floor Korean style when one of the teachers in our Bible college — a minister in our organization — began to verbally attack me. Because I occasionally chose to play

catch with my sons instead of attending the mid-week church service, the minister told the students that I was selfish and lazy. I remained quiet while the students fidgeted with embarrassment. When his speech was over, I raised my hand and asked for permission to speak. I said something like, "If you want to know more about how selfish I am, I can tell you even more than you have just heard.

He knows the strength of the steel He is testing.

This is something I wrestle with constantly, and the professor is right. I am basically a selfish person," and said no more. Before the fast, when I was still a fighter, I could never have done that. After the fast, it is now my nature to handle conflicts this way. I would never go back to the old way; the new wine is much sweeter. Later, someone told me that the students were amazed and discussed among themselves how I had handled the public criticism I received. I was glad I did it right.

Several semesters ago, here in the United States, a student took me to task in front of the entire class. I didn't fight back. I didn't defend myself. I just answered his questions. Later, because of the way I handled that situation, several students told me that it helped them see how the student was demonstrating a poor attitude. This would not have happened if both of us had been fighting. On the other side of my fast, the younger, less mature, more feisty version of myself would have handled that differently.

No one likes crises. No one likes to suffer physically, spiritually, emotionally, or mentally. Our egos don't like to suffer either. Yet the Master metallurgist knows the tempering process perfectly. He knows the strength of the steel He is testing. He knows the right temperature for the fire, the right temperature for the coolant, and the best timing to make your metal stronger. Some of us require hot fires and tremendous pressures in order to be willing to change, yield, and die. The crises will only last for a while, but the improvements can last the rest of our lives and into eternity. God is more concerned about our development than our comfort.

HABIT SEVEN

Know Who You Are and Are Not

"But by the grace of God I am what I am,
and his grace to me was not without effect.
No, I worked harder than all of them — yet not I,
but the grace of God that was with me."

I Corinthians 15:10

In reading about this habit, you will begin at a new level to discover who God made you to be and what you do well. Such a discovery can introduce you to new levels of confidence, strength, self-satisfaction, and joy. At the same time, it can free you from covetousness, jealousy, and envy of others' successes.

After serving since 1965 in my chosen career, I have learned the importance of recognizing both who I am and who I am not. Coming to terms with this has introduced me to levels of peace and a freedom from covetousness that I could never have experienced under the old paradigm. Career decisions are easier. I judge others less. I am less jealous of others' successes and less proud of my own. I am freer to enjoy and appreciate who God made me to be. I am also freer to enjoy others and who God made them to be.

The Five Selves

Years ago, a friend loaned me an old textbook on behavior and advised me to read it. In it, I learned some ideas about how to evaluate who we really are. I learned that it is simplistic to think there is only one perception of our self. There are multiple perceptions in even our own minds and the minds of those who "know" us. Let's look at these perceptions — the five selves.

Table 7-1. The Five Perceptions of Self

First Self	*The self I want to be*
Second Self	*The self I think I am*
Third Self	*The self I think others believe I am*
Fourth Self	*The self others believe I am*
Fifth Self	*The real self no one but God knows*

The first self is the self I want to be (Figure 7-1). I imagine what I would like to be, do, or am becoming. Before long, I have adopted those imagined images as my own impression of who I am — my hoped-for self. However, as you know, what is imagined is not necessarily real. It often is not. We could call it the "dreamed self." With careful thought, we can separate our true self from our imagined, successful self. However, it usually requires a dose of honesty and self-criticism.



Figure 7-1. The first self — the self I want to be.

The second self is the one I think I am (Figure 7-2) — especially in moments of honest reflection. The self we honestly believe we are may, of course, vary with moods. Usually, we all admit that we are not as bad as we think we are when we are down on ourselves. Likewise, we are not as good as we think we are when we are especially happy with ourselves. This second self is neither of those, but somewhere in the middle. The person that I acknowledge in my inner heart is the self I perceive myself to be. We could refer to this as the "admitted self."



Figure 7-2. The second self — the self I think I am.

The third self is the one I think others believe I am (Figure 7-3). Some spend more time in this exercise than others, but we all imagine what others believe of us. Since we normally care about what people think, this perception is usually important to us. We may have come to terms with the incongruity between our first and second selves — the reality that what we aspire to be is different from what we really are. However, we shudder to think that anyone else would know what we really are. We prefer to think their perception or impression of us is closer to our first self — our ideal self. I call the third one the "I think they believe self" because we only think others believe that way.



Figure 7-3. The third self — the self I think others believe I am.

The fourth self is the one others believe I am (Figure 7-4). What others really believe of us may be considerably different from what we think they believe. Psychologists say that, in reality, we might be surprised how little others actually bother to think of us at all. Much of our worry about what others think is just wasted. Nevertheless, if we ponder these issues, we can appreciate the difference between what we think others believe of us and what others actually believe. Of course, others are the only ones who know what they really believe of us. In addition, they have almost no idea of what we think they believe — unless we talk about it. Let's call this fourth one the "they actually believe self."

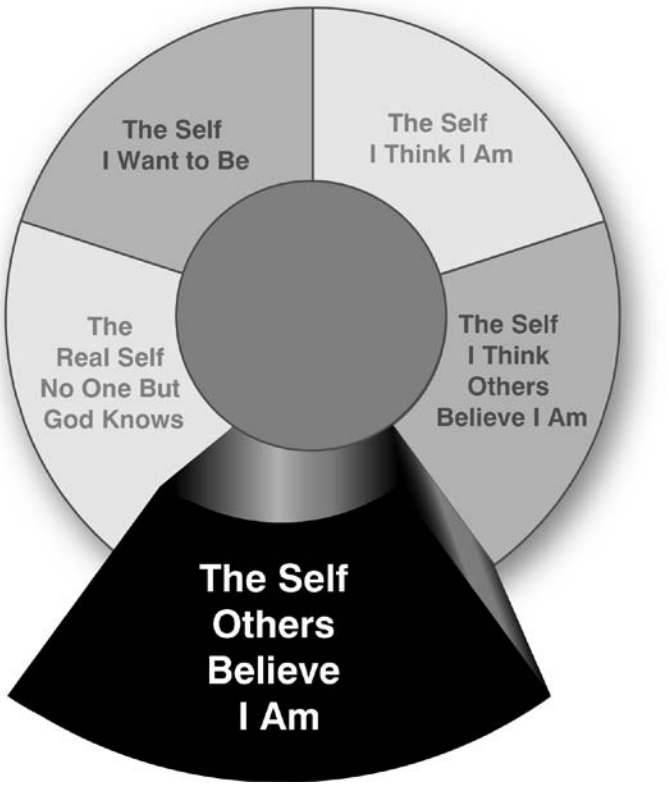


Figure 7-4. The fourth self — the self others believe I am.

The fifth one is the real self no one but God knows (Figure 7-5) — the one we can only guess at by comparing, contemplating, evaluating, and even discussing the combination of the "dreamed," "admitted," "I think they believe," and "they actually believe" selves. Yet, Christians dare to claim that the fifth self is not only knowable but also known. Of all five selves, knowing this one is the most valuable to each of us. It is the one God knows. He individually created each of us, so he knows our entire makeup. Nothing we ever think or do is hidden from Him. He knows us perfectly — which, of course, is much better than we even know ourselves.

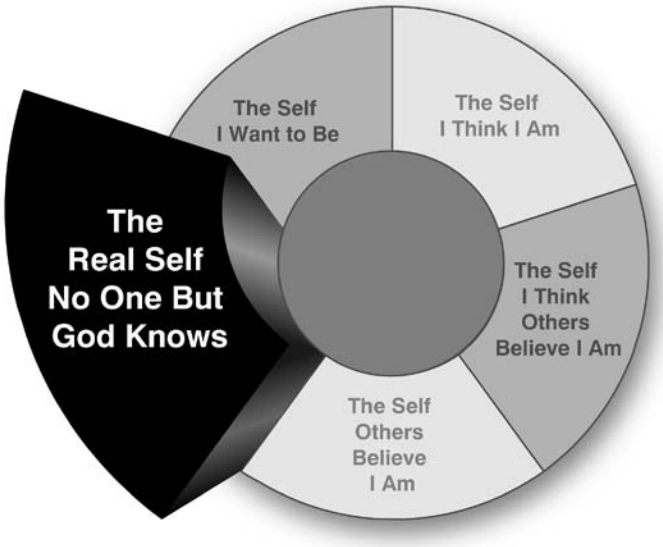


Figure 7-5. The fifth self — the real self no one but God knows.

Knowing the Real Self

The big question for those who want to become all they can be is, "How can I know this fifth self?" The following three thoughts will get us much closer to understanding who we are.

1. The Word of God is a mirror. Honest and regular reading of it helps us see ourselves as we really are. When you compare the mirror power of God's Word with the sacred texts of other religions, our advantage becomes more obvious.
2. When the Holy Spirit tells us something, we should truly listen. He has come into the world to convince, teach, and reveal truth. He is willing to — very effectively — point out areas we need to improve.
3. In view of the difference between the "I think they believe self" and the "they actually believe self," we should pay more careful attention to what others say to us and about us. This, too, is a valuable mirror. Certainly, we should disregard some criticism. God can help us recognize unkind, destructive remarks. However, assuming we are listening honestly to wise and caring people, all three of the above thoughts can help us realistically evaluate ourselves.

A major strength of young adults today is their rugged determination to be honest, transparent, and authentic. Others' honesty will help us as we try to discover the real self. Our personal defense mechanisms sometimes become resistant to what others say about us. It protects us from undue self-condemnation. This can be good — especially if we have been unfairly exposed to too much criticism. On the other hand, this defense mechanism can make us insensitive to learning about ourselves for our own improvement. When that happens, we may have defended ourselves too well. It may insulate us from the very criticisms that can free us from our false impressions.

We must try to find the middle ground. Some of us receive too much peer pressure — we are so sensitive to what others think that we are paranoid. Others are too insensitive and therefore miss the opportunity to improve. We achieve balance when we care enough about personal development in others and

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ourselves to confront and be confronted — without destroying or being destroyed.

Distinguishing the differences between the five selves can help us improve interpersonal relationships. It can also help us appreciate the importance of truly listening. The person who sings off-key cannot tell he is doing so. Likewise, we can make social, service-related, professional, or personal mistakes. We may simply not be aware of it unless we learn to listen better and with greater sensitivity. Realizing there are different perceptions of one's self is a significant first step toward knowing who we are (and are not). There may be a vast difference between who we want to be and how others see us. When we recognize this, we are more likely to start listening carefully to others and bring the two perceptions closer together.

Discovering the fifth self (the real self no one knows), however, is more important than the other selves. We should seek to know and improve the real self, not just to develop lofty ego trips and high-sounding dreams. Dreaming of improvement can be helpful to an extent. The human imagination is, after all, a marvelous gift of God. However, preoccupying ourselves with dreams distracts us from making real improvements.

Trying to improve the real self is also more productive than the bondage of muddling along thinking we can never change the admitted self. We should not be bound by what we think our limitations are. To an extent, we need to dream — some of us need to learn to dream — and try to think of ways to improve ourselves. Nonetheless, being caught by the dreamed self leads to too much dreaming and being caught by the admitted self leads to too much discouragement. God can and will help us find the balance and improve realistically.

Trying to improve the real self is much more fruitful than wasting time needlessly worrying about the "I think they believe" self. The self we think others see in us and the self they really see are different. The "we think they believe" self is really just another form of the first self — only imagined in our minds. In the final analysis, what we think others believe is not important. Avoid being preoccupied with what others may believe of you. There are more constructive things to think about.

Developing the real self is far more useful than seeking to know the "actually thought self" — the self people really think we are.

As we have noticed, knowing what others really think can lead us to more realistic appraisals. They may help us or want to help us and often do. However, they may have some wrong impressions about us as well. We often call those misunderstandings. Others could think too favorably or too unkindly. In either case, people do not see us as we really are. To be insensitive to their opinions can be a fault, but to be overly preoccupied with their opinions can tie us up. In attempting to please everyone, we please no one, including God and ourselves. The fear of God is superior in such cases to the fear of man. We need to be more attentive in reverential respect to God — we must exercise caution lest we displease Him — rather than being preoccupied with how mere people may think about us.

We have compared each of the first four selves with the fifth self. Now we can conclude that all the first four selves are unimportant compared to the self God sees. God is, after all, the one to impress. God is the Judge. He is the Giver of all eternal rewards. He is the Giver of eternal assignments of real consequences in the next, permanent, and eternal state. Living a life with constant sensitivity to pleasing or displeasing God is what it means to live in the fear of the Lord. We are not acting out of dreadful fear, but out of loving concern lest we displease someone who loves us and whom we love. Proverbs 9:10 says that the fear of the Lord — being concerned about the self God sees — is the beginning of wisdom. There is, however, another very important self God sees to which we now turn our attention.

The Sixth Self

There is a sixth self we have not previously discussed: **the self God dreams I could be (Figure 7-6)**. God is not the only one who may have ideas about what He wants us to become. How many of our parents, friends, and spouses have aspirations for us? Others see less accurately what we could and should become than God does. Only God can see that perfectly. The sixth self, therefore, would be other than, more realistic than, more wonderful than, and certainly more doable than the self we would like to try to be or the self our parents, friends, or spouses imagine we could be.



Figure 7-6. The sixth self — the self God dreams I could be.

God has a realistic dream for us. By working on knowing the real self, we can gradually become more like the one God desires — our best possible self. In this process, we seek to know our gifts and talents, use our strengths, repent of and change any bad habits, and move with confidence in what God is helping us to become. We will eventually discover our sixth self — the one God knows we can become. The sixth self is the one that completely fulfills the will of God for each person. Every Christian is successful to the degree he becomes his best possible self.

Your best possible self is more realistic than your "dreamed self," more lofty than your "admitted self," more meaningful than your "I think they believe self," and more important by far than your "actually thought self." The only reason it is more

important than your present real self is that it is the self God truly wants you to become. His dream for you is absolutely, positively, and surely best. It is the best possible self you could be. If you seek Him, it is the self you will be.

Becoming your best possible self has nothing to do with position, rank, being a salaried Christian worker or volunteer (full-time or part-time), working in church, industry, government, business, or otherwise. It has an entirely different type of criteria. Are we doing what God wants us to do? Are we growing and developing in it so that we are all God wants us to be in whatever position we serve? Paul said, "It has always been *my ambition* to preach the gospel where Christ was not known …" (Romans 15:20, emphasis mine). Paul was a preacher, but he encouraged the believers in Thessalonica to "Make it *your ambition* to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders …" (I Thessalonians 4:11, emphasis mine). He encouraged others to have another kind of ambition. Most believers have jobs and relationships in their communities that provide opportunities for becoming effective "salt in the soup." Because of that, our generation may be able to win many for Christ if we can keep salt out of the "ministry" and in the soup. You do not have to be a full-time minister of the gospel to become your best possible self — just be a full-time Christian. There is a self God knows that you could be and dreams you will become. For most of us, this self may well be developed most effectively in an arena outside the church.

Table 7-2. The Six Perceptions of Self with Practical Goals

The self I want to be	*Strive to be all you can be.*
The self I think I am	*Realistically and humbly face personal limitations. Don't be an unrealistic dreamer.*
The self I think others believe I am	*Don't let your fears about what others think discourage or debilitate you.*
The self others believe I am	*Learn to listen to others when their appraisal of you can help you improve.*

The real self no one but God knows	*Seek to see yourself as God sees you. He starts with what is and then works to improve it.*
The self God dreams I could be	*Dare to discover God's dreams for you and strive to fulfill them.*

That person is successful who becomes the self that God knows he or she could be — the best possible self. The world's common notion of material success is a long way from the definition of success we are using here. Furthermore, even the Christian's common notion of "ministry success" is also something other than what we are calling "success."

The Equation for Calculating Success

The best possible self is God's very loving and beautiful desire for every Christian. To understand this more fully, look at an equation that includes several variable factors we sometimes overlook.

Success = (Talents + Opportunities + Accomplishments) ÷ Motive

Figure 7-7. The Equation for Calculating Success.

Success (S) is the degree to which we accomplished what we could have for the Lord. It is the extent to which we did God's will and the degree to which we became our best possible self. Many of us think Success equals Accomplishments, but that is far too simplistic. Some accomplishments are visible, some are not, and some are improperly motivated. God sees and weighs it all. Furthermore, there are other factors, handicaps, and advantages to consider.

The **Talents factor (T)** includes abilities, consequent responsibilities, inabilities, handicaps, and consequent freedoms from some responsibilities. It has to do with what is in us. We each have a different set of talents which includes unique combinations of physical, mental, and spiritual abilities and gifts. The more talent a person has the greater responsibility for

accomplishments. For those with many talents, much is required. For those with few, less is required. God requires what we can do, not what we cannot do. God anticipates what we have to give in life, not what we cannot give. However, He expects us to use the talents He has given us.

The next factor is **Opportunities (O).** The opportunity factor includes opportunities available through contacts, resources, or circumstantial openings for usefulness. It also includes consequent responsibilities as well as any lack of opportunities and responsibility. We each have different degrees and numbers of opportunities. Opportunities have to do with our context — our external situation.

Talents and opportunities are different factors. Talents are internal abilities — what the person has the ability to do. Opportunities are external conditions — connections, tools, finances, access to schooling, social and political environment, and open doors. We should consider a person's circumstances as well as their native abilities. Some are born into families who know influential people or nations where finances for educations are readily available. Others, with equal or superior talents, are born into a family or nation with severely limited finances, educational systems, or other resources that would have aided the development and use of native talents. The success question is not so much what talents and opportunities we have or do not have. Instead, the question is how we use the ones we have. When we consider these talent and opportunity variables, we realize that we are in no position to conclusively measure anyone's success on this side of heaven.

Accomplishments (A) include both visible accomplishments people can see and invisible accomplishments only God sees. People usually only consider someone's visible (known) accomplishments. This equation for evaluating our success, to the contrary, also includes the accomplishments that only God sees. Yet, for all of this, there is another important factor: Only what we do for God counts. This is factored into our equation by the motive (M).

The **Motive (M) factor** has the power to divide the combination of Talents, Opportunity, and Accomplishment. Only the part that we do for the Lord remains after M has divided it. An ulterior Motive cuts across it all. Jesus said that good deeds, prayer, and fasting done to receive the praise of people would not be

rewarded again — they already received their reward. Some of our accomplishments, therefore, may be disqualified because we had selfish motives. Such wood, hay, and stubble will someday be burned up, leaving only what we did with correct motives — gold, silver, and precious stones — to be rewarded. Accomplishments done for the Lord will be laid out before Him and others on the day we are judged. God's measure of our success will be considerably different from ours. Only God can be totally fair, because He alone knows what the combination of Talents, Opportunity, and Accomplishment divided by Motive equals. He alone is able to calculate Success.

This equation may feel unnecessarily complex. However, it is possible that still other factors exist besides talent, opportunities, accomplishments, and motives. The heavens are higher than the earth. Likewise, God's equations are higher (more complex and accurate) than ours. Our purpose in looking at the six selves and examining the success equation — S=(T+O+A)÷M — is to provide a background for understanding how each of us can more completely fulfill our potential when we know who God created us to be.

When does God announce our success? When does God let us know how well the real self measures up against the one we could have been? Christian believers will not be judged for their sin. That judgment was borne by Jesus on the Cross, and it is over. Christian believers will, however, be judged for their service and there will be some surprises in heaven. Though we don't know perfectly how well we are doing, S=(T+O+A)÷M gives us a hint and minimizes the prospect of surprise.

Here is an illustration. Mr. Hyde looked good in the eyes of men with his accomplishment level of 75, but with a talent level of 95, his 75 was only 78.9 percent of what he could have been. One-third of his motivation was to earn the praises of men — it reduced his reward score by one-third to 52.6. His neighbor, Ernest, however, had an accomplishment level of only 60, but that was 86 percent of his talent level of 70. Since Ernest's motives were pure, nothing was subtracted from his 86 percent. Which man did the best compared to what he could have done?

Though admittedly mechanical, this perspective may compel us to accomplish everything our talents and opportunities allow with the purest of motives. We can learn to celebrate the talents and opportunities we have and keep our hearts right. As we

become increasingly faithful in using what we have with a pure heart, we will find that we compare ourselves less, and our personal peace significantly increases. We are less inclined to be prideful from favorable comparisons and less likely to be intimidated by unfavorable comparisons. Too long the enemy has used unfavorable comparisons as a tool for discouragement, intimidation, and poor self-image. Too long, he has used favorable comparisons to make us unduly proud.

Understanding the success equation relieves us from the personal disappointment we feel from those unfavorable comparisons. We simply do not know the Talents, Opportunity, and Motive of others. Therefore, there is no way we can know how successful they really are. This equation exposes unnecessary self-condemnation and browbeating. This perspective on success frees each of us to judge ourselves as best we can by the standards God will use on judgment day. We should judge ourselves so that we do our best, but not so harshly that we are demoralized.

Success is the degree to which we have done the will of God. The degree to which we have not done it is the degree of our failure. A proper evaluation of success is contingent upon several factors:

4. Only God knows how successful each of us is.
5. We ourselves do not know how successful we are.
6. No one knows how successful another person is.
7. Judgment of each other is foolish and useless.
8. Comparison of one's accomplishments with another's is also foolish and useless.

This understanding of success has the power to completely replace comparisons and competition with affirmation and cheering.

Feelings of pride and inferiority both come from shallow comparisons of visible accomplishments. Understanding the equation means we replace our pride and feelings of inferiority

with a desire to encourage others. This understanding of success has the power to completely replace comparisons and competition with affirmation and cheering. We are happier and so are those around us. Those who run marathons know we all win, and we all celebrate each other's wins.

The Advantages of Knowing What Not to Do

It is better to do good things than to do bad things. Therefore, some people, rather simplistically, decide that if something is good to do, they will do it and become extremely busy doing good things. However, there is a better criterion for deciding how to make ourselves useful in the world: know the difference between good and best. The counterfeit is the enemy of the real, and sometimes good is the enemy of best. The better the counterfeit, the more dangerous this enemy is. If we are busy doing good things, we will not be free to do the best things.

Becoming successful in God's eyes — becoming our best possible self — demands that we distinguish between *good* and *best*. Finding out about ourselves is useful because what is *best* for one person may not be *best* for another. When we find out what God knows and what we need to know if we are ever going to fulfill our personal potential, the likelihood of finding our *best* increases considerably. In *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People,* Stephen Covey recommends writing a personal mission statement. This is a tool that can help you achieve your best.

Your Personal Mission Statement

Writing a personal mission statement can be a very liberating experience. This happened for me in 1999 when, at age 55, I followed Covey's advice and wrote mine. A mission statement is not so much invented as discovered. It comes out of careful reflection on what God has done in developing us. Review your own experience, as we learned to do in Habit 1 (Learn from Experience) and Habit 2 (Recognize Learning Opportunities), and then write your own personal mission statement. As the years go by, update it as often as needed.

By age 55, a person should know who he is. I sat down at the computer one afternoon and in about an hour and a half, I typed up the mission statement that follows. When my wife, Char, read it, she casually observed, "There is nothing new here. That is what you are." In the months that followed, both our sons, Dan and Joel, read it. Each of them said essentially, "That's you, Dad. That's who you are. You think like that." I was pleased to hear these reactions of those who know me best because a mission statement, if it is to be helpful, must be honest. We don't write mission statements for publication. Instead, they are a tool for self-definition. They help us discover the self we really are and aid us as we strive to be the self God knows we can become. They also help us make important decisions that set the direction of our lives.

Here is my personal mission statement. It was originally written just for my own benefit. Consider it just an illustration from someone else's life as you write your own.

Personal Mission Statement of Ron Meyers

GOD is the glorious, all-important, vital, meaning, and life-giving center around which my values, attitudes, activities, and goals revolve. His Word is the standard for my behavior and meditations. In all my relationships with persons and things mentioned below, it is He whom I seek to please and serve, and He whom I seek to glorify through them.

I recognize that my **SELF** is a unique creation of God, deliberately designed and intentionally placed in this generation and location with a high purpose. I have been given unique abilities and opportunities, both of which entail responsibilities. As a faithful steward, I seek to develop the talents entrusted to me without being envious of the abilities, possessions, or opportunities He has given to others.

My **WIFE** is the most significant other person in my life. We are friends, life partners, lovers, co-laborers, fellow adventurers, parents, and prayer warriors together. For eternity, we will be brother and sister in the Lord and intend to do nothing in this life we will regret as we

continue our relationship under new rules in the next. We share a desire to encourage each other to be all that each can be. To this end, we stimulate spiritual, educational, and social growth — we want to improve together. In order to grow, we have agreed we are willing to confront and be confronted. In our free discussion of ideas, we like to spar. Neither academics nor finances are our goals, though we seek to improve ourselves educationally and to be wise stewards of material resources — earning, saving, investing, and giving all we can to worthy kingdom-related causes.

WORLD EVANGELISM is the great cause to which I have consciously dedicated my life and resources. Anything I can do to further the cause of seeing the world's people come to know Jesus Christ as their Savior is automatically the high priority. I will go anywhere to lecture, teach, train, or raise up Christian leaders who can further evangelize their people. I seek to give them tools they need and release them to serve in ways most effective in their own culture. When I cannot personally go, I financially support those who do. I train young missionary and ministry candidates. I pour myself openly and honestly into them in an effort to help them in their generation to improve on the efforts made by missionaries in mine. I seek to be transparent so that they may be prepared for difficulties as well as the opportunities involved in world missions. I also methodically and by name pray daily for nations, national heads, governments, pastors, churches, Christians, and peoples.

I believe that earthly life is merely temporary preparation for the **REAL** existence that begins when we depart this tent of clay. When my mind and spirit are free from present physical restrictions, I anticipate the fulfillment of my eternal destiny in my new body. Holy and lofty opportunities for meaningful service and responsibility await me. At that time, I do not want to regret having missed any opportunity to serve, give, or prepare adequately on earth. I seek to apply now, in this life, the same value system we all will use in the next; to live and serve now so as to have no regrets then.

Not long after writing my mission statement, I experienced a test of my budding belief in their value. My dean offered me an administrative position. It had a salary raise, more prestige, and

increased opportunities to minister to seminary students. Most interesting to me, it would have put me on the administrative council which meets regularly with the dean. I would have enjoyed that and would have learned much.

About the same time, however, my superior in International Educational Fellowship (IEF) resigned from his position. I had served with IEF for two and one-half years, and was serving as Asian Director at the time. My roles in IEF and Oral Roberts University (ORU) were complementary. IEF gave me an opportunity to travel, teach, minister, and serve in foreign nations during breaks from teaching at ORU. My work in the field with IEF augmented my work in the classroom at ORU. My preparations for teaching at ORU bring me into continued contact with the latest developments in missions, strategy, and awareness of the state of world evangelism. However, due to an almost complete change in the administration of IEF's parent organization, funds for the open position were unavailable.

Am I bound by my mission statement? No. I am free to allow it to help me stay on my life's course.

I had just written my mission statement, in which I say that anything that has to do with world evangelism is automatically a high priority for me. So which position should I accept? The promotion and salary increase at ORU or the added responsibilities with no monetary increase at IEF? After several days of thought and largely because of my mission statement, I chose to accept the position of the director of IEF with no additional compensation. This position entailed at least twice the responsibility of being the Asian Director. It also meant that I must decline the administrative position I was being offered by my dean. Why did I turn down a raise and an opportunity for prestige, influence, and increased responsibilities? Writing the mission statement helped me define who I was and what my life was about. It helped me know better than ever before what I should do. It made making a decision consistent with my value system much more possible. Did it make financial sense? No, but this decision was consistent with what I had said in my mission statement about my financial goals, too. It was as though God tested me to see if I would be true to myself or try to be somebody else. It was a profound experience. Does this mean I

have lost my liberty? Am I bound by my mission statement? No. I am free to allow it to help me stay on my life's course. It increases the possibility of becoming my best possible self.

Who Are You?

What have you learned about yourself thus far on your journey? What gifts have you discovered? What talents do you have? What do you do so well that not only do you do it with confidence, but others also observe that you do it well? What is valuable and important to you? What criteria do you use in weighing your decisions? In short, who are you? Can you write it down just for yourself? If you will, you will find that it is easier to be true to yourself because you know who you are. How can you be true to yourself and who God made you to be if you have not defined it yet? The difference in your lifetime between doing good and doing best may depend on you knowing who you are and what your mission is.

Every believer should know they are where God wants them to be. They should be doing what God wants them to do. Knowing this frees us from jealousy and numerous other distracting detours. We all should develop our own strategies for a life of useful service. This can become a personal philosophy that emerges from a lifetime of formational events. It results in an increasingly clear definition of what is important to you. This framework gives direction, focus, and ultimate purpose to a Christian's life. It will help you move from having some fruit to having much fruit — from doing good to doing your best. It is worth giving some thought to know who you are and are not. When you know who you are, you know what to do. When you know who you are not, you know what not to do — not because it is not good, but because it is not the best thing for you to do. Only by habitually limiting ourselves to doing only what is best can we ever hope to truly be all we can be — a highly effective Christian — and fulfill God's dream for us.

One more word. Limiting ourselves to only doing what is best does not mean we cannot make temporary exceptions in which we serve just because there is a need. In these cases, being willing to serve any way or any place we are needed becomes the best thing we could do for another reason: It is best for the common cause. In some cases, people have discovered something new

about themselves by first just trying to help in a situation for which they felt unqualified — because they were needed.

This habit is positioned here in the sequence of habits because it provides a good platform on which to build the next — marriage. The marriage relationship is an intimate and long-lasting human relationship. If there is any human who is interested in you becoming your best possible self, it is your spouse. This is why the marriage relationship is a very good arena in which to develop your character and help another do the same. When those close to us also have the habits of highly effective Christians, everyone wins.

HABIT EIGHT

Grow in Character as Your Marriage Grows

"... do to others as you would have them do unto you."

Matthew 7:12

Most of this book deals with individual habits — how you order your own life so you grow to your maximum potential. The next three habits, however, deal with family relationships. Using these relationships for personal growth, instead of allowing them to deplete our resources, can make a wonderful addition. Family relationships are God's chief means for molding us into Christ-likeness. In them, we must sacrifice — die to ourselves — for it to work. Here we examine personal growth in marriage. Then, in the next two chapters, we will discover that while helping our children develop, we also develop enormously.

Would you like to have such a good marriage that others use your marriage as a model for their own? If you apply what you read here, you can have just that. Why would anyone want to live with less than the best — two highly effective Christians living and growing together?

God wills healthy and affirming marriages. His Word gives instructions about how to build them. We can allow our marriages to be a workshop for spiritual character development and the marriage partnership — a ministry team. Good

marriages are built; they don't just happen. Maintenance and improvement are continual, lifelong projects. My wife, Char, and I have learned to "turn to" instead of "turn against" each other. Marriage is a diamond with many facets worth polishing. In the following pages, you will read some of what we have learned in our many happy years of growth together since April 1969.

Marriage and Cultural Issues

Consider marriages in Confucian family systems. Char and I served 18 years in Asia. We lived with the subtle remnants of Asian family traditions in which deceased ancestors are perceived to remain active in the daily lives of living descendants. They are believed to be able to bring good fortune or punishment to the living. This is the rationale for veneration of ancestors. Ancestor worship and the accompanying emphasis on respect for parents produces a vertical family structure. Sons serve their fathers. Parents choose the marriage partners of their children. Wives do not change their names when they get married. They remain outsiders in their husbands' families.

Good marriages are built; they don't just happen. Maintenance and improvement are continual, lifelong projects.

In such a patriarchal and vertically oriented family system, daughters-in-law serve mothers-in-law. Most unfortunately, love for one's wife is considered an insult to one's parents. Men take a wife to produce descendants. Marriage is a means to both please the ancestors and produce future worshippers. Children serve their parents to gain their favor with the hope of avoiding future catastrophes after Mom and Dad are "gone" (but not gone in this worldview). In this environment, wives resent being used and live for the day they can use their own daughters-in-law. As an understandable and unfortunate result, romance is often lacking in marriages but flourishes outside of them!

In 1996, we returned to the United States where marriage is under another type of attack. Young adults often feel that romance is the only basis for marriage. When they no longer feel

romantic, they think they have fallen out of love. American culture has lost sight of the fact that to love or not to love is an act of the will and that marriage is a contract for a lifetime. Breaking that sacred covenant has become so much the cultural norm that even believers are breaking it. The divorce rate for Christians is no lower than that of the non-Christian sector. In the northeastern states, where the percentage of born-again believers is lower, the divorce rate is the lowest. In the Bible Belt and south where the percentage of born-again believers is higher, the divorce rate is the highest!

This chapter is not an anti-divorce tirade. We will think more deeply than that and illustrate how we can grow as our marriages grow. If we are fine-tuning our character in our marriages, we experience one of the strongest developmental processes woven into human social fabric. Over time, we change and change and change, and so does the situation. No one can know what the spouse or the situation will become with time. But contracts remain in force. Our romantic dreams of marriage may have become a mirage. Our plan for a sweet dessert may have become a dry and parched desert. But if we get the emphasis right, mirages can become marriages again, and deserts can become desserts again. It is all a matter of correct emphasis!

Asian marriages are pressured by vertical family problems while American marriages are entered too lightly and broken too often. The Bible provides many healthy instructions for personal character development, equal partnerships, and useful service to God through our marriages. Furthermore, as a bonus, we get to really enjoy romance, too! According to surveys, Christians have the highest rate of enjoyment of physical intimacies. Non-Christians talk more about it, but Christians enjoy physical intimacy more with no regrets, guilt, or misgivings. Char and I, like hundreds of others, have learned how to be good friends in marriage and enjoy a better party than anything Hollywood has to offer. Like other mature Christians and happily married partners, we too joke, romp, play, talk, listen, rake leaves, and wash dishes like young people in love. You can, too!

The Reciprocity Principle

To reciprocate means to pay back in kind. Verbal exchanges continually occur between married partners. They can be good

or bad. Satan wants to undermine our joy by sowing seeds of discord in marriages. He tries to drive wedges between husbands and wives, to divide and conquer, to destroy the strength they could gain from unity and purpose in the marriage. Satan seeks to begin negative reciprocal cycles. God wants to help us maintain positive ones. Behavior in any close relationship is much affected by the principle of reciprocity. You have heard spouses exchange pleasant and affirming words: "That looks nice." "Thanks, you look good to me, too." We have also heard negative cycles: "That was a klutzy move." "Well, you were in my way, jerk." Humans are naturally inclined to return good for good or bad for bad, and both the size and speed of the exchanges can be increased or decreased. The goal is to slow down, reduce the size, or even abort the negative cycles, and, at the same time, start and increase the speed and size of the positive cycles.

Scripture says, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Matthew 7:12). If you don't like the treatment you are receiving, review the treatment you are giving! It is not likely that a partner will consistently return bad for good. If you are not *receiving* courteous respect, it may be because you are not *giving* courteous respect. God's rules are good for us. The above verse could say: "It is good for you to do to others as you would have them do to you." Plant seeds of courtesy, honesty, affirmation, and care. You will benefit by reaping the blessing of courtesy, honesty, affirmation, and care. Be a good spouse, and you will find you have a good spouse. Keep the positive reciprocal cycles going in your marriage.

If you are not yet married, evaluate the relationship with the person you are dating. Does that person possess the potential for partnering in a mutually affirming reciprocal relationship? A good married life, including good physical experiences, is built on this kind of maturity. When I come home from work, I like to announce my arrival as I come in the garage door. I walk down the hall by singing out something like, "Hey, hey, Baby, I want to know if you'll be my girl." This sets a good tone for the entire supper hour and evening because Char responds in kind.

The Role Model Principle

Marriage roles for the most part are unconsciously learned by long-term observation. My dad's greatest gift to me was to treat

Mom like a queen. He was always saying something good or kind to or about her. He never allowed any of his children to be critical of her. Some of us, sadly, must overcome the disadvantage of poor models. After all, we did not choose our parents. But be of good cheer; there is a solution to the role model problem! We are to honor our parents. However, if they are inadequate marital role models, find another model — a better example — and follow the one you choose to follow.

Let's learn to capitalize on our partner's strengths, while we help compensate for their weaknesses.

What is the best gift you can give to your children? The daughter who grows up watching a respectful relationship between her parents will not settle for less herself — she is safe. You don't have to worry about her getting in with the wrong crowd; she has seen the good model, knows the respect which she has received at home and which she has seen her mother receive, and won't settle for less. The son who grows up watching a respectful relationship between you and your spouse will understand the role of a kind married partner. He will also want a wife who has potential for a mutually affirming and respectful marriage. He, too, is safe.

Find the Strength behind the Weaknesses

We all have strengths and weaknesses. Interestingly, there is often a strength on the flip side of our weakness. A merciful person may appear weak, but she is good at sympathy. A disciplined person may seem mechanical, but he is dependable. A flexible person may not reach his goals quickly, but he can adjust to a variety of situations. The challenge is that weaknesses are often more obvious than strengths, especially if the strengths have not yet been encouraged. Consider this your invitation to discover your spouse's strength that is on the other side of his or her weakness. When we do that, we can begin to encourage and develop it. Let's learn to capitalize on our partner's strengths, while we help compensate for their weaknesses. Does this

remove the weakness? No, but it changes the focus and therefore greatly alters the relationship from a war of criticism to a mutual appreciation of strengths.

Char is creative. She seems to brim over with good ideas — so much so that she does not have the energy to complete all her ideas. She gets started on one good idea for helping someone and then thinks of a great idea for making something for a grandchild. For a long time, I complained about all the unfinished projects laying around the house or hiding in closets, boxes, and drawers. Then I learned to appreciate her creativity! Now, sometimes I help her finish them and other times I simply give her "space" to finish them herself. Identify weaknesses and strengths; compensate for weaknesses; utilize strengths. If you do this, the level of peace in your home will rise more than just a few notches.

The Equal Partner Principle

This could also be called the Mutually Submissive Principle. Marriage is a blend of equal partnership and mutual submission. Wives are called "heirs with you" in I Peter 3:7. God is my father-in-law! God won't answer my prayers if I don't take good care of Char. When I pray, God asks, "How are you treating Char? How are you taking care of my daughter?" When our marriages are balanced by scriptural guidelines of respect and equality, in honor preferring one another and bearing one another's burdens, our competition becomes cooperation. Your spouse is a child of God — don't violate one of God's kids! Before she is my wife, first (and eternally), Char is my Christian sister.

"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" is written at the head of the section on marriage instruction in Ephesians 5. Many Bible publishers make the mistake of inserting the heading "Wives and Husbands" after this phrase, thus excluding this verse from the section on wives and husbands. Paul didn't put the heading there; we did. In other words, the first phrase in Paul's section on the marriage relationship in Ephesians 5 is: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." Wives are not the only ones to submit; both are. The mutually submissive principle works in all family relationships, especially, the husband and wife partnership. It is not the weak person who can understand this; it is the strong. Weak people are afraid to make

themselves vulnerable; they want their own way. The strong know when to yield and have character to do it.

Caring Enough to Confront

Of course, we should be tolerant and patient with each other in marriage. However, too much tolerance and patience with another's faults can create problems. God can give us the wisdom and grace to know when we should yield to our partner. He also can help us understand when it would most honor Him (and the partner) to kindly approach them about issues. We should not be hypercritical, but we should love enough to discuss real issues.

In the interest of your own continued development, create an atmosphere where your partner can confront you when you have a blind spot. Likewise, don't allow your partner to repeatedly do something seriously wrong. Lovingly and tactfully approach them about it. Otherwise, you permit the behavior and appear to approve by passively allowing it. This is sometimes referred to as codependency. When one partner becomes too tolerant, he or she loses the opportunity to learn how to address issues politely. As a result, the other partner loses the opportunity to grow by dealing with his or her faults. People who always get their own way become less flexible. Unfortunately, in some marriages, one partner becomes increasingly passive while the other becomes more and more stubborn as the years go by. This is good for neither one — nor their friends!

Growth in marriage is an exciting life-long, gradually developing process. Part of the process is caring enough about our development that we welcome criticism. Caring enough about our mate's development that we are willing to confront them is also part of that process. Have courage, not only to save your marriage, but also to grow in it. When someone is too controlling, it is permissible to kindly and firmly resist — or confront — him or her by asserting yourself. I read about a man who grew tired of taking the kind of vacation his wife wanted year after year. He finally embarked on a vacation by himself after putting his wife on the plane for the vacation she always wanted. I didn't have to get so radical, but one recent summer vacation with my family, there were several times I felt pressured towards activities I did not want to do. Remembering

the principle I am dealing with here, I said I would "sit this one out." I finished my time in prayer, read a book, and ran a training run. When the whole family was together again, I was glad to see them.

The Headship Principle

The idea of headship in marriage has been severely criticized, mostly because it is misunderstood. Headship is not a grasp for authority on the part of the husband. It is an awesome responsibility; neither a head-ache nor a head-trip. Headship involves maintaining unity, care, provision, and nurturing for the body — in this case, the wife — and sometimes accepting guilt when something goes wrong. It also produces order which entails someone leading and someone following. However, the overriding responsibility of headship is to care for another. There is a world of difference between "lording it over" and "responsibility for the well-being of."

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Healthy headship involves free discussion of plans while they are being made. A smart and loving husband involves his wife's counsel and prayer in the planning process. Plans birthed in discussion and prayer together are more easily implemented because both parties "own" them. Before we went to China in 1991, I wanted to go, but Char didn't. I knew she didn't want to go, so I told her we wouldn't go if she didn't want to. Meanwhile, she knew the disappointment I would experience if we didn't go, so she was willing to go. Her rationale was based on this verse from the *Living Bible*: "Wives fit in with your husbands' plans" (I Peter 3:1). This principle for wives is the counterpart of the husband's duty to love, protect, and cherish wives as Christ did the church. He gave Himself for her salvation and eternal comfort. These two sets of duties can work well together, but the key is for husbands not to demand submission. Submission is not something we demand; it is something the partner gives. When husbands do their part well,

the wives' parts become much easier. This sobers me greatly. When Char knows what I want, she tries to fit in with those desires, just as when I know her need, I try to provide it. Often she is more successful than I am.

The head is responsible to protect the body — the wife. Husbands must protect wives from outside dangers — even our children. I would not allow our sons to speak disrespectfully to Char. Outside dangers are probably the easiest to address. However, a husband must also protect his wife from himself — something much more difficult. Char is susceptible to my attack because she trusts and loves me, and her defenses are down when I am around. Wives need their husband's support — not their attack. There is also a third danger — husbands must learn to protect their wives from getting down on themselves. Sometimes Char becomes discouraged and becomes overly critical of herself. It is part of my responsibility as head to remind her to not be so critical of herself and find ways to encourage her.

"I was wrong; I am sorry." Taking guilt, like Jesus our model "head," brings comfort to the body and unity to the whole.

Husbands are to love their wives like Jesus loved the church and gave Himself for her. Not only should they nourish and protect, but also maintain the unity of the marriage. That, too, is entailed in headship. Jesus was willing to take on guilt to save the church, and He was guiltless! To follow His example, husbands must sometimes "take on" guilt or bear the blame to save the marriage. How unlike our Model we often are. When husbands *blame* wives instead of *defend* them — when they put guilt on the wife instead of take guilt on themselves — they fail in the headship responsibility. When husbands are "man enough" to admit they are wrong or Christ-like enough to take on guilt instead of blaming, then the marriage relationship can grow. The six most difficult words are sometimes the most important: "I was wrong; I am sorry." Taking guilt, like Jesus our model "head," brings comfort to the body and unity to the whole. In Jesus' case, the Church enjoys the comfort of forgiveness and unity with Jesus. In our case, true headship, responsibly undertaken, means wives experience freedom from blame and both parties enjoy wonderful unity in the marriage.

This is an example of headship: "I didn't realize I was expecting too much. I am sorry. How can I help?" The warmth created by this kind of responsible headship is delightfully carried over into other aspects of a loving marriage. Gentle and loving touches are more joyfully received when preceded by gentle and loving words. When wives feel safe with their husbands, it is easier for them to open their hearts and arms to them.

Marriage is a highly symbiotic relationship — two dissimilar organisms in a mutually beneficial relationship. As each partner does his or her part better, it becomes easier for the other. It is easier to submit to a husband who admits his mistakes than to a husband who needs to be right all the time. It is easier to want to protect and nourish a wife who is trying to work with the husband's plans. That's been my experience. What I have never experienced, but observe would be more difficult, is to want to protect and nourish a rebellious wife. This would be true whether she were actively rebellious or even if she were only passively rebellious by giving reluctant or no cooperation. Slow or begrudged cooperation is dangerously close to passive rebellion. Instead, wives should help their husbands. They need it. Husbands, making demands of your wives is a departure from the nurturing type of headship Ephesians discusses. Unless we are careful, headship can deteriorate easily into something more like patriarchal tyranny.

Don't Let One Apple Spoil the Whole Bushel

When one apple in a basket is spoiled, it can spoil other apples. With prolonged exposure, the whole basket will eventually spoil. There are six apples in marriage's basket — major areas in which agreements or disagreements may occur in a marriage. These six areas are:

9. Philosophy/religion
10. Use of leisure time
11. Parenting
12. Finances
13. Intimacy
14. Education

When married partners have a difficulty in any of the areas, it is best to isolate it and draw a circle around it. A problem in one area does not need to affect the other healthy areas. Keep the other healthy areas healthy. This gives the relationship the strength it needs as it works on the unhealthy area.

Some partners deny the other intimate physical pleasure if there is a problem in another area of their marriage. Both lose, however, when one apple spoils another; emotions build up instead of dissipate. You maintain a good environment for problem solving to the degree that you can keep the other "apples" healthy. Eventually both partners win.

Ever since I had my first paper route at age 11, I have carefully tithed, saved money, and avoided debt. Char, however, had a different background and has always been more generous with money than I. In our family, I am the saver and she is the spender. She and I have discussed this ever since we married — sometimes at length and sometimes with considerable heat! After all these years and counting, we still have achieved no great landmark-breakthrough-comprehensive-everyone-wins solution!

I am becoming more liberal, and she is recognizing the wisdom of good fiscal policy. We both are winning gradually. This apple in our basket has had the potential of spoiling the other apples many times, but we have never allowed that. We have a great time with the other five apples. When decisions must be made about money, we carefully work it through. What is the apple that could spoil your basketful? That apple could hinder you from being your best possible self. However, if you handle it correctly, it can help you become your best possible self. You choose. Meanwhile, don't let one of your difficult areas spoil the other great ones. Enjoy the good areas. Grow in character as you work on the potentially difficult areas. You both can become your best possible selves.

Learn How to Argue

Why do we assume we should be polite in every other relationship, but fail to recognize the importance of courtesy in this important relationship? We all enjoy being treated politely, and it is more fun to be polite than to be unkind. Therefore, we should maintain order in our arguments**.** Every couple argues over something. Marriage is designed to be a vital arena of

character development so it is important to learn to argue constructively. Timing is everything though. Sometimes the conversation becomes too heated. If that happens, make an appointment to discuss the current dividing issue. This will give you both some time to cool off.

Char and I have agreed that if one partner wants to bring up an additional issue, it needs another appointment — or we could agree to discuss that issue next. The point is that we should solve each issue individually through discussion; bringing up other issues is fighting. We are not competing; together we are looking for resolutions to problems.

The goal of the argument is to find what is best for the marriage, and what is best for the couple. Counter-attack (addressing another problem in another area) is not good argument technique and is only counter-productive. Furthermore, we should learn to argue the issue, not attack the person.

Sometimes the conversation becomes too heated. If that happens, make an appointment to discuss the current dividing issue. This will give you both some time to cool off.

Opinion A and Opinion B might seem best for Partner A or Partner B, but Agreement C could be the best for the relationship — which is good for both partners! A variation of Opinion C is to agree to use Opinion A this time and Opinion B next time. If you always follow Opinion A, however, two unfortunate things happen: Person A becomes more obstinate, and Person B does not develop. Person B may sulk or quietly rot. Neither can fully develop if either is stubbornly predominant. Let us be more interested in growing up than trying to prove we are right all the time.

The word *compromise* may imply losing. Compromise suggests that neither party got what he or she wanted. That is a false perception. Both got what they really wanted. The phrase "negotiated settlement" is much better. Negotiated settlements are good for the relationship and therefore good for both parties. Both win when a negotiated agreement is reached.

Several months ago, after I had finished preparing breakfast, I called Char to the table. She was in the next room reading an article in the newspaper out loud to me. I called her the second time as I put the finishing touches on breakfast. She continued to read on. I called her the third time at a higher pitch, and she finally came. "I was reading an article to you," she said. I responded unkindly, "And did it occur to you that maybe I didn't want to hear the article?" We ate our breakfast with less than our usual friendly chatter, and I left for work.

Later when I returned home that afternoon, Char lovingly confronted me. "You offended me by the way you called me to breakfast. I was sharing something important with you." She then told me calmly that she had been upset at breakfast but chose to wait to speak with me about it. She reminded me of the times I had lingered at my e-mail when she called me for supper. In the calm of the afternoon, we discussed the breakfast misunderstanding. We agreed I would come to supper and she would come to breakfast more quickly. We have learned that postponing the confrontation for a short time is not avoiding the problem issues; it is a way to handle them without trying to do so in the heat of the moment. We both win.

Clean Out the Garbage

Don't let a day pass without clearing the air of any grudges or unresolved issues. "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry" (Ephesians 4:26). Char and I don't want unresolved issues to fester. We have agreed that we would rather talk it out than put a bandage over an infected wound.

Praying together at the end of the day is a good time to clear away the rubbish if there is any. Couples should pray together as well as individually. In our family, we each have our time of prayer alone in the morning, but pray out loud together before we go to sleep at night. We also like to share insights from our individual Bible reading. This way, we are contributing to the spiritual growth of the other while, at the same time, growing through the experience of sharing. This helps make the Word the standard for behavior in marriage.

At night in prayer, I love to thank God for Char and her godliness and pray that God will bless her in each phase of her work. I love that almost as much as I love to hear her pray for

me, thanking God for a loving husband, praying *for* me and *with* me about the issues I may face in my roles at the university, home, or abroad. It makes me feel strong, loved, and appreciated. Whenever she thanks God for some aspect of my character, it makes me try even harder to live up to her expectations.

Shoulder to Shoulder

No marriage partner can meet all the needs of the other. I used to want all our individual activities to be totally intertwined. I now believe that the most healthy stance is for both partners to face, not each other, but God, others, service projects, and life's mission — hand in hand, heart with heart, and shoulder to shoulder. We must often face each other on a regular basis so that we may face those things shoulder to shoulder. However, the couple that only faces each other doesn't do God or anyone else much good. They get tired of each other! Partners should release each other some times, and at other times, focus on each other. Happy is the couple that finds a project that is bigger than both of them! They can become strong together, happy and more useful to each other, God, and others.

We love sharing life but have learned not to smother each other.

I now encourage Char to develop her own circle of friends and activities. She releases me to do the same. At the end of each day, we share from our experiences, and both of us are enlarged. I learn from someone's comment about her artwork, and she learns from my experiences in the classroom and on the basketball court. We love sharing life but have learned not to smother each other. We both are growing more.

Put Jesus at the Center

Strong, fervent love for Jesus makes married partners attractive to each other. A professor friend invited me to speak at her Old Testament Theology class a few years back. In my remarks, a student picked up on my love for Char. Later, that student met Char in the library and discovered that she was the Char that I

had talked about. Then he and Char exchanged thoughts on Char's love for me. Still later, the student met me in the copy center. He told me that as he turned away from talking with Char, he asked himself the question, "Why do those two love each other so much?" He said the Lord told him at that moment, "It is because they love *Me*."

Because I love God first, I love Char more than I would if I loved Char first. Because Char loves God first, she loves me more than if she loved me first. That is a paradox, but when we love God the most, our capacity to love others increases. Here is another paradox: When we seek maturity and friendship first in our marriage relationship, the physical expressions of love, romantic pleasure, and physical satisfaction increases to become more wonderful than if we had sought physical satisfaction and pleasure first. Mature friendship in marriage is the basis for healthy, long-term, intimate experiences. A mature friendship maintains the trust necessary for a full and free physical relationship. "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things [friendship, companionship, love, romance, intimate physical pleasure, and satisfaction] will be added to you" (Matthew 6:33).

Begin Now To Prepare Your Attitude

You may not be married. You may be reading this so that you can help some of your married friends. Or you may intend to get married some day. If you intend to marry, preparation for your marriage and attitude toward character development in marriage begins long before the wedding. Let's not focus *only* on staying sexually pure. Yes, we should stay pure, but there is a deeper line of thought we can take as we prepare ourselves for a mutually affirming and character-developing marriage. We should build respect and understanding and, kindly and intentionally, test each other during courtship. Remember, you don't own, nor are you owned by, the one you are dating; treat the other person respectfully and require respect. Treat every person you date with the same respect you want those who are dating your future mate to exercise. If the person you are dating is not willing to seek a mature relationship, kindly and firmly

terminate the relationship. It could be the best thing you ever did for yourself — and a reality check for the other party!

While you are courting, keep your wits about you and your eyes open. Look inside the heart, mind, and spirit of your partner. What makes you think that the disrespectful person you are dating will suddenly turn into a respectful person when he or she marries you? Learn to know a person's spirit. Don't let today's culture press you into its mold. Increasingly, throughout the world, marriage candidates have a voice in marriage choices. In the United States, you have a choice of whom you date and whom you marry**.** It is better not to marry than to marry the wrong person. Pay attention to how your courtship partner treats parents, siblings, and waiters and responds to offenses and interruptions. By paying attention, you can learn of his or her character. Keep your head about you; don't let your heart run wild — yet. It is not unfair to the partner to do this; you are unfair to yourself if you don't. After marriage, you are under a lifetime contract, according to the Word of God; marriage is for keeps.

Marriage is a great and truly wonderful experience! No one should have to experience the insecurity of always wondering if their marriage is going to last. It will; it must. You will try harder to develop yourself and your marriage if you know that marriage is permanent. Marital happiness is God's idea! His plans and rules are best. It is only when we do not keep God's rules that our marriage relationships are robbed of the joy and character development God intended.

As a part of our wedding ceremony, Char and I sang the following song to each other. It expressed how we felt on April 27, 1969, and we feel the same way today!

> Darling, the day has come that we've been dreaming of
> When at the altar white, we'll say our vows of love.
> Oh what a happy time! All gone the doubts and fears
> And with the promises we'll add this one my dear:

Refrain

> Each for the other and both for the Lord,
> Oh darling, sweetheart, let the angels record,
> Vows, sweetly spoken, they will never be broken,
> Each for the other and both for the Lord.

We'll walk together, love, through sunshine through the rain,
We'll mingle tears and smiles and travel unafraid,
Halos of happiness will crown each passing day,
'Till heav'n shines ahead and beckons us away.

Adapted from "Each for the Other" by John Peterson

HABIT NINE

Raise Confident Children

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy,
it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude,
it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered,
it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight
in evil but rejoices in the truth. It always protects,
always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

I Corinthians 13:4-7

Few things in life are as important, potentially rewarding, or heart breaking as raising children. This chapter provides tools for contributing significantly to your child's confidence, courage, and self-acceptance. You can help your children gain the ability to relate favorably with others. The goal is to equip your children to influence their peers more than their peers influence them. If you do this, they will be more stable and steady. Regardless of the company they are in, they will be unshaken and unshakable. If you take these suggestions and testimonies seriously, you will worry less about your children getting into the wrong crowd — unless they are trying to reach out to them with the love of Jesus. However, there is a catch. This habit will take a lot of your time for the first 18 years of each child's life.

For a number of years before Char and I were married, I prayed and searched for a wife and anticipated being married. Life with

Char has been even better than I expected, though, as you noticed in Chapter 8, we have had to be intentional. We deliberately decided we would remain friends after we were married — and then worked at it. One of the great surprises in life, however, has been the joy of parenting. We have thoroughly enjoyed each progressive stage with our children. We have experienced times of progress for both children *and* parents. Each phase — newborns, babes-in-arms, toddlers, primary students, junior high, senior high, college, and now adulthood — has produced a never-ending drama of personal growth and joy that has far surpassed anything I dreamed. Still, just as in marriage, successful parenting also must be intentional; you have to make a decision and then work at it. Because of the great importance of parenting responsibilities, Chapters 9 and 10 are devoted to this subject.

It Is Possible

We all want to raise confident and obedient children. Both qualities are possible, and we all have the power to do it right. I used to wonder if I would be a good parent. Char and I were blessed to have parents who demonstrated a good mixture of love and discipline. Char's wise and elderly grandmother came to Canada to help when our son, Dan, was born. She too had some excellent practical advice for us. Before we left Canada for Korea, we attended a very helpful Basic Youth Conflicts Seminar by Bill Gothard. In the early 1970s when Char taught Christian family studies in Korea, we absorbed other valuable materials like *Dare to Discipline* by Dr. James Dobson and *The Christian Family* by Larry Christianson. Those are great standard books on raising children, and most Christian bookstores have these or many other updated fine books available. Later, I listened to a taped series by Charlie Shedd. In what follows, you will find traces of what we learned from these sources. Distinct advantages belong to those of us whose own parents were good role models. Yet, even without the advantage of good parents, there are plenty of written materials and experienced successful parenting veterans available to serve as role models. This and the next chapter can help you get started.

Children become adults. That may seem like a blinding flash of the obvious, but much of our adult behavior reveals that we either do not know or believe this. When we disregard or

disrespect our children, we seem to be saying that we do not feel they are significant. Children are people, and their development is important. Respecting, enjoying, loving, and spending time with each child built a strong friendship between us that has flourished now that our children are adults. This strong friendship provided a good relationship with them for training them in the ways of the Lord that included both proper attitude and behavior. With careful thought based on recognizing the importance, value, and rewards of parenting, you too can do well. Don't be afraid; just take parenting very seriously.

Decisions and Priorities

A primary step toward raising confident children is to intentionally choose to do it. You must believe the value of raising confident and obedient children is greater than the cost. Otherwise, you may prefer not to have children. Recognize the time it takes to raise responsible citizens, and make a prayerful and united decision with your spouse. Child rearing has tremendous rewards, but it is not without costs. If we count the cost in advance, we will be ready to face the years of responsibility that follow the excitement of the stork's arrival. These costs, paradoxically, provide us another important arena for spiritual growth. In God's economy, when someone gives, everyone profits — including the giver.

The first step is to prepare for children. Readiness means different things to different people. Whether that readiness is psychological, spiritual, or financial, children should be welcome and anticipated. Psychological and spiritual preparation should precede other preparation. It is not a sin for married couples to choose to remain childless. Under some circumstances, such a practical decision could show maturity and great foresight. Under other circumstances, however, if children will not be warmly welcomed, it would be better not to have them than to raise problem children who become problem adults. It is sad to see children growing up in an unprepared, unwelcoming, and undisciplined atmosphere. No one wants problem children. Better not to be parents.

Parenting takes time and commitment. Adults sometimes lament that they did not spend more time with their children. No matter what we've done wrong in the past, we can correct our courses

mid-stream so we have no regrets later. Along with hundreds of other parents, I chose to take time developing our sons, and I have never ever been sorry. An obedient and confident child brings great satisfaction and happiness to the parents while a disobedient child brings shame to them.

Numerous times during our 13 years as missionaries to Korea, time invested in our sons took some time from my work. Affirming my personal priorities, I often said to myself during those years, "I may fail as a missionary, but I will not fail as a father." I enjoyed my work as a missionary and felt it was some of the most important work anyone could do. Even so, it was less important to me than my role as a father. Fortunately, I was not a failure as a missionary and I received a great deal of satisfaction from my small part in the success of the church we worked with in Korea. Nonetheless, I derive even more satisfaction from having raised obedient, confident sons.

An obedient and confident child brings great satisfaction and happiness to the parents while a disobedient child brings shame to them.

When we were preparing to leave Korea, many of our students who had become pastors visited us in our home. Koreans are wonderfully polite, and they came in large numbers to greet us during those final days. Several made statements that typically sounded like, "We learned from you in the classroom, but we learned more from you by visiting your home. The happiness the two of you enjoy together in your marriage and the pleasantness, obedience, and manners of your sons have taught us much about Christian family life." Money cannot buy the joy remarks like these produce deep in our spirits.

When parents attach more importance to parenting than to career responsibilities, they experience fewer crises in the parent-child relationship. Paradoxically, the career does all right, too. This policy led us to problem-free parenting. It eventually gave us more freedom to pursue careers than if we had originally given careers first priority. Illustrations of this irony abound.

The Link between Confidence and Obedience

Confidence and obedience in our children are interrelated. To raise children who are secure and confident, most people realize that parents should learn how to affirm and encourage them. What some people do not realize is that there are deeper dynamics to the relationship between confidence and obedience. Affirmed by praise from wise parents, the obedient child becomes even more confident. The confident child is more satisfied to remain within the behavioral boundaries explained to him. He knows boundaries are good for him and that crossing the borders is not good for him. Confidence and obedience feed on each other in healthy ways.

Well-defined, consistent, and firmly enforced perimeters for acceptable behavior contribute to confidence and character development in children. If these future adults do not learn obedience early in life, they suffer a serious, life-long handicap. Moms and dads have a tremendous privilege and responsibility to bring up obedient, responsible, caring, and mature citizens. When children know their boundaries, they learn to function confidently within them. If they do not know where the boundaries are, they feel the need to conduct a series of tests to find the boundaries. Children without clear boundaries are therefore often tentative — not confident. Small children will reach to touch something they were just told not to touch and watch to see whether their parents will enforce the prohibition. In older children, tentativeness shows up as a lack of self-confidence.

On the other hand, confidence and obedience are responses to two different emphases. One emphasis — encouragement — is loving, affirming, jolly, and celebrative. The other — discipline — is firm, forceful, persuasive, and demanding. Both are evidence of love, and both are necessary if our offspring are to become both confident and obedient.

Respect goes a long way in raising confident and obedient children. What does it mean to respect our children? If we truly respect them and honor their dignity, we will not seek to embarrass them. Even when disciplining them, we will treat them fairly. We will discuss discipline more in the next chapter. When administered appropriately, correction is not counterproductive to developing confidence. For example, if

there has been no previous rule, there should be no punishment at the first offense — only instruction. Children often don't know something is wrong until someone defines it for them. Until their consciences are informed and developed, we can give them the benefit of the doubt by punishing them only after adequate prior instruction. When preparing to punish, we can acknowledge that the child is trying to be good but made a mistake. Instead of telling the child he or she is bad, we can say, "That was a bad thing to do," not, "You are a bad child." We don't want our children to perceive themselves as essentially bad nor do we want them to try to live up to that perception.

You are no doubt familiar with the old saying, "Children are to be seen and not heard." Char and I never agreed with that.

There is nothing mutually exclusive about love and punishment. In our home, we routinely showed immediate love after punishment. Hugs affirm that the child is not rejected but is still dearly loved. Love and hugs are not inconsistent with loving punishment. We also had a spiritual time to pray together so that the incident would not happen again. This shows the child you really support them and that you don't enjoy punishing them. Correctly administered punishment produces obedience. Obedience deserves praise, and praise produces confidence.

You are no doubt familiar with the old saying, "Children are to be seen and not heard." Char and I never agreed with that. It is true that children need to know when to be quiet and listen. However, encouraging their participation (not domination) in conversation taught them how to present their ideas, when to be quiet, how to ask questions, and how to be tolerant of ideas different from their own. We found that this contributed further to their confidence levels.

As our sons grew through their teenage years, anyone of the four of us had the right to call and chair a "family meeting" any time, providing advance notice was given to accommodate busy schedules. Chairing the meeting was an opportunity to develop leadership and to express ideas. We didn't establish this policy with the goal of building their confidence. However, knowing

they had our ear fostered an atmosphere in which their confidence could develop.

Advocate, Not Adversary

The relationship between some children and their parents seems to be predominantly adversarial. The parents criticize and the children defend; the parents demand and the children resent. It is much easier and a lot more fun for the whole family if children find advocates in their parents. Such supporters essentially affirm and seldom criticize. When they do criticize, they are kind and give loving explanations. How is such a relationship developed? Part of the answer to that question is attitude and part is found in the next chapter on raising obedient children. Obedience deserves to be affirmed; disobedience doesn't. Since raising obedient children is primarily the responsibility of the parent, the onus is still on parents to correct them. However, even this can be done in a way that is consistent with the equally important joy to be our children's fan club.

There are a number of ways we can demonstrate our desire to be our children's advocate. When our children were still small, Char read something that resulted in a family policy of saying "yes" unless there was a good reason to say "no." This proved to be a little difficult to do at times. However, we found it helped our boys develop over the years, and it taught Char and me to release them.

We most recently applied the principle on a family vacation. With our adult children operating on their own, they still sometimes ask us what we think about things. We still try to maintain our policy of saying "yes" whenever possible. Our adult son, Dan, was a single schoolteacher. At the time, he was living with a Korean family in Seoul for the sake of the language-learning environment. Dan wanted to bring that family's 12-year-old Korean son on our Alaskan family vacation. Opportunities to talk with Dan were quite rare since he lived on the other side of the world. Char and I wanted more time alone with Dan to talk with him about teaching abroad and his plans for the future. Nevertheless, Dan wanted to share the vacation experience with this young Korean boy who had become part of his new family. We did not push our feelings on Dan. Instead, we again said, "Yes."

Of course, there were some inconveniences with including a foreign, non-family member with whom we had to use another language. However, we reaped many benefits. We could see Dan functioning in the Korean culture. We heard him speaking the language we had used during our Korean years. Moreover, a Korean had the opportunity to experience Alaska with an American family and caught a salmon! He could take that memory — and photo — with him for the rest of his life. Over the years, I built bicycle jump ramps for our grade school boys, went places, did things, and ate food I would not have chosen, all because of our policy of saying "yes" when we could. My inconvenience was probably minimal, but the advantage to the friendship with our sons was enormous.

Telling them, "Because I told you to," is not a good enough response to develop the kind of thinking, discerning men we wanted to raise. Better to be an advocate than an adversary.

We also decided early that any questions our sons had the awareness to ask, we would answer. I have been saddened many times hearing parents telling their curious children not to ask so many questions. We did not say, "Don't ask so many questions," but, rather, "That is a good question." We felt that if they understood enough to think of the question, they deserved an understandable answer. As our sons' questions matured, so did our conversations. More than once, this policy took us into subjects some parents and children never discuss, but we were never sorry. We never felt the need to change the policy. A few times the openness of the relationship allowed me to take my turn to ask some quite pertinent questions myself. Today, our sons are still asking good questions.

Char and I fostered "freedom of speech" in our family even when it meant critique of our own ideas. We wanted our children to think for themselves. This policy developed naturally and unintentionally. One day, however, I "discovered" the value of such a strategy at a get together at my parents' house filled with the extended family and a pile of cousins. In the course of

the mealtime conversation, one of our sons made an innocent-enough criticism of me. One of my brothers said, "My children would have never criticized me like that. We would never have had such a remark in our family." My reply was, "We have freedom of speech in our family." Several days later, after everyone had gone home, our sons told us that their cousins were impressed with the openness of our relationship. By allowing our children to question and challenge, it gave us the opportunity to reexamine our policies to make sure they were fair. It also gave our children the opportunity to learn from our answers to their questions of "Why?" Telling them, "Because I told you to," is not a good enough response to develop the kind of thinking, discerning men we wanted to raise. Better to be an advocate than an adversary.

Investment of Time

Almost every aspect of the subjects addressed in this and the next chapter take time. When parenting is a priority, taking time to do it right is not laborious. Playing with children takes time. Talking with them takes time. Correcting them responsibly takes time, and sometimes this occurs at inconvenient moments. If or when taking the necessary time begins to seem laborious, this may be an indicator that our priorities have shifted. We make time for what is important to us. Is raising confident and obedient children a priority with you?

Spending individual time in relaxing and fun activities between each parent and each child (as well as collectively) provides tremendous returns in the child's development. In our family, we enjoyed both group and one-on-one activities that affirmed the child's value. Many books on parenting recommend this, and it worked well for us. The deepest heart-to-heart talks happen one-on-one. The following character-training subjects require unhurried treatment: freedom and responsibility, choice of words, disrespect, insensitivity to others, feelings, waiting your turn, and controlling the tongue. Spending adequate time together allows for demonstration and explanation.

The greatest advantage of deliberately investing time with children is the opportunity to improve their level-headedness, trustworthiness, and maturity. Those qualities open the door for advanced responsibilities. Those responsibilities, in turn, provide growth potential with increased confidence. The maturity my sons

demonstrated at ages 15 and 16 gave me the confidence to encourage them to purchase cars of their own. That maturity had developed because we spent time together in earlier years. We were friends and our relationship was solid. Since we had developed an alliance during their early childhood, they were happy to spend time with Dad during their teen years. I valued that and the time we spent working together on those cars.

Creating an Atmosphere for Talking

The best conversations with our sons were unstructured and informal. True enough, I could sit down with a son and say, "I have seven items I want to discuss," and work my way through the list one at a time. However, there is a different atmosphere if I say, "Hey, let's play catch with the Frisbee." We chatter while we play and genuinely enjoy being together. We can still cover the seven items, but in a more relaxed and natural way.

When the boys were younger, simple games or errands together created time to talk. Later when they had busier schedules, we had to be more deliberate. As the boys got older, they worked and saved their money. They were delighted and surprised when at 15 and 16, I gave them permission to buy cars if they wanted. They were responsible for all expenses, but I would help with paperwork and was willing to register them in my name. The time we spent in the years between when they bought their cars and eventually left home was invaluable. I look back on the fun and work we did together with great satisfaction.

Step 1 in this process was deciding what car to buy. They looked at ads in the newspaper. We made trips to shop for cars in our family station wagon. This meant I got to participate in the process and occasionally asked or answered a question. We discussed things like depreciation and the value of hiring a mechanic to examine the brakes and other parts before the purchase. We also discussed evaluating the car by how many miles it had left in it rather than how many miles it had on it. Dan bought an enduring old Volvo, and Joel bought an Audi — both with lots of miles left on them. As I look back on those experiences, I think it was a wonderful and natural way to help young men develop the ability to shop, evaluate, and make good decisions.

Both boys' cars needed some work. I don't know how many valuable hours Dan and I spent preparing his Volvo for the paint job he gave it. I don't even remember what we talked about, but I remember we had a great time together. Joel's silver Audi needed some bodywork. We learned a lot as we knocked out the rusted areas, patched, screened, and built them up. By the time we finished the project, the car looked wonderful, and the father/son relationship was great shape too. The Audi stood proudly in our driveway for several weeks, waiting for Joel's 16th birthday. When he took it for its maiden voyage, guess who got to go with him? He invited me. He started the engine, and then he said, "Dad, let's pray." As he led in prayer, I heard him dedicate the car, its use, and conversations in it to the Lord. I was a guest in his car and participated in his experience. What a way to watch values pass on to the next generation!

We discussed important topics, but I don't recall whether we discussed them during those work times or during conversations in between. I do remember, however, that I never regretted investing the time necessary to maintain both vehicles and relationships.

One time, Joel let the oil level in his Audi get too low and something blew in his engine. I knew how many months it had taken Joel to save to buy the car. I also knew how many more months it had taken him to save the $900 it was going to cost to rebuild the engine. As we pulled his car with a rope to the repair shop one cold evening, I didn't give him any "wise" advice. Much earlier, I had talked with him about oil gauges, changes, and pressure, but he didn't need my reminder that night! When our kids go through these learning experiences, they don't need lectures — they need help. Our helping hand, without the "I told you so" keeps the relationship open for other lessons they either request or allow.

Our last summer in Korea — 1985 — the boys and I hiked along the Chirisan Ridge some 120 kilometers from our cabin in Wangshiribong (Kings Bowl Peak) to Chunwangbong (Thousand Kings Peak), South Korea's highest mountain, and back. It took us five days. In our backpacks, we carried a tent and supplies for sleeping and eating for the entire time. We talked and laughed most of that time, and moaned and groaned under our loads part of the time. The last day, we woke up to drizzling rain, broke camp, and hiked all day in the rain. Our boys developed ruggedness, perseverance, cooperation, and the

ability to encourage. In addition, we further deepened our friendship. I don't remember what we talked about. However, I do know that now after the boys have been gone from home many years, they both relate well with their peers, respect people of all ages, love God, and seek Him and His will with a passion. Somewhere during those hours together, they developed some important skills.

The Transmission of Values

Values pass naturally from one generation to the next when parents invest time having fun with their children. We must make generous time allowances for them. It is imperative to maintain the good friendship established in earlier years and gradually take on projects of interest to the teenager that are consistent with the teenager's (not necessarily the parents') gifts. That closeness paves the way for a free flow of ideas and values. Profound ideas and values are exchanged and absorbed through non-manipulative dialogue — and the learning takes place both ways. Both parties win.

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You cannot communicate attitudes about the value of an eternal soul in a moment. A brief statement cannot relay God's supremacy, power, majesty, and tender loving mercies. People cannot quickly comprehend the value of spiritual and physical purity. It takes time to understand the advantages of having a clean mind, heart, and body before God. There is power that belongs to the person who lives in God's will, has a strong faith and confidence in the sovereignty of God, and knows that God is an ever-present help in time of need — these are concepts that are transferred in multiple conversations while hiking up mountains and riding up ski lifts. We can pass these great values from one generation to the next during an evening conversation

in a mountain cabin as the wind blows through the trees outside. At times like those, parents can reinforce the practical, personal usefulness of prayer. This is the way to pass the important baton — the knowledge that nations are changed and lives are rearranged through the power of intercession. These values are relayed as parents and children wrestle through problems with the unkind child in the neighborhood or the subway officer who didn't understand the situation. It takes time to learn how to take problems to God instead of handling every offence and grievance ourselves.

When children know how to obey, we can trust them. When we can trust them, they are worthy of greater responsibility and freedom — these are wonderful truths. Our children are willing to learn them if we will walk around the block with them and discuss it. (In Chapter 10, we discuss what to do when teaching obedience requires more than just walking and discussing.) How does a new generation learn the value of eternal things and reject the materialistic, pleasure-oriented, unbelieving culture of our times? Communicating these values is the most important — and time-consuming — job a parent has.

Safety in Dangerous Situations

The world abounds with multiple dangers both seen and unseen. We cannot entirely avoid them, but we can learn how to maximize safety through them. One Sunday afternoon when we lived in Taejon, our grade-school-aged sons and I took a bike hike around the city. In those days in Taejon, there was no such thing as orderly traffic that stayed in lines, waited, yielded, or even quietly proceeded. There were horse-drawn, person-drawn, and ox-drawn carts. There were buses, trucks, taxis, motor scooters, motorcycles, and numerous bicycles, all operating on different sets of rules. How is a parent of adventurous boys growing up in such a traffic environment to maintain his sanity? My response was to take them out and teach them. As we traveled, we talked about the traffic, the way cars passed on both sides of the buses, often swerving into the bicycle lane. We observed the way the buses drove with their blaring horns instead of steering wheels. We learned how to pace ourselves in the traffic and plan ahead to time the traffic lights. We also had a lot of fun and exercise.

When we moved to Seoul, our sons were older and many times rode their bikes three or four miles through Seoul traffic to school. This entailed a trip across one of the Han River's long and very busy bridges. You may ask how our sons handled that. On the other hand, you may ask how Char and I handled that. We did not worry because we had taught them how to be safe in danger. There are more than just physical lessons to draw from this experience. We too often overprotect our children, and then they are not able to handle danger in life on their own. Later in his career, Dan lived alone abroad, studying a foreign language and preparing to take the gospel to a strongly anti-Christian nation God has laid on his heart. When he gets there, he will live with danger yet be safe. Joel is a pilot of the powerful F-15E which has air-to-air and air-to-ground smart bomb delivery capabilities. We still are not worried. Not because our sons are in safe places, but because our sons know how to be safe.

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We used to hike in the mountains near our cabin in the south part of the Korean Peninsula. If we came to the top of a cliff with a scenic view beyond and below, I would sit down on the stone with my feet extended toward the edge. Making sure the entire surface of the back of my legs gave me ample traction, I inched forward to the edge and carefully let my feet dangle over it. Each of the boys would sit down and carefully do the same. As we sat there, we discussed why it would be foolish to stand up, exposing our whole body to the wind. We discussed traction and the advantages of keeping our body's center of gravity low. We also observed the different kinds of clouds. We noticed their movement in different directions and speeds because the wind was doing different things at different heights. We discussed the soaring birds and learned about the upward currents of the wind. These are the kinds of times I look back on with satisfaction. I think of how controlled our sons are today under situations of pressure and duress. When I see them behaving safely in our dangerous world, I am glad we had those times together. Of course, each parent must assess the maturity, capabilities, and readiness of

each child to receive this kind of instruction. Though our comfort levels in dangerous situations may differ, deliberately investing time teaching children how to handle physical danger pays big dividends. My sons needed it and your children do too. In the case of moral or spiritual dangers, unlike remaining safe in or near physical danger, the safest position is to stay far away.

Letting Go

As children become teenagers, ease off on the controls. In most healthy relationships, confidence and obedience develop properly in younger, more formative years. When it comes time to release teens and young adults, both parents and teens are ready and eager for the liberation. We took steps to prepare for that.

In the summer of 1987, one year after we returned to the United States from Korea, Char and the boys were gone for a week to youth camp. I stayed home alone to finish "finishing" the basement in our house. Dan was 16 and driving, and Joel was just 15. I do not recall that we had ever discussed the matter of the boys getting their own cars. As I worked, I listened to a tape series by Charlie Shedd in which he encouraged parents to release and trust their growing teens. It was a great series, and I recommend it to parents. What he said struck a positive note in my heart, and soon after the boys returned from their trip, I called a family meeting to suggest that the boys consider buying their own cars. The development of their character, sense of responsibility, self-reliance, and maturity was in my mind; the prestige and convenience of having their own set of wheels was in theirs. I was grateful that I took that step.

Char and I knew we wanted to return to the mission field as soon as the boys were launched into their academic careers. We told Dan and Joel we would provide for them through graduation from high school. However, they were to be responsible for their financial arrangements for college. As it turned out, the boys not only bought their own cars but also their own clothes all through high school. Their sense of responsibility for financing their projects helped Char and me since we were pioneering a church and I was finishing my last academic program. However, the greatest benefit was in the development of their autonomy, self-reliance, self-confidence, courage, and maturity. Everyone should not necessarily do it

exactly as we did, but we found that allowing autonomy, giving responsibility, and nurturing character growth all seemed to go together. Augustine, the famous early century church leader in North Africa, taught personal accountability by saying "Love God and do as you please." So when our sons went out in their cars with their friends, we would often say, "Take Jesus with you and have a great time." We smiled and laughed with them as they left the house, and then we turned to each other and exchanged knowing and hopeful responsible parents' glances.

Their senior year of high school, by mutual agreement between them and us, each of our sons experienced a change in status. They became adult guests in our home; it was no longer necessary to have our permission for their activities. They would let us know where they were and when they would be back, but it was not a matter of getting permission. It was a courtesy since they lived in our home. We wanted them to learn to make decisions for themselves while we were still available to them. We felt this would make it easier for them to adjust to complete autonomy when they left home. We are happy that we gave them independence at the same rate they wanted to receive it. It allowed us to completely avoid the adversarial relationship that often accompanies the "generation gap." In many cases, the generation gap is nothing more than a normal reaction of a healthy child to too much control by the parent. We were never sorry we allowed these freedoms. However, there were times one of us would have to remind the other that the policy would eventually produce mature citizens. We were also glad we had taken pains in their younger years to prepare them for adulthood.

One of the most difficult times of allowing such freedom was during Dan's senior year. Dan decided he would serve in the U.S. Army. Since he was responsible for paying for college, it would help him earn the Army College Fund. It would also enable him to see some more of the world than just Asia before he settled down to attend college. Like many parents, we questioned his choice. What kind of people will he meet? Will he ever really go on to college? What habits will he pick up? The questions were endless. Nevertheless, in June 1989, upon graduation from high school in Pennsylvania, Dan moved to Fort Sill in Oklahoma. He began his military career as a Fire Support Specialist. He visited us for Christmas that year, and left for Europe the next month. Did we do the right thing to trust him to make his own choice?

In 1991 while Dan was still in Germany, we moved to China. In November 1992, he returned to the United States from Germany, and bought a good used Audi that lasted many years. Without our pressure, he enrolled himself in a university, applied for the Army College Fund, and began a highly successful academic career. He graduated in 1996 with honors and a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education. Travel, Europe, and life experience had helped mature him further. Now in academia, he knew the questions to ask and the things to do to get the most out of his university years. Dan made careful decisions about the army, the university, the church he chose, and even his friends. Our earlier training and later release paid off. Dan was safe even though we lived abroad. I certainly wouldn't delay or compromise a child's growth just to keep him on a par with peers. Let him develop strong personal faith and lead his peers instead of follow them. You won't find a father anywhere on earth more proud of his son than I am of him today.

If we control our younger children correctly, they will use their freedom responsibly when they become teenagers.

Control children at younger ages. Release them later. May the Lord help Christian parents to provide consistent discipline early in their children's lives, then the wisdom to let those same children make their own decisions when they are adolescents. If we control our younger children correctly, they will use their freedom responsibly when they become teenagers.

Scripture says, "Train a child in the way *he* should go, and when he is old, he will not turn from it" (Proverbs 22:6, italics mine). The emphasis in this verse is not so much on moral training. It is important to help a child discover his or her particular strengths and skills. Further, we should encourage his or her development in a way consistent with those gifts. Helping them find and exercise their gifts guides them to become their best possible selves. It takes courage and faith in our children and the Holy Spirit's work to release them. Over-controlling adolescents is counterproductive.

Additionally, parents should respect their children and avoid unnecessarily doing or saying things that embarrass them. A little sensitivity to when they are with their peers goes a long way. Getting out of their way is one more way to release them.

Returns from Investment

The value of raising confident and obedient children is far greater than the cost. Doing the kinds of things recommended in this chapter is a major undertaking. This project takes about 18 years. During that time, raising confident and obedient children must be a priority. At times, it may take us away from our careers. That is okay. The returns continue even into the next generation as our children raise their children in a similar way. We usually feel we can only serve the generation in which we live, but this is not so. We can raise children who will serve God in the next generation. This means that we can increase the sphere of our influence from just our own generation to include succeeding generations.

We tried to teach our children that obedience was a matter of principle, not just a way to avoid getting caught doing wrong.

We tried to teach our children that obedience was a matter of principle, not just a way to avoid getting caught doing wrong. Whether we were present or not, we required obedience. To reinforce this, one of our family rules was that our boys had to obey their schoolteachers. If they got into trouble at school, they had a second punishment coming at home because they had also broken a family rule. At the beginning of each new school year, I would explain this family rule to our boys' new teachers. Several times during our 20-plus years of parenting, I had to act on this rule. Year after year, teachers told us how cooperative and obedient our sons were. This happened at Joel's graduation from the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. It happened even more recently when he graduated from flight training. It also happened when I attended Dan's graduation from ORU in 1996. Char once had occasion to do public service one year in the

inner-city grade school in Tulsa where Dan taught for three years. She, too, heard Dan's peers praising his cooperativeness. Raising well-disciplined, respectful, and confident children is a rewarding experience!

In this chapter, we discussed how to raise confident children. This is not, however, the only ingredient in the mix. Like us, our children have a sin nature and a propensity to do wrong. We have to deal with that part of them, too. Char and I found however, that the key was to discipline ourselves consistently in order to discipline them consistently and fairly. This habit by itself would be out of balance as would the next habit of raising obedient children. However, the principles in these two chapters combined help us raise children who are confident because of our affirmation and obedient because of our loving discipline. To be able to appropriately release them, you must invest the years of training and discipline we examine in the next chapter.

HABIT TEN

Raise Obedient Children

"A wise son brings joy to his father,
but a foolish son grief to his mother."

Proverbs 10:1

This chapter deals with training and disciplining children and complements the previous chapter on raising confident children. The two features of the balanced parent-child relationship — affirmation and discipline — work in tandem. The strong friendship formed by affirmation supports our program of training them in the ways of the Lord. While lack of affirmation may produce children who lack confidence, when it comes to discipline and obedience, there is an even more direct relationship between the parent's consistent, loving, fair, and firm discipline and their children's cheerful obedience. Char and I are still benefiting from having respected, enjoyed, loved, and spent time with each child. The strong friendships and respect created between us during those years is still growing now that the obedient children in our home have become obedient adult citizens in society.

While the previous chapter was pleasurable, bear in mind that the "medicine" of this chapter contributes significantly to the "health" of that one. The results of the lessons in this chapter, still evident today in our boy's lives, give me the courage to share them. Small doses of consistent, loving, and firm training

produce years of long-range benefits. It is comparable to training a young sapling to grow in a certain way — after it becomes a large and strong tree, it remains firmly in the desired position.

The term "punishment" is used deliberately. Whether prison for criminals or spanking for children, punishment is a matter of justice being done. Certainly, there is a role for mercy, but mercy without justice becomes not only unjust, but also unmerciful. Departments of "correction" have failed massively at correcting because they have made the violator into the victim. When we punish our children, we teach them those actions and choices carry consequences and that God's standards must be taken seriously. You can find a fuller discussion of this issue in "The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment" in *God in the Dock* by C.S. Lewis.

Small doses of consistent, loving, and firm training produce years of long-range benefits.

Obedience and Confidence

From the beginning of our parenting experience, Char and I assumed the responsibility for our children's disobedience. Observing different parents' discipline policies — or lack of them — over the years confirms that our early hypothesis was right. Though there may be some unique exceptions, if children are not generally obedient, it is their parent's responsibility. "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right" (Ephesians 6:1). "Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord" (Colossians 3:20). It is true that these verses address children, but isn't it the responsibility of the parent to teach them? Interestingly, teaching obedience contributes to a child's confidence.

I have seen parents scold their disobedient children in the supermarket with heated accusation in the tone of their voice asking, "Why are you so disobedient? Why don't you listen to me? Why don't you do what I say?" Publicly scolding disobedient children does not contribute much to their obedience and even less to their confidence. Sometimes there is a

bit of a rascal in me. If I had the nerve, cooperation of the child, and were a good ventriloquist, I would put these words in the mouth of the accused child to say to the parent, "Because you never taught me obedience. You never required it of me consistently." When children know where the behavioral boundaries are and that they will be enforced, they learn how to function confidently within them. If they do not know where the boundaries are, they feel the constant need to conduct tests to find the boundaries. They are therefore often tentative — not confident.

Well-defined, consistent, and firmly enforced perimeters for acceptable behavior greatly contribute to a child's confidence and character development. If these future adults do not learn obedience early, it becomes a life-long handicap. Moms and dads have a tremendous privilege and responsibility to bring up obedient, responsible, caring, and mature citizens.

We tried to teach good behavior *and* good attitudes. We wanted our children to not only behave correctly but also think correctly.

The ways of the Lord include both behavior and attitudes. In our training program and discipline policy, we tried to teach good behavior *and* good attitudes. We wanted our children to not only behave correctly but also think correctly. This does not mean they had to share our opinions. Nevertheless, they were required to have the correct attitudes. For example, we insisted on not only obedience, but also willing, cheerful, and prompt obedience. To encourage this, we expected them to respond with, "Okay, Daddy," or "Okay, Mommy." If they were whining, we would say, "Now say that same thing over again, but take the whine out of your voice." We would then wait until they got it right. We wanted our children to grow up knowing how to cheerfully obey and relate to us. It would prepare them to cheerfully obey and relate to their heavenly Father when they were on their own.

Neither of our sons was a pushover. We did not want them to be. Nonetheless, we wanted the power of their personalities to remain under control. For example, we never allowed our sons to hit each other. They were required to express their views

persuasively with the force of their ideas, not the volume of their voice or superior physical strength. Taking the time to walk them through this helped them develop self-confidence. In debating ideas with them, I still take great delight when one of them, with good reasons, successfully challenges an idea of mine.

A God of Order

The responsibility and authority parents have over their children comes from a God of order. God wants order in family, church, and society even in this present temporary state on earth. The family is the arena wherein God's order is first taught and enforced. Children leave home for a day to go to school, or for months or years later in life. When they do, they carry with them the behaviors and attitudes they learned at home. In spite of this, there is another more far-reaching reason for learning obedience and order.

Awesome privileges and responsibilities accompany being created in the image of God. To comprehend them, think beyond mere earthly life to our eternal life. Becoming highly effective Christians goes far beyond the question of spending eternity in either heaven or hell. God is producing a royal group of priests and kings who will be His worshippers and vice-regents in His universe for eternity. For the eternal scheme to work correctly, we need to learn obedience in this lifetime. Our experience in this life allows us to learn obedience well and prove we are responsible. If we learn well, there are eternal rewards of privilege, dominion, and self-fulfillment available in the next life. Preparing to fulfill God's dream for each of us to become highly effective Christians — our best possible selves — begins with parents training children. Free will with a capacity for dominion makes mankind unique from all other animals. It also makes learning obedience necessary, and parents possess the responsibility to begin it.

Friendship with Children

It is not contradictory to be both a friend of your child and a disciplinarian. We cultivated affirming relationships of strong friendship with our sons as discussed in Chapter 9 (Raise Confident Children). In this chapter, I share the practical ways we implemented our disciplinary program. As far as I can tell,

the two roles were never confused in our son's minds. They never felt we were being inconsistent. They knew that our posture towards them was supportive. Still, when their behavior merited it, our role would automatically change. Their "friend" became God's law enforcement officer — both in one person. Let me explain further.

My role as "friend" and my role as "judge" never interfered with each other. We never carried grudges over from discipline into our play times. When court was in session, they did not try to use the friendship element to curry favor. If you want to be a friend to your children, do not think that being a pushover as a disciplinarian improves your chances. Your friendship will be deeper if they respect you. "Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it" (Hebrews 12:9). They don't base their respect for you on whether you are soft in your discipline. It is based on your integrity and justice. Integrity is a strict consistency between what you think, say, and do. Justice is a consistent and unbiased enforcement of clear and fair rules. If you are consistent and just, your role as judge and chief penal officer will never interfere with your friendship.

If you are consistent and just, your role as judge and chief penal officer will never interfere with your friendship.

Loving and Firm Discipline

In the early 1970s, we attended a *Basic Youth Conflict* seminar conducted by Bill Gothard. We learned some of the following ideas then. Others we picked up as the years went by. These 16 principles are included here, not as someone's academic theory, but as the way we actually applied them. We used these policies as we trained our children. If you habitually apply them in an affirming, respectful, and loving atmosphere, they will contribute to the process God will use to make your children confident and obedient.

1. Husband and wife should agree on the boundaries. Children recognize a weak link. If possible, they will divide

parents to escape discipline. Enforcing rules is difficult enough even when both parents equally commit to the process. However, lack of agreement further complicates this and confuses the child. Gaining obedience from our children begins with clear rules. Regardless of which parent enforces the rules, children must also understand they are continuously "in effect." Furthermore, agreeing on the rules provides a good developmental experience for the parents. They learn how to negotiate, and the process helps produce good and fair rules.

2. Be consistent; keep promises. Some parents only enforce the rules when they are angry. This teaches the child that disobedience is tolerated at some times but not at others. To be sure, the mood or emotional condition of the parent may change from day to day. That is even more reason to evaluate behavior by rules rather than the emotion of the moment. When rules are made out of necessity after careful reflection and are consistently enforced, the child learns to behave consistently.

Action is more effective than threats. Threats soon become empty. When you say you are going to punish a behavior and then don't, the child learns that your words mean nothing. Your child loses the opportunity to grow in accountability, you lose the respect of the child, and your relationship with the child suffers. Administer punishment when punishment has been promised. That develops a sense of justice and accountability in your child.

3. Establish clear rules. Clear rules make for easier enforcement. Rules are developed in response to life situations. Through rules, it becomes clear what the child may and may not do; what he or she must and must not do. When rules are clearly defined, everyone knows when they have been broken. Clear rules provide the necessary background for establishing guilt. If there are no clear rules, how can guilt be established?

Along with giving clear rules, we must also explain the rules. These life-related teaching moments provide opportunities for us to help our children make sense of life. Saying "because I said so" doesn't teach a child much. However, a child would understand this explanation: "Because if you say that to her, you will hurt her feelings. That will make her sad, and maybe she won't want to play with you anymore. And that would make you sad."

4. If there has been no previous rule, there should be no punishment at the first offense — only instruction. Your children do not know something is wrong until you define it as

wrong. Children grow up and become stronger, more creative, and more capable. The list of rules needs to keep pace with their growth. Sometimes, parents can anticipate possible wrongs before the growing child is able to misbehave in a new way. If they can do that, they can establish a rule ahead of time. Then when the child misbehaves, parents can establish guilt and punish them at the first offense. However, if new situations create new wrongs that are not defined, there should be no punishment — only instruction — on the first offense.

5. Begin early. Even babies can learn the meaning of "yes" and "no." If your new baby is allowed, he will rule your whole home and all your activities from his crib. He will tell you when to turn off the lights and when it is time to play. Our first confrontation with Dan was when he came home from the hospital at eight days old. For the first time in his life, the lights were turned off at the time for him to sleep. Understandably, he cried. Gently and firmly, we taught him he was not to cry when the lights went out. To do this, we first checked to make sure there was no physical discomfort and then again closed his room door. When he cried again, I reentered the room, said firmly, "No!" and exited the room. He stopped crying though we had already agreed to let him cry himself to sleep if required. As the months go by, gently and firmly teaching crawling babies where they can go and where it is safe for toddlers to put their hands is not only possible, it is necessary. They can learn early to become responsible and accountable members of a family.

We had a forbidden fruit in our home every Christmas — a delicate clay nativity set on our coffee table. Although within reach of our toddlers, they were forbidden to touch it. It provided an opportunity for them to learn obedience. For many years, we enjoyed that nativity set. It finally broke, not from abuse, but from packing and unpacking it so many times. Children can learn early to obey. Let's not deny them the opportunity to learn obedience when it is easiest.

6. Go to a private place for discipline. In teaching and disciplining our children, our intent is not to embarrass but to instruct and punish. When a child is punished in front of other people, their attention is not on the instructions the parents may be trying to give them; their attention is on themselves and their embarrassment. I cannot tell you how grateful I am to have learned this early. The times of training we had with our sons

were intimate and fruitful in part because we went to a place alone and gave our undivided attention to each other.

7. Acknowledge that the child is trying to be good but made a mistake. We all live with the contradiction that we want to do right, yet do wrong. We knew our sons' hearts. We knew they wanted to obey and please God. When we discussed the offense before administering punishment, we acknowledged that we knew they wanted to do right. Don't tell the child he or she is bad. Instead say, "That was a bad thing to do." If we say, "You are a bad child," we may build or contribute to a self-image of being bad which will work against the parents and the child in later years. If we tell the child they are good but did something bad, we give them a good image to live up to. At the same time, we recognize that they did something wrong that deserves to be punished.

The reaction to sorrow is sorrow. It is a precursor to repentance. Even if sorrow is not the main emotion you are feeling, let it be the emotion you are displaying when punishing.

8. Display sorrow, not anger; create an atmosphere of repentance. Sorrow softens the heart; anger hardens it. Our children's reaction to our anger and attack is usually self-defense. There are plenty of times that we are angry when our children disobey. No responsible parent wants to punish his or her child in anger. However, that is not a good enough reason to avoid punishing them. Control your emotions, maintain your composure, get over your anger, and proceed with the process because it is right, not because you are angry.

The reaction to sorrow is sorrow. It is a precursor to repentance. Even if sorrow is not the main emotion you are feeling, let it be the emotion you are displaying when punishing. How many times with sorrow in my voice would I lament, "Oh, Danny, it makes Daddy so sad to see you disobey!" or "Oh, Joey, it makes Daddy so sad to know that I have to spank you!" Our display of sorrow makes the lasting impression that we really care about their behavior. If we love our children, it will make us sorrowful

to see them misbehave. I can remember spanking our boys, often with tears of sorrow and sympathy running down my face.

Perhaps you have punished your children in anger in the past. Controlled discipline may take a little practice as you perfect your skills. It is better to be transparent and honest with your children than to distance them with parental pride. When we made mistakes, we confessed them and asked for forgiveness. Far from losing respect in the eyes of your child, to the contrary, your genuine integrity, honesty, and confession wins more respect. Children will forgive our confessed weaknesses. Confessing our weaknesses and asking their forgiveness gives us an opportunity to model an attitude we want them to develop toward God and others.

9. Establish guilt by asking, "Who made the mistake?" The child soon learns to answer, "I did." Clear rules are important. The child who understands the clear rule also clearly knows that he broke it. By requiring the child to answer this question, the child acknowledges that his misbehavior precipitated this disciplinary session. It is very freeing to the sympathetic parent to hear the child acknowledge guilt. We can proceed with a clear conscience and confidence. Our child has only himself to thank that he is being punished. Parents don't have to carry any false sense of guilt, as though punishing the children was the parents' fault.

10. Establish authority by asking, "Who says I am to punish you?" The child soon learns to answer, "God." This shows the child that the parent is also obeying an authority. The child learns to understand that just as children are to obey parents, so parents themselves are also under God's authority. This makes the whole family judicial process much more objectively fair in their minds. Parents are not out to "get" the child; parents are under authority to train the child. When the child grows up, he too will become immediately responsible to God. God gives "spankings," too. "The Lord disciplines those he loves, and punishes everyone he accepts as a son" (Hebrews 12:6). Accountability and obedience are issues we all will live with for a lifetime. Children seem to be able to understand this to a wonderful degree, which makes our job as parents much less difficult. When we administer punishment, we are obeying God.

To train children to be obedient, we must discipline ourselves to consistently discipline them. Char and I were determined to

consistently, lovingly, and firmly teach and discipline. Our goals were grounded in the belief that this was what God wanted. We knew that, and our boys knew that. Otherwise, the parental protection instinct would have prevented us from harming our sons. We are under authority to use authority. When we require obedience, we obey; when we allow disobedience, we disobey.

11. Establish the proper motive for correction. Ask, "Why am I punishing you?" The child should answer, "Because you love me." Children can understand explanations. By providing explanations, we honor, respect, and teach our children justice. When they know the rightness of our actions, it makes receiving punishment less traumatic. The Bible is clear, "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him" (Proverbs 13:24). We punish our children because we love them. There are a thousand reasons we can think of for not punishing them. "They are so sweet, so cute, and so innocent. I don't want to punish them in anger. I don't want to alienate them. I want to be kind. It hurts me to hurt them." None of these reasons is enough, however, to stop a parent who loves a child from justly punishing clear disobedience to a clear rule.

Goodness and kindness are not the same things, though they are both fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). We are to be good, and we are to be kind. Nonetheless, when I am punishing my child, I am not being kind. In punishment, my unkind behavior is an intentional exception to my normally kind demeanor toward that child. Punishment in a consistent, loving, and firm way is good. The offending child has brought the consequence of his misbehavior on himself. Good parents will keep their promises and punish the child. Ill-advised parents will be kind at the wrong time. In doing so, they will teach their child that disobedience is okay. A good parent will be unkind at the right time and discipline his child. "Discipline your son, for in that there is hope; do not be a willing party to his death" (Proverbs 19:18). "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:11).

Consider for a moment the legitimacy of physical punishment. Some prefer other forms of punishment such as denying privileges, requiring additional tasks, subtracting from allowance, confining children to their room, making them face the wall, or sit in the corner. However, the Bible often refers clearly to

the "rod." "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him" (Proverbs 22:15).

Unfortunately, some parents are out of control and punish their children in anger. Uncontrolled emotions are a tragedy anytime. They are especially tragic when little ones are injured in body or spirit. We have all heard horror stories, and some of us have experienced those horrors. We shun the notion that we would ever want to harm our children. Nevertheless, we should not allow others' misuse of physical punishment to prevent us from its proper use. There are many good things that are misused, but we continue to use them — only correctly. Who wants to stop eating just because some overeat? Should we stop sleeping just because some oversleep? Should we stop making love just because some commit sexual violence? The solution to misuse is correct use, not to abandon use. The Bible instructs us that we are to spank our children and can achieve excellent results when we do it lovingly, consistently, and firmly.

12. Tell the child the number of swats in advance. Advance notice shows that punishment is a deliberate, calculated, and fair process, and not a product of parental emotion or anger. Advance notice forces the parent to make a just decision. It also provides the child an opportunity to respond. If our son said, "My brother did this same thing yesterday and only got three swats. Why are you giving me four?" we listened. In our home, we welcomed limited participation of the child in the discussion of numbers. However, our boys understood that the parent had the final authority to establish the number. In our house, if there was a second offense within a day, the second punishment was automatically twice the number of swats. We sometimes reminded our sons of this to discourage future disobedience.

The Bible instructs fathers to not be too rigid in their requirements on their children. Scripture holds up a standard of uncompromising fairness. "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4). "Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged" (Colossians 3:21). Discussion of the number of swats in advance proves the judicial process is fair.

13. Use a neutral instrument; hands are for loving. The Bible speaks of an instrument for punishment. "He who spares the *rod* hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him" (Proverbs 13:24, emphasis mine). The specificity of the Bible

seems not only to require physical punishment, but punishment with a neutral instrument. There are several good reasons to follow Proverbs closely.

I have seen children fear the hand of their parents. This is most unfortunate. When we go into a private place and work our way through the steps described above, by the time we get to the use of the "rod," we have already been together for a while. The child knows this is not a vindictive attack; it is deserved punishment God requires of parents who love their children. My hands wrestled in play and caressed in love. Our sons did not fear those hands. There was no confusion in our boys' minds between those hands and the instrument of punishment in those same hands when correction occurred.

We used paint sticks most of the younger years of our sons. Paint sticks were light and had enough flat surface area to spread the impact over considerable amount of skin to make injury unlikely. We struck our son's hips in the place it seems God has prepared for this. There are no bones that could be injured near the surface of hips. Because the instrument was so light, however; we also required the removal of clothing. Fathers shouldn't embarrass or humiliate their daughters, however. The degree of tenderness in each child differs and should be considered. The point is to inflict pain, not cause damage. In our case, during junior high, the frequency of spankings was greatly reduced. Spankings were almost nonexistent during high school. The last time with each son was only once during their whole junior year of high school. In those final rare times, I used a flat belt. By then, the "young sapling" had already become a "fine tree;" he was growing to become a sensitive, strong, and upright young man.

14. Encourage crying. The biggest drawback of requiring a child to sit, wait, stand, stare, or pay a fine is that there is no point for emotional release of the sorrow from godly repentance. Spanking aids repentance because it provides an appropriate moment for crying. Punish severely enough that they cry. The child will feel refreshed, relieved, and cleansed by this process. Spankings are also over more quickly than the long, drawn-out types of punishment. In the final analysis, spanking and crying are consistent with the teachings of Scripture. God is a good enough psychologist to know that tears are good for us in this instance.

15. Show immediate love. Loving hugs are consistent with loving spankings. As divergent as the two behaviors are — spanking and hugging — our two sons always understood what each of them meant. Furthermore, our sons were not the only ones to endure the spankings and enjoy the hugs! Hugs affirm that neither the child nor the parent is rejected, but both are still dearly loved. We found that times of punishment were ultimately very intimate and endearing times. We didn't talk about the up-coming hugs during the process outlined above, but as the years went by, we all knew that the hugs were coming.

The same parent who gave the punishment should give the hugs. We don't want the child to be confused regarding justice and love on the part of both parents. Each parent should support the punishment the other has administered. That is another reason both parents together should establish clear rules in the beginning.

We found that times of punishment were ultimately very intimate and endearing times.

16. Pray together that this doesn't happen again. This final step clearly involves God in the process and shows the child you really support them. Spend time sincerely praying that God will help the child behave correctly so he or she will not need spankings in the future. This step helps the child understand that you do not enjoy punishing. This prayer helps form a closer parent-child alliance. Both are on the same side, and sin is the enemy. These last two steps — the expression of love and prayer together — bring the punishment session to a very positive, affectionate, and spiritual conclusion.

Working your way through all 16 points takes time. Allow adequate time to complete all of the steps. Training children is neither an unimportant sideline nor a brief interruption of other more important duties.

Even Though It Is Not Easy

Our children were required to obey whether we were present or not. Obedience with us was a matter of principle — not just fear of being caught by parents. We reviewed this policy with

babysitters and teachers regularly. As part of our family rules, we required our boys to obey their schoolteachers. If they got into trouble at school, they earned a second punishment at home because they had also broken a family rule. At the beginning of each new school year, I would explain this family rule to our boys' new teachers. During our 20-plus years of parenting, I only had to act on this rule a few times.

When one of our sons was in the first grade, there was an instance when it was particularly difficult to enforce this policy. Yet, it was particularly beneficial to our first grader as we look back with hindsight. His first grade teacher seemed to especially enjoy putting our son in his place. Our natural inner inclination was to defend him, but we refused to give in to that desire and instead required him to submit to the teacher. One day, he expressed his resentment toward her by defecating in his pants. The school principal insisted that this was deliberate on our son's part and that he was showing rebellion. I had some difficulty believing our innocent son was guilty of such horrendous behavior. Nonetheless, I took him home, and Char and I discussed the situation. It was difficult for us to enforce our own rule when the teacher seemed to have her own agenda for our son. That same school year, a neighbor girl and her parents had a disagreement with that same teacher regarding a grade. The teacher asked the parents, "Well, what grade do you want me to give your daughter?" They asked for and obtained an "A." We, however, refused to take the easy way out. Our son would earn his grades and obey his teacher; we would ask for no special favors. Because of the severity of the offense, we agreed to eight swats and, beginning with Step 6 above, proceeded through the steps you just read. We were glad to be past that.

However, when I went to pick up our boys the next afternoon, I learned that our son did the same thing again! That meant we had to enforce our rule regarding repeat offenses: twice the punishment the second time around if it was soon after the first offense. That would mean I was required by our own family rules to swat my son 16 times. Never before or since was I required to inflict such pain. It had already been difficult to require our son to submit to a vindictive teacher, and I was severely torn by the situation. We drove home from school in silence. I was already showing great sorrow, and our son knew it was genuine. After consultation with Char, I entered the boy's bedroom and followed through with our agreed plan. We went through the process once again beginning with Step 6. With my

jaw firmly set and tears streaming down my face, I counted out the 16 swats. Our son wept. I wept. Char wept. It was one of the most difficult times I ever had in all our years of parenting.

We didn't realize at the time that the childcare and kindergarten experiences in Korea had taught our son he could get away with too much. Treatment of his classmates had not been as kind or good as we had thought. Respect and obedience for his teachers had not been what we had thought. It took this very difficult time, with two days in a row of severe spankings, to break our son's stubbornness. Yes, we had to continue the discipline as the years went by, but never again did he need to repeat that awful experience. For many years after that, he was kind to classmates and younger children. He was respectful to teachers and obeyed cheerfully. It didn't all depend on just those two days, but they were a definite turning point. I would much rather handle the discipline myself when our child was in the first grade than need even more severe measures from other authorities later in his life. After all, he was our responsibility.

They developed consciences that enabled them to discern when God was giving them corrective nudges.

Easing Off and Letting Go

As children grow up, parents should adjust tactics as they continue to build on the foundation established earlier. As children become teenagers, ease off on the controls. Teenagers are like young adults in many respects. By respecting their dignity while still requiring obedience, we do them and ourselves a favor. In a healthy relationship, children develop confidence and obedience in younger and more formative years. This gives parents the confidence to release their teenagers. We found that the greater amounts of trust that we gave our sons at this stage had an affirming and sobering effect on them. We gradually released them to experience "God's spankings" instead of ours. They developed consciences that enabled them

to discern when God was giving them corrective nudges. Today as adults, they still know how to interpret the signals.

The Joys of Success

When our children were small, people said, "Enjoy them while they are small because later you can't do anything with them." We never agreed with that terrible statement. Requiring obedience of our children produced immediate and long-term benefits. We have thoroughly enjoyed our children from the beginning. We have received the repeated compliments on our sons' character and obedience that give me the courage to share with you here how we did it.

In Habit 8 (Grow in Character as Your Marriage Grows), we learned that married partners grow in character by learning how to work together. Either personal character growth occurs or each party remains less than they could be. The parent-child relationship provides similar personal growth potential. As we discipline our children, we learn how Father God works with us, and our own character develops. We draw close to our children as we obey Scripture and require them to obey.

Exercising the self-discipline to consistently, lovingly, and firmly discipline and teach our children is yet another way for us to become our best possible selves. Working my way through the 20 years our sons lived with us was a personal developmental process in itself. Deciding to raise children is a decision to accept responsibility and improve ourselves because of the learning experience it provides. Scripture even lists control over children as one of the qualifications of church leaders. "He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?)" (I Timothy 3:4-5). We must raise our children well because it is right to do so, not just to qualify for Christian ministry. God is using a well-ordered home as a standard for measuring spiritual leaders. It argues for the virtue of disciplining children and teaching obedience. God trains us in many ways. One way is by requiring us to train our children in our homes.

Handling Children in Less Than Ideal Circumstances

Much of what you have read here is based on our own experience — a Christian home with two parents who loved God and each other. Char and I also agreed on the principles very early. We both worked hard to implement them consistently. There were two of us, and we supported each other. Yet, realistically, we know that not all children have two parents united in their desire to give the time and effort to parenting recommended here. What of today's children of single parents? On the other hand, your children may already have grown several or more years before you discovered the need to begin consistent, loving, and firm discipline. What happens when we start late? What do we do in these situations?

Your children may already have grown several or more years before you discovered the need to begin consistent, loving, and firm discipline.

My students in seminary have asked these same questions. I suggest that they hold a family meeting. During the meeting, they can explain their previous shortcomings, accept the responsibility for them, and announce the new policies. In one case, there was a dramatic change within several weeks with only minor difficulties remaining. My student's wife, Kathy, was joyous as she told me about the changes and the increased participation of her husband, Dan. Instead of running wild, she said, now the children were already more controlled. Children are resilient. They will bounce back from most challenges. As soon as children begin to discover the rewards and greater liberties and trust that go with enforced rules, they will join the alliance.

As in any case, when we learn new information that helps solve an existing problem, we have to start where we are. Begin to apply the teachings of Scripture. God will honor our efforts, hear our prayers, and support us through the changes. When the new punishment policy begins, admit that part of the pain results

from your own previous failure. By accepting that responsibility, you and the child are on the same side and on the same team against disobedience. When you show sorrow over your past failure and over the disobedience of your child, God can use your sorrow to soften the heart of your disobedient child.

The hugs and prayer time at the end are extremely important. In the single-parent situation, it forges the new two-party alliance against a common enemy — disobedience. The emotional alliance between the single parent and the child against disobedience is important because neither has anyone else to turn to for support. In this case, the "penal officer" and the "convict," who are usually on opposite sides, strangely join forces and together conquer the dragon of disobedience. Instead of being divided by disobedience, they are united against it. The hugs confirm that learning obedience is neither competition for power nor personal or unkind vengeance. Rather, it is a God-given way to bring His blessings into the home now. When the child becomes an adult, he will be glad his single parent had the courage to make the change. God is at the top of the authority chain. He who established the authority and responsibility will personally help make His purpose succeed.

Instead of being divided by disobedience, they are united against it.

Our generation is not the first with single parents. There were many widows (like Char's grandmother) and widowers who excelled in their parenting roles. A single parent should not use his disadvantage as an excuse not to raise obedient children. If he does, he and his children have an even greater disadvantage — he thinks he is excused.

Marriage and parenting are both great experiences. Failing to keep God's rules robs our families of the joy and character development God intended between spouses and between parents and their children. Both parents and children develop when we raise well-disciplined, respectful, and confident children. It produces two generations of highly effective Christians.

HABIT ELEVEN

Understand Personal Finance

"You cannot serve both God and money."

Matthew 6:24

"He who gathers money little by little makes it grow."

Proverbs 13:11

The way we handle our personal finances indicates more accurately than anything else where our values lie. Money is the means of exchange we use during our time on earth. Our use of money and the value we place on it indicate how much we place our affection on things above. It also indicates how well we integrate biblical teachings into our personal worldviews. Our use of money reveals what is important to us — whether we are controlled by heavenly values or earthly ones. If we see clearly, we will appreciate the much greater value of our heavenly investments. Then we can learn how to side-step avoidable losses and enjoy God's ample provisions during our temporary time on earth.

This chapter will help you effectively use money in terms of an eternal value system and biblical worldview. A biblical worldview reveals the greatness of our wealth stored in heaven. Money is temporary and unworthy of being our first priority. In spite of this, we still should learn how to use it rather than serve

it. We need to understand how to master it and use it well for noble, eternal purposes in the present life. Adopting a holy and biblical lifestyle and properly applying practical biblical instructions regarding money can introduce both heavenly and material advantages.

People's habits reveal their value systems. Some people are so heavenly-minded they are little earthly good; others are so earthly-minded they are little heavenly good. The United States to which I returned from China in 1996 was very different from the one I left when I moved to Canada in 1969. That difference influences my outlook on United States culture today. In my childhood, I knew people who thought that having little money was a sign of godliness. Now that I live in the United States again, I find that for some, material prosperity has become a symbol of godliness. Both of these imbalances give us a distorted impression of God.

Eyes on Heaven

In the church of my youth, there was a time when heavenly promises meant a lot. In those days, we had a more biblical, rather non-materialistic worldview in which investment in heaven was preeminent. We believed in delayed gratification, sought things above, and valued teachings like Matthew 6:19-21: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." To most of us, gathering money and focusing attention on it is not the opposite of serving God, but this is the Bible's teaching. "You cannot serve both God and money" (Matthew 6:24). One can have both, but one cannot serve both. We must make a choice — Jesus eliminated the middle ground. Surprisingly numerous times, a materialistic desire has crept unknowingly into my heart. It interferes with my daily prayer and personal determination to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. Though I choose to seek God's kingdom and righteousness first, almost daily I have to make some new life-related application of that decision. My earthly decisions are better when I make them from a heavenly perspective. I understand earthly finances better when viewed with God's eternal reward system in mind.

In a biblical value system, the eternal is profoundly more valuable than the temporary, as meditation on this verse has taught me: "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things" (Colossians 3:1-2). We are to use money and serve God, not use God and serve money. Some of us, including myself at times, have this reversed. Paul warns about those "… who think that godliness is a means to financial gain. But godliness with contentment is great gain … For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (I Timothy 6:5, 6, 10). That is clear teaching regarding a biblical value system. Those wise enough to receive Paul's instructions greatly benefit.

A weak doctrine of future things contributes to a greater love for present things.

As a corollary, our worldview is not biblical when we evaluate others in terms of their wealth. Notice how subtly money attracts our attention the next time a person considerably wealthier than you enters the room. The Book of James says "… don't show favoritism … If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand there' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom He promised those who love Him" (James 2:1, 3-5)?

Today, we don't hear as much about the poverty and simplicity of Jesus' lifestyle as we did just one generation ago. Instead, we hear an emphasis on the wealth of Job, Abraham, and David as well as verses such as: "The Lord be exalted, who delights in the *well-being* of his servant" (Psalm 35:27, emphasis mine). "Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that *all may go well with you*, even as your soul is getting along well" (III John 2, emphasis mine). To be sure, these verses are in the Bible, but we must balance individual truths with the full counsel of Scripture. We will find it somewhere between the poverty theology with which I grew up and the prosperity theology that I have encountered since my return from the mission field. To our loss,

our focus has shifted during these 40 years from heavenly rewards to earthly prosperity. A weak doctrine of future things contributes to a greater love for present things. What is God's balanced plan for our attitude toward money? How can we avoid extremes? What does it mean to understand and hold to a heavenly and biblical sense of values?

The Value of Permanence

I was born in the 1940s and raised in the 1950s. Sometimes in my youth, Christians were accused of seeking "pie in the sky bye and bye." We knew that Paul had taught: "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men" (I Corinthians 15:19). We simply did not live for things here and now. We celebrated heaven and often sang hymns about it. Freedom from materialism begins with loving something else much more. If we love things much, it may indicate we don't love God enough. True wealth is wealth that is invested in eternal issues that pay eternal dividends.

Perhaps the generation of my childhood tailored their theology to fit their situation. We left all to follow the Lord and believed He was returning soon. My grandfather left a judgeship to enter the ministry. My parents would sacrifice anything for the sake of the churches they started, church buildings they bought and repaired, and pastors or missionaries they tried to help. In addition, I worked with them to do all I could. We justified having few material possessions by rehearsing the verses that described our poor financial situation in a good light. I cannot fully discern whether our poverty was caused by theology or if it was the result of our financially humble experiences. Nonetheless, our experience was consistent with our belief. Our eyes were heavenward.

Earthly life is temporary, and we have not yet received all our benefits. Psychologists tell us that willingness to wait patiently is a major mark of maturity. The ability to live with delayed gratification is willingness to do without some things now. Sometimes it means waiting your whole life for the sake of experiencing greater gratification in the next. Christians have the best reason to be mature. That was the setting in which I formulated my heavenly value system.

The Materialist

A materialist is someone who believes only in the reality of matter. They do not believe in God, a Creator, spirits, angels, or the afterlife. Char and I became familiar with this philosophy during our five years in China. A number of the thinking, young adults were taught materialism and sincerely believed in it. Many were required to take courses on scientific atheism.

It is consistent for materialists to be materialistic, but not for the Christian.

The materialists' desire to possess money or greatly value material things is consistent with their worldview. They have nothing to live for other than the present material universe. Some of them are prosperous while others are not. None of them hopes for or anticipates a greater, permanent, conscious personal joy in the next life. They live only for the present. In some cases (especially in cultures like China's), they live for their children whom they think of as an enduring extension of themselves.

A Christian believes in the teachings of the Bible: God, the Creator, spirits, angels, and a very real and conscious eternal afterlife. A Christian believes in both the material and non-material, temporary and enduring realities in the cosmos. Christians accept the passing nature of matter. They recognize the enduring nature of the spiritual and more greatly value eternal things. Christians do not deny the value of matter because God declared it good at creation. Still, unlike the materialist, we believe that the present material nature of things is temporary. Based on the Bible, we believe that the conscious personal joy of our afterlife is far more intense and long lasting. The New Testament says that our present suffering is not worthy to be compared with the greatness of our eventual eternal condition. Earthly life is just the workshop near the great house. On the other hand, paradoxically, even during this temporary period we can use material things to serve eternal purposes. When this is done mere matter does takes on an eternal value.

The materialists' value system and habits are consistent with their "no eternity" belief system. To the contrary, Christians' materialistic habits or attitudes are inconsistent with their beliefs

in eternity. In other words, it is consistent for materialists to be materialistic, but not for the Christian.

Heaven's Monthly Statements

Since 1991 during our first year in China, I have made periodic contributions to a retirement investment program. We also save and invest in funds from which we can draw before retirement.

Today, technology helps me track my investments. I can check the account activity and balances any time. I enjoy tracking the progress but, more importantly, Scripture says good stewards are to stay aware of the condition of our flocks. Even as I do, however, I am aware of another much more important portfolio. As a daily private exercise to increase my heavenly account awareness, I began recording some of what I think goes into this more important account. I used the Bible's criteria for what God considers worthy of His reward. Right next to my "temporary" investment records, I also sometimes record the "account activity" for that day that I think pleased God. My calculations are probably not as accurate as those in my temporary investment portfolio of certificates of deposit, stocks, and bonds. Still, this exercise helps give me perspective. It keeps my heavenly account before me.

According to Jesus' teachings, God is watching and will reward us for our secret prayers, fasting, and good deeds. I love these verses: "But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matthew 6:3, 4). "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matthew 6:6). "But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (Matthew 6:17, 18).

The Psalmist indicates that God has a record of our tears. "Record my lament; list my tears on your scroll — are they not in your record" (Psalm 56:8)? A record of our tears is a comfort to those who have many of them, especially when they are shed for the cause of Christ or in "fellowship of sharing in his sufferings" (Philippians 3:10). Such tears will not go without

reward. In another place, the Bible refers to appropriate rewards for service done for God. "If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward" (I Corinthians 3:14). The earthly retirement investment portfolio is just a shadow. The real portfolio is the one God manages. Careful records are being kept, and each thing we do that merits reward is carefully noted. If we had a proper computer, modem, and heavenly log-on capability, we could watch our account and trace the balance from day to day — earthly days, that is. Since this is not possible, we will each just have to keep reading the investment manual to study the criteria the Manager uses in recording our balances.

Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). This means that we spend significant amounts of time thinking about what is important to us — the portfolio we are investing in the most. We may think we *invest in what we value.* However, Jesus addresses a deeper truth — that we will *value what we invest in.* Our hearts (our thoughts) are where our investments are. If we invest in heaven, we will think about heaven. If we invest in earth, we will think about earth. Heart follows investment. If you want your heart set in heaven, invest there. How we deal with earthly funds (stewardship issues) is actually also one part of the record in our heavenly account. In Chapter 7, we learned the formula for calculating success: S = (T + O + A) ÷ M (Success equals the combination of our Talents, Opportunities, and Accomplishments divided by our ulterior Motives). God watches to see how well we did compared to how well we could have done. Focusing on the eternal portfolio makes it easier to use our temporary personal finances for heavenly purposes — as long as our temporary personal finances remain a means we use and the heavenly purposes are the end for which we use them.

Determining Your Own Sense of Values

Everyone is free to choose his or her sense of values. This section will help you begin to clearly define yours. It will help you discover ways in which you may be unconsciously lured into the mold of the world system. It may help you identify areas where you can allow God to more perfectly transform you by renewing your mind.

The Lord will give you wisdom to know how to order your personal finances in a way consistent with your eternal values — perhaps even as you answer these questions:

15. What is important to you?
16. What do you value and dream about? Is it earthly or heavenly?
17. What do you consider worth doing, having, striving to have, protecting, increasing, or maintaining?
18. Are your practices consistent with what you say is your value system?
19. Are non-material criteria more important to you in making vocational or job choices?
20. Is the location of your job, the colleagues with whom you work, the freedom to serve God in this career, or the proximity to a church you like more important to you than salary amount in career decisions?
21. What is the value of the work itself when the salary issue is not even considered?

An 11-Year-Old Child's Decision

When I was growing up, we had a chest in our living room. Inside the door of the chest was a brown metal savings bank with six yellow compartments on the inside. Each compartment had a slot for inserting coins and a hole for inserting rolled-up dollar bills. My brothers, sister, and I each had our names on our compartment. From age 11 until I was a senior in high school, I had a newspaper route. The pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters I had saved from time to time changed to dollars — several each week. When my compartment got full or nearly full, I deposited the money in a savings bank downtown and earned 2 percent interest on my savings. Each week, I paid my tithes and placed from three to six dollars in the bank. I noticed that my peers at school and the other carriers spent their money more easily than I did. Even at that young age, I was saving money so I could go to Bible college. As I look back on it, it was good training.

It was satisfying to me to tell my story years later to our sons and pass on the values my parents had given me. It is just as satisfying, more than a decade after our younger son left home, to contemplate how these ideas are helping both sons. Some

ideas continue to bless us through repeated generations. The ideas in the next section are a heritage any of us can pass on.

Saving and Using Money

You don't have to be an economist to understand these next five practical steps.

Commit to reasoned spending rather than impulsive spending. Thoughtful, reasonable, careful, and deliberate financial decisions are superior to those driven by emotion and peer pressure. We must avoid being influenced by the three vices mentioned in I John 2:16: "cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes, and the boasting of what he has and does." Peer-sensitive American Christians are often "frogs in a well" on this point. Frogs think the whole world is like the well they live in. Our "well" is materialism, and we don't even realize there is another way to think about material possessions. Firmly adhering to thoughtful decisions about finances is the key. Having enough money to make a purchase is not a good enough reason to make the purchase. We have fewer needs than we commonly suppose. Hang on to the money, earn some interest from it, and wait until you make the next deliberate decision to purchase something necessary.

Some want God's prosperity and blessing without keeping the rules the Bible gives us for gaining them.

Buy only what you can afford to pay cash for. By avoiding debt, we avoid the expenditure of interest expense, and we make purchases more carefully. We save first, and then buy with cash. Willingness to wait for the gratification of desires is a mark of maturity. Delayed gratification is not possible for the immature who must have what they want immediately. If we can learn to plan ahead, save money, earn interest, and avoid paying interest by making cash purchases, we can do more with less. The Bible's promises to financially prosper those who are wise have been hijacked by deceitful forces. The promises of God's blessings are not a license for careless spending. Some want God's prosperity and blessing without keeping the rules the Bible gives us for gaining them. Remember, our real values, are in heaven, not on earth.

Knowing this makes it easier to live without some things others have while we save to eventually buy what we need.

Don't spend all you earn. Proverbs tells us to study ants. "Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! … It stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest" (Proverbs 6:6, 8). Saving is very ant-like. "He who gathers money little by little makes it grow" (Proverbs 13:11). Money saved little by little over an extended period is used or invested more carefully than money received by surprise or in a lump sum. The choice to save is grounded more in the decision than the amount of income. There have been three periods in my life when I could not save money — our five years in Canada, our four-year first term in Korea, and our last year in China when we lived partially from our savings. Most of my life, however, I saved a little at a time because I recognized its value, not because I was earning a lot. Certainly, I was not saving because I had "extra!"

Put money away regularly to avoid paying interest. It is better to receive interest than to pay interest. I was only about 11 years old when I discovered this sound economic principle. It has affected my personal fiscal policy ever since. I began to carry newspapers and save the larger percentage of my profits. My father and I struck a business deal between us that helped clarify this principle. At that time, bank interest on a regular savings account was about 2 percent. The interest rate on my folk's home mortgage was 4.5 percent to 5 percent. Dad offered me 3 percent interest for loans to him of $100 each. These "notes" were dated and interest was either paid or added to my account each subsequent year. Years later when we bought the cabin in the mountains of South Korea for $700, I received Dad's final payments. The 3 percent was a savings for him and a higher interest rate for me. We both benefited. Debt is one of the factors in the widening gap between the rich and the poor. If you are not already on the receiving side, I invite you over even though you may have to live without some things for a time. You will have to decide what is more important to you — immediate possession of things or long-term financial freedom.

It is better to receive interest than to pay interest.

I have never paid a car payment or car-loan interest. I bought each of my cars with cash. Earning interest while saving money before making the purchase is better than paying interest after

the purchase while making payments. The interest paid on a car loan far increases the amount you pay for the car. If you save the money before you make the purchase, you pay less than the purchase price because you received interest while saving. You can apply that interest income toward the purchase. Our cars serve us well, but we know we have to eventually replace them. To plan for that inevitable purchase, we lay funds aside so can purchase other good, used vehicles without debt. When we do, some of that money will have earned interest. This practice ensures that income from interest is always part of what we use to pay for any major purchase.

In some circumstances, credit may be useful and eventually bring long-term benefit. One example might be student loans for college. Debt is also sometimes necessary to start or grow a business. This chapter does not address all possible issues, yet we will try to speak to the important principles. If you have a marketable skill with high earning power and you can manage temporary debt, use your credit wisely. Everyone needs to practice intentionality and self-control.

Purchases things that increase in value instead of things that depreciate. Similarly, purchase items that are durable rather than faddish. For example, the value of cars decreases — especially new cars. I have no quarrel with anyone who can afford to buy new cars without spending a lot on interest, but because of my own income levels, I have never purchased a new car. However, I have purchased two homes, and both times the value increased. The first time was new construction when we came home from Korea. Five years later, we sold that duplex for 120 percent of the purchase price when we returned to the mission field. We invested the capital gains in certificates of deposit and eventually in mutual funds that increased in value while we served in China. Upon returning from China, we purchased our second house, a freestanding, rustic contemporary home. It also increased to 120 percent of what we paid within five years.

Another of our financial goals was to pay off our house as soon as we could. On a single modest professor's salary, we were able to pay off our mortgage in just four years. Here is how we did it. First, we made a down payment of 30 percent of the purchase price. Then, most months during the next four years, in addition to the regular mortgage payment, we also paid a second payment that went completely toward the principle. When I taught summer school, I paid what I could on principle. By doing these things, we paid $10,000 on the mortgage each year.

We also once paid another $30,000 from our investments in mutual funds. By the summer of 2000, we had entirely paid off the mortgage. It is not unusual for a 56-year-old person to pay off a mortgage, but it is unusual for someone who served as a missionary and earned as little as we did to pay off his mortgage only four years after returning to the United States. This accomplishment was not due to a large income but to careful money management. You can do it, too. You just have to stay in control.

Stay in Control

During my Bible college years, I attended class all morning. I worked the afternoon and evening shift — sometimes in a glass factory and sometimes in a lawnmower and refrigerator factory. At the end of my junior year in the summer of 1965, I bought my first car. I paid $1,800 for a 1962 blue, four-door, hardtop Buick Invicta with beautiful Scotch plaid-fabric seats. The asking price was higher than that, but I understood that people who paid cash got better deals. The car dealership did not have to hassle with the paper work, collections, and risks entailed in car loans. The car was a honey, and I drove it for seven years. However, the lessons I learned in the process were even more valuable than the joy of owning that first car. Over four decades later, I still take advantage of the savings and thoughtful purchases made possible by disciplining ourselves to pay cash. Stay in control of your finances. If your debt is manageable, you have marketable skills, and no cash-flow problems, you are still in control and can use your funds more freely than in my illustration. Then again, if your debt is out of control, you need to get it in control. It's a decision.

If you purchase in any given month more than you can pay for, you are agreeing to pay interest on your loan.

Credit cards make spending — actually borrowing — money very easy. They should be called "debt cards." Credit cards seem like a sinister plan of the enemy to make us spend money we don't have. They keep us in debt paying for our purchases and interest on the loans. We are only padding someone else's pocket with our hard-earned money — for many months or years. For a long time,

my wife, Char, and I chose to avoid credit cards. We finally had to get one during our China years because it was impossible to rent a car without one when we visited the United States. Even so, we pay them off each month to avoid interest charges. We avoid spending more than we can pay off in any given month. This is merely an application in another arena of the same policy of paying cash. If you purchase in any given month more than you can pay for, you are agreeing to pay interest on your loan — possibly a staggering 18 percent or more, which significantly increases your "purchase" price.

Perhaps your cash flow situation is such that making car or credit card payments is not a problem to you. In that case, you are handling your debt load; you are still in control. Just don't let car and credit card payments keep you in financial bondage. Far too many people today are unable to follow their calling because of their debt. Remember our permanent riches are in heaven. Living more modestly and staying out of debt frees us to respond when others are in need or the Lord calls us to move. The Scriptures deal with finance more than nearly any other subject. As in every area of life, read the Word, pray, seek godly counsel, decide, and act.

The Power of Long-term Savings and Investments

Three very interesting but little-known verses reinforce long-term financial benefit from good use of funds. Their wisdom gives us considerable financial power. Humans tend to want to receive, win, or inherit a great amount of money all at once. However, God's wisdom is just the opposite. Money received too easily is not a blessing. Instead, it is a curse because the receiver does not value it appropriately. Funds saved carefully a little at a time over the years are valued more. Here is part of the wisdom of God on the subject: "… he who gathers money little by little makes it grow" (Proverbs 13:11). In addition, "An inheritance quickly gained at the beginning will not be blessed at the end" (Proverbs 20:21). We may be tempted to dream about winning the big prize — it is that kind of a dream that drives gamblers. Yet, how many times has a large amount of inheritance or prize money evaporated in just a few years?

Time is on the side of the person who can save money little by little. Perhaps in the parable of the talents, God also had interest income, certificates of deposit, and the stock market in mind when

he said, "*After a long time,* the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them" (Matthew 25:19, emphasis mine)? Both the principles of Proverbs and the parable of the talents incorporated the wisdom of this biblical money-saving, profit-gaining phrase: "little by little for a long time." That accurately describes my personal savings policy I have practiced since I earned my first dime as a little boy. I can still remember getting the change to pay my tithe and saving the other nine cents.

Continued savings increases tremendously over time. If you save $100 each month for 40 years, you have put $48,000 into savings (40 years x ($100 x 12 months) = $48,000). Now, add 6 percent interest compounded annually over that period beginning with the first $100. Left untouched, your 40-year savings project will produce $191,696. Not everyone will save this amount each month, but the illustration proves what regular savings can do over time.

How long would it take your investment to double? The Rule of 72 states that your principle will double at a certain point determined by dividing 72 by the percent of interest. If you receive 6 percent interest, it takes 12 years to double your savings, while 9 percent interest reduces the time to 8 years (72 ÷ 6 = 12, 72 ÷ 9 = 8). If you want more information on how money saved over time can multiply, check out books and charts that go into depth on financial management. Your banker will also be able to assist you.

Letting God Set the Economic Level

Let God set your economic level by what He gives you rather than what you want to have. By seeking God, His kingdom, and His righteousness first, He has set my economic level far higher than I ever dreamed. I am blessed materially, but did not seek it. When I get to the part of the Lord's Prayer where we request our daily bread, I usually say something like, "Lord, You have already blessed me beyond my expectations. As You continue to meet my needs, give me the grace to always seek You, Your kingdom, and Your righteousness first. You set the economic level according to Your wisdom." I follow that by mentioning the areas of His provision.

The habit of saving a little at a time for a long time has provided many advantages. In 1965, I paid cash for a car. In 1966, after working my way through Bible college, I graduated debt-free. In

1973, we left Canada with no debts. The bicycles, stereo, and other possessions we shipped to Korea had all been paid for. In 1986, upon our return from Korea, we had enough savings to make a down payment on a duplex being newly constructed. We sold that in 1991 to return to the mission field and placed our capital gains in a certificate of deposit. Two or three years later, we rolled it into reliable mutual funds. In 1996, upon our return from five years in China, we paid cash for furniture and two cars. We also made a $30,000 cash down payment on our first freestanding house. God placed us in a much nicer house and neighborhood than we ever thought possible. Our income has never been large, but we can testify that by following biblical principles of finance — saving little by little for a long time — all these material blessings have become ours.

At a deeper level, we receive great personal satisfaction to see our two sons following the same principles. They are already beginning to enjoy significant material blessings. Both of them sincerely seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. Both are generous givers and careful savers. The goal is not material gain but stewardship that frees us to pursue heavenly priorities.

Doing Well on Earth

When people become Christians and take the Bible seriously, their lifestyle changes and they abandon money-wasting vices. The benefits are evident. Better life habits lead to better health and fewer healthcare expenses. Tithing opens up the windows of heaven's blessings. Honest, dependable employees earn more responsibility and higher wages. These and other factors converge to produce the economic lift that Christians experience. Our honest, hard work bears good fruit. Yet we live in a time of over-emphasis on prosperity justified by a theology that fits it. Perhaps basic human weakness is to blame. At any rate, what course alterations do we need to make to avoid materialism and still lead godly, abundant, and influential lives while laying up treasures in heaven?

Having resources imparts greater responsibility to use them for kingdom purposes. They are not just for our consumption. We are blessed to be a blessing. If we can shift our focus, the present generation and its material prosperity, can contribute to world evangelism in a powerful way. In Chapter 13, we will explore our opportunity to reach the world by grasping the bigger picture. Meanwhile, let us seek to understand what a heavenly

value system looks like. Here are several issues that may help make honoring God with our substance more natural.

Many people ask if they "have to" tithe on income before taxes (gross income) or if it is enough to merely tithe on what they receive after taxes (net income). There are two things wrong with this question. First, when we seek to do or give the bare minimum, we miss the joy of giving our best. For someone who enjoys doing everything wholeheartedly as unto the Lord, seeking the bare minimum seems cheap. When Jesus came to earth on our behalf, He was not thinking about the bare minimum He could give to us. Second, the tithe is to be given on the amount of increase. Even though the government takes tax out of our salary checks, we were paid the whole. Taxes charged by the government are calculated on the total salary. It seems reasonable that our tithe should be calculated the same way. Tithe on the whole if you want God's blessings on the whole.

As the Lord provides opportunity, consider increasing the percentage you give away. This should be a natural response to the blessings of God as financial blessings increase and surpluses accumulate. R.G. Letourneau, the successful Christian inventor and manufacturer of large earth-moving machines, had it right. By the end of his life, he was giving 90 percent of his income to God and living contentedly on 10 percent.

Char and I tithe on all our income and place part of our income in our retirement fund. We also carefully tithe on the interest and stock market profits when they accrue in the retirement fund. This means that everything in our retirement fund is already tithed on. When we begin to use those funds after retirement, we have no obligation to tithe on them again unless there is any gathered interest not already tithed on. Nevertheless, we have discussed the fact that we may want to tithe on all of them again as we use them. We have no desire to leave a large amount when we pass away. Our sons have grown up knowing how to be content and do not need a large inheritance. More importantly, our funds are an extension of ourselves. We enjoy giving ourselves and our funds to eternal causes. It is a joy to think that, at death, we would continue to support those Christian ministries that we believe are making an impact in their respective ministry spheres.

The Bible says we should give to God regularly and give an offering of the "first fruits." First fruits offerings are an opportunity to give God all the first payment of income from a new source such as the increase in salary when we get a raise or the increased income from a new job. To give a first fruits offering means to simply wait until the second payment before we begin to keep the amount of increase in our income.

Scripture says we should give liberally, systematically, and cheerfully. Nevertheless, some zealous ministers and ministries use emotional appeals to move givers to action. I prefer to be systematic about my giving pattern, but we should give if we can and feel it is a legitimate cause. God is wonderful and so practical. He does not seem to want us to feel a heavy sense of obligation in those instances when we cannot give because we do not have anything. Those with money and no income may give, but according to Scripture, they have no obligation to give if they have don't have enough to give without suffering or becoming needlessly dependent on others. The Bible says to "let no debt remain outstanding" (Romans 13:8). In order to pay our bills, we sometimes have to resist the pleadings of high-pressured collectors of "offerings." In II Corinthians 9:12, the advice is practical: "For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have." God does not require of us what we cannot give. He is looking for "willingness" and blesses willing people even when they cannot give. The problems develop when we could give and do not, but that is another matter. The enemy likes to have Christians over-emphasize a truth so much it becomes an extreme — even a lie. Giving is a great joy. However, giving because one feels pressure from people is not God's plan. If the Holy Spirit is prompting us to give, then we want to obey.

It is much better to be surprised by God's blessings than to expect them

Our funds are an extension of ourselves. We enjoy giving ourselves and our funds to eternal causes.

Some believe that giving is a means to receiving. Offerings are not bribes. We cannot buy blessings. Offerings are "offered" not calculated to buy something. Blessings are blessings; they are not

paid to us because we earn it by our "giving." John Wesley, the famous preacher to the common people of England taught his generation to earn all they can, save all they can, and give all they can. That is still sound, kingdom-oriented advice, but the motive is not "to get." God blesses the cheerful giver and gives seed to the sower. However, it is much better to be surprised by God's blessings than to expect them and not to be grateful for them. If He chooses not to give us material blessings, we have no room to complain against Him.

When we think about leaving an inheritance to our children, how much should we leave? If we train children well in fiscal matters, they will already be doing well by the time their aged parents die. Char and I plan to leave something for each of our children, but we don't want to give it all to them. The expectation or the money itself could have a corrupting effect. We are excited to think that we can leave a part of it for designated Christian ministries. After we are gone, the Lord's work can continue to advance, in part, because of our financial stewardship and careful estate planning.

Responsible giving requires a little homework. Is the need legitimately represented? What percent goes for overhead? Who is doing the job best? Are the financial records audited by a neutral organization and open for review?

We have all heard that we can't take it with us when we die. However, our tithes and offerings are one of the ways we really can invest in our heavenly account. Service rendered to God and money invested in God's work enables us to "take it with us." In this instance, when giving from one account, we are adding to another. Offerings are "transfers."

Surprises in Heaven

"Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world — the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does — comes not from the Father but from the world" (I John 2:15-16). When we get to heaven, we will be glad we paid attention to John's warning. Though not necessarily sinful in themselves, the world and its earthly emphasis on material prosperity, comfort, possessions, clothes, cars, and homes will seem like shallow goals or plastic idols compared to the new reality we will then see so clearly. Material

blessings are a gift from God. The way we decide to use them is our important choice — to invest in eternal or temporary issues.

It is possible to order our lives using heaven's value system now. We are wise to do so. Take the 21 men who were tried for war crimes at Nuremberg at the end of World War II. Had they realized the pending judgment for their behaviors, they might have believed and behaved differently during the war. Fortunately, we know in advance the standard God will use for our eventual evaluation. He is recording our "investments" in heaven with even greater precision than investment corporations use to track their clients' funds. Because of our imperfect knowledge, we may not know each day what God records in our heavenly account. Nevertheless, the more we read the Bible and try to understand God's value system, the more we can begin to understand the criteria the Accountant uses as He makes the entries.

Without the need for so many things, we have more funds free for eternal projects.

I mentioned earlier my occasional notes of heavenly "investments" to strengthen my awareness of that account. They help me remember what I live for — what is important to me. When we have a weak sense of heavenly realities, we emotionally over-invest in earthly things. If our heavenly account is correctly valued, thought given to it lessens our need to accumulate temporary things. At the end of all our days, we should be proud of how much we invested in the eternal account. We should have no regret about letting the temporary account interfere with the eternal bank account. When we properly value heavenly (eternal) things, we see earthly (temporary) things in a more accurate light — as tools to use instead of symbols of wealth to pursue. Without the need for so many things, we have more funds free for eternal projects.

What we do with what we have here on earth is more important than how much we have. Do we spend it on ourselves or on a heavenly project? If we spend it on ourselves, do we purchase things we really need or just want? Do others' purchases influence ours? Do we purchase things that will increase in value? Do we buy durable or faddish things? Do we draw closer to God in thanksgiving for every advancement He allows? Do

we acknowledge Him adequately in a time of prosperity? Do we draw closer to God in dependence on Him at every setback?

Earlier we noted two imbalances: too little attention to possible earthly blessings (too heavenly minded) and too much attention to earthly blessings (not giving enough thought to the eternal). I have seen both. I grew up in an environment that, perhaps, had its head too much in the clouds. Years later, I returned from a career in Christian foreign missions to encounter a culture not placing enough value on the eternal. Somewhere between these extremes, there is a proper equilibrium. In proper balance, we would not bring disrepute to the kingdom of God by unnecessary poverty and bondage to debt, and yet we would have enough resources to finance God's great work. We would not be so preoccupied with enjoying earthly things, financial success, and the accumulation of the temporary that we are impoverished in heaven when we get there. I don't want to live in a simple "cabin in the corner of glory land." God clearly shows us in His Word practical ways to handle money so that we do not live in shambles here either. If I had to choose, I would live temporarily in a simple cabin here and later invite you to a 21-course dinner in my eternal heavenly mansion for a thousand years or so.

HABIT TWELVE

Enjoy Physical Health for Spiritual Reasons

"... honor God with your body."

I Corinthians 6:20

It is man's prime duty to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. This means that everything — including our attitude and practice regarding health issues — should glorify God. Trim, disciplined, exercised bodies create a better impression whether one is a Christian or not. Christians, however, have additional reason to be disciplined and fit in body, mind, and spirit: They want to bring glory to God. Most of the habits of effective Christians deal with becoming beautiful spiritually. However, Christians should also want to glorify God at the physical level by caring for their body. This chapter provides evidence that healthy, trim, strong bodies, free of diseases that are caused by our own sins and excesses also bring glory to God. This, in turn, augments the greater glory brought to Him by godly attitude and behavior.

There are two extremes we want to avoid. The first is greatly emphasizing only spiritual things while neglecting our bodies. This can lead to habits that are destructive to our health. The second is too much emphasis on the care of our bodies. Some in our society glorify, over-emphasize, or idolize ideal bodies. This worship of the body is equally in error. Scripture portrays a balanced position in which we give greater care to spiritual

concerns than to the body. Nevertheless, we are called to exercise self-control in a way that glorifies God in our bodies — the temple of the Holy Spirit. When a person has a physical handicap such as a thyroid problem, there are other principles to apply. God has given us our individual bodies. To the degree that our care for them makes a difference, we ought to keep them in good shape.

To the Glory of God

There is enough in the Bible about healing — regardless of what we believe about its application today — for us to know God values health. Health is the ideal that makes healing valuable. Jesus said that a man was born blind not because of his sins or his parents' sins. Rather, he was born blind to bring glory to God. Yet surely, it was not the blindness that brought glory to God but rather the healed state. His sight eventually glorified God. In other words, health is better than healing. Job's healing also brought glory to God, but still, health is the state from which healing — its restoration — derives its value.

Here is a spiritual illustration. In a world lost in sin, living a holy and useful life is better than falling into the sin that requires redemption. Even though redemption is a wonderful thing when it is needed, not needing it is better — redemption itself implies this. Maintaining health is better than being healed since being sick is what necessitated being made healthy. Having and using energy for godly work and service is better than experiencing the lack of energy that makes receiving it necessary. We celebrate the increasing number of people around the world who receive supernatural healing in answer to the prayer of faith. However, some diseases — including those God is willing to heal — can be avoided through regular preventive maintenance. As acts of obedience to God, let's discipline ourselves to do those things that give and maintain good health. It is better to rest, exercise, and eat well to attain the energy to serve vigorously than to need healing to

Maintaining health is better than being healed.

restore what we could and should have maintained. What brings greater glory to God, our obedience and safety — or His rescue?

The Greeks, more than the Hebrews, were guilty of over-celebrating the beauty of strong healthy bodies. Paul may have had that aspect of the Greek worldview in mind when he told Timothy, "Physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things" (I Timothy 4:8). Of course, it is better to discipline and train ourselves in godliness as most of this book emphasizes. Nevertheless, even physical training contributes to godliness since we can serve God better with healthy bodies. Healthy, strong bodies allow us to better accomplish the more important exercises of prayer, fasting, study, and work. The Christian maintains bodily health and strength for an eternal purpose. That desire extends beyond the physical strength and appearance that preoccupied the Greeks. This is one difference between Christians who strive to glorify God with their bodies and those who live merely at the physical level.

Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:23). Peter's list of godly qualities mentions that self-control should be added to knowledge (II Peter 1:6). God wants to use us and will as much as our character allows Him to. Just as He works more through people who have other fruits of the Spirit — love, joy, peace, etc. — it makes sense that He can work more through someone who also has self-control than someone who does not. The Bible clearly commands us to "honor God with your body" (I Corinthians 6:20). This includes more than just the moral conduct of our bodies. It also includes their care and discipline. We are to offer our bodies as living sacrifices to God (Romans 12:1), so shouldn't we offer Him the best body we can maintain?

"Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

I Samuel 16:7

We are enriched when we come to know people at a deep level. Nonetheless, our first impression of them is based on mere appearance — the body we see. As Samuel considered Jesse's fine son, Eliab, God told him, "*Man looks at the outward appearance*, but the Lord looks at the heart" (I Samuel 16:7,

emphasis mine). We rejoice that God knows our hearts and motives even when others only see the outside appearance. To glorify God fully to man, however, we must start with the first impression — our *outward appearance*. To dress our bodies neatly is appropriate. To keep our bodies in good shape is equally appropriate. We can do both for godly and spiritual reasons. To glorify God is a spiritual reason to stay fit. It matters how our bodies appear.

Far more importantly, the disciplines we exercise to keep our bodies fit and trim spill over into the other areas of our lives. They influence us as we discipline ourselves for prayer, obedience etc. We become better people. Self-control in the physical arena is not just a physical thing — it is spiritual, too. Similarly, areas of indiscipline also spill over into other areas. If our goal is to be all we can be for God, we should strive to achieve and maintain a fit, trim, and healthy body. That is spiritual.

We express spirituality in the way we use our minds and bodies, not just through spiritual worship. We show love for God in care for our bodies in three categories: rest, exercise, and diet. All three deserve our serious consideration. There is much to do for God. With healthy bodies, we can feel better, look better, do more, do it more easily, have more fun doing it, and live longer. That glorifies God and brings us closer to being our best possible self.

Rest

We often think of the sixth day of creation, when God made man and woman, as the grand climax to the story of creation. However, the seventh day is the more fitting pinnacle. That was the day on which the Creator paused, surveyed, appraised, rejoiced, and declared His work good — the all-encompassing event to celebrate and the example to follow. Rest from successful work is restorative. God created the Sabbath, commends it to us, and commands that we follow His example. Why?

God knows us because He created us. He knows our physiological make up and understands that our bodies need periodic rest. He knows our psychological makeup and understands that our minds also need a rest from the pressures of daily responsibilities. He knows our spiritual makeup and

understands that we need to take some deliberate time to nurture our spiritual man. We are rejuvenated in the presence of God when we worship. He commands it because it is good for us. He blesses us with a weekly appointment with Himself, a time for teaching, worship, rest, recreation, fellowship, and prayer, as well as just plain fun. If your responsibilities make it possible, Sunday seems a natural time to take a day off each week.

If your job requires work on Sunday, take another day for rest. If you don't, after years of misuse of your body, you risk becoming ill. This happens because we would have lived beneath our privilege, violated God's provision for our health, abused our bodies, and brought negative physical consequences on ourselves. God wants to spare us that. There is enough time in each day to do the will of God. There is enough time in six days to do the work God intends for us to do. To work any more than that is to do something God does not intend. Rest and enjoy Jesus.

There is enough time in each day to do the will of God. There is enough time in six days to do the work God intends for us to do.

Does this mean we advocate rest as unto the Lord? Yes, that is exactly what is meant. Sometimes it takes faith to stop working and "lie down in green pastures" (Psalm 23:2). Obedience on this point is far superior to continuing to work because we are relying on ourselves. God wants us to rest. We do not keep a Sabbath because we are lazy. We keep it because, among other reasons, we recognize that rested bodies do better work in less time with less effort.

I love my work. Nevertheless, I believe in resting. I am careful not to work on Sunday. If I must work Sunday, I choose another day that week to rest. Each of us must decide what activities we feel are restful and allowable for us on our day of rest. People who sit and work at a computer are not resting. To be restored, all systems have to be down for regeneration of spirit, mind, muscles, emotions, and the whole person. On your day of rest, do things that are far different from what you do at work. If you are a professional tennis player, let up on the hard workout for one day. If you work at a desk all week, playing tennis might be a

God-glorifying activity on your rest day. Rest so your body recovers from the physical, emotional, and mental stresses of life.

Daily rest is also important. Four days per week, I rest my brain and exercise my body with basketball or running and weight training. In the evening, when my body indicates it is tired, I quit working soon if not right away. Char and I sometimes go for a stroll before retiring. The devil may want us to overdo, but God certainly does not. “In vain, you rise early and stay up late toiling for food to eat — for he grants sleep to those he loves” (Psalm 127:2).

Annual extended rest periods, as the Jews did, are also good. They observed three annual feasts which would have been restful for them. Each year Char and I take a vacation. Because my work with one of my ministries involves international travel for weeks at a time, sometimes simply staying home is the most restful vacation. I enjoy and appreciate these times of rest. They help me stay fresh and joyful, and I am usually eager to get back to work at the beginning of each new semester.

Some Christian workers seem to feel they are free to work as much as they want because their work is important. They correctly believe the eternal destiny of souls depends on the success of their work, but they mistakenly assume they, therefore, must not rest. To the contrary, because their work is so important, Christian workers need to be extra careful to pace themselves at a speed they can maintain for a lifetime. Ministers are especially negligent in keeping the third commandment — that God has given for everyone’s good. Since God’s laws are good for us, “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy” could just as well be restated: “It is good for you to enjoy the Lord’s Day and keep it separated from other days.” The root word for “holy” means “separated.” For ministers whose work keeps them busy on Sundays, it could be paraphrased: “When your work requires you to be busy on Sundays, it is good for you to enjoy another day and keep it separated from others.”

The devil knows better than to attempt a frontal attack on a zealous and committed minister of the gospel. Instead of getting in front and trying to stop us, he cleverly goes around behind us. He places his deceptively soft, gentle hand firmly on our backs and begins to push, increasing the pace as much as we will let

him. Meanwhile, he whispers, "Pray more, work harder, work later, don't stop, keep going, press on, souls are dying, people need you, work some more, don't rest." He tries to burn us out. Unfortunately, this tactic works all too successfully. God does not love ministers less than non-ministers — giving non-ministers a day off but denying ministers the same rest. A day with books, children, sports, and your spouse— whatever you consider a pleasurable recreational activity— is God's gift to you. If you decline it, you do so to your own injury. Taking periodic time for rest is part of pacing yourself for the long haul. With each passing year, you become increasingly experienced and valuable in the kingdom of God. We need you. We don't rest because we don't like to work; we rest because we want to serve a long time with healthy bodies and alert minds. Highly motivated for meaningful work as I am, it takes more discipline for me to rest than to work. I rest so I can work better and longer.

Exercise

Exercise is consistent with Bible teachings about work even without the direct command to exercise.

The Bible was written in an agrarian age. During Bible times, everyone got plenty of exercise from the normal activities of travel by foot and work without machines. Physical labor was considered good and healthy. "A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work" (Ecclesiastes 2:24). The same Bible that says we are to rest one day a week also says we should work six. Work in Bible days involved physical labor. Don't you suppose Jesus enjoyed the exercise of walking? Even without direct commands to exercise, the Bible's lifestyle teachings are consistent with exercising for health. Our technological age has produced lifestyles drastically different from the Bible's agrarian context. We have to address some developments in modern society with biblical principles rather than direct commands. For example, the Bible does not tell us we should not look at vulgar pictures on the Internet — that possibility did not exist in Bible times. However, most Christians believe it is wrong to do that. Likewise, exercise is consistent

with Bible teachings about work even without the direct command to exercise. Those who do physical work today do not need to exercise — they already do.

Find exercise that physically invigorates you. It should also be mentally restful, pleasurable, and suited to you. The greatest health improvement comes to those who exercise moderately over those who don't exercise at all. Like the principle of diminishing returns, there is less additional benefit to extreme, vigorous exercise over moderate exercise. Find the level best for you. I feel sluggish when I exercise less than my regular routine. When I go running, I give it my all. I like basketball because it is highly competitive and social. Our characters are refined as we learn to call our own fouls and submit to others' calls — even when they are questionable (to us). Our lives have seasons, and we need to adapt our routines as we go.

Why do we feel so good when we do exercises? When we exercise vigorously, our body manufactures rejuvenating chemicals. For example, when we exert our bodies, our brains signal our bodies to secrete beta-endorphins. This chemical helps us feel fresh, vigorous, and alert while building up our short and long-term immune systems. Endorphins dull any pain of the exercise and provide a healthy "high." Long-term aerobic exercise causes more endorphins to be secreted moderately over a longer time. Your body uses these beneficially during your walk in your neighborhood or the contest of the game. Vigorous exercise also helps burn off excess fatty tissue. For every additional pound of fat, the heart has to pump blood through an extra 200 miles of capillaries (small vessels between arterioles and veins). When we carry less weight, we have more energy for more creative things.

Exercising vigorously three times a week is not always possible. Consider mixing walking into your daily activities. Look for opportunities to be spontaneously active. Great choices include jump rope, bicycle riding, walking, running, dancing, or roller skating.

Mixing Exercise with Life

During the summer of 2000, I visited seven nations on two continents in six weeks. I made 68 presentations. Nine times, I

gave away Christian leadership-training curriculums. The schedule was the most demanding I had ever faced.

Kenya was the last nation I visited in Africa before I went on to Asia. Kenyans are great runners so I thought it would be fun to run there. I conducted two separate conferences in my six days in that country. Somewhere in the middle of that time, I went for a two-hour run in the mountains of northwest Kenya near Kapenguria. I began about 4:30 p.m. after four full sessions of teaching, and ran up a mountain highway that was not too busy. The friendly Kenyan students who were on their way home from schools, fields, and work often stopped to watch the bald white man running up the mountain. Many of them waved and called out — poking each other and laughing. Some would run along by my side for a while.

I was about 50 minutes out and up, among the beautiful trees of that part of the world. A sudden cloudburst came over the mountain and soaked everything. The rigors of prayer and lecturing all day had exhausted my mind, but this adventure was stimulating and restorative. As I ran back down the mountain soaking wet and splashing water with each step, many of those who watched me run up the mountain now noticed me again — some of them from their dry porches. Because I was already warm from the run when the rain started, it was most refreshing. As I ran splashing down the rivulets in the mountain highway, I would have been laughing because of the comedy and the fun I was having had I not been so busy breathing. The next day we began more ministry. I was refreshed and ready.

Glorifying God through a Healthy Lifestyle

Earlier in United States history, infectious diseases killed vast numbers of people. With advances in medical science, the number today is relatively small. Instead, degenerative diseases kill more people now. These diseases are basically diseases of lifestyle. I am not referring to sexually immoral lifestyles that lower life expectancy. Unhealthy lifestyle is the biggest cause of staggering health care costs in the United States. A study of patients at Massachusetts General Hospital revealed that 86 percent of patients admitted required hospitalization because they had an unhealthy lifestyle. Is it any wonder that businesses are beginning to offer fitness programs for their employees?

Up until 80 years ago, 70 percent of Americans got their exercise through physical work and ate unrefined foods. Today, almost all of us eat refined foods. Many of us no longer do manual labor. This change in our culture directly affects our health. Our lifestyle has drastically changed. Lifestyle is the factor that most affects our life expectancy. The other three factors are health care, environment, and genetics. Unhealthy lifestyles cause more than 50 percent of deaths. In other words, what we eat and drink and how much we exercise affects our health more than health care, environment, and genetics combined. Furthermore, of these four factors, lifestyle is the only one we can easily control. We can do little about health care and environment. We can't do anything about genetics yet. Genetics account for only 25 percent of the factors affecting body fat, while lifestyle accounts for the other 75 percent. In other words, our lifestyle, not our genetic code, is most responsible for our body composition and life expectancy.

> As I ran splashing down the rivulets in the mountain highway, I would have been laughing because of the comedy and the fun I was having had I not been so busy breathing.

The Results of Healthy Habits

Here are six basic, achievable habits for a healthy lifestyle:

1. Eat regular meals each day (especially breakfast) and avoid snacks
2. Maintain a normal body weight
3. Exercise moderately
4. Sleep seven or eight hours per night
5. Don't smoke
6. Either abstain from or drink alcohol moderately

Studies indicate that at age 45, by following five or six of these healthy lifestyle habits, you can expect to live to age 78. If you keep only three of them, you can expect to live only to the age of 67. In other words, you can add 11 years to your life by doing those six very simple practical things. There are even cultures in the world in which many live well over 100 years of age because they have diets that are low in fat, cholesterol, processed sugar, salt, and calories. That is just the life expectancy factor.

Good health provides increased quality of life. As surely as 11 years can be added by living a healthy lifestyle, you can also benefit from a better quality of life. Have you ever spoken with someone who has a healthy lifestyle and is sorry about it? It feels better to be healthy. Just as wealth is more than a mere absence of poverty, health is more than just an absence of disease. For good measure, notice the six performance components of exercised bodies God wants you to have for His glory and your enjoyment: agility, power, better reaction time, balance, speed, and coordination. You can be fit and trim, have more energy, be more awake, and move around more quickly and easily if you have good health. Who would not want to add these things to their list of blessings?

Our lifestyle, not our genetic code, is most responsible for our body composition and life expectancy.

Even for people who have not traditionally exercised over the years, it is not too late to begin. Even a 90-year-old can adapt and respond favorably to a physical fitness program. Exercise will still help from the time you begin. It will add length and quality of life and increase your resistance to disease while reducing the cost and bother of health care.

A number of good books on health and exercise exist today. Look at several and design a program that works best for you. Books give various reasons for maintaining a balanced program of exercise and good diet. You may add your own personal spiritual reason —you want to glorify God in your body in every way possible.

Diet

Eating is a God-given pleasure, feasting is a part of celebration, and "all food is clean" (Romans 14:20). However, as with other God-given pleasures, we can misuse this one, too. We are told to control our appetites and that the Holy Spirit will help us exercise self-control. Scripture forbids both gluttony and drunkenness. Paul says of "enemies of the cross of Christ … their god is their stomach and their glory is in their shame" (Philippians 3:18-19). So how do we feast to God's glory without overdoing it? How do we lose weight if we are overweight? What is the best way to eat for health?

A lifetime pattern of nutritious eating and proper exercise is best. In order to lose weight, some go on diets. However, to try to lose weight on a low-calorie diet without exercise causes the body to burn the lean tissue and protect the fat stores! The part of the body you want to go away stays, and the muscle tissue you want to remain healthy comes under attack. This is the body's way to survive. When there is not enough calorie intake, the body thinks a famine is coming and works to preserve the storehouse reserves of fat. When you go off the diet, your muscle tissue builds up again, and you are back to the weight you had when you started the diet. When you diet, you deny yourself needed nourishment. Without calories in the form of carbohydrates, you deny your brain and central nervous system the energy they need. This is why a person is prone to bad moods when dieting.

The body feels weak; energy level is low. This leads to still less of the badly needed normal exercise that is good for the body.

The best diet is controlled eating with proper exercise for the rest of your life. To try to lose weight by not eating is counter-productive. It is far better to maintain a controlled intake level so you remain strong and are neither starving nor uncomfortable. Exercise along with a normal calorie intake is pleasant and, with practice, is possible to maintain. In the end, it is much more productive. Losing any more than one or two pounds per week is not good for your health. A healthy lifestyle is far superior to diets.

The best diet is controlled eating with proper exercise for the rest of your life.

Fiber (both soluble and insoluble) in vegetables and fruit helps regulate the digestive system. It adds water and bulk to the stool that help decrease intestinal, colon, and other types of cancer. White refined bread has almost no fiber. Whole grain bread has fiber. The label on the wrapper will usually list the fiber content. Chemicals used in farming are present in the food chain and our intestinal tract is the place these toxins gather. Keeping sufficient fiber in the tract at all times contributes to internal cleanliness, regularity, and health. Cancer cells multiply uncontrollably. Pre-cancer cells, though not normal cells, do not multiply yet still need to be eliminated. Fiber helps eliminate toxins and reduce the accumulation of pre-cancer cells. A high-fiber diet helps our body eliminate pre-cancer cells before they mutate into abnormal cells. This is why fiber is our friend.

Alcohol and caffeine, on the other hand, are also enemies to our bodies. Alcohol is a depressant, caffeine is a stimulant, and neither has very much food value. Coffee, tea, colas, and chocolate contain caffeine. In addition, alcohol is a toxin. When you drink more than your body can readily eliminate, you poison it. Many Christians avoid problems with alcohol by abstaining from it. For some time in the United States, many people were taught total abstinence. Since the Bible commends self-control and forbids over-drinking, many avoid the temptation to over-drink by simply choosing not to drink at all. I do not drink, but have no quarrel with those who drink under control. The Bible teaches that

we should not misuse our "freedom" to tempt another to do something that they consider a sin. I don't want to cause anyone to stumble. In my cultural context, that could easily happen. Many Christians strictly avoid dependence on alcohol but seem unaware of the danger of dependence on other stimulants.

As a child, I recall that my mother and father needed several cups of coffee to get moving each morning. I distinctly remember thinking that I did not want to depend on caffeine stimulation to get myself going. I understood that a healthy body would have the energy to get going without stimulants. It seemed logical that stimulants could stimulate too much activity for an inadequately nourished body. I don't normally drink coffee, tea, colas, soft drinks, or eat chocolate though it is not wrong to consume them occasionally. It is far better to eat and drink things with nutritional value. Nutritious food nourishes the body instead of stimulating it to work, or even overwork, with caffeine.

Many Christians strictly avoid dependence on alcohol but seem unaware of the danger of dependence on other stimulants.

There are also financial advantages to eating nutritious foods and drinks instead of stimulants. A cup of coffee costs money yet contains little if any nutritional value. Most carbonated beverages are loaded with refined sugar — not good for the general health or teeth. They too are costly, and so is the dentist bill. Candy bars have the same problems. A cup of coffee or soft drink and a candy bar per day could cost $1.50. If someone had those treats six days per week, that would equal just over $39.00 per month. Placing that same $39.00 each month in a savings account at 5 percent interest for 40 years would accumulate to $68,874.79. In addition, you would have more years of health to spend it. On the other hand, if you really want a nutritious alternative, why not eat fruit or vegetable juices and granola bars? By packing a healthy lunch, using whole grain bread and nutritious contents along with some fruit, I don't need to snack between meals. My body gets good

nutrition, and I reduce the chances of lifestyle-related medical bills. I am rewarded with good health.

What is the result of holding to a good diet? Do you doubt the validity of watching what you eat? Look at a church that emphasizes good eating patterns. The cancer rate of Seventh Day Adventists is only 50 percent of the national average. They also have only one-half the expected heart disease and diabetes of the national average and a greater life expectancy.

We don't have to be "health nuts," to understand the correlation between eating right and being healthy and productive. God does help us, and He does heal our bodies. In fact, He created our bodies to be self-healing — a process greatly enhanced by general good health. Still, we are responsible for keeping ourselves spiritually and mentally alert by eating what is nourishing and not what merely stimulates us.

Overeating

Overeating and excessive drinking are both prohibited in Scripture. The lack of shame or embarrassment that Christians in the United States associate with overeating seems inconsistent with that. Obviously, the consequences of alcoholism endanger society more than overeating. Yet Scripture prohibits both behaviors. A student once asked me how God could have used a late evangelist even after he became an alcoholic. I responded, "If God can use the overeaters among us, could He not also use an over drinker?" God uses us even when our lives are not completely holy. It is a wonder God uses any of us. Even when God uses us in our undisciplined state, it does not make it right to be undisciplined.

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As a rule, someone who is overeating and not exercising will be overweight. I would not have come to these conclusions had I not spent 18 years observing the lifestyle and eating habits of Asians. I noticed the same thing in Africa. I don't see so many

overweight people in non-Western countries. We live with plenty in the West, and that introduces us to certain temptations people in other parts of the world do not have. We have such ease and abundance that we must exercise a discipline not needed in other parts of the world. They don't overeat because they can't afford it. Our prosperity creates the need for discipline. We must maintain sensible portions even when we eat out — especially when we eat out. Taking part of your dinner home with you or splitting it with a spouse or friend enriches you physically and financially.

During the weeks following my 40-day fast discussed in Chapter 5, (Fast Systematically), I intentionally gained weight. I needed to. An interesting thing happened — I gained weight past my usual 170 to 175 pounds right up to 180. Yet, the problem was bigger than just that — I was gaining weight quickly. Because I had stopped my exercise program during the fast and recovery period, I became sluggish. I remember thinking, "God has given me such wonderful peace from my time of prayer that it is even affecting me physiologically. I am gaining weight and may become a roly-poly, jolly man." It was then that I decided that being physically fit for the sake of the work of the Lord was important to me. I cut back on the weight-gain project. With more discipline required than usual, I got back into a regular exercise routine. I decided not to be heavy and then acted on my decision.

Some people are simply careless about what they eat or how they exercise. If we believe our health problems are genetic, we have little motivation to try to be healthy. If we think it won't matter, we won't try. I hope this chapter has convinced you that lifestyle decisions make an important difference.

Not every overweight person overeats. We should always be charitable towards those with medical ailments that cause them to be overweight. Medical science offers limited help for these problems. God can and does heal bodies. He can heal the glands that regulate how much food is changed to fat or energy. However, our discipline plays a big part. A far smaller percentage of people in other countries have the diseases Americans blame for being overweight. Perhaps many of those who claim a medical reason for being overweight really don't. One overweight friend of mine insisted that he had a medical problem. When I observed (silently) the volume and the nature of what he ate, I realized that he could look like I do and I could

look like he does within a year of exchanging eating patterns. If you have a medical reason for being overweight, that still does not excuse you from being more overweight than is caused by your medical condition. You still need to practice self-discipline and healthy habits. A medical situation causing you to be overweight may not dishonor God but overeating does. The lack of the fruit of the Spirit — self-control — produced it. Then again, those who are disciplined in eating patterns must remember that pride in the form of judgmentalism is also a sin to avoid.

If you ask Him, God will give you the grace to examine your eating habits. If necessary, He can help you increase the self-discipline we talked about in Chapter 3 (Exercise Self-Control). If you are overweight, you might be overeating or not exercising enough or both. You may be able to sing, pray, serve, or even preach well. However, if your food intake is not under your control, you will not be all you can be. If you bring this area under your control, you will be pleased and surprised how much better you will do in every area of your life.

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Food That Is Good for You

In recent years, the food pyramid has seen some changes. The traditional pyramid has whole grains at the most essential level. Fruits and vegetables follow on the next layer. Those who study nutrition now suggest we move the fruits and vegetables to the bottom, most essential level. The change was prompted because "grains" include bread made with highly refined white flour. People are eating too much refined flour while not eating enough vegetables and fruits that have more water and fiber content.

Fruits and vegetables that are fresh and ripened on the vine or tree are best. They absorbed nutrients out of the soil right until the time they were picked. You can sometimes buy these at a

farmer's roadside stand or grow them in your own garden. Unfortunately, fresh fruits and vegetables ripened on the vine or tree are very limited. The second best choice is fresh frozen. Fruits and vegetables lose nutrients as they go through the lengthy transportation process to the grocery store shelves. Fresh frozen products have a shorter length of time between harvest and freezing. On the other hand, fresh vegetables and fruits in our grocery stores are harvested before they ripen. By not ripening on the vine or tree, they don't have some of the vitamins and minerals they would gain by ripening on the vine or tree. If you can't get fresh or fresh frozen, canned without additives is better than canned with additives.

Choose beverages and foods to moderate your intake of sugar — especially added sugar. In our country, non-diet soft drinks are the biggest source of added sugar. Sweets, candy, ice cream, cake, cookies, and fruit drinks are also major sources of added sugar. Further, they are sweetened with white sugar, which has had all the nutritional value refined out. All that remains is the calories. The body cannot tell the difference between natural and added sugar. White sugar taken into the body is absorbed quickly into the blood. It elevates the blood sugar (glucose) levels so high that the pancreas has to work hard to secrete sufficient insulin to bring down the glucose level. Not only is the pancreas overworked, the insulin causes the glucose to be deposited in the cells to get it out of the blood. In someone without exercise, it builds up the amount of body fat. Exercise will burn the glucose in both muscle and blood. Muscles — if they are used — can take glucose directly out of the blood.

A healthy combination of sensible portions of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, skim milk, fish, lean meat, poultry, beans, and foods that are low in fat and added sugars is wise. Lean meats, dark turkey meat, spinach, cooked dry beans, and whole grain breads are good sources for the iron your red blood cells need to carry oxygen. Learn to inspect food labels for added iron in cereals and other foods. A variety of whole grains including brown rice, cracked wheat, whole grain corn, oatmeal, popcorn, whole oats, whole rye, and whole wheat is good for you. Each vegetable and fruit is rich in a different nutrient, so keep mixing up the variety. Raw fruits and vegetables have the greatest

nutritional value and can be eaten in soups and salads. Consider eating fruit for dessert.

Those with a vigorous exercise program do not have to be as careful to stay trim. My reason for eating healthy food is not so much to stay trim as to give good nourishment to my exercised body. For those who have a less vigorous exercise program, dietary issues may make a greater difference in their health and physical appearance. We bring more glory to God if we have all the fruits of the Spirit, including self-control to help us maintain good physical health for spiritual reasons.

Spirit, Mind, and Body Working Together for God's Glory

There is a high correlation between spiritual, mental, and physical health. Studies revealed in *How to Live 365 Days a Year* by John Schindler show that over 50 percent of our illnesses are emotionally induced. Furthermore, 75 percent of physical problems in older people are a result of negative effects of unhealthy emotions. Choose courage, determination, and cheerfulness over crabbiness, grumbling, and worry. Keeping attitudes positive is important at all ages. Yet, the effects of emotions become increasingly clear with increased age. In *Head First*, author Norman Cousins confirms this and further explains. When under siege by negative emotions, especially extended frustration, our bodies manufacture their own poison. When we believe the worst, we tend to experience the worst. Our bodies possess a marvelous mechanism for warding off and combating disease — our immune system — which functions best when stimulated by healthy emotions.

The good news for the Christian is that freedom from psychological dysfunction is rooted in spiritual health. Spiritual blessings of forgiveness, peace, and joy provide a reward that goes beyond the good feelings of the heart to include the body's health. The interconnectedness of the body, soul, and spirit of man provides an advantage to the believer.

In this chapter, we examined evidence that you can largely control your physical health and serve God better with a healthy body. In other words, we learned that good physical health can positively influence our spiritual lives. In the reverse order, mental and spiritual well being is advantageous for physical health. Why not allow each variety of health — spiritual, mental, and physical — to positively affect the quality of life in the other two arenas and enjoy abundant life in all three spheres? That glorifies God, and He wants that for us. This would make a big contribution toward becoming highly effective Christians and our best possible selves.

In the introduction of this book, I mentioned the Boston Marathon crowd's power of encouragement. Now, you are in a life-long spiritual marathon. With all the chapters of this book, I want to be a part of the crowd cheering you on. Those who work with cattle say that when a cow is calving, other cows in the barn will "moo" long and loud to encourage her. As you give birth to the fulfillment of your dreams and potential, I want to "moo" my encouragement to you. If the crowds in Boston and the cows in the barn have the ability to encourage, then surely we can encourage each other in our spiritual journey. This chapter about physical health is intended to encourage you to run your spiritual race better and help you realize your dreams with the aid of a strong, trim, and healthy physical body. Keep up the good work!

HABIT THIRTEEN

Grasp the Bigger Picture

"... was preached among the nations,
was believed on in the world."

I Timothy 3:16

One of the greatest compliments a master craftsman can give is to invite a journeyman or apprentice to join him in producing a work of art. Growing children often want to "help." Even adults are familiar with the joy of being asked to contribute to a project we value. God's dream is to gather a large group of beloved persons with whom He may enjoy an eternal, meaningful love relationship. The amazing wonder is that He is inviting you and me, not just to be a part of that special group, but also to partner with Him in the grand enterprise of gathering it. It is a high calling and noble privilege to become God's partner and contribute to His grand design. All human beings were created to love God and enjoy Him forever, but some are not yet aware of this. Those of us who already know Him, therefore, have the unique opportunity to contribute to something that means very much to God.

God is everywhere in the world. There is no place He is not already working. He is inviting people everywhere to participate in His grand, worldwide, soul-saving, church-building, family-extending project. This generation's challenges and opportunities surpass those of previous centuries. Our physical bodies eventually slow down. However, if we expand our horizons, our

adventure of discovery, growth, and usefulness can continue well into our senior years.

The Frog in the Well

There is a Chinese and Korean parable called The Frog in the Well. The frog in the well thinks the universe is like the stone walls, darkness, and occasional splash of the bucket that make up his "world." Each of us frogs may be excused for being born and raised in our own wells. On the other hand, we have ample opportunities to break out of those narrow confines through magazines, travels, books, or conversations. Becoming the best possible "frog" doesn't necessarily mean you have to get out of your well physically, but there is no reason to remain there mentally.

Since God created the whole earth and all the frogs therein, we should be aware of what is going on outside our well. Given that Christian frogs in our well have good news all frogs ought to know, we have even more reason to be concerned about the frogs outside our well. Even if we do not all go to other wells, there are many ways we all can be involved in God's great worldwide enterprise.

Every one of us was born and raised in a specific place on this earth that influences our worldview. To view the whole earth and God's grand design from a wider perspective, consider the following facts.

A Demographic Perspective

To bring your "picture" of the world up to date, read excellent books like *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* edited by Ralph D. Winter. This marvelous reader contains 124 chapters of the best missiological writing available. It includes hundreds of years of missions experience and scholarship in its 782 pages. Some of the statistics cited below are from that book. Winter's *Perspectives* has four sections: Theological, Historical, Cultural, and Strategic. Reading it will inform you about world

evangelism, missions, related stories, and insights. You can read of life and death outside our well.

The human race can be viewed from many different perspectives. Look for a moment at all the people in the world from the perspective of their distance from the nearest church. Why this perspective? For all their imperfections, churches remain the best tools for world evangelism. Jesus, wise strategist that He is, said He would build His church. Churches are the place where the gospel is preached, evangelism is taught, new believers are nurtured, workers are trained, and encouragement is given. Because of that, the distance between a person and the nearest active church is a big factor in determining the likelihood of someone becoming a Christian. The multiplication of churches in the world remains the best strategy for winning the world for Jesus.

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Combining data in the *Status of Global Mission* report (mid-2005) with data in the January 2005 issue of *International Bulletin of Missions Research,* we may calculate that 10.7 percent of the population of the world is the dedicated "Great Commission Christians." They are the most powerful group of people in the church. This group includes those with a life-changing, genuine faith they are likely to share with others. Some inside the organized church are called "second-generation Christians." These individuals call themselves Christians but have neither made a personal decision nor have genuine faith themselves. They, too, need a conversion or a change of allegiance to become true believers. Called nominal Christians, they make up approximately 22.4 percent of the world's population. Some Christian workers are especially gifted at working patiently with this unique type of unsaved people. Nevertheless, both dedicated and nominal Christians are already in the church. Combined, they make up approximately 33.1 percent of the population of the world.

People who live within geographical and cultural reach of a Christian church make up another approximately 32.2 percent of the population — almost one-third of the people in the world. In missiology, we refer to these people as "reached." It does not mean every member of their society is already a Christian. Instead, it means there is a church within a reasonable distance that speaks their language and understands their culture. We consider that society reached with the assumption that many will be saved as a healthy church continues to do its job. There is plenty of work for dedicated Christians in the churches in these societies since the dedicated Christians are only 10.7 percent of the world's population. They are attempting to establish meaningful personal relationships and communicate with the 32.2 percent who live nearby, are culturally similar, and speak the same language. For every dedicated Christian in churches all over the world, there are three unbelievers within their cultural, linguistic, and geographic reach. The sobering surprise for many, however, is the next category.

About 34.7 percent of the people of the world live where there is no church within cultural, linguistic, and geographic distance. In other words, just over one-third of the world's population is unreached. They would have trouble finding culturally relative information about Jesus even if they were actively searching. They are called the "unreached." Because they are not visible, many of us don't realize they even exist. They are off our radar screens. Do we dare pretend they are not there? This is the spiritual demography of the world, even though many do not realize it. Seeing the world's population this way helps us become aware of what is going on outside our well.

Consider also the distribution of Christian missionaries in the world. Only 26 percent of the missionary force works among the unreached people groups of the world. Including both Western and non-Western missionaries, 74 percent of the missionary force serve among largely Christianized people (those who are reached). Clearly, there is a great imbalance in the distribution of Christian workers in the world. We not only need missionaries, we also need to distribute them more strategically.

The unevenness of missionary distribution is easily illustrated when you consider the Chinese and the Hindu people. Each has over one billion people. Together, they make up over one-third

of the earth's population, yet only 4 percent of the mission force works among them. In the reached areas of the world, there are 185.6 missionaries per million people. Yet, there are only 2.73 missionaries per million people in Muslim areas. Many places do not have churches within cultural, linguistic, and geographical reach of the 34.7 percent unreached of the world. We must move this information onto our radar screens.

Raising Awareness Levels

As a young boy, I decided I would serve as a missionary. I still wonder how a six-year-old child could make such a significant career decision. How could a little boy know that his sense of values was consistent with God's heart for the world? The decision was not based on formal missiological training. I do not remember hearing missionary stories or particular conversations before age six. I do not know what caused me to suddenly announce to my grandmother that I was going to go to Egypt when I grew up and tell the boys and girls there about Jesus. I evidently heard something — missionary stories or conversations — in our home and church that planted the ideas in my heart. My grandmother made trips to Mexico and Cuba with goods and a message, and she talked about these trips as a matter of course. Maybe that was a part of it. We must not underestimate the formative power of personal stories from parents, grandparents, children's teachers, pastors, and informed Christians in raising awareness in our generation of the eternally valuable service to be rendered in other parts of the world. Seeds of these wonderful ideas must be planted in young minds.

Good books are another important means of raising missions awareness. Ruth Tucker wrote an excellent biographical history of Christian missions called *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*. By reading it and others like it, we can grasp the dedication, challenges, obstacles, choices, and victories experienced by wonderful Christians. Here are some examples.

7. You can read of Polycarp. After serving for 86 years, he was burned at the stake in Smyrna. His death won a great victory for the Christians since many non-believers were horrified by what happened.

8. Syrian traders traveled the old silk road to western China and introduced the gospel. You can learn what they did correctly that led to 150 years of Christian influence among the elite. You can also learn what they did wrong that led to its eventual failure.
9. In a bold masterstroke of missionary genius, Boniface chopped down the sacred Oak of Thor the Thundergod. This bold action severed the root of the fear of Thor. Thousands watched the defiant act and were converted to Christianity when they realized that neither the tree nor Thor had the power to oppose Boniface.
10. Against enormous public and private opposition in India, William Carey translated the entire New Testament into six languages. He translated parts of it into another 29 languages. He also helped liberate widows from sati, the dreaded requirement to cast themselves on their dead husband's burning bier. He was able to convincingly prove from the Hindu's own sacred scripture that sati was not required.

You may laugh or cry as you read stories of David Livingstone in central Africa, Hudson Taylor in central China, or Lottie Moon and her great accomplishments in China. There is C.T. Studd, who, after serving in China and India, began working in central Africa at age 50. You can read of the five New Tribes Mission missionaries in Bolivia who gave their lives for the gospel in 1943. Read about five more who died at the hands of the Auca Indians in Ecuador in 1955. There are many stories of common folks with less-spectacular, yet wonderful results for their efforts. There is a lot of good, life-enriching missionary reading out there.

Reading and reflecting on these biographies can help you, your children, your church, or circle of friends be more aware of the issues. The *Trailblazer Books* series (Bethany House Publishers), written for children, includes numerous missionaries' biographies. These thrilling adventure stories introduce young readers to Christian heroes of the past. Many of the biographies in the *Women of Faith* and *Men of Faith* series (Bethany House Publishers) deal with the lives of missionaries. The *Christian Heroes: Then and Now* series for children from YWAM (Youth With a Mission) Publishing can provide hours of fine reading for young readers or even wonderful parent-child reading times.

These books help us pass on great values to our children. The lives of these heroes and heroines still speak to us today. Allow real stories of these real heroes to expand your perspective.

We can also learn from their mistakes. Some of their sufferings were intensified through errors. Some of their families suffered needlessly. Some died needlessly. Is the gospel worth dying for? Yes, of course, but it isn't always necessary. If the deaths were needless, there are lessons to learn even though God used the mistakes to further His cause. Just because God uses a mistake does not make the mistake any less a mistake. As a trainer of missionaries, these are things I must think deeply about and teach. Yet the vast majority of missionaries' suffering was unpretentious, pure heroism — a price to be paid for a valuable service rendered — and is to be lauded.

As our awareness increases, the Holy Spirit can use the information in our heads to stir us as He wills. He chooses how to use what is in our heads; we choose what we put there. The Spirit of God moved me as a six-year-old boy, but there must have been some stories told earlier which made that possible. This generation, too, can seize the extraordinary opportunities before us. Not everyone will live abroad, but everyone should be informed and involved. Our heroes are the frontier missionaries who take the time to research where the gospel is not preached and then go to those places. They need our logistical help and deserve our greatest respect. May we pray for them as we celebrate them and their work.

Seven Advantages for This Generation

This is a great time to be involved in God's work of world evangelism. There are seven tremendous opportunities before us never experienced by any previous generation.

1. Due to the world population explosion, there are more non-Christians alive now than in all the preceding centuries combined. If we seize today's opportunity, we could win many souls for the Lord.

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☐12. _____ Due to the same population explosion, there are more Christians alive on earth now than have ever lived in the preceding centuries combined. We have the manpower to do a big job well.

☐13. _____ Worldwide transportation and passenger service is the best it has ever been. This enormous advantage means we are able to travel easier and arrive sooner and more safely.

☐14. _____ Worldwide communication is faster and easier than ever. From many fields, we can send reports, prayer requests, and information. We can receive affirmation and information from family, friends, and missions administrators in seconds at low cost via the Internet.

☐15. _____ Disease prevention is better than ever. We can purchase inoculations for almost any disease in the world. By merely using wisdom and keeping up on our shots, we can live abroad almost free of disease.

☐16. _____ There are greater financial resources available to finance worldwide gospel work than ever before. These resources are being channeled through churches, mission organizations, and other unique networks to qualified and sincere persons.

☐17. _____ There is a broad array of missiological tools available for today's cross-cultural worker. Linguistic aids enable us to learn languages without a language institution. Cross-cultural communication, once fraught with miscommunication and misunderstandings, is now possible with a reasonable degree of accuracy. The ability to use lessons from applied cultural anthropology to reduce frustration while living among people who think so differently improves the mental health of missionaries. We are able to do smarter missions today. Missions history has informed our missions practice so that colonialism and paternalism have given way to partnerships and fraternalism with many missionaries serving, as they should, under the guidance of the local people.

Though the magnitude of the task is sobering, these seven factors cause us to rejoice because of the increased potential for serving well in our generation. This is a great day to be a missionary.

In July 1973, our family of four moved from Canada to Korea. We had most of the above advantages except for Internet communication and the missiological training. I later received missiological training during several furloughs. We experienced all seven of these advantages in our later years in China and my trips to Asia and Africa since our return to America. During our last year in Beijing, we could communicate with our sons via e-mail almost daily. Contrast this with missionary David Livingstone and his wife between 1852 when she returned to England and 1873 when he died in central Africa. They went years between letters. While she cared for their children and her own health he made three grueling, lengthy exploration trips through the heart of Africa. Our generation enjoys tremendous advantages. Studying missions history makes us acutely aware of the tremendous handicaps that hindered our missionary predecessors.

Facing Previous Generations of Heroes

Our predecessors traveled months by ship, often arriving weak or ill, and waited long months for mail. They served in the midst of numerous life-threatening diseases and faced cross-cultural communication problems without today's missiological training. They learned languages without current linguistic aids and had no opportunity to read the hundreds of lessons in missions history. The most important tools of our spiritual work are spiritual — personal discipline, serving with love, humility, prayer, and fasting. Our missionary predecessors certainly used those tools. Nonetheless, here we are referring to the unique technological and educational advantages we have today. When we consider their disadvantages and their successes, how will we face these heroes when we get to heaven? Today's advantages are so great, disadvantages so few, opportunities so vast, and stakes so high. How will we look them in the eye unless we seize the opportunities?

This is a great day to be a missionary.

The zealous interest in world evangelism observable in many Christians today is extremely encouraging. Complacency, seen in a few places, is probably not caused by intentional selfishness. It is simply a matter of being uninformed — a frog in a well. Other generations rose to the challenges and opportunities of their days. Our generation, partially lulled to sleep by convenience, ignorance, ease, and prosperity, will change with our help.

Sending Our Best

Lord, hasten the day when we again send our finest sons and daughters to this noble enterprise.

One of my favorite stories from the history of the early Christian Church comes from the great church of Alexandria, Egypt in the second century. The elderly bishop of that church, in a vision on his deathbed, learned that a man would arrive the next day with a present of grapes. That man was to become the bishop's successor. True enough, the next day a rustic, illiterate, and married layman named Demetrius arrived with bunches of grapes taken from a vine on his farm. Through this curious circumstance, Demetrius was hastily ordained and, surprisingly, ruled well on the throne of St. Mark's for 42 years. During this time, the church produced three great scholars: Pantaenus, Clement, and Origen.

Pantaenus was a Jewish Christian educated in Greek philosophy. According to the early church leader, Jerome, a deputation arrived from India one day. Demetrius asked Pantaenus, his most famous scholar, to respond to their invitation to go to India for discussions with Hindu philosophers. The bishop considered the cause of the advancement of the Christian church in far-away India no less important than the advancement of scholarship at home.

Lord, hasten the day when we again send our finest sons and daughters to this noble enterprise. The mission field is not the place to send less-competent Christians or misfits. We have not done this exclusively, and God can use anyone. Nevertheless,

that is no reason we should not send our best-qualified Christian workers abroad. May we not be so ethnocentric that we feel other places in the world deserve less than our finest minds.

The Courage Factor

Even when we value participation in God's great project of world evangelism, we still need courage and confidence, or we will not budge from our well. When Char and I lived in Canada, we learned in 1972 that we were to go to the Orient. It was the beginning of the fulfillment of my childhood dream to be a missionary. I did not realize that, at a deep subconscious level, I was afraid until one day as I was praying, I felt as though God said to me, "Call me Dad." I was shocked. My own dad and I were good friends, but the idea that God wanted to be closer — a friend, a buddy like my dad — had never occurred to me. To me, that is what He meant when He wanted me to call Him "Dad." God deserves the respect and love associated with calling Him "Father," but, in addition to that, He invited me to a new level of friendship. Praying alone in our church in rural Canada, I did not carefully analyze this. However, as the years have passed, I realize this is what God was saying. I had known Romans 8:15, says "… you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, '*Abba* Father.'" *Abba* means "papa" or "daddy." At that time, I still had not experienced that level of intimacy with God. Even now, when work or life gets tough and I need to feel really close to God in prayer, I call Him "Dad." I suspect He enjoys this as much as I do. It takes courage to serve the Lord, whether in familiar or new surroundings, whether in your usual ways and mother tongue or in new ways and foreign languages. Yet, you can do it; with your Best Friend traveling with you, you can go anywhere. We don't go alone. This is a partnership.

In the spring of 1978, Char and I were preparing to return to Korea for our second term. The international director of missions for our denomination and I were both guest speakers at a missions conference in Pennsylvania. It was there that I learned I was being asked to serve as the "acting supervisor." Until then, I had served as director of student ministries, director of youth camp, counselor to pioneer pastors, and professor in our minister-training institute. This appointment meant I would be

responsible for the entire field. I would also serve as chairman of the national board of directors. After the conference, Char and I headed back to California to prepare for our return to Korea. We passed through Iowa on our way where I shared the news with my parents. I explained that I had been given a considerable responsibility. I even confided that I sometimes felt overwhelmed and anxious over it. I was not sure this was a normal reaction to accepting a new responsibility.

The next morning, my mother told me that she had been praying and thinking about what I had said. She said I should not be afraid. My fears only indicated that I was trusting in myself, not God, and that was inappropriate. If I trust in God, I need not be afraid. My fear only served to reveal my misplaced trust. Since then, every time I am afraid of a responsibility, I remember her advice and that my fear tells me I have again misplaced my trust.

My fear only served to reveal my misplaced trust.

There are two wonderful and opposite characteristics of God that are an enormous help to weak humans struggling with tasks far bigger than themselves. One is the fact that God is nearby, and the other is that He is not. Let me explain. Because God is near, He is aware of our situation and perfectly able to identify with it. Because He is not only nearby but also bigger and more powerful than either we or the situation in which we are living (or struggling), He is able to help us. Were He only big and somewhere else, He might not want to help. Were He only near and feeling my anxiety, He might not be able to help. I am reassured that God is near and knows my situation. Simultaneously, He is strong enough to do something about it. In theology, we call these two wonderful truths the imminence and transcendence of God. He is close and caring, and He is big and strong enough to help. Combined, they are a great encouragement to us. When we contemplate the greatness and power of God and the care God has for us, we have no reason to be afraid. Because we are frail humans, we may feel afraid. However, there is no reason to be afraid if we are trusting in God. This is about as practical an application of the omnipresence of God I know. God is already there and invites us

to join Him. We certainly don't take God to places new for Him — or too difficult.

Creator and Savior

He does not work in a controlled atmosphere. Instead, he labors in a workshop cluttered with catastrophes of our making, recreating injured and broken people.

Throughout this chapter, we have been contemplating the fascinating privilege of our partnership with God. What an awesome privilege it is to work together with God! On the other hand, our task is more difficult than building; it is reconstruction. Almost any builder will tell you it is easier to begin with a new foundation and build a new house than to repair an old house fallen into disrepair. Yet, look what God is willing to do to give you and me the opportunity to participate in His great project.

Compare the creation of the natural world with the subsequent multiple recreations of fallen persons. In the creation of the cosmos, God worked by Himself in a one-time performance. He worked with perfect tools, in a controlled atmosphere, with no resistance or opposition to His creative work, and with the measurable result that non-existent heavenly bodies were made out of nothing — they began to exist. The greatness of the natural universe is an irrefutable testimony of His power to create. In the miracle of salvation, an even greater and more profound dynamic is at work. In this arena, God works continuously through the centuries; not alone, but with each succeeding generation of faulty "tools." He does not work in a controlled atmosphere. Instead, he labors in a workshop cluttered with catastrophes of our making, recreating injured and broken people. He impresses us, not so much with His power, but with His love. He produces results that are immeasurably beyond our comprehension out of messes equally beyond our repair. God gives us the worth and dignity which comes from partnership with Himself. With this profound privilege in view, I sincerely

want all the more to fulfill His dream for me. I want to be my best possible self. This is not because at my best I become deserving of being God's work partner. It is because God wants a work partner who is an effective Christian working at his best. Being my best brings satisfaction to Him.

Thinking outside the Box

The Scripture teaches that we are priests. In addition to that, God calls each of us to our individual professions through which we honor and serve Him. If this is so, then we should all pray as seriously about our calling and job performance as the preacher is expected to when he prepares and delivers his sermon. Do you realize you are just as "ordained" to do your job as an employee or employer in the will of God as the "ordained" minister is? To think otherwise would mean that preachers were the only ones who could serve God completely in His will — a notion I reject. Philip, the deacon in the book of Acts, was not a paid professional. Yet, he had tremendous influence for God. As other believers fled persecution in Jerusalem, Philip also left for an unnamed city in Samaria. We don't know if he had career-related business there or not, but we are told a revival broke out. Next, he journeyed on the desert road from Jerusalem to Gaza. There he met the Ethiopian treasurer and led him to the Lord. After that, he went to the area of Azotus — formerly hostile Philistine territory. He finally reached Caesarea where he still lived years later when Paul passed through on his way to Jerusalem for the last time. Philip enjoyed years of fruitful "ministry" everywhere he went, but we never read that he was anything but a deacon. If we would eliminate the distinction between paid professionals and volunteers, we would release an enormous amount of creativity and energy by dignifying, recognizing, equipping, and releasing all the people in the body.

According to statistics, the most effective way to communicate the good news is person-to-person, friend-to-friend, and relative-to-relative in conversation. Survey after survey shows that 60 to 90 percent of Christians become believers through personal influence. Ideas are exchanged in non-threatening ways through the normal give and take of conversation, living and working together, and informal dialogue. Win and Charles Arn conducted

a study of 240 people who converted to Christ. Of those, 35 converted because of information transmission that includes tracts, Bibles, and other non-personal pieces. Another 36 converted because of persuasive monologue which includes evangelistic sermons. However, the vast majority (169) converted through informal dialogue — friendly conversations.

Adult education professionals know that more information is learned through conversation than speeches. A speech may contain more information, but people learn more through conversation. Learning through conversation creates an opportunity for questions and answers, higher interest levels, non-threatening exchanges of information and more thoughtful, less emotional decision-making. Conversation is more life-related, non-threatening, and natural. Most importantly, it is the most effective means of sharing the good news. The verb usually translated "preach" in the New Testament could just as well be translated "communicate." We don't have to "preach" to communicate. Experience shows us that conversation is more effective.

Persuasive monologue produces a decision. Unfortunately, the decision lacks the depth that is characteristic of conversation between friends.

The Arn brothers analyzed another group of 240 persons. This time, all the subjects became Christians but later changed their minds and dropped out. In this study, 25 became Christians by information transmission; six of them made their decision because of informal dialogue; and 209 of them had made their original decision to become Christians because of persuasive monologue. Persuasive monologue produces a decision. Unfortunately, the decision lacks the depth that is characteristic of conversation between friends. An emotional decision is made because of the emotional appeal of persuasive monologue, but often the reason is not understood. By contrast, the person converted through non-manipulative dialogue is more likely to continue after the decision because his or her level of

understanding is higher and a conversation has begun — a relationship has been established.

Interestingly, Chinese law requires believers to use the most effective means of evangelism possible! Let me explain. Freedom of religion in China allows individuals to believe what they want. Nevertheless, believers are forbidden to publicly propagate their beliefs in large meetings or through the media. This leaves Chinese believers with the only means available to them — personal conversations. As we observed above, it is the most effective and economical means anyway.

All Christians should engage in meaningful conversation wherever they are. Then the Christian family could win the world more effectively than if we were to somehow get everyone to go listen to a sermon with us. Thankfully, some are converted through preaching. In addition, some progressive Christian television programs effectively use a conversational format. This further attests to the effectiveness of conversations over monologue. Nevertheless, statistics indicate that the most effective method of conversion is conversation — informal dialogue between a believer and a non-believing friend. Unfortunately for some Christians, our social networks are limited to only Christians. We need to not only think outside the box, but get outside of it, too.

A Second "Conversion"

We are saved out of the world. As we mature in the ways of the Lord, we require a second conversion back into the world if we are going to season it as Jesus intended. Meaningful social relationships with non-Christians may be your most valuable asset. Our holy huddle is one of our greatest weaknesses. Christians enjoy getting together. Unfortunately, however, we enjoy *koinonia* (communion, distribution, and fellowship) too much and catch "koinonitus" — too much insular fellowship. Some Christians memorize mechanical presentations while others lob messages from a distance to coerce non-Christian friends to become believers. However, there is a better tack. Engage in honest conversation with non-Christians — speaking and listening. Avoid conversations where two people take turns

talking, neither truly listening nor responding to what they just heard. That is a kind of simultaneous monologue with polite interruptions. It does not yield the kind of give-and-take, listening, and responding effective conversation requires. We will speak more of this in the next chapter.

We must learn not to love the world in one way — the "world" of materialism, hedonism, humanism, idolatry, and unbelief. Conversely, we must learn to love the world in another way — the "world" of precious eternal souls is to be greatly loved. In God's mind, it was worth Jesus' death and should be worth our best efforts on its behalf.

Paul made it *his* ambition to travel, evangelize, and plant churches in new places. Yet, Paul himself taught his readers to "Make it *your* ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders …" (I Thessalonians 4:11, 12, emphasis mine). Bloom where you are planted. If Jesus is the center of our lives, our good living will speak for us. Our ideas will naturally spill out through conversation in kindly ways. As Christians the world over do this, more and more people will want to become Christian.

God, the Master Builder, is inviting you and me to become His partners in a great enterprise. He wants not only to make you a part of His project; He also wants you to help Him with the work. Your unique participation is integral to its great design. It is vital to your journey of becoming everything He intended you to be. It is questionable that we could ever be at our best unless we are engaged in some way in God's grand project.

Realistic Goals

Have you ever heard people say, "I was afraid God would send me to Africa as a missionary if I didn't do such and such," as though service there were a punishment God gives naughty children? To the contrary, being sent to Africa is a great privilege. It is an opportunity for the obedient and the disciplined, not punishment for the disobedient and undisciplined. For some of us, foreign missions is an assignment that helps us become our best possible selves. I admit that I have

my own bias — I would send everyone I met to the foreign mission field. However, I am not the Holy Spirit. Clearly, such a policy would not be good in every instance. Serving on the foreign field is, nevertheless, a high privilege. God confers on us an awesome honor when He allows us to be His messengers.

God's great worldwide enterprise allows for many forms of expression. Some are on the front lines while others work with logistics and supplies. The whole thing is a team effort. Each of us must find what part we can and should play. If the world is the field, we can only conclude that all of us already live on the mission field. After we discover where we are called to serve, our task becomes one of merely discovering what we are to do there. Only the Holy Spirit can show you your place. The challenge considered in this habit has been to try to describe the enormity, grandeur, and value of the task, and trust that you will find where you are to be and get there — or, if you are already there, continue to serve there faithfully. The world is no longer so big that you cannot think seriously about the other parts. Neither are your conversations with your non-believing friends so unimportant you want to engage in them without prayer. We all have a major part to play.

Material things have their greatest value only insofar as they serve an eternal purpose.

Worth versus Ease

We all have a standard by which we determine worth. We call this a value system. Some people evaluate the worth of their activity based on the amount of pleasure it brings, monetary rewards it earns, or the amount of its prestige. Activities that have eternal worth — those that make the difference in the destiny of eternal human souls — really have the greatest worth. Material things have their greatest value only insofar as they serve an eternal purpose.

During our years in China, Char and I met a number of other Christian foreigners living there. They were of all ages and in

multiple pursuits — business, education, medical, diplomatic. All were seizing the opportunity to share their Christian faith in many different ways, not a few with Chinese university students. These well-motivated, visionary senior citizens and young adults with eyes that see far into the future have my most profound respect. They are some of the modern-day unsung heroes and heroines of the church. Isaiah said of them: "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation …" (Isaiah 52:7). People who have an eternal perspective don't ask how easy a project is. Instead, they ask how much eternal worth it has. They know what is worth believing; what is worth doing; and what is worth talking about. How beautiful on the mountains are their feet! Because of their integrity — complete integration in what they think, do, and say — their conversations are a part of what God is using to win the world to Himself.

In the next chapter, we will consider some ideas to help us identify with those we wish to influence. Whatever your target audience, effectiveness in communicating your message will depend, in part, upon your awareness of their "well" and your ability to express yourself in ways that make sense to them. We often must learn the ways of other "frogs" in order to make lasting impressions on them. Wherever we are, the Lord would have us follow His example in being sensitive to others, their needs, and the best ways to connect with them.

HABIT FOURTEEN

Become Sensitive to Contexts

"I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some."

I Corinthians 9:22

This chapter is designed to prepare us to be better communicators. The previous chapter established that geographic closeness does not guarantee good communication. Though becoming geographically close can be a first step, there are issues that are equally critical. Our message is important. To make sure we convey it, we also need to connect in social and personal ways. If I want you to understand me, I must also speak your language and understand your culture. I must speak to you on subjects you are interested in — or subjects about which you recognize your need to know more — if I want you to listen with attention. The more we are able to get into others' worlds and address issues they are interested in, the more likely we are to effectively communicate.

In this chapter, we consider how to be sensitive to the situations — the contexts — of people with whom we would like to share our good news. This information will help increase your effectiveness as a communicator, whether dealing with linguistic and cultural issues in cross-cultural communication or simply considering how to enter the "world" of a neighbor more

effectively. Your business may put you in contact with international people in other countries. Or your neighbors may be internationals in your own increasingly cosmopolitan or multicultural city. As our world shrinks, we need to learn to accurately communicate cross-culturally. On the other hand, you may simply want to know how to better understand people in your "world." They may be from a different generation or, for any other reason, think differently. In any case, the communicator is responsible for being sensitive to the other party's perspective. People aren't likely to study intercultural communication strategies just so they can understand our message. We must adjust to their world if we want them to "hear" what we mean. After reading about this habit, you may want to learn more about cross-cultural communication as a Christian. Check out Charles Kraft's excellent book, *Christianity and Culture*.

Not everyone will, nor should they all, subscribe to "our kind" of Christianity.

The following story illustrates the flexibility an effective communicator must exercise. The incident describes a specific situation. It teaches cultural sensitivity lessons that apply to effective cross-cultural communication. Not everyone will, nor should they all, subscribe to "our kind" of Christianity. In other cultural situations, other modes of expressing the gospel may be more appropriate.

Core Values or Peripheral Issues?

During a recent summer, my five days in a Muslim country were almost over. I had one more appointment. My host had arranged for me to meet someone at 9:00 a.m. before I flew on to India in the afternoon. My host — a former Muslim, now a Christian — had carefully told me that the guest requested this appointment and further explained that he was "probably not the most important person for you to meet." I was willing to meet him and was in for a delightful surprise.

Rafique wore a beard and the traditional attire of Muslims in his country. He brought his friend, Mohammed, a behavioral science professor. Though dressed like a Westerner, he had mannerisms similar to Rafique's. Rafique works in health care, and Mohammed teaches in a local college. These two men represent what missiologists would call a highly indigenous, Muslim-sensitive group of "believers" — believers in Isa (Jesus) as the way to receive favor from Allah. They do not use the name "Christian." Doing so would distance them from the circle of family and friends they most want to reach with their faith.

As I listened to Rafique, I noted that these men were sensitive to their cultural context, just as I advocate in my *Contextualized Theology and Evangelism in Context* classes in seminary. They pray with their hands open and slightly lifted — the way they were taught to pray to Allah as Muslims. They call Jesus the "Holy One" instead of using the offensive term "Son of God." They do not refer to the Trinity, though they themselves believe in each member of the Trinity. The term "Son of God" and references to the Trinity in the Muslim worldview are taken to refer to an immoral God who had sexual intercourse with a woman and produced a bastard. They don't use the word "church," and they don't use a cross for decoration. They meet and pray in homes and in every way appear to be Muslim.

They use strategies that are consistent with the Muslim worldview. Their children's book about Isa has no pictures of humans. I was told pictures of humans are offensive to Muslims. Mohammed and other Muslim prophets did not — would not — allow their pictures to be used. They do not use the Jesus film for the same reason. Rafique told me Muslims will watch the Jesus film, but there is a problem. People in this country could not respect or believe in anyone treated with such disrespect as to be portrayed in pictures or films.

Rafique explained that the life of Jesus in Arabic has been written in the Quranic style. It has 30 chapters, just as in the Quran. They don't use "Matthew" or "Mark" as names of books because Muslims don't use men's names that way. Instead, they use "Manger" and "New Life" as the names for those books, which make the Gospels more palatable. Each chapter begins with "in the name of God" as in the Quran.

By profession, Rafique works in health care and Mohamed is a professor. However, their primary task is to spread the news about Isa. They study one afternoon a week at Rafique's office and have communion with water and bread. They do not observe Christmas and Easter. Furthermore, they continue to attend the regular Friday's prayer session in the local mosque. Muslim women are difficult to convert because they fear their husbands, but men are more likely converts. The wives follow their husbands in conversion. Rafique's group, therefore, targets husbands.

Christians in their country tell these believers that they are not Christian because, of all things, they do not observe Christmas and Easter! Rafique and his friends just go on believing and serving, even without the strength and support of brother and sister Christians in their own nation. Rafique asked me for Christian materials that he could adapt and use in his Moslem context. I gladly gave him more than he asked for.

God appears so perfectly in the human context that we sometimes fail to realize He had been anywhere else. That is perfect

Was it right to encourage Rafique? Should I have given him the materials? Was I right to release him to adapt them? How much of the Western "Christian message" is essential, and how much is cultural? What traditions can be omitted without compromising our belief? What can we do to make it easier for people to become believers without changing cultures? What requirements have we added over the years to the invitation to receive salvation from God? How can Christians be more flexible and sensitive to the situation of others to make it easier for them to become believers? Is Rafique simply doing in his cultural context what Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each did in writing a gospel for particular target audiences — Jewish, Roman, Greek, and general? Finally, if not in public ways, how does a believer in Isa "confess" his faith before men? How does he avoid having a watered-down Muslim-like semi-Christian "faith?" In short, what are our core values, what are only peripheral issues, and what is syncretism? We will return to

Rafique and Mohammed after examining some of these questions in more detail.

God the Communicator

In the book God gave us, He could have totally overwhelmed us with equations, formulas, astronomical, cosmological, chemical, molecular, geological, and atomic information. Its complexity would have caused Albert Einstein to scratch his head and ask God for the simple version. Instead, God used a sheepherder named Amos and a fisherman named Peter, as well as scholars Moses and Paul, to write a series of human stories in the common language of the day. The result was an easy-reading book that addresses human history and spiritual needs. It was done so perfectly that some say it's *just* a human book. In missiological terms, sensitivity to contextual issues for communication purposes is called "contextualization" — adapting to the cultural context. God contextualized his message so well that many do not realize that hidden, divine, and supernatural truths lie in those histories and discourses. When the message fits and is easily understood, that is impressive contextualization.

There once was a man who perfectly acted the part of a common person. Even though miracles happened through him and divine wisdom came from his lips, some people still thought He was just a man. They did not recognize that God also contextualized Himself so perfectly that we didn't even realize He came from outside our earthly context. Even today, God appears so perfectly in the human context that we sometimes fail to realize He had been anywhere else. That is perfect contextualization! The truth was still hidden — as God wanted — yet revealed — as God also wanted.

God is a perfect communicator. He tailors His message to our situations. He masterfully adapts the eternal, unchanging Word to make it understandable in changing human conditions. He makes allowance for the endowment and opportunities of the people with whom He deals. He considers not only humanity and human weakness, but also human culture. In missiological terms, we would say He is "receptor-oriented." He knows the grid

through which his target audience views things and adjusts His medium of communication accordingly. For example, he used angels for Israeli shepherds who believed in angels. He used a star for Eastern astrologers who knew how to interpret them. Because He knows the answer, He does not need to ask, "How will they understand this?" Nevertheless, to follow His example, *we* must ask that question.

We can learn this central lesson of contextualization from God. We too should adapt our message to fit the context wherever we serve, whether it is a foreign country, rural America, academia, or the inner city. When we contextualize, we make the message fit the local situation. We apply it accurately to local issues and confront the right problems in a manner consistent with local culture. If we do this well, others cannot tell that the message came from outside the local context. If our message is rejected, it should be because its hearers don't like the message, not because we communicated it poorly.

Words are merely symbols to which we attach meanings. We should be more concerned about the meaning being communicated than the choice of particular words.

Regarding Words and Cultures

Words are merely symbols to which we attach meanings. We should be more concerned about the meaning being communicated than the choice of particular words. If we are translating, we should translate meanings, not words. Meanings are more important than words. We must be willing to sacrifice words in order to preserve meanings — even when we are emotionally attached to the meanings. God is primarily concerned with meaning, not the particular symbol used, and His model is worth duplicating. In translation theory, this is called dynamic equivalent translation. Such translations create the same impact on the new culture that the original translation had on the original culture. Dynamic equivalent translations may use

different words than the original, but they will have the same meaning. The alternative is to use the "right" words, but convey a different meaning.

In one culture of the world, people do not lock their doors. Whenever a guest comes to visit, he calls out to his friend, who recognizes his voice and welcomes him in. In that context, if a thief approaches a house, he does not want to reveal who he is by speaking, so he says nothing and knocks on the door. If someone is home and asks who it is, he silently slips away — undiscovered. In that culture, friends call at the door and thieves knock. In such a context, how would you translate Revelations 3:20? "Here I am! I stand at the door and ____." If we used the original text and said, "knock," we would miscommunicate, whereas if we used "call" instead, we would communicate accurately. Even cross culturally and through an interpreter, I have often "connected" by using this illustration.

Become a sensitive cross-cultural Christian worker. Whether serving in our increasingly pluralistic society at home or serving abroad, we must adapt our message to the various contexts where we work. Feel free to generously use local metaphors, illustrations, symbols, parables, proverbs, sayings, and even jokes. They contextualize the message we have to share. We must use the most appropriate and applicable methods to convey it.

For centuries, people have used materials at hand — stone, dirt, and wood — to build dwellings. One theologian refers to this as "vernacular architecture." It illustrates the natural need to construct buildings of local materials that fit the local scenery. This common form of architecture sometimes produces structures of beauty. However, it always produces something that fits its context. If homebuilders naturally produce vernacular architecture, couldn't believers produce vernacular theology? If we do this correctly, we can avoid exporting an alien (and alienating) culture with the gospel.

Find and Communicate the Meaning

Christian communicators look for universal truth that applies to every person in every culture at all times. They present that truth in ways understandable in the local culture. God is the Creator of all the races and is interested in everyone knowing Him. His book, the Bible, contains universal truth that is above culture — let's call it supra-cultural truth. Bible writers rather naturally contextualized their messages and that further creates complex communication issues for us. They probably did this unconsciously since they were already part of the cultural contexts they were addressing. As a result, the supra-cultural truth in the Bible is "hidden" (to us) in its contextualized form in the materials written for other (not our) specific cultural contexts.

For example, you have to understand something about vines to grasp Jesus' meaning about staying attached mentioned in John 15:4. You also have to understand why shepherds sleep in the gate of the sheep pen to appreciate that Jesus is the door. This is mentioned in John 10:7. The supra-cultural truth is that Jesus protects. The symbol used to express this is the "door." When the shepherd himself puts his life on the line by lying in the gateway to the sheep pen, no enemy can pass by him. In Jesus' case, the Good Shepherd gives His life for the sheep. All the messages (meanings) in the Bible need to be "decoded." They must be identified, separated, and defined apart from their Hebraic, Aramaic, (agrarian) and Grecian symbols in their original contexts — not confused by the cultural (mis)interpretation of the cross-cultural communicator. We must restate the meaning using new and appropriate symbols the receptor's culture understands. This is called "encoding the meaning" in the cultural terms of the receptor culture. It enables them to understand its meaning in their context.

Here is another illustration that demonstrates decoding and encoding the cross-cultural communication process. What supra-cultural truth was Paul addressing when he told women to wear their hair long? Was he not speaking of honoring one's head — one's husband? In first-century Corinthian culture, a woman wore her hair long to honor her husband. Her hair length was a culturally appropriate indication that she was married. Paul did not mean that people in other contexts must wear their hair a certain length. Today in my culture we would say, "Wear your wedding ring." In parts of Africa, we would say, "Wear your leather skirt, not the grass one." That is why we should first discover, and then teach, the supra-cultural truth of the Bible. In addition, we should be free to use whatever local symbols are necessary to convey the deeper spiritual or practical meaning.

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The Need for Continual Reformation

Two of the most well-known reformations are recorded in Acts 15 and church history. In the first, the Jerusalem council determined that new Gentile believers in Asia Minor did not need to be circumcised. The second was the protestant reformation of the 16th century. We learn in Acts 15 that the churches of Asia Minor did not need to keep all the Jewish customs. In Luther's day, the Christians of Germany learned they did not have to keep all the customs of Italy — celibate priests, Latin liturgy, etc. These reformations meant that believers in Asia Minor could be non-Jewish, and in Germany, they could develop a church life that better fit German culture. These reformations illustrate that each new geographical area may adapt Christian practices to make the message better fit its new context.

As we progress through the centuries, new generations appear in the same geographical locations. These new generations deserve to hear a contemporary gospel message. They desire an applicable theology presented meaningfully in their contexts. I served as a pastor in a church in rural Ontario in the early 1970s. During the same time, I worked with a group of Canadian "Jesus People" outside the church. We organized a Jesus People parade, rally, camp, and regular Bible studies in the homes of youth. I did not realize then that I was instinctively contextualizing my message and method in a way consistent with principles I now know to be universal. God is not threatened by the adapted approach. He is not offended by adaptations to the cultural, sociological, and psychological situation of the receptor. Rather, He is delighted that we are willing to incarnate the message in a new context — just as Jesus incarnated himself into the human context. God wants to be understood. Making the message clear is better than wasting our listener's time with unclear "messages" that may discredit the relevancy of our gospel.

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Acceptable Range

In becoming sensitive to context, I am not saying we should throw off all restraints. In fact, we should recognize that there is a limited range of acceptable variation. There is some room to wiggle. The famous reformer John Calvin noted that the New Testament writers used freer expressions than writers used in the Old Testament. They were content if the section of the Old Testament they quoted merely applied to their subject. In ministry abroad, I have used the ribbon bookmark attached to my Bible on numerous occasions. The ribbon gives me about 10 inches of freedom to move in any direction. It reminds me there is a limit since the ribbon is attached to the Bible. In a similar

manner, some interpretive leeway is appropriate. Nonetheless, our teachings always need to be attached to the Bible as the standard. This model is called "the Bible as tether."

You notice a certain freedom when you compare Mark 2:26 and I Samuel 21:1-6. Mark says, "Abiathar," gave David the consecrated bread. According to I Samuel, Ahimelech gave David the bread. Abiathar and Ahimelech were both real people, but they were not the same person. Mark (or a copyist) simply used the wrong name, yet God does not straighten him out. The truth of Mark's message is not affected by this minor difference. Freedom is allowed in the use or choice of words, but the integrity of the meaning must be preserved. When translating or interpreting Christian materials, we can incorporate helpful explanations in the text of the translation. Explanatory notes in scholarly texts are a possible exception, since there are some technical issues that need clarification. However, for most of our work, the goal is clarity at first reading or hearing. Foreign statements requiring a footnote are a distraction.

Revelation

A revelation has to mean something to me to be revealing. When attempting to introduce people in another culture to Jesus, we lead them and, in some cases, release them to discover their own applications of the Bible's messages to their local situations. If we truly believe that the Holy Spirit will guide those with whom we work into all truth, just as He has guided us into all truth, we have a spiritual reason, as well as strategic reasons, to release them.

We usually train Christians by putting information in their heads. Yet, they are sometimes unable to comprehend or are unmotivated because it has not been personally revealed to them. Spiritual insights need revelation — *revelation* is different from *relevance*. Let's illustrate by referring to a type of strong plastic glue made up of two thick substances that react chemically to form an extremely strong adhesive. Revelation is like one part of that two-part epoxy and plastic combination. One is base (the Bible) and the other is activator (the Holy Spirit). Both are needed. We need the written truth in God's Word, but we also

need a culturally sensitive Holy Spirit revelation by the Activator. The Holy Spirit, Jesus said, would be our Teacher. The Holy Spirit is a Revealer. He is at work in revelation.

Foreign missionaries and national church leaders who cooperatively collaborate create the best Christian teaching material for other contexts. Neither one can easily achieve balance alone. Foreign Christians working alone may tend to pass on foreign ideas; the nationals may tend to produce a mixture of truth from God and local cultural values. When the truth is contextualized and altered, or when culture or other religions are presented as gospel truth, the result is called syncretism. Culturally sensitive Christian teaching materials should be a Bible-based, relevant, and applicable revelation that scratches right where they itch, and even creates new itches. Contextualized theologies fit their contexts.

Freedom of Expression

The Bible is error-free in what it teaches, and the truth of its message must be preserved. While maintaining the integrity of the message, word choices that help contextualize eternal truths are allowable — even essential. In developing culturally sensitive Christian materials, writers, translators, and interpreters should choose expressions carefully. They should ask, "What words will best convey the meaning intended?"

There are many lessons that our culture does not allow us to learn because our culture is not asking all the questions.

Our cultures are like magnets that draw us to the sections of Scripture that seem most applicable in our lives. National church leaders with whom we work should be free to let the magnet do its work. If not, local believers could miss what is most important or valuable in any given context. Do you get excited reading genealogy? I don't, but since some cultures only keep genealogies of important people, the genealogies in the

gospels signal to them that the man at the end of the list is an important person! The books of Matthew and Luke introduced Jesus' genealogy early, but only some cultures allow their readers to catch the full impact. What great new applicability the Bible might have if we let the local culture ask the questions. What if we were to think of the Bible as a book of case studies — not a theology textbook? There are many lessons that our culture does not allow us to learn because our culture is not asking all the questions.

Like our teaching and curriculum, the type and location of the church gathering, the time and style of worship, and personnel choices also ought to be dynamically equivalent. They should fit the local situation just as nicely as meeting at Solomon's porch fit the needs of the early believers in Jerusalem (Acts 5:12). If today's church does not fit its context or loses its sense of vitality, excitement, and adventure, we are less than the apostolic church.

Evidently, the Israelites were not hesitant to "convert" poetry — an ancient Canaanite hymn to Baal, or at least its patterns and metaphors — and use it to worship the true God.

If we over-value each word in the Bible or rigidly try to force its every idiom onto every modern culture, we may miss the process of applying its *truth*. That may lead us into "Bibleolatry" (worship of the Bible) rather than *worshipping the God of the Bible* as we apply the Bible's truth to our lives. Some have misunderstood these words of Jesus: "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished" (Matthew 5:18). This verse does not make individual words and symbols sacred, rigid, and inflexible. Instead, it emphasizes that what God says will happen. This is not a verse about how to translate the Bible; it is about the enduring quality of the truth in the Bible.

Application is a major component of contextualized theology. It requires flexibility to change words to preserve meanings. Each word is inspired incidentally — it is the thoughts that are important. Some people are too preoccupied with the gift-wrapping and miss the value of the gift — preoccupied with the words and miss the truth. The importance in the words is derived from the truth that the words convey.

We can further build a case for freely using local expressions by reevaluating Psalm 29. Many of us have read this highly figurative poem and rejoiced in the strength of our God:

> Ascribe to the Lord, O mighty ones, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
> Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness.
> The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord thunders over the mighty waters.
> The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is majestic.
> The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.
> He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, Sirion like a young wild ox.
> The voice of the Lord strikes with flashes of lightning.
> The voice of the Lord shakes the desert; the Lord shakes the Desert of Kadesh.
> The voice of the Lord twists the oaks and strips the forests bare.
> And in his temple all cry, "Glory!"
> The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord is enthroned as King forever.
> The Lord gives strength to his people; the Lord blesses his people with peace.
>
> Psalm 29

What if you heard this psalm was adapted from a heathen poem praising the local rain god, Baal? Psalm 29 is one of the oldest psalms. In recent years, it has been common to stress the similarities between it and the ancient northwest Semitic-Ugaritic literature. The psalmist who adapted this poem illustrates a good example of healthy flexibility. Evidently, the Israelites were not hesitant to "convert" poetry — an ancient Canaanite hymn to Baal, or at least its patterns and metaphors — and use it to worship the true God. For centuries now, He has received and enjoyed precisely those words of praise originally ascribed to another god every time believers use Psalm 29 to worship Him.

God does not seem to be bothered or threatened by contextualization or use of the local metaphors or symbols — thunder claps, lightning flashes, and trembling mountains — found even in converted idolatrous poetry. Because it fit both the

conceptual and literary aspects of its context, Psalm 29 probably made a strong and clear impact on its original hearers. Can you imagine their first impressions? Paul quoted a heathen poet at Athens (Acts 17:28) and John and Charles Wesley used bar tunes to create some of the hymns that were influential in their day. Taking similar liberties for the sake of helping our message fit today's contexts could have more impact as well.

Translating Ideas with Words

In parts of Papua New Guinea (PNG), sweet potatoes and pigs are the main diet and means of exchange. If there is a misunderstanding between persons, families, or communities, a certain number of pigs can be used to buy release or forgiveness of the debt. Pig feasts are celebrated to express new peace between formerly warring families. People in this culture therefore immediately understand when God is portrayed purchasing a good relationship between mankind and Himself by offering a pig sacrifice. This idea was conveyed easily to Hebrews with Jesus as the Lamb of God. Recently in the Eastern highlands of PNG, I independently asked two different local residents if, from a communication standpoint, "pig" was a better word to use than "lamb" in their context. Each agreed with me. Yet, I have received violent reactions from some Westerners when I use this illustration. Still, in other parts of the world, my hearers have welcomed the freedom. I would not translate lamb as pig in the Bible perhaps, but I would certainly use pig when teaching the idea of Jesus as our sacrifice. In Myanmar, one pastor shook his head in joyful amazement and said to me, "What a profound idea, to translate meanings!" Let's look at some of the issues.

Some cross-cultural Christian workers are specifically involved with translation. Even those who work in their own culture sometimes have to "translate" meaning for a younger generation. Consider what a good translation should be like. Here are three possible criteria:

"What a profound idea, to translate meanings!"

18. It does not sound or read like a translation.

19. The translator was free to allow his own personality to express itself.
20. The effect on the reader is just as live and vivid as the original was on the original readers and hearers.

Formal correspondence translations can obscure intended meanings. Word-for-word translations fail when there is no compatible word in the other language. A good translation should not require outside footnotes or additional outside explanations. Translators can avoid this problem by clearly writing what the original *means* — not what it *says*. As a result, the explanation is incorporated in the text naturally. It is clear without additional explanation. "Word-faithful" translations use the original words yet, in doing so, become "meaning-faithless" translations. The Bible writers wanted to be understood, not admired. Greater cultural and linguistic distances between the original and the new translation require us to take greater liberties to preserve and communicate the meaning.

Being sensitive to contexts allows us to say less yet communicate more.

Individual context also affects what aspect of a truth you emphasize. What does "abundant life" mean? The Christian life has both qualitative and quantitative values. Abundant lives are eternal and everlasting and are also presently abundant, real, and meaningful. This can be stated two ways: 1) We have life that primarily extends forever and secondarily is meaningful here and now. 2) We have life that, primarily is real and meaningful and, secondarily also extends forever. If our communication is receptor-oriented, we should use whichever is more important to our audience! Take the United States for example. There are some at the low end of the economic scale whose main concern might be issues of bread and butter. For them, abundant life as "meaningful here and now" would be most valuable. For those at the top end of the economic scale who have material wealth but fear death, "extends forever" would truly be good news. In some cases, these two might be reversed — the wealthy looking for meaning in life now and the poor anticipating heaven. The receptor-

oriented communicator is sensitive to the unique need of each non-Christian. Unfortunately, the uninformed person must shoot blindly into the unknown and hope he may hit something. Being sensitive to contexts allows us to say less yet communicate more.

An American Handicap

Americans may be frequent travelers. Still, we are often insensitive to the cultural dynamics of the missionary task. No culture is superior in every way to other cultures. The United States is, for now, economically, technologically, and militarily superior. Consequently, Americans have unconsciously and unintentionally taken on an unhealthy ethnocentrism. Our strength in our strong areas has produced a weakness — pride — in another. When we travel in the non-Western world, our economical and technological advantages are obvious to us, but the strengths of others are not as obvious. Our value system has not taught us, nor does it encourage us, to notice their strengths. We may not notice or fully appreciate the values that their cultures emphasize and our hosts demonstrate — attitudes of a servant's heart, humility, yieldedness, simplicity, graciousness, hospitality, and the honoring of others.

I once stayed for four days in the home of a carpenter in East Africa. I slept in the living-dining area of their small house on a foam rubber mat they provided. By candlelight, we moved the coffee table and couches each evening to make room. In the next room were the live roosting chickens we would eat that week — one or two less of them each night! There were about 12 of us who ate together at this house, so we pretty much all lived in community. My prayer time in the morning was spent walking in the neighborhood; everything else was done in front of everyone else. My hostess graciously offered to do my laundry and I accepted the offer. I shaved by Braille (without a mirror) in front of the house using a pan of warm water. The outhouse had two rooms — the toilet and the bathroom in which I bathed each day. This bathroom had a stone in the middle of the floor to minimize the effects of the wet dirt on the bather's feet. Mud naturally developed because water splashed from the bucket holding the bath water. Bath time was also the time and place for changing clothes. My training in intercultural studies and years of

experience living and traveling abroad prepared me for most of this, and I did not think too much of it. However, I learned something important near the end of my time in that home. To my surprise, the hostess had been hand-carrying all the water for laundry, drinking, cooking, and bathing from the village well some distance from their home! When I learned that, I appreciated their hospitality all the more.

I shudder to think of how rude or insensitive I might have been. My culture did not prepare me to be sensitive to how far water was carried for my bath and laundry. I was not prepared to even consider this question or possibly offer to help carry water. Americans are economically prepared to buy plane tickets, but culturally handicapped unless we make an intentional effort to compensate for our blind side. If we are careful to be humble, American Christian travelers could be a force for good in the earth. Our gracious hosts and hostesses in other countries anticipate and overlook our differences. We must work hard not to add arrogance to our cultural disadvantages. Because our culture does not place a high value on quiet humility, patience, service, and honor to others, we often don't recognize their courtesy when we see it. Our hosts must exercise those qualities all the more because of our lack of them.

In the paragraphs above, we have observed some differences in the strengths of cultures. Now, let's try to unravel an even more complex web. Who has the authority to define what sin is — the Western missionary or the local culture? Biblical absolutes are not negotiable. However, since worship and honor look different in different cultures, there could be misunderstandings. For example, should Christians bow before the graves of parents at anniversaries of their deaths? This question has stimulated lengthy discussions in China and Korea with those two cultures generally coming down on opposite sides of this divisive issue. Some say bowing at the grave of parents and ancestors is breaking the first commandment — to worship no one but God. Others feel that they break the fifth commandment—to honor parents — if they do *not* bow. Europeans, Africans, Latin Americans, and Asians each should be feel released to live up to their *own* consciences, not to live up to the conscience of foreigners. Sin, in some cases, may be defined according to the application of the Bible to the local cultural context.

Start Where People Are

God starts with us where we are and works with us to help us grow. It seems only fair that we too should start with new converts where they are. However, our ethnocentrism and subjectivity often hinder us from being as magnanimous as we might be. God is willing to accept us where we are. He is willing to bring us through the process of growth, gradually fulfilling each culture's moral ideals, of which the new convert is already aware, and then God's ideals as we grow in knowledge of the Lord.

To place unnecessary cultural change on the threshold of conversion is to require changes God does not require *at that stage.*

Polygamy, slavery, and smoking are all possible examples of areas in which the cross-cultural Christian evangelist should give the new convert some space for gradual growth. Paul did not require slave owners to immediately release their slaves. The direction of our lives and our central allegiance must change at conversion, but some changes will take several generations. To place unnecessary cultural change on the threshold of conversion is to require changes God does not require *at that stage.* In doing so, we retard the rate at which people convert. In missiology, "starting point" and "process" are the key concepts in the model that expresses this thought. It is an important idea because, in world evangelism, it can help Christian evangelists be less judgmental and increase the confidence of new converts. God seems to be less concerned about pure doctrine and more concerned about pure hearts than we are.

What about polygamy? Can we accept the marriage vows of the generation now accepting Christ, multiple wives and all, and then teach the next generation the value of monogamy? On a plane from Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania to Arusha, Tanzania, I discussed this topic with a Tanzanian lady. She told me that many African men turn to Islam because Christianity does not accept polygamy. I was sorry to hear that. To force instant monogamy on an existing polygamous family system is to

require numerous divorces and great social upheaval. When insisting on instant monogamy, what do we do with the anti-divorce teaching? Do we require divorce and social upheaval in order to become Christians? A women currently living in a polygamous society may feel more *secure* in that society than one who lives in a monogamous society where she can be divorced at almost any time. Monogamy, after all with the practice of easy divorce and remarriage, is sometimes merely serial polygamy. Polygamy is understandably more attractive than monogamy in places where security is valued more highly than freedom. In those societies, the "formerly married person" has no acceptable social role and often resorts to prostitution. When we convert people in other cultures to Christianity, we should start where they are culturally. Through education and time, a healthy process of redemption will occur in their society. Perhaps the next generation will adopt monogamy.

The Role of the Holy Spirit

Paul could never have covered as much territory as quickly as he did if he had stayed in each place long enough to solve the kinds of problems that go with the establishment of new churches. However, he trusted the Holy Spirit in matters of finance, church discipline, and administration. He was therefore able to rapidly move on to other new areas. Over the years, he stayed in contact with the churches in which he had taught and ministered. Yet, he was willing to trust the ministry of the Holy Spirit to work in the leaders he appointed. When we recognize how the Holy Spirit works in our lives to lead us into the truth, we can expect Him to work in a similar way among others.

There is a great deal of doctrinal diversity even among Christians. The ability to tolerate differing views within the perimeters of biblical truth is a mark of spiritual maturity. Christians could divide themselves over the position of Mary or questions about the Trinity. What if we tried to find common ground instead? All who receive God's salvation are our brothers and sisters. We ought to accept them regardless of our differences. It is possible to think along similar lines when discussing different cultural expressions of Christianity, each appropriately fitting their different contexts.

A more culturally specific theology has a greater impact in its own context. However, that same theology is less able to effectively address the needs in other contexts. Most people react to this by trying to produce a cover-all or universal theology. The problem is that generalizations abound and specific culture-related issues are seldom addressed in universal theology.

Would not the multi-cultural mosaic of the body of Christ in the world be much more varied and colorful and also make a stronger impact in each context if we released the Holy Spirit to work in and through national church leaders to address issues of concern in their contexts? For example, should Christians use the same herbs that witchdoctors prescribe for certain sicknesses? Someone asked me this question during a pastor's seminar in Kampala, Uganda. I answered that I felt it was permissible providing the reason was not because the witchdoctor had recommended it. The local translator took the liberty to give his opinion too. He felt it should not be taken because it would indirectly give credence to the witchdoctor. I later shared the question in Bangladesh. One pastor there believed that demons are nothing to fear for Christians who have a greater power through faith. He felt that the person should take any herbs he wanted. The American, African, and Asian each had different thoughtful answers to the one question. Different contexts require different responses.

Should we lift and kiss the Bible to indicate it is a holy and revered book? Some Muslim evangelists promote this idea. They do this to the Quran in Islam to show reverence. Because Christians don't kiss the Bible, they come across as highly irreverent toward their Scriptures. Do believers have to celebrate Christmas and Easter? Should Christian women wear veils? Western theologies largely ignore these non-Western culture-related questions. However, the Holy Spirit has been helping people decide questions like these in a number of different contexts for centuries. Trust God to help each people group develop a theology that addresses the right questions, confronts the right issues, and offers the right biblical solutions to culturally specific and pertinent problems.

Now back to the question at the beginning. Remember Rafique? Would you have encouraged Rafique to express his faith in such cultural garb? Would you have given him the Christian

curricula? Would you have told him he could and should adjust them to fit his situation? Would you have told him to omit materials from the curricula that did not fit his cultural context? Would you have released him to add whatever he and his colleagues feel necessary so that it addresses important issues in his context? And would you have accepted him as a brother even though he doesn't use the word "Christian" and prays to Allah in a mosque? Are you offended in your Christology that he calls Jesus the "Holy One" and not the "Son of God?" Are you willing to let his countrymen find salvation through Isa and worship Allah as Rafique teaches them? While easy answers regarding Rafique and his team may elude us, he tells me they have won many converts who are now in active groups in every county throughout his nation. These numbers of converts alone do not prove the correctness of his position. However, his contextualization provides an opportunity in an otherwise nearly impossible situation. Remember Jesus was willing to talk with Nicodemus at night at a time when Nicodemus felt free to talk. Now, what about the recent immigrant who lives down your street or the teenager down your hall? How can you get into their worlds without judging them?

Now, what about the recent immigrant who lives down your street or the teenager down your hall? How can you get into their worlds without judging them?

It is not important that everyone subscribe to the same cultural expression of our beliefs. It is more important that all people in all cultures find and accept a biblical form of belief in Jesus that fits their situation. Requiring everyone to accept our form of cultural expression would greatly retard the growth of Christ's church throughout the earth. According to United States Census data, cultural diversity in America is rapidly increasing. This is just one more reason for the astute Christian communicator to be culturally sensitive, receptor oriented, adept at asking questions, and skilled at listening for understanding.

To require others to come to our conceptual and linguistic world would possibly be easier for us but much less fruitful. I believe in incarnational missions. I cannot escape my obligation to be the one to do my best to "travel" to another person's world. May the Holy Spirit help us to get there culturally as well as geographically. When we are sensitive to contexts, our message is more likely to fit and have impact. We will have become more incarnational — more like Jesus.

HABIT FIFTEEN

Obey From the Heart

"If you love me, you will obey what I command."

John 14:15

In this chapter, we examine a simple frame of reference by which we can assess how well we are pleasing God. How well we are pleasing God centers on the answer to this question: "Are we doing what God said to do?" God lets us know what He wants us to do through His Word, our conscience, the authorities He has placed over us, His Spirit, and perhaps other means as well. At multiple junctures over the course of a day, we should always be able to answer "yes" to the question: "Are you doing what you are supposed to be doing right now?" This simple yet weighty question is the ultimate criterion by which we should live. It will help us to always live at our best and qualify for God's great rewards.

You may already know this and only need to stay with your habits and policies and continue to be your best. If not, please know you will never become your best unless you believe it is possible to obey God — possible for you to know what God wants and possible for you to do it. If you believe that is impossible, then you cannot. Yet, in reality, it is possible for you to take control of your thoughts and reject the evil you imagine if you only will. Horrible as the thought is, some choose to remain in ignorance and disobedience, but that is not necessary. If you can change

your mind, you can change your life. When you know you have the power to change, you can, and if you want to, you will.

Most Christians are aware that man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. Yet, in this chapter, we treat obedience as the ultimate criterion for measuring what is worthy of reward in a person. Why? Obedience includes belief in God and worship — believing the right things and saying the right things — which both glorify Him, but is not limited to those issues of the heart and mouth. Obedience also includes our actions, which have the power to complement or contradict our belief and worship. Our actions either glorify or dishonor God. In our obedient behavior, belief and worship find artistic display — it is beautiful to behold. Everyone does not see the belief in our hearts or hear our words of worship, but people do see our behavior. More are influenced, therefore, by our worship in action than by our worship in words. If we have integrity, our thoughts, words, and actions will be integrated — consistent. This habit brings our worship in action (obedience) up to the same godly level as our worship in thought (beliefs) and words (worship). May God burn this truth deep into our spirits — that obedience is important. God uses it as the ultimate criterion in rewarding us.

If you can change your mind, you can change your life.

This chapter does not focus on any specific area of behavior you are to work on or explicit command you are to obey. Instead, it addresses the theme of intentional obedience to whatever identifiable application you need to make. The Holy Spirit, God's Word, your conscience, or your superior will make it clear to you what specific application fits your situation. Let's leave that part sufficiently open to allow you to apply the obedience principle — worship in action — to whatever way your present circumstances require. The Lord is working on some part of us at any given time. Apply this to that part.

The Confidence of God

In the best possible world the triune God could imagine, His three-part self had millions of counterparts who could relate to Him in meaningful, intelligent, and loving ways. God envisioned Adam's race as being sufficiently like Him in our powers of choice and dominion that we would be intriguing counterparts to Him. Creating a race of such beings entailed the risk that we would not choose to love Him in return. Nevertheless, having someone choose to love Him meant enough that He was willing to take that risk.

God is very confident. This is understandable since He has sufficient love, wisdom, knowledge, power, and understanding to deserve our love. God gives freedoms to man and makes Himself vulnerable to their choices. His willingness to do so is founded on His great qualities, abilities, and the confidence He has because of them. God is so confident that He can afford to take the risk of creating mankind with a free will and placing him in an environment where he can make real decisions. He was not willing to have only counterparts who would worship Him mechanically or coercively — without feelings, choice, love, and genuine admiration. That would not have been the best possible world.

In making Himself vulnerable, God created a situation in which He could experience the joy of being loved and the disappointment of being rejected, the happiness of being obeyed and the sorrow of being disobeyed, the delight of being willfully worshiped and the intense sadness of being willfully overlooked. God genuinely feels these emotions as He responds to how we treat Him. He is the best there is in the universe. When, to *our* loss, we neglect Him, He is saddened for our sake as well as His own even if *we* don't have enough sense to realize the mistake we made and what we are missing.

His response to our actions is not a calloused immunity to heart-felt feelings, as though He had watched the "movie" of human behavior a billion times over from eternity past to eternity future and had become bored with it. Human choices and their consequences are not a required, predetermined script played out in a prescribed drama. If they were, God would or could watch it with less emotional attachment because He would have always

known what was going to happen. However, the God we see in Scripture and in our experience is intensely interested in the unfolding drama. He is extremely impassioned as He appeals for the affection of people. He is intensely interested, emotionally involved, and eager that we make the right choices. He is happy when we do and disappointed when we don't. Our obedience is the ultimate criterion for evaluating human choice and behavior. Obedience has the power to make God happy and disobedience has the power to make God unhappy.

To comprehend this, reconsider the sovereignty of God. Sovereignty is not absolute control in the sense that He overpowers human choice. God has deliberately given up some control — namely your decisions. That is the risk — the price He was willing to pay in order to have meaningful relationships with significant counterparts. That is the way God wants it. God's sovereignty is not hyper-determinism. We often say that God is in control of everything, but that is not the case in the absolute sense. He is in control of what He wants to control, but He does not want to control everything. God has decided not to be in control of everything so that human beings to whom He has given a free will may live in an atmosphere in which real choices are made. Humans are in control of some things — their decisions — for which they are responsible. This best-possible universe that God created has the ability to delight the heart of God if we obey.

God's sovereignty is not hyper-determinism. We often say that God is in control of everything, but that is not the case in the absolute sense.

The Free Will of Man

The ability of man to weigh evidence, have his own chosen value system, decide to worship God or not, choose to obey or not, and consummate his own decisions with free behavior is an awesome

and fearsome danger. Clearly, man is responsible for choices as shown by God's system of reward and punishment. The choices we make are real. The environment in which we make them is free. The consequences of our choices are enormous. We are responsible for our choices because the choices are ours. If there is no freedom of choice, there can be no responsibility.

Integrity is a strict consistency — integration — between what we think, say, and do. If you tell others what you think and you have integrity, others can reasonably guess how you would react in a variety of circumstances. God has integrity. Moreover, He has told us what He thinks. The Bible makes it clear what He wants, expects, values, and loves, as well as what He hates and what makes Him sad or angry. He is watching to see if we will try to conform our behavior to please Him or if we will become our own gods and live our own lives independently. How blessed are those who make right choices. How damned are those who don't.

God constantly watches our actions and responds accordingly. He responds to some of our actions with joy, encouragement, and blessings. He responds to other behaviors with sorrow and discourages us from further pursuit of that course of action — sometimes withholding blessings. A master weaver of Persian rugs can use a novice's weaving error to create a distinctive, creative, and unique carpet. God is the Master Weaver. He is able to respond to our choices — some of them bad — and still work out His overall purpose through the "weaving" we make — our choices. In granting us freedom, God gives up some of the control over what will happen in human history. He can accomplish His purpose even in the process of responding to choices over which He intentionally exercises no control.

What is Obedience?

Why take the preceding two sections to discuss God's confidence and man's free will? Any perception of obedience not based on proper understanding of those two thoughts would lack depth. Obedience means laying aside your preference to defer to the will of another. Sometimes obedience is easy such as when our preference is similar to the will of the other. Other times, when our preference is significantly different from the will of the other, it is difficult. This is why obedience is the ultimate criterion for evaluating our "reward-ability." We honor the one to whom we submit, and obedience is a way we honor God. If we can get this habit right, the other issues of life will fall readily into place.

We must all decide whether we will serve God or serve self. The paradox of paradoxes is that, in serving self, we are not our best possible self; God and we both lose. By right choices — obedience — we become our best possible selves — highly effective Christians. When creatures who have real power of choice obey the will of another — namely God, who took the risk that we might not — we are at our very best. In serving God, God and we both win. That is art at its finest — the most beautiful dance.

He can accomplish His purpose even in the process of responding to choices over which He intentionally exercises no control.

What are the practical applications of such ideas? Revisit the example of the division of Christians into the two camps of clergy and laity. Some perceive clergy as the dedicated and fully obedient ones and believe laity as not quite so dedicated. It is wrong to assume that paid, full-time Christian workers are more dedicated or obedient than unpaid volunteers. Clearly, there are other ways to measure the worth of a person's service. Obedience is that criterion. It is better to be out of the "ministry" and in the will of God — being obedient — than in the "ministry" and out of the will of God — being disobedient. At any juncture in our lives, we ought to be able to know that we

are where we should be and doing what we should do. Nothing matters as much as this.

I have a high view of my calling as a missionary. I suffered a personal identity crisis when we returned from Korea and were introduced as former missionaries. Though we were pioneering a church for our denomination, I wrestled with being a pastor and a student. I suffered again along the same lines when I was no longer clergy. I went to China as an English teacher and became a Chinese language student studying Chinese culture! Why was that difficult for me? What unjustified elitism caused me to scorn not being a minister? I had been 100 percent obedient in each of these decisions yet they were difficult identity crises for me. Why? Even now, I wrestle with being a professor training ministers rather than being in the ministry. Clearly, I should not. Corporate men and women who leave their corporate roles to stay home with their children full-time experience the same thing. Can we learn to be confident of God's approval when we obey even when the appearance of the matter could cause some to misunderstand or not appreciate the value of our good decisions?

Success = (Talents + Opportunities + Accomplishments) ÷ Motive

Figure 15-1. The Equation for Calculating Success.

We know "non-ministers" who are totally dedicated, zealous, prayerful, humble, sincere, growing, and obedient Christians. They deserve great respect. We also know egotistical, prideful, stubborn, and insensitive "ministers" who enjoy a certain vocational prestige. I would partly consider myself in that group. The degree to which you obey God is the degree to which you are successful. The success equation in Figure 15-1 on the previous page was fully explained in Chapter 7 (Know Who You Are and Are Not). Obedience is the key to understanding the equation.

The equation measures the degree to which each of us is obedient. It compares how well we did to how well we could have done. This has nothing to do with vocation. It has everything to do with submitting our wills to those of others.

Degrees of Punishment and Reward

The Bible contains many references to varying rewards and crowns. It indicates that not everyone in heaven will receive the same reward. In I Corinthians 3:12-15, the Bible describes what is worthy of reward (referred to as gold, silver, and precious jewels) and what is not worthy of reward (wood, hay, and stubble). We do not perfectly know how God measures the quality, quantity, or value of rewards. However, God is, in one sense, the perfect behavioralist who encourages our good behavior with promises of rewards. His plan is working when we obey. Incidentally, in heaven we will all be perfected so there will be no jealousy over another's rewards or positions.

Scripture clearly says that one sin or type of sin can be greater than another in this verse: "Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin" (John 19:11). And again:

> "That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Luke 12:47, 48).

Clearly, to whom not so much is given, not so much is required. These verses about God's justice indicate that there are degrees of punishment in hell. He is a just God dealing with variable degrees of reward and variable degrees of sin. That tells us something significant: our behavior matters. It will be justly punished.

In addition to the physical discomforts of hell, the eternal mental suffering will be perfectly proportionate to the sin each person committed. The human memory has a built-in punishment mechanism. As we ponder our behavior, it could forever produce mental suffering exactly proportionate to our own sins: the degree to which we knew better, the things we did, the opportunities we had to repent and make amends and didn't, the awfulness of what we did compared to what we could have done, the awfulness of where we are (hell), compared to where we could have gone (heaven). If our opportunities were few and our

knowledge little, such mitigating factors would lessen our loads. If our conduct was not as bad as it might have been, that too would lessen our loads. The greater our opportunities and knowledge of what we should have done, the greater our responsibility. The greater or increased frequency of our evil deeds, the greater would be our mental grief. In other words, the less we sinned, the less condemned we would feel; the more we sinned, the more condemned we would feel. Since each will suffer mentally proportionately to his own situation, the anguish of hell will perfectly fit each occupant.

Our behavior does not determine whether we spend eternity in heaven or hell. That decision is based on whether or not God forgives our sins, and that depends on our belief in the Savior, confession, and repentance. Salvation is a free gift for those who confess and repent. For those who do not repent and end up in hell, the amount of mental anguish will correspond to their behavior. On the other hand, our accomplishments do not determine acceptance into heaven. That is based on our belief in the Savior, repentance, and confession of sin. For those who get to heaven by their faith, rewards will be proportionate to deeds.

To be sure, there is a very wide gulf and great difference in status between those who *barely* make it into heaven and those who *almost* make it in. Ironically, it is quite possible for some with better behaviors than ours to end up in hell if they do not confess their sins. Some with sins that should have kept them out of heaven will be there because God forgave them — not because their behavior was good. Belief is the criterion that determines the *place* where someone spends eternity. However, both places (heaven and hell) will contain different degrees of reward and punishment based on behavior. Belief places us in one or the other of those two locations; behavior determines our ranks. Faith in God and confession of sin for salvation is more important because it determines our eternal dwelling places. Nonetheless, behavior (obedience) is still extremely important. We do not know how much or even if our

Belief places us in one or the other of those two locations; behavior determines our ranks.

various rewards or regrets will affect our relationship with each other, but the degrees will be there. My hope that you are not reading this in an attempt to lessen your punishment in hell but rather to increase your reward in heaven. Nevertheless, if I thought I were going to hell, I would still watch my behavior (obey God) if for no other reason than to have less to regretfully brood over for eternity. Through this book, I hope to encourage good behavior (obedience) both for the sake of being your best now and also so you may enjoy your reward forever.

During our years in Asia, people often asked us about the eternal state of their ancestors who did not know Jesus. The Bible says that those who are lost in sin are eternally separated from God. How do we answer the sincere question of the inquiring Oriental or African? The discussion of degrees of punishment allows us to comfort the surviving relatives of the "lost" with the truth that a just God will not punish anyone to an inappropriate degree. That includes those who had less opportunity, no knowledge, and not much sin. For reasons explained above, all those eternally lost will have the exact amount of "regrets" their behavior merits. Even in hell, there is evidence of the fairness of God.

Everyone will be treated fairly. Some will be treated with grace. Every person will get at least what he or she deserves. Treatment will be proportionate to the degree they obeyed (responded to) the information they had. Those who have repented of their sins, forsaken them, and received forgiveness will certainly receive much better treatment than they deserve. Nevertheless, no one in hell will receive worse than they deserve. When our unsaved ancestors "obey" the information they had (do what their conscience and knowledge of God's requirements dictated they should have done), they will not suffer more than they deserve.

Degrees of Obedience

Not everyone obeys with the same spontaneity, joy, or thoroughness. There are three dimensions to consider: the pace at which we submit our will to God's, the degree of cheerfulness or willingness we display, and the completeness with which we do so. These are the three most obvious measurements of the degrees of our obedience. Anyone wanting to bring his Christian

performance up to his potential should pay attention to these factors. The more quickly, cheerfully, and thoroughly we obey, the better God likes it — the more we perform at our best.

There are several discernable ways to measure obedience. At one extreme, just next to disobedience is reluctant, unhappy, and incomplete obedience. At the other end is immediate, cheerful, and complete obedience. Throughout the central area of that continuum are varying degrees we can consider. My experience of late obedience in Korea illustrates that obedience — even reluctant obedience — is better than disobedience. Jesus told a story about two sons:

> "What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' 'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. Which of the two did what his father wanted? The first,' they answered" (Matthew 21:28-31).

In an earlier chapter, we noted my wrong attitude in dealing with Reverend Park in Korea. My administrative policy for expansion of the work was right, but my sour personal attitude toward the one who opposed me was wrong; therefore, I was wrong. God could not work in that situation because of my bad attitude. Gratefully, I later had opportunities to serve and honor Reverend Park. One way I did this was not to tell others of the hurtful things that he continued to do. I could have told about them, but I did not. Because of what the Lord showed me during my fast at the mountain cabin, I stopped judging him and served him. I am glad I did. I wish now that I had done so earlier. When the Lord dealt with me on the mountain, I wish I had responded more quickly. It took several days of soul-searching alone with God for me to resolve this issue because I was, at first, only reluctantly obedient. In addition to the lessons I learned about serving instead of judging, I can now add this: It is better to obey late than not to obey altogether. Even though time passes and our obedience is not as spontaneous as it should be, it is not too late, as long as we are alive, to change our minds. If the enemy can get us to believe that it is too late to obey, we will be unnecessarily locked into the patterns of past disobedience. We may miss opportunities to serve, and with the passing of years and the changing of the situations, we may not

be able to make right all the wrongs we did. Nevertheless, as long as there is breath in us, we can confess and determine to change from that point on. We can still finish well.

However, there is yet another factor. Even if we immediately obey, complaining about it robs us of the experience of the joy of service. Just as God loves a cheerful giver, so He loves a cheerful "obeyer": "Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (I Corinthians 10:31); "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (I Thessalonians 5:18). Obedience includes the attitude we have in our hearts. This is more difficult to control than mere outward physical behavior. God even commands us to be joyful. "Be joyful always" (I Thessalonians 5:16). If we are not joyful, we are disobeying! Therefore, at the same time we perform whatever action is involved, we have not fully obeyed by just doing the right action. We have to do it with the right attitude with joy. Eliminating the complaint factor makes us more open to a full experience. Adding the joy factor opens us to even greater possibilities while we obey. We are coming closer to being highly effective as our best possible self.

Nevertheless, as long as there is breath in us, we can confess and determine to change from that point on. We can still finish well.

Immediate, Cheerful, and Thorough Obedience

Immediate, energetic obedience done cheerfully and completely as unto the Lord is the level of obedience Scripture commands: "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men" (Colossians 3:23). Try to think of something that is difficult for you. For some, it might mean praying for those who despitefully use you. It is easier to pray about them, than to pray for them. God wants us to genuinely invoke His

blessing on them, ask Him to favor them with blessings, and, with all your heart, want Him to do it. In obedience to the Word of God, can you genuinely pray for good things for those who have misunderstood, misused, or defamed you? Try that or whatever else challenged you as you read this paragraph.

During several of our years in Korea, we had a house helper. In America where vegetables, grains, and meats come ready-to-use, this may seem like a luxury. However, we found that domestic matters there, without help, took too much time from our work. One of our helpers served us particularly well. We called her Ajamoni — Korean for "Aunt." She and Char always worked closely together throughout the house, but when we had guests, Ajamoni was especially a blessing. After the meal was prepared and served, she would attentively watch Char to see what her next move should be. Just by a look, a nod, or a silent gesture, Char could signal her to bring on another platter, fill a guest's glass with drinking water, or make someone more comfortable. Ajamoni, by her careful attention to Char's desire, taught us the meaning of Psalm 123:2: "… As the eyes of a maid look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God …" We have often hoped that we could be as attentive to the Lord's desires as Ajamoni was to ours. When we give attention to God like that, it becomes possible to read His signals. Some of His signals are obvious; some are subtle. Obedience is our response to whatever signal He sends, whether it is through His Word, by His Spirit's leading, our own conscience, or the request of an authority He has placed in our lives. Failure to respond to any of those signals is disobedience. Our responsibility and pleasure is to correctly interpret the signals and do what they say. When we do that quickly, cheerfully, and completely, we are at our best.

Proactive Followership

Administrators like it when subordinates do what they are told. They also like it when they seek additional tasks. Any boss likes the employee who answers their questions. But even more appreciated are those proactive employees who also volunteer additional unrequested, pertinent information the boss may not know to ask about. We like people who not only complete the assignment but also offer additional ideas for improving the

operation. Can we become proactive followers of God? Is it possible to add to what God requires and have God's genuine approval? Can sacrifice be better than obedience?

In the case of obedience to God, it is doubtful that we can do better than obey. If we seek to sacrifice, to do something beyond obedience, the words of Samuel to Saul may apply: "Obedience is better than sacrifice." Is God pleased if we give or serve sacrificially? The Bible indicates the answer is "yes" since giving and serving sacrificially is something God has asked us to do. Nevertheless, we should not seek or expect praise from men, and we should not become proud in doing it. Going beyond the requirement to the optional — doing extra — should not become a point of pride or dependence on our own works. If it does, we have entered into another type of pride-related problem.

Ajamoni had Sundays off. What if she would have come to our home to clean or cook on Sunday? Would that have pleased us? No, because we loved her and wanted what was good for her. We wanted her to enjoy her day of rest with her family. We preferred that she do what she wanted on that day. God wants what is good for us and is pleased for us when that happens. It is doubtful that, with God, we should try to do more than obey. Obedience makes Him happy. Anything else seems tainted by some motive other than pleasing Him.

Obedience is Good for *Us*

God is a loving heavenly father who desires the very best for His children. He protects us by providing laws about things that are not good for us. However, receiving benefit from His "protection plan" involves our choice. If we do not want His protection and blessing, He will not force them on us — we can disobey. He gave each of the commandments, including but not limited to the Ten Commandments, to us for our good. They are designed for our benefit — not because God does not want us to have a good time, but because He wants what is good for us. He wants to protect us from ourselves. Each prohibition, where it says, "You shall not …" could be read, "it is not good for you to …"

Let's take a look at several commandments as an exercise in discovering how God's commandments are good for us. The first

commandment is a good one to use to illustrate this principle. As we noted above, it becomes, "It is good for you to have Me as your only God." God is the best of all possible goods. He knows, without conceit, He is the best. He does the best possible good for all His friends. In knowing Him, they have advantages — access to wisdom, power, assistance, guidance, information, insights, health, and friendship. The very best God can give to anyone is Himself! To know Him is to know the best. To have Him is to have the best. Those who set out to please God and enjoy Him forever are destined to have the best possible of imaginable lives — here and now and for eternity. This is why a loving, gracious, and good God gives Himself to us and says, "It is good for you to have Me as your only God." Seeking sensual or other pleasures, material wealth, fame, or reputation will never satisfy the human heart like knowing and having a relationship with God. Can you see how this commandment benefits us?

There is enough time in six days to do the work God intends for us to do. To do any more is to do something God does not intend.

Here is another example. Take the commandment, "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy." Don't assume that God wants us to be inactive and imprisoned from things we enjoy that day. If we assume a deeper meaning in separating the Sabbath from other days, we can take the liberty to state it in a different way: "It is good for you to enjoy the Lord's Day and keep it separated from other days."

God knows our physiological makeup because He created us. He is the Maker and knows how our machines function. He knows our bodies need periodic rest. He knows our psychological makeup and understands that our minds also need a rest from the pressures of daily responsibilities. He knows our spiritual makeup and knows that we need to take some deliberate time to nurture our spiritual person. He blesses us with a weekly appointment with Himself, a time for teaching, worship, rest, recreation, fellowship, and prayer. This is good for us. If your job requires work on Sunday, take another day for rest. After

years of misusing your body, you risk becoming ill. We could become ill when we live beneath our privilege, violate God's provision for our health, abuse our bodies, and bring physical consequences on ourselves. God wants to spare us that. There is enough time in six days to do the work God intends for us to do. To do any more is to do something God does not intend. Rest and enjoy Jesus. God wants what is good for you. To deny this is to misunderstand the character of God and fail to recognize the pleasure He gets from taking good care of us.

Would a person please God by working for Him seven days a week — not according to God's Word. We enter into dangerous territory when we think we can do more than obey and that God would be pleased with this. God is pleased when we do what He says. He is less pleased if we take our "service" to Him under our own control, trying to do it on our terms, not His. There are three potential dangers if we go beyond what God says to do: self-will, pride, and dependence on works. Self-will may lead us to do what appears to be good things. However, they will never be the best things if we put ourselves in the driver's seat and relegate God to the passenger seat. Pride in ourselves is more likely if we expect that we can earn God's favor by doing extra. This is very much akin to depending on our works. If we depend on works, we are not depending on God and have misunderstood grace. As a result, we take our focus off what makes Him happy and place it on what will boost our ego. There is something deeply wrong about boasting in what we do for God. Highly effective Christians are still just obedient servants.

God wants good things for us and has built this in to His instruction manual for life — the Bible. It brings more pleasure to Him if we do what He has said in the manual than if we try to "sacrifice" and do more. He wants us to be well, rested, happy with Him, content with His reasonable requirements, and ready to stay with the pattern for a lifetime. We stand close to a dangerous edge when we live a life of excess, over-doing, unnecessary sacrifice, asceticism. We must avoid the martyr complex (different from being a martyr) and assuming we know better than He does. Obedience is better than trying to offer more to God — sacrifice. We are wise enough to be proactive in following humans and they may be served better when we

improve upon their instructions — saying or doing more — but we cannot improve on God's instructions.

If God were selfishly demanding that we keep the commandments only for Him, then the egocentric psychological factor might lead us to seek what we want and deny Him what He wants. However, in this matter, glorifying Him is good for us. Doing what He wants is the best for us, too. When I can, I like to snow ski with our sons. What if I decided not to ski because the ski lodge was making a profit from my skiing? Let them make their profit; I ski because I like the wind in my face, the thrill of the challenge, the excitement of the race, the victory over the slopes, and the soreness of exercised muscles. Skiing is fun! I ski for me.

I am glad that God is glorified when I keep his Word. Nevertheless, even if I wanted to be totally selfish, I believe obeying His Word, His Spirit, my conscience, and my superior is totally beneficial to me. His Word protects me from terrible losses. It introduces me to a safe, fulfilled, completely satisfying life. God's instructions are one of the ways He protects and blesses us and shows us his great love. This is one reason why obedience is the ultimate criterion for evaluating humans. Obedience has the power to benefit me, and disobedience exposes me to harm.

Position versus Behavior

Because we are saved by faith, our position in Christ (and heaven) is secure. That is the good news. Here is the bad news: because we are saved by faith, we get careless in our behavior (obedience). The book of James talks about faith and works. It draws the sobering conclusion that if faith is real, our works show it. His two issues (faith and works) could also be termed "belief" versus "behavior" or "position in Christ" versus "obedience to His will." Our belief in Jesus secures our position, but we too often fail to take our responsibility seriously to obey and behave scripturally.

In this discussion, the main concern is not about where you are going. For discussion purposes, assume that, by faith, you are going to heaven. Beyond that, the concern is about who or what you are. Heaven is a location; let's go there. Beyond that and even after we are on our way there, more importantly, let's be somebody that pleases God — who obeys with all we think, do, and say. Right belief will get you there. Right behavior will get you rewarded. Without good behavior, you can get to heaven (because you are forgiven), but without right behavior — obeying — you will never be your best here or there.

To help us evaluate whether or not we are behaving (obeying) correctly, take a brief inventory. You are free to substitute these with your own questions, using whatever issues you are dealing with now. What is hindering you from being a humble, gracious, prayerful, zealous prayer warrior? What keeps you from being a supporter, encourager, and strong and wise witness to the truth about God in your home, church, neighborhood, and work environment? Are you joyful? Do you have lust? Are you angry? Is your attitude correct? Do you fast? Do you pray? Do you read your Bible regularly? Are your eating habits under control? Are you exercising? Are you learning from your daily experiences, or are you complaining about them? Do you passionately love God and seek Him with all your heart, mind, and strength? Do you love material things and seek them, or do you love God's kingdom and His rightness and seek it? Are you jealous? Are you gracious to your family members? Are you selfish? Are you genuine? Are you involved in some aspect of winning the lost in the world? Do you tailor your presentations of the good news so they make sense to people where you are? Are you sensitive to others around you? In short, is your behavior biblical? Obviously, the list could go on, but even more important than these questions are the ones you and the Holy Spirit will discuss.

Right belief will get you there. Right behavior will get you rewarded.

In each of these issues, either we are behaving in a godly way, which pleases God and us, or we are not behaving in a godly way, which pleases neither God nor us. God cares a great deal about

what we do. We also receive benefits of protection for ourselves by our obedience. Does anyone else benefit from our obedience?

Why is Obedience, Not Faith, the Ultimate Criterion?

The habit we are discussing is obedience. Another criterion is used in determining who gets into Heaven: Has this person, in saving faith, turned fully toward Jesus Christ as the One through whom we obtain acceptance into God's family? All who have done that are in God's family and make it into heaven; saving faith is the criterion for getting in. So why is obedience — not faith — the ultimate criterion discussed here? Why did we include this lengthy discussion about obedience, behavior, and works if they are not the criteria for determining who is in God's family? It is because obedience allows you to become your best possible self. Obedience enables you to fulfill God's dream for you.

This book is not evangelistic. My intent is not to explain why I am a Christian or give you reasons why you should be one. It is not my purpose to convince you to join the happy throng in front of God's glorious throne in heaven. With all my heart, I hope you will be in that crowd. However, my emphasis throughout this book has not been to convince you that heaven is a better place to spend eternity and that you bring more happiness to God by being there.

My purpose has been to help you become all that God dreams you could be. That goal reaches further than merely persuading you to join me in the grand, eternal dance in God's ballroom. I want you to receive an abundant entrance into heaven, to have some fruit to lay at the Master's feet, and to have no regrets about how you spent your earthly life. My hope is that your joy and anticipation of that day colors all you say and do. I want you to live every day of your life with great expectancy for that entrance into heaven. Then, not only will you arrive safely, but many others will come with you. You will have had increased influence and improved effectiveness because you lived your life at your best. You and your friends will both win.

It is not important that you memorize some formula for presenting Christ to others. It is far more important to impress others with what they see in your habits so they will want to be like you and go where you are going. In other words, let's learn not to be so concerned about what we say but what our life says.

We want an abundant entrance in heaven, but there is more. The habit of obeying from the heart is included because your obedience (behavior) can determine whether *others* reach heaven. If the concern were merely about your own entry, we would discuss faith. However, so that many others desire to reach heaven and glorify God for eternity, we must address Christian behavior (obedience). Our obedience greatly influences the reputation of Christians and the Christian's God throughout the earth. That is another reason for the habit of obeying from the heart. Others use your life as a determining factor in their decision whether to seek the God they see in your life. Your obedience has the power to greatly benefit others; your disobedience has the power to deny others those benefits.

Your obedience has the power to greatly benefit others; your disobedience has the power to deny others those benefits.

God took the risk that you may not choose Him when He gave you a free will. He then added another risk — that you may not obey Him, and, therefore, would not influence *others* to spend eternity with Him. It is difficult enough to comprehend that God would take the risk that we may not seek Him. It is even more awesome, beyond human comprehension, however, to contemplate that our decisions to obey (our loving and kind behavior) has such potential good influence on others. That is why obedience is the ultimate criterion for our reward. While none of us has the power to save the world, we each have the power to live effective, influential lives at our best. Choosing God will get you in; obeying Him will get others in.

HABIT SIXTEEN

Persevere Tenaciously

"Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus."

II Timothy 2:3

The habit of obeying from the heart is possibly the most important in this book. It deals with the ultimate criterion by which all behavior is evaluated when we meet the Lord. This present chapter now addresses the second most important habit: persevering in obeying God. Deciding to obey is not enough; it does not guarantee completion. We have to persevere in obedience as we face our unseen spiritual adversary and the various obstacles we meet in life. Character development occurs when we pursue goals in the midst of opposition. Remove the obstacle and the character-development process is aborted. Note the difference as you compare these two sentences. To say, "John is doing well," is a nice statement. However, it is bland compared with this sentence: "In the midst of terrific opposition and almost insurmountable adversity, John is proving his endurance, growing enormously, and still doing well." If God had made a world without the presence of evil or the need for perseverance, we would never have had the opportunity to develop fully. That world would have been too easy. This world provides the opportunity, in the process of rising to conquer, to become our very best.

Obstacles Are Deliberately Planned

God is more concerned with our development than with our comfort. If this were not true, every instance of our discomfort would illustrate that either God is weak and cannot help us or that He does not care and will not. Neither is true; He is not weak and He does care.

Moreover, He cares about our development. Difficulties develop us. Jesus said, "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Then again, He also wants us to grow — and bear much fruit — and that takes pruning. "… every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful" (John 15:2).

If God had made a world without the presence of evil or the need for perseverance, we would never have had the opportunity to develop fully.

Have you ever obeyed God and found that in the process of doing what He asked, you encountered opposition? The disciples did. (Mark 6:45-52). One night, they were going exactly where Jesus had just told them to go. They encountered a storm on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus foresaw a storm on Galilee that night yet sent them into it. Furthermore, he controlled its duration and its severity. Jesus saw them rowing against the storm in the evening and didn't go to them until the fourth watch — 3:00 a.m. At an earlier time, He had accompanied them through a storm. At that time, He was asleep in the boat, but at least He was there in the boat with them. The disciples learned that Jesus could calm storms. This time, Jesus was not with them in the boat, so it probably seemed to them like an even greater crisis. During this latter storm, Jesus walked on the water towards his disciples in the boat. He did not abandon them; He came to them and calmed the storm. The disciples' experience teaches us that our difficulties, their severity, and their duration, all are under God's control. Each experience prepares us for the next. As our faith gets stronger,

the difficulties get harder. When we realize this is all part of His scheme for our good, we are not to worry. To the contrary, observe how God is working and embrace his handiwork in our lives.

What if circumstances went well for us every time we were in the will of God and did not go well if we were not in the will of God? Everyone would seek to be in God's will — not because they love God but because they love having things go well. To keep us weak, our adversary would like us to think that difficulties indicate we are out of God's will. Yet, a storm does not necessarily indicate that we are out of the will of God. The disciples were in the will of God and still were in a storm. We must be careful in evaluating storms. Jonah was out of the will of God, yet God used a storm at sea to arrest his attention and redirect him back into God's plan for his life. God can use opposition to redirect or change our course, but difficulties do not automatically mean that we are going in the wrong direction. A storm is, therefore, an occasion for reappraisal, prayer, development, and recommitment. A storm is not the time to quit. The devil wants to undermine our faith by making us think that we are out of the will of God when we have opposition. We must be aware of this tactic. God allows opposition for our development and good. It toughens our faith and improves our character.

The weather in Beijing can be very cold, especially when the north wind blows the Siberian air through the city. Radiators pumped heat into our third-floor Beijing apartment only several hours each day. Preserving this precious heat was therefore an important measure. We took great pains to seal all the cracks in the metal windows. One Saturday afternoon during our first year in China, Char and I both had headaches. We laid down to rest for a while before our Chinese language teacher came for our lesson. Soon we remembered we had chicken soup in the refrigerator and thought that perhaps the broth would have a healing effect. I got up and boiled it on our gas burners. My head was throbbing. We drank the soup and felt so sick we decided I would go ask a Christian neighbor friend to pray with us about the problem. He came down two flights of stairs to our apartment. Upon entering, he immediately realized our room needed some fresh air. After a brief conversation, it became apparent that we were gradually killing ourselves with carbon monoxide — a

colorless, odorless, extremely poisonous gas. We had been so careful not to let the cold air in that we had also stopped our supply of fresh air. More importantly, there was no way for the carbon monoxide to escape. This event sobered us greatly. We recalled that we had a similar problem the previous Saturday. That began to make sense as Saturdays were the days we were in the apartment the most. Other days, we were out and about with our responsibilities — in the fresh albeit cold air. Observe that our difficulties with gas poisoning were not a sign we should leave Beijing. Instead, it was merely an obstacle that needed to be met and conquered. Sadly, I have seen people leave because of similar problems. Nevertheless, there is another dynamic.

When we become anxious or worry about our difficulties, we have two storms — the original circumstances (exterior storm) and inner frustrations (interior storm). God wants to develop people who know how to experience inner peace in the midst of external difficulties. We can handle an enormous amount of difficulty if we maintain inner peace. Our boat is in real trouble when our external storms whirl into our hearts and we experience an internal storm. If we can keep the circumstantial adversity circumstantial — so it can't produce an interior storm — we will be poised for perseverance. This is why God uses storms for our training.

Our boat is in real trouble when our external storms whirl into our hearts and we experience an internal storm.

Recognize His Handiwork

We live at the level of our perceptions. In our difficulties, we react according to what we perceive is occurring. The problem is that our perceptions are sometimes incorrect. There are occasions when God works in our behalf, and we don't recognize His handiwork. Perhaps this is because He is working quite differently than we expect. We often think things are getting worse. Instead, the new development that we think is

making our situation worse is really God beginning to work. Go back to the story of the disciples crossing the sea at night. When Jesus came to them walking on the water, they thought He was a ghost. The very person they needed and wanted was coming. Things were about to get much better. Help was on the way. Jesus was coming to them, but since they did not recognize Him and thought He was a ghost, they thought their situation was getting worse. Find out what God is really doing instead of reacting to what we only perceive to be happening at the natural level.

In the spring of 1985, our national church in Korea had its first convention. We were living in Seoul, but the national headquarters was 90 miles south in Taejon. In addition to my church work, I also attended seminary part-time. One afternoon upon arriving home, Char met me at the door. She announced that the international president of our denomination would be attending our convention. He would arrive in Seoul a day or two early, stay in our home, and travel to the convention with us! Visits from the director of the missions department were big enough events, but we never dreamed the president would visit us. Furthermore, Reverend Park on our national board, with whom I had the administrative policy differences, had a close relationship with the president! I had cause for anxiety.

It happened to be a day I was fasting, so I went upstairs to our bedroom to finish the afternoon by praying until supper, at which time I intended to break the fast. As soon as I closed the bedroom door and began to pace back and forth in the room praying, the Holy Spirit whispered clearly, “This is not a ghost.” I knew immediately what He meant. This looked like a ghost, but it was not. From that moment on, with peace, confidence, and eventually expectation, I prayed for a good visit with our president, a good trip to Taejon, and a good convention. We had a great time with him in our home. Our sons enjoyed him. We had a safe trip to Taejon even though the muffler fell off and a short in the electrical system forced us to drive at night without headlights — with the president! The convention was fine, and I had nothing to worry about. Much of the peace of mind I enjoyed and the optimism I felt to pray with expectancy was due to the Lord. He graciously helped me realize that this visit was not to be feared. This was not a ghost; it was the Lord at work.

When the wind, wave, and rain are contrary in your life and your boat is shipping water, ask yourself, "What the "ghost" is in my storm?" Perhaps it is God beginning to work differently than you expected. Learn to release God to help as He knows best, no matter how different from our expectations that best may be.

Remember the Former Miracle

He can calm your present storm just as surely as He fed loaves and fishes to your hungry crowd yesterday.

Our walk with the Lord is a series of difficulties and answers to prayer. It seems as though one difficulty is no sooner overcome than another appears. The day before calming the storm on Galilee, Jesus had fed 5,000 men, plus women and children. Jesus had solved that difficulty by a wonderful miracle of creation and provision, but the disciples seemed to have already forgotten about it. We worry under our present distresses because we forget the miracle God did for us in the past. If we remember the miraculous nature of the help we received the last time we had difficulty, we are more likely to maintain our sense of peace in the storm we are now facing. Jesus said that the disciples needed to remember and understand the loaves — the former miracle. What storm or storms has God already brought you through? What miracles has God already done for you? Has God changed? No. He is still the same. He can calm your present storm just as surely as He fed loaves and fishes to your hungry crowd yesterday.

In the summer of 1986, we returned to the United States after 13 good years in Korea. They did not replace me with new foreign personnel when I finished my final term. Korean nationals were in place continuing the student work, camps, church planting, pastoring, teaching, and administrating our pastor training program and the corporate affairs of the national board. Working ourselves out of a job is basically a missionary's task, and we had done that six times during our 13 years there.

As I returned to the United States, I knew the Lord was leading me to complete a final academic program. I also wanted to pioneer a new church while I was studying. I had trained and encouraged the Koreans to pioneer new churches and pioneered one myself in Korea. I felt it would be appropriate for me to do it again upon our return to the United States. I talked to the appropriate supervisor about starting a new church. We had the choice between pastoring an existing church in Ohio and starting a new one in southeast Pennsylvania. A couple had moved to Pennsylvania from one of our denomination's churches in northern California and was interested in helping to start one. I will call them Greg and Patty.

I knew their former pastor, Fred, in northern California so I called him. I reached his wife, Sue, and chatted with her about Greg and Patty and our desire to start a church with them. I asked Sue if she would be willing to recommend Char and me to Greg and Patty, since Sue knew us all. It never occurred to me to ask if Sue would recommend Greg and Patty to us.

Char and I flew from Los Angeles to Pennsylvania, met Greg and Patty, and decided to start the church. We made a down payment on a duplex to be constructed and returned to Los Angeles to get our boys and luggage. We were ready to begin our new adventure in the East. We began by having services in Greg and Patty's spacious home, and Greg became the church treasurer. Our personal belongings that arrived from Korea were stored in their large and empty basement until we could move them into our duplex when it was ready in several months. Meanwhile, we rented several apartments.

The first several months, we made rapid progress. Our kind of church was truly needed in that community. A number of families were happy to have us there. Greg, however, began to graciously hint to me that all was not well with Patty. She was discontent with several things about the church and about me in particular. Several weeks passed, and then one Sunday evening and Monday, I received phone calls from Greg and three other heads of households announcing, one at a time, that they would not be attending our church anymore. In one week, our church dropped from 35 people to 18, as the 17 people in those four families left. My heart was broken. Greg and Patty decided that they would not work with us or attend the church. In addition,

they evidently discussed their discontent with others. It affected our leadership and reputation in such a way that other good people were negatively influenced. Certainly, I was not a perfect American pastor, so part of the crisis was probably due to my own inadequacy. After several conversations with Greg, I saw he was helpless. A conversation with Patty merely resulted in a vicious verbal attack of bitterness, venom, jealousy, and unkindness. Because of the "training" I had been through in Korea, I was able to remain quiet in my spirit through those heart-breaking conversations. I had been through tough times in Korea and knew God was still the same. Nevertheless, I still felt bad because I partially believed the unkind remarks against me in Patty's verbal attack — I internalized the severe criticism.

For about 10 days, I experienced intense discouragement. Was I that hard to get along with? Had I failed God? Had my years abroad distanced me from people back home? Should I have been more assertive? Less assertive? What did I do wrong? Did God trick us to bring us here? In the second week on a Wednesday, I was fasting and praying. In those days, I used to go across the street from where we lived to a wooded and secluded area to pray. I had worn a path in the circle I walked around in those woods. I went to my wooded place of solace and desperately prayed that God would help us in our impossible situation — especially with my own discouragement. I begged God to give me new strength to help me through it. Brown and yellow fall leaves covered the forest floor. As I grew tired from walking, I eventually laid face down in those leaves and grass and continued praying. I reminded the Lord of the 23rd Psalm. I said, "Lord, You are the One who can restore our souls. Please restore my soul. I desperately need restoration. I am dry. I am empty. I have no confidence left."

This was not the first time for me to pray for restoration. There had been a time in our last years in Korea when my creativity was in low supply. I had asked God to restore my vision, creativity, energy, and zeal. He had answered on all four points. I needed a miraculous restoration again. With my face buried in leaves and moist forest grass, my body stretched out on my Counselor's couch, and tears streaming down my face as the deep pain in my heart wrenched my soul and spirit with unspeakable agony, I wept as I pleaded with God.

God answered that prayer. I do not recall how long I remained in the woods that day. However, when I returned to our apartment, I confidently told Char that God was going to carry us through. We remained in that community for three years, and I learned not to internalize every unkind thing that was said to me in a verbal attack. We eventually turned the church over to a brother we had invited on staff and helped to train. Once again, God had showed His strength and we continued to develop resilience. The same God who brought us through our Korean difficulties brought us through some more.

Psychological Obstacles

The Magi took two years from the time they saw the star in the East until they arrived at Jerusalem in search of the new king. It evidently took them that long to prepare for and make the journey (Matthew 2:16). The geographic obstacle to worshipping Jesus was not as big, however, as the psychological ones. Our biggest obstacles in life are psychological and spiritual. If you can change your mind, you can change your life and your world. The wise men, undoubtedly, expected anyone there would be able to answer their questions upon arrival in Jerusalem. They probably assumed that many would have recognized and honored the new king and that they would find many worshipping. But no! No one among those they interviewed was worshipping Him. Furthermore, Jerusalem seemed surprisingly indifferent. Did they abandon their search when they met indifference in Jerusalem? No! These wise men did not stop seeking just because others were passive.

Our biggest obstacles in life are psychological and spiritual.

The Jerusalemites could have worshipped Jesus far more easily than the wise men. Yet, of those who lived in Jerusalem, only Simeon and Anna are recorded as worshipping Him. Even so, the wise men demonstrated a steadfastness of purpose that carried them on toward their goal. Possibly one of the greatest surprises in their experience occurred when they left Jerusalem. It was strange

that they left Jerusalem alone. Why didn't anybody from Jerusalem go with them? They came from a far country to worship the King while the scholars of Jerusalem wouldn't travel merely 10 kilometers to Bethlehem! They maintained, "We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him" (Matthew 2:2). Even though they left Jerusalem alone, they went on. What resolve!

It is often discouraging for us to labor for the Lord under severe handicaps when others — smarter, stronger, and more qualified — who could serve him more easily are not taking advantage of their opportunity. How many times have others who could have served more easily not done so? They may drive a nicer car, live closer to the church, wear better clothes, enjoy greater platform magnetism, or have better educations. Is that sufficient reason for us not to serve? Just because we must work harder, travel further, and overcome more obstacles than others, is that sufficient reason to abandon our quest to know more about and serve Jesus?

I developed a willingness to persevere under difficulties at age 11 on my first paper route, even when others had it easier than I did. We lived on the north side of town in a middle-class neighborhood. Route 4 was in the less economically prosperous south part of town. It meant I had to travel more than a mile away from my home to deliver papers. I collected my subscription payments on Saturdays. I had to go that far, sometimes repeatedly, to find people home and collect their payment. Occasionally, I missed someone's home or a dog carried the paper away from my customer's porch. This meant that I had to go this same distance to take care of the "miss." Between delivery, collection, and misses, I had to develop determination. All this trouble earned me three to six dollars to put in the bank each week. My whole family was glad when, several years later, I got Route 1-C. It was much closer to home and in a better neighborhood. The difficulties of earning money by carrying newspapers and collecting payments for them developed me in other ways far more valuable than the money I earned.

My parents saw me struggle with the difficulties. They supported me but never "carried" me. This was a good way for them to raise me. They never drove me in the car to the south side for anything. There were plenty of rainy, snowy, sweaty, and windy days that made carrying papers hard work. Whenever there were 20 pages or more, or inserts to be inserted before delivery began,

that meant more work and heavier loads. I carried about 100 papers in those days and endured a sore shoulder many times — and grew stronger. We rob our children of opportunities to grow when we make it too easy for them.

I would not trade my childhood learning experiences for anything now. They taught me lessons in perseverance that I would use later. They gave me the ability to see a task through to its completion and to stay with a church until the difficulties are solved. Because of them, I could remain on the mission field when there was opposition or pray through to restoration when reverses occur in planting a new church. I learned part of that lesson carrying the daily paper in my hometown.

Upon return from Korea and our move to Pennsylvania, both our boys got paper routes. As my parents had done, I supported our sons but did not carry them. They got themselves up before dawn, carried their routes, took showers, and got themselves to school on time each morning. Within a year or so, they bought cars and got better, good-paying jobs. Dan worked for a deaf mother of two young children. He had enormous responsibility and did well. Joel worked for some time for a man on a respirator. Every time he cleaned the parts of the apparatus, the man's life was in Joel's hands. What awesome responsibilities for a 16 and 17-year-old! What growth and dependability they developed! Perseverance and dependability are things that can be passed from one generation to the next.

We rob our children of opportunities to grow when we make it too easy for them.

Expectation versus Reality

How many times have you found that your expectations tricked you — the realities of the new job, new structure, new pastor, or new neighborhood did not match what you expected? Is God obligated to produce a reality that matches our expectations? Do we need to change our expectations and adjust to His realities instead? Only heaven will fully match — even greatly surpass — our

expectations. We must learn to adjust if we are going to persevere through the difficulties of life and the even greater difficulties of character development. That is a big part of perseverance.

How excitedly and joyfully the wise men went to Jerusalem and then Bethlehem! Were they disappointed to find indifference in Jerusalem in the king's court and academic community? Were they surprised to find no royal mansion in Bethlehem? In Bethlehem, they found a baby in a common house (Matthew 2:11) where, evidently, Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus had been invited after the birth of Jesus. These wise men were able to see the spiritual dimension beyond the physical surroundings of the common house. This helped them adjust to the reality they found in Bethlehem.

When we first arrived in China as English teachers, we went through orientation. As foreign experts, we were guests in their country and were not to discuss politics, sex, or religion. We could, however, answer students' questions, and we could have guests in our apartments. I was always glad the students had such good questions! I became acquainted with several Chinese Christian men from another university and they came to our apartment for a Bible study on Thursday evenings. The men and I enjoyed our times together, and they were growing in knowledge of the Bible. Yet, Char and I had been in Beijing for just over a year when I was informed that the police had a file on me. This came as quite a shock. I had tried to walk a tight line between my desire to share my faith with inquirers, teach Bible truths to believers, and encourage Christians on the one hand, and still live within the requirement of the government on the other.

Many common people welcomed our message. Opportunities to share it came in miraculous answers to prayer. However, serving the Lord as a prayer warrior and witness for the gospel where sharing it is not legal has its risks. We knew it would when we went there. We had read about those heroes of faith "… who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies … were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the

sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted, and mistreated — the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains and in caves and holes in the ground (Hebrews 11:33-38).

In all my thinking about suffering for faith, it had been others who underwent it, not I. It was quite a psychological jolt to think that maybe I would be required to do that. Could I? Would I? Was I willing? Would I stand firm? Could I endure? Many questions raced through my mind. In the end, I decided that if that were required of me, I would be willing. I was not leaving, nor was I changing my posture of prayerfully seeking opportunities to serve God's purpose in the land in which I felt called to live. Many fine Christian people in the West have just as much dedication. It is my conviction that if circumstances were such that we in the "free" world needed to pay the price, we would be willing. We, too, would rise to the challenge as believers in other generations and nations have done. We, too, would persevere. How do I know? I "read" my own reactions to the discovery of my Beijing police record. Opposition deepens resolve.

How many times have your expectations been different from the real situation in your life? In your career, family, church? You feel God leading you to move somewhere so you move. Then, when you arrive, things are different than you expected. How do you escape from the fact that God led you there? The reality you discover is different from your expectations. Nonetheless, it is not different from what God expected when He led you there. The wise men did not allow the difference between their expectations and the reality they found to stop them from pursuing their God-given purpose. They showed an amazing ability to accept reality although it was significantly different from what they had imagined. The idea they sought to investigate — the project they were about — was more important to them than the difference between their expectations and their findings. Don't be sidetracked by surprising circumstances! The perseverance of the wise men included the flexibility to adjust to surprising realities. The wise are able to shift from expectations to reality and stay with their

Opposition deepens resolve.

goals! They move from a victim complex to a victor's attitude; they stop asking, "Who did this to me?" and begin to ask, "How do I move on from here?"

Buy the Whole Field

Jesus told a short story of a man who bought a whole field with joy. "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field" (Matthew 13:44). In that story, Jesus' urged His followers to be willing to sell all, give all, and surrender all for the cause of the kingdom. Some people live in political or religious environments that mean they have to buy the whole field to become believers. In our case, our whole family decided to buy the whole field so Char and I could continue our work in China. This is how it happened.

During our last year in China, we lived partly on our savings and partly on the stipend Char earned teaching English. I spent that year completing a collection of 40 essays in Chinese on various Christian subjects. Upon return to the United States, these were published and have since been reprinted in China. On the other hand, times were difficult financially that last year, and we were not sure what God was saying. In February of that winter, we attended the wedding ceremony of our son and daughter-in-law, Joel and Elizabeth. In the days just before the wedding, Char, Dan, Joel, and I discussed our situation in China.

We discussed the fact that our ministry venture required us to live off savings and the pros and cons of this situation. Nevertheless, we were convinced that God loved the Chinese. Having learned the language, it seemed right to stay there in such a spiritually needy and fruitful harvest field. The boys spoke up, "We cannot support you now at this stage in our careers so you can stay in China, but if you want to live on your savings and retirement funds, our way to show our support will be to take care of you in your old age." After discussing this, we four agreed that we would "buy the whole field." As a family, we would do what it would take in order to continue the work we were doing.

The boys had always been supportive, especially so since becoming young adults. They encouraged their empty-nester parents to return to the mission field if that was what we wanted. Even so, we were not prepared for the level of commitment we saw demonstrated in what they were saying to us. We now realize that perseverance in one generation had produced it in the next. This was not produced by genetics — it was our sons' choice to imitate their models.

We now realize that perseverance in one generation had produced it in the next.

As far as we four were concerned, we bought the whole field. Sometimes perseverance is best shown by buying the whole field just as the man did in Jesus' story. He "in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field." As we saw it, that was the only way for us to keep our hand on the plow in China. However, within a month or so of our trip back to Beijing, I received the surprise phone call from Tulsa, Oklahoma. At God's direction, that call eventually led to our unexpected return from the mission field to the United States to train missionaries and pastors. As it turned out, the privilege of serving in China was replaced by the opportunity to train men and women in the next generation of Christian workers. Buying the field was not required of us, but we had made the decision to do so and had returned to China, planning to stay whatever the cost. We have no regrets.

Look at our Savior who remained His best possible self to the glorious end of His earthly assignment. In His finest moment, "for the joy set before him endured the cross" (Hebrews 12:2) for the redemption of all who would believe. Perhaps you can see the evidence that joyful, complete obedience, self-control, and perseverance through adversity is the best way to become your best possible self for eternity. That is God's dream for you, and with God's help, you can fulfill it. And when you do, He will smile because part of His dream came true in you.

HABIT SEVENTEEN

Be Intimate with Your Heavenly Father

"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God."

John 3:1

In this final chapter, we turn our attention to the intimate nature of our relationship with our heavenly Father. In considering intimacy with God, we maintain our respect, amazement, and awe at His glory, grandeur, and excellent greatness, yet add something else. If we only respect God in His greatness and awesome power, we miss an important view of Him. We must also consider His gentle, soft, and tender side — our view of Him (as Daddy) and who He wants us to be to Him (His own little boys and girls). You cannot be whole without balance. We must balance our perceptions of the strong and dynamic side of God by our grasp of His tender and approachable side if we want an accurate portrait.

I took a six-month sabbatical/mission trip to South Africa and India. During the trip, I conducted an experiment to learn increased effectiveness in ministry — I increased my daily amount of prayer time. Indeed, I became more effective in ministry. An unexpected result, however, was a new closeness to God.

Two Aspects to God's Greatness

During the four months in India, I was blessed with numerous occasions to introduce audience members to the two glorious thoughts mentioned in Chapter 13 (Grasp the Bigger Picture) — God is both big *and* near. If He were only big and powerful but not near and caring, He could help us but would not. If He were only near and caring but not big and powerful, He might be able to sympathize but He could not help us with our problems. It is the combination of His great power and His nearness that makes Him so wonderfully unique. This is extremely different from the Indian polytheistic concept of many violent and distant gods whom helpless humans try to placate to avoid evil. The fact that the true God is both big and near means that He both can and will help us.

Every time I shared these thoughts, my listeners responded with joy. I explained how God was not only big and powerful (*able* to help) but also near and caring (*willing* to help). My Indian listeners could easily note the contrast between the God of the Bible and India's many gods. In discussing these profound theological truths about God's power and willingness to help, I never used the words "transcendence" or "imminence." Nonetheless, it was my intent to share these grand ideas in terms they could easily grasp — and the interpreter could easily translate.

We must balance our perceptions of the strong and dynamic side of God by our grasp of His tender and approachable side if we want an accurate portrait.

That illustration sets the stage for a discussion of our intimate relationship with God as our Daddy. We cannot fully understand all God's greatness by merely considering His creative power, majesty, wisdom, and perfect knowledge. There is another tender, intimate, and equally wonderful side of God's greatness — He is also near, warm, friendly, tender, accepting, and

approachable. We may have to change our perspective to appreciate this tender side of God, but seeing things from God's perspective is what we want. As God gives us the ability to see things from His point of view, we should expect changes in our perceptions. If we view things from a new perspective — with God-given perception — we can appreciate the ideas in the following paragraphs.

A Unique Opportunity for a Paradigm Shift

Upon our return from India, I decided to take three days to be alone with God while my experiences abroad were fresh in my mind. I asked God to give me His own debriefing so that I could process what I had learned from Him through prayer. I also wanted to fully understand what I had learned about the process of learning through prayer. The increased power in preaching and teaching and new insights into old truths during the six months abroad were profound, and I did not want to slip back into my previous pattern. I wanted God to show me His priorities and value system. What was important and unimportant to Him? What was valuable and of no value to Him? What was worth pursuing and what should I hold in relative disregard? I determined I would adjust my own value system to conform more perfectly to His. I was seriously asking for a change in paradigm. The India trip was over and responsibilities in the United States had not yet resumed. I took advantage of this time "in between" to ask God for insight.

The Bible says, "Come near to God and he will come near to you" (James 4:8). From the use of the word "near," we can assume that God wants a close relationship with us. He prefers that our relationship is close, not distant; soft, not hard; warm, not cold. He wants it to be friendly and intimate, not adversarial, resentful, or characterized only by things like awe, respect, fear, and reverence. Those responses are a natural aspect of a relationship with a Holy God. However, we miss an important part if we miss the friendly and intimate aspect.

Perhaps my prayer to draw close to God fueled my own accompanying efforts to draw close to Him. Immediately, I began

my morning times of prayer by imagining myself at the base of a raised platform on which God sat on His glorious throne. I would say something like, "Father, here I am in the midst of glorious splendor streaming from Your mighty throne. In all the light, brightness, color, shimmer, fragrance, and glory of this place and in the midst of the sound of multiplied voices singing, exclaiming Your greatness in praise so that the ground trembles with thunderous volume, I lift my voice in awe at Your greatness and majesty. I prostrate myself before You with my face on the ground, out of profound reverence and humility; I acknowledge Your superiority and exceeding greatness." Imagining myself in God's throne room and expressing myself in this way made my praise more real, conscious, and meaningful to me than merely saying the familiar words of praise I have used for many years.

However, it is difficult, if not impossible, to pray in clichés when you are on His lap talking with your Daddy.

After praising God in this way for some moments, I usually proceed to another step. I typically say something like, "And now with caution and awe, I lift my head from the ground to look on Your beauty and lovely face. I see You smile and nod to me. I receive it as Your invitation to ascend the steps and I approach Your throne. You are smiling and encouraging me to approach even closer. I climb up on Your lap, lay my head against Your shoulder, and, place one arm over Your shoulder and the other around Your neck. I whisper with deep feelings in Your ear, 'Daddy, I love You. Daddy, I love you.'" After several moments of speaking intimately this way with God, I descend from His lap, throne, and platform to proceed with my normal routine of prayer and intercession for the day.

Some Advantages of Taking Time to Linger on Daddy's Lap

During the six months of increased time spent in daily prayer abroad, I continued to draw closer and closer to God. It became easier to spend the increased amount of time in prayer each day. I learned to enjoy a more relaxed pace, moving from praise to prayer, lingering as long as I wanted on each point. I knew I was experiencing a spiritual change that continued upon my return to the United States. On the morning of January 2, 2003 — more than a week after my three days of debriefing alone with God — I proceeded to pray as described above with one major change: At the point in my prayer when I normally descended from God's lap, throne, and platform, I had a deep longing to linger on God's lap. I told Him so and He invited me to stay. I proceeded through the remainder of my prayer time staying on His lap, changing my vocabulary to be appropriate for a child speaking to his daddy.

It is easier to pray rote prayers when God is in heaven and we are on earth, or when we are in a crowd or distant from the throne. However, it is difficult, if not impossible, to pray in clichés when you are on His lap talking with your Daddy. Clichés can help us continue to say words when we are praying aloud, but they do not contribute to depth in the conversation. They can help make our prayers sound orthodox and acceptable to anyone else around, but they do not add to the meaning of the moment in private personal prayer. When talking with Daddy, you are forced to be real. You have to focus on what you are saying to convey something meaningful. When you envision yourself leaning against His shoulder talking intimately, it is extremely incongruous to be merely speaking oft-spoken phrases with your mind somewhere else. Every time I catch myself doing that, I am even more embarrassed than when my mind wandered when I was merely praying from my prayer place on earth. Going in your spirit before the throne of God makes mind wandering less likely. Climbing up on Daddy's lap and talking directly into His ear makes mind wandering and clichés even more inappropriate. It is an awesome and holy privilege to be on His lap. When we speak in Daddy's ear, every word uttered and every thought

expressed takes on new depth and richness. The universe and the challenges we face back on earth are viewed differently from Daddy's lap — everything looks different there. Problems appear very small, non-threatening, and easy to solve.

The Power of Words

Words communicate meaning. When we use words like holy, exalted, lifted up, high, mighty, glorious, and awesome, we honor God in His splendor — and rightly so. However, in the use of those words, especially if we exclusively use those kinds of words, we also may unconsciously place God at a distance. Jesus and Paul's use of *Abba* (Mark 14:36, Romans 8:15, 16), however, helps us realize God is near. *Abba* means father or daddy in Aramaic, and Jesus' use of that word, praying in the everyday language of the family, makes God seem nearer, even though Jesus' Jewish contemporaries would have considered that disrespectful. *Abba*, as used there, could be translated "Daddy." Jesus, faced with crucifixion on Calvary, used *Abba* in prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. Paul emphasizes sonship twice. In Romans, he says, "… you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, '*Abba*, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" (Romans 8:15, 16). According to Galatians, we are sons privileged to use that name. "Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, '*Abba*, Father'" (Galatians 4:6).

A few verses in the New Testament quote Aramaic words and then translate them. For example, Jesus' words on the cross, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' mean, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (Mark 15:34). The translation included in scripture removes the mystique from the Aramaic words. However, *Abba* remains un-translated in Mark, Romans, and Galatians. If *Abba* is the familiar name for father, it is too bad that it was not translated into the reader's language as "Papa" or "Daddy." This word, used as an intimate expression of little children to their own fathers, would have greater impact — its original and dynamic impact — on Bible readers. Instead, it was only explained in the margin or Bible dictionary. Unfortunately, leaving it in Aramaic — *Abba* instead of *Daddy* — lessens the impact of that word and the emotional feeling it could produce in the reader. It is a

ministry of the Holy Spirit — the Spirit of Adoption — to assure us that we are sons and daughters of God. Older children call their fathers, "Dad." On formal occasions, they might refer to them as "Father." However, the use of *Abba* indicates God accepts us as His little children. He is available to be near and dear just like loving human daddies like to be to their little children.

In Habit 13 (Grasp the Bigger Picture), we discussed the courage factor. I mentioned there how I was positively affected by being able to call God "Dad" as a young missionary candidate preparing for his first term in the Orient. Knowing my heavenly Dad was going to always be with me gave me courage to face the unknown. That was a great step forward in my journey toward intimacy with the heavenly Father at that time. Subsequently, I have occasionally called Him "Dad" to my comfort and our mutual joy. However, words often have several different connotations. While "Dad" was more intimate than a Divine Creator high and lifted up on His great throne, "Dad" was the term I had used for my dad from probably about age 10 and older. I loved Dad and hugged him often, but the years of cuddling with him on his lap were over by then since I had become a bigger boy. Our hugs had become manly and full of bravado with frequent pounding on the back, etc. When I began to call God "Daddy," it was a further step in becoming childlike, recognizing my weakness as opposed to His strength; His wisdom compared to my foolishness; His vast knowledge in contrast to my ignorance. It was another huge multifaceted conceptual step. God seemed be big and strong all over again while I became more aware that I was weak, dependent, uninformed, and foolish. Yet, simultaneously, I was close to someone I loved, trusted, and felt comfortable being affectionate with in a childlike way. I became deeply aware of a new aspect to a relationship that was already wonderful.

Jesus said, "… unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3, 4). To call God "Daddy" requires a childlike attitude. In this same vein, Jesus said to Jerusalem," … how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing" (Matthew 23:37). Each of these metaphors contributes to our understanding of a close relationship in which the little one unhesitatingly runs to be close to and safe with the parent. Take "Daddy" from the one metaphor and combine it with "running to safety under the mother hen's wing" from the other. It is easy to picture a little boy running to the lap of Daddy God, kissing and hugging His neck, and being hugged by the strong arm (wing) of the kind and assuring, protective father. This seems to be part of what happened in Jesus' spirit in a time of great extremity revealing His humanity. He faced Calvary and wrestled in prayer concerning His struggle to do the will of the Father. It was then that Jesus called God, "Abba" — Daddy (Mark 14:36).

It was not the mother hen who wanted to maintain distance He was talking about, but rather the little chicks.

As we pray, we have no question about the ability of the powerful Creator to work whatever miracles are necessary to answer our prayer. The question is seldom, "Can God do this?" It is usually, "*Will* God do this?" The contrast between talking to the Creator and talking with Daddy is that the Creator could; Daddy would. Daddy has always been approachable, available, and willing. It was not the mother hen who wanted to maintain distance He was talking about, but rather the little chicks when Jesus said, "but *you* were not willing" (Matthew 23:37, emphasis mine). Jesus wanted intimacy. In other words, Daddy wants us on His lap. We are the ones who hesitate to enter into this kind of intimacy. Daddy answers prayer better than His little children can pray. Knowing that as we submit our prayers to Him, asking for His kingdom to come and His will to be done, Daddy will most certainly act favorably in our behalf. This reveals how praying to Daddy — in addition to addressing Him as the mighty and

powerful God — adds the element of tenderness, love, and favor not readily grasped by the exclusive use of the distance-producing words of grandeur often used in prayer. The distance between sinners and a Holy God is, of course, created by the sin of the sinner. However, even after becoming members of God's family, *we* may create distance between God and ourselves — either by our sin or our hesitancy to be intimate with Him — *God* doesn't. Never will we approach Him only to find Him stiff-arming us to hold us at a distance. He is the awesome and great Creator; yet He takes particular delight in being our Daddy. He is infinitely more than just our Daddy; but He is *also* our Daddy.

I had a revelation on that day I first lingered on Daddy's lap and continued through my prayer time calling Him and thinking of Him as Daddy. I discovered that by getting down from His lap, or, worse yet, never getting on His lap, I unconsciously created a distance between Him and myself. In the early stages of discovering these truths, I changed from the little boy on Daddy's lap back to my adult role of professor and intercessor too soon. I had not remained a little boy — dependent, reliant, and admittedly ignorant of what was best. Being (or finally becoming) Daddy's little boy revealed even more lessons.

The Others on Daddy's Lap

Later, as I prayed for Char, I found I perceived her as a little girl who was also on Daddy's lap. I found my prayers for her were much more tender, delicate, caring, and sympathetic. I wanted Daddy to hug her, strengthen her, and answer her prayers also. It was not difficult for me to begin to imagine many of Daddy's little boys and girls romping, playing, or seeking solace there — all of them with hurts and problems Daddy could fix.

The idea of touching God may seem too intimate to you at first thought. This is even truer when we think of a lingering, familiar, or prolonged intimate touch. For further insight, consider one of God's names. One of the Hebrew names of God in the Old Testament is *El Shaddai* which is generally translated "God Almighty." The name could refer to "God of the mountain" or, originally, probably "breast." Some say it means

"many-breasted One," graphically illustrating God's abundant ability to nourish all His little boys and girls.

Char and I conducted a three-day pastors' conference in Salur, a town in northern Andra Pradesh on the east coast of India. One afternoon while Char was teaching, I went for a walk through the vegetable section at the market. This section included an area for discarded vegetable pieces. A young family of pigs was eating and rooting noisily through the useless particles. This location must have seemed like pig heaven to them. The sow had a belly covered with well-supplied breasts, and the squealing, scampering piglets seemed to always want more nourishment. Fascinated, I watched for a while. The sow lay down on her side and positioned herself so that a whole row of hungry piglets could wiggle, squirm, and cuddle up to fountains of plenteous and nourishing sustenance. As I ponder that scene and again mix a few metaphors, I think of a loving Daddy, calling the little chicks under her wings, to find multiple sources of nourishment for many little boys and girls. How could the little ones enjoy, experience, or find that kind of comfort unless they were willing to cuddle, snuggle, and press close to flesh? Yes, God is Spirit and you cannot physically cuddle with Spirit, but the symbolism and metaphors (both from Scripture) allow for this mental image.

How could the little ones enjoy, experience, or find that kind of comfort unless they were willing to cuddle, snuggle, and press close to flesh?

Is it proper to mix metaphors when discussing God and our relationship with Him? Jesus mixed metaphors in one sentence when He said, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). God is infinitely greater, bigger, and more complex than we are. Our relationship with Him has too many facets to adequately convey with just one figure of speech. While mixing word pictures, let's throw in another one: "The name of the Lord is a strong tower;

the righteous run to it and are safe" (Proverbs 18:10). Given the complexity of the multifaceted relationship we have with God, we should have no problem with combining meanings — safety under mother hen's wings; soldiers running from battle to the safety of a fortress, and the abundant provision for all the children of Abba — Daddy — who is also El Shaddai. Can you envision many of Daddy's little boys and girls as his soldiers who occasionally getting roughed up in battle? They sometimes need nursing and healing — running to the protection of His strong and encircling arms to find nourishment as they press against, cuddle, and snuggle at His soft, warm, and nourishing supply? That is intimacy, and Daddy loves it.

What Will Daddy Do With Our Requests?

Another aspect of lingering on Daddy's lap is the new and intimate perspective you gain about asking Daddy for favors. Any child who is confident in the arms of his loving Daddy is not afraid to ask his Daddy for what he wants. As I lingered on Daddy's lap, I found myself going over the personal things I had asked for during the preceding months. However, as I used the intimate language of a child, the distant way in which I previously made the requests seemed cold and artificial. Therefore, to be consistent with the intimacy of my "new" location and the relationship I had with Him, I asked Daddy for the "cookie" of help with my work and the "cinnamon roll" of open doors of opportunity to serve Him. I mentioned each request using vocabulary appropriate for a little boy talking to his daddy. As you move from request to request in your prayer time, the effect of this paradigm will be to give you more confidence that Daddy is listening, and greater assurance that Daddy will take care of it. The conversation is very real.

Daddy's Correction

Eventually, I arrived at the personal prayer request I had been making in those days: I wanted to be pruned so I could become more fruitful. Jesus taught that His Father was the Gardener and

that "every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful" (John 15:2). I said, "Daddy, You are the Gardener. Please prune me, the branch."

God shows us many ways that He is our Father and that we are His children. One very real way he demonstrates His Fatherhood and our sonship is through His willingness to correct us. He shows us he is genuinely our Father by the correction He gives His children. Char and I taught our sons to say and mean, "Okay, Daddy" or "Okay, Mommy" when we were either instructing or punishing them. It is not enough for children to physically experience the correction we administer as parents; we want our children to willingly receive or embrace the correction at a spiritual level — not resent it internally while they endure it physically.

These thoughts led me to approach Daddy, just as a willing child might surrender to the instruction and correction of his father. I said, "Daddy, realizing who You are to me and knowing I am safe in Your arms, as needed, correct me. I want to be pruned so I can be fruitful." I did not say this because I am sadistic or masochistic. Pruning is the process through which a fruitful branch becomes more fruitful. I want to be more fruitful, and submission to the pruning of the Gardener — a correction from Daddy — is the biblical process through which a fruitful branch becomes more fruitful. In that moment of the closest intimacy I had ever experienced, I prayed, "Daddy, correct me." I gained a new understanding of Hebrews 12:5-11, which I soon consulted to make certain my experience was true to Scripture. It was.

> "And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: 'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.' Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline

> seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

This is precisely what we need from Daddy.

The Bible says, "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear..." (I John 4:18). We don't have to be afraid of unfair treatment from our heavenly Daddy. No child likes correction, but children who love and trust the fairness of their fathers willingly accept loving correction. Those who willingly receive correction are more likely to be correct; those who are pruned are more likely to be fruitful. Course alteration — correction — is vital to arrive at our destination whether we are in a spaceship, steering down a highway, dribbling down the basketball court, or attempting to be our best possible self. To be all we can be, let's accept our Daddy's correction, though it would be even better to welcome it.

Perhaps we don't accept correction from just anyone, but surely we could accept it from our Daddy.

Here is the amazing benefit of this habit of being intimate with your Heavenly Father. If we are intimate with our heavenly Father, we become more trusting and open to the process of being pruned, corrected, and fruitful; we will hit the target; we will be all we could be; we become our best possible selves. Our positive and intimate relationship with God gives us a positive attitude toward His correction. Perhaps we don't accept correction from just anyone, but surely we could accept it from our Daddy — who, not incidentally, is very wise. It's been said that old dogs cannot learn new tricks. However, old dogs who are intimate with their Daddy can learn new tricks.

Ultimately, it is a compliment when God corrects his little child. The advantage God's little children have that helps us accept His correction is that we are adults. Unlike children, we are mature enough to realize correction is a compliment. We know that the training is evidence we are dearly beloved children. We are privileged to receive this attention from our perfectly fair and loving Father.

Obtaining and Maintaining Balance

To think of God as only powerful and distant lacks balance. It is also inaccurate to conceive Him as a doting father with no requirements or controls who will always treat you like a spoiled child. The ideas in this chapter help us balance our view of God by portraying the tender, gentle, and personable side of His character. Even from our newly understood position on Daddy's lap, we should still remember to revere our Holy Creator. However, if you have only revered Him as Creator and never sat on His lap, there is an emboldening and comforting aspect of your relationship with Him yet to discover. That discovery could be a great source of strength for you.

When Elijah had a public "power encounter," called fire down from heaven, defeated, and killed the prophets of Baal and Ashterah on Mount Carmel, he first "*repaired* the altar of the LORD which was there" (I Kings 18:30, emphasis mine). He did not need to build a new altar, nor did he use the altar in its broken down condition. This seems to be a good model for us when we want to perfect or further develop our ideas. When we learn new ideas, we don't need to throw out all we knew or held dear. New truth should augment, enhance, and add new dimensions, depth, and understanding to old truth. We can add a newfound appreciation for God as our Daddy to our repertoire without discarding our existing understanding of Him in His might and majesty. Add your new appreciation of closeness and intimacy with God to your former confidence in His great power and strength.

We can apply the same principle to an individual application of each of the 17 habits in this book. We do not need to completely change our positions in any of the habits. Each habit holds the potential to enrich our current understanding. It would be our loss if we felt we had to agree with either, all, or nothing. The good news is that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, will teach us if we ask Him. Sort through the ideas and select those parts that will help you "repair" your altar. Be sure to hold fast the good ideas that have served you well thus far in life. The world has many different ideas about what God is like and what He requires of us. Even among Christians, there is a variety of

opinions about this or that in the Bible. This is healthy given that God has created us with such variety. We each can find a group of Christians that closely expresses it as we see it.

Most Christians know we are not to completely fit into the world system. As Paul said, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2). In many instances, we simply do not realize the ways we are unconsciously influenced by the world's value system. In this book, each habit hopefully nudges us away from conformity to the pattern of the world and toward the transformation made possible by the renewing of our minds. We want our minds renewed, our worldview transformed, and our outlook aligned with the values of the Bible. Our ultimate goal should be to become highly effective Christians — our best possible selves. God uses each one of us as much as we let Him.

Afterword

Webster's dictionary defines "potential" as "capable of being but not yet in existence." It "denotes possibility, capability, or power." It is "the inherent ability or capacity for growth, development, or coming into being." Potential, therefore, is the word we use to mean that something can be accomplished.

This book was written to encourage you to reach your potential through good habits. The good news is that the One who truly knows your potential is also keenly interested in helping you fulfill it. He gives the necessary fruit of the Spirit — self-control — that helps you maintain the habits that make you highly effective. Without self-control — or self-discipline — performance will be considerably less than potential. For too long, we have allowed the enemy to rob us of our potential successes by believing his lie that we could not fulfill the dreams God placed in us.

Not many dance with joy celebrating self-control. However, we all rejoice when we experience the results. This is because results demonstrate that we have become highly effective. This line of thought is not a salvation by faith maintained by works. It is salvation by a faith so real and life changing that works — habits — of obedience follow. The results of obedience benefit you in both short and long-term—both on earth and in heaven.

May the Lord enrich your life as you press forward on your journey of new growth, development, and satisfaction in fulfilled potential. The Bible contains the keys — habits — to help you become your best possible self. Becoming a highly effective Christian simply means obeying God's Word whether He assigns you to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, or the ends of the earth.

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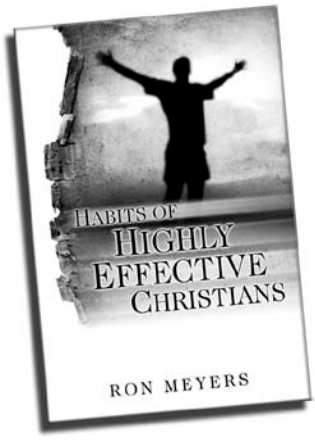
Ron Meyers, PhD



Author Ron Meyers, PhD was born in 1944 and raised in a pioneer pastor's home. In 1965, he began pastoral ministry as a student pastor in a rural community 70 miles from the Bible college he attended in mid-Ohio.

He, with his wife, Char, have served more years outside the U.S. as pastors in Canada and missionaries in Korea and China than their years in the U.S. Since 1996, he has served as the Professor of Missions and Coordinator of the Master of Arts in Missions program in the School of Theology and Missions at Oral Roberts University. Ron travels to African, Asian, European, and Middle Eastern nations during his summer breaks from university responsibilities. He has two adult sons, Dan and Joel, a daughter-in-law, Elizabeth, and four grandchildren.

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