



## **From Coping to Cure**

*By Henry Brandt, Ph.D.*

### **LESSON 18: IF YOU DON'T WANT TO, YOU AREN'T GOING TO**

#### **THOUGHT STARTER:**

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

Romans 12:1-2, NKJV

*Now may the God of peace . . . make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever.*

Hebrews 13:20-21, NKJV

In my high school days we had a basketball coach whom I both appreciated and feared. When he was looking in my direction I always tried to be shooting a basket, which was the strong part of my game. When he walked toward me, however, I knew what was coming.

"Good shot, Brandt," he would say. "Now let me see you dribble."

That was the worst part of my game. I hated to dribble, but he forced me to do it. As a result, I became a better player.

#### **STANDARDS OF PERFORMANCE**

Every day during the Olympics, we heard and read about the years of sacrifice, hard work, and continuous training to which the athletes subjected themselves. There was daily talk about world record holders. The standard of performance included many comments on perfection: perfect physical condition, perfect weight, perfect skill and performance, perfect attitude, perfect concentration, perfect persistence in the face of competition or adversity, perfect teamwork if it was a team effort.

A few achieved perfection; no one can maintain it. Yet, athletes keep trying.

One heart-warming story that came out of the Olympics was about Jackie Joyner Kersee who competed in the heptathlon, a two-day series of seven events for women. She grew up on Piggot Avenue in St. Louis, across the street from a tavern, down the block from a pool hall, and around the corner from a playground.

"I knew at the age of nine that I could jump," she recalls. "That's when I started running and jumping off the porch."

A fireman's brigade of siblings used a potato chip bag to "borrow" sand from the playground and install a landing pit off the porch.

Nino Fennoy, a saintly coach of the kind these neighborhoods seem to inspire, steered her through a series of junior Olympic championships and a busy career of basketball and volleyball at Lincoln High. The girls basketball team went 62-2 during her last two years, and Jackie was All-State. She went to U.C.L.A. on a basketball scholarship and was a star performer there, too.

In 1981, Mary, her mother, who was the determined disciplinarian with a willow switch, died at age thirty-eight after a one-day illness. "Her determination," Jackie says, "passed to me."

Working under a U.C.L.A. assistant track coach, Bob Kersee, Jackie headed toward the 1984 games. She won a silver medal. She married her coach in 1986 and with his help, she overwhelmed the international field with the only 7,000-point performances (four of them) on record. In 1988, she took the gold medal. Jumping, she says, is like leaping for joy. "I don't know what it is about that extra second or inch." She always aches but never minds it. "To ask my body not to ache would be too much," she says.<sup>1</sup>

People helped her reach her goals in spite of the obstacles, but the desire, will, and drive come from her.

As I thought about this area of athletes and the Olympic atmosphere of striving for excellence, I recalled the struggles my wife and I experienced in the early years of our Christian life. We presented our bodies to God as a living sacrifice. We wanted our lives to be well pleasing in God's sight. We didn't have the foggiest idea of what such a commitment meant or how to go about discovering "that good and acceptable and perfect will of God." There was no well-marked highway. There was no two-way direct communication with God. We had a lot to learn.

Our faith in God and in the Bible as the Word of God was very shaky. We needed some exercise so we could improve and perfect our faith and hope in God. We decided that we needed to study the Bible first of all. Then we needed to test it against life. We also

needed some teachers and coaches to help us along the way. But the desire and will to study, to improve, had to come from us.

A young pastor, Dick Wilkenson, took an interest in us. He encouraged us to get a concordance and learn to use it. It would help us get biblical answers to our many questions, he said. We took his advice, which proved to be one of the most helpful moves we made to get to know what "pleasing God" meant.

It was he who introduced us to a biblical principle that disturbed us:

**"Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. (Matthew 6:33, NKJV)**

Up to this point in my life, my main preoccupation was in acquiring a home and the means to assure a comfortable, secure life. We had a new car, a new house, membership in a sailing club, a sailboat, access to a golf and tennis club. Even thinking about God was not a serious consideration. My pastor kept bringing up this verse and urging us to review our priorities.

Sunday was the best time for sailing and doing homework. (I was taking some engineering courses at night.) Golf or tennis took two or three evenings. Looking after the lawn, playing with the children, visiting our families took up time. It seemed our world consisted of pleasing ourselves.

## **TRAINING REQUIRES DILIGENCE**

He kept asking us pesky questions in relation to that verse, such as:

What are you doing with your time? What are you doing with your money? What are you studying in the Bible? Why weren't you in church on Sunday?

I had mixed feelings about him and his questions because I was embarrassed by the answers I had to give him.

Once, in exasperation, I told him to mind his own business. He said he was. As long as I came to his church, I was his business. He was my "coach."

Gradually, our focus changed from things to people. People appeared from nowhere asking for help with their problems, and we would invite them to come for dinner. We discovered that these dinner invitations were very expensive.

Besides, we had very little background for helping people.

We started going to church regularly on Sundays. Our sailboat, golf clubs, and tennis racquet got less and less use.

For two years, Eva and I struggled with that verse. What should come first in the use of our time, talent, and treasure? Both of us had a growing desire to know more about the Bible and to be of service to other people. Our thoughts went so far as to consider going back to college for a few years to study the Bible.

We reasoned that if the Bible contained the most important information in the world, we should know more about it.

Finally, my wife and I decided to test that verse, I compiled a financial statement that included everything we owned in the world. Then my wife and I sat down at the kitchen table and had an imaginary meeting with God. Eva and I showed God what we were worth and told Him we were prepared to risk it all in order to test this verse. We admitted that our minds were filled with doubts, but by faith we would try to obey God as a first priority. We reminded God that we were interested in the whole verse.

We told the young pastor about the step we took and that we were considering returning to college. What did he think? He replied that this was a serious matter. I had a wife and two children, a one-year-old and a three-year-old. I was just getting a good start in the engineering field. He could not advise us one way or another. He said we would need to take a step of faith, and one test would be that we should have peace about such a move.

We had to admit that the whole idea scared us and we were very uneasy about such thoughts. Our minds were filled with doubt, but we did want to obey God as a top priority. We asked God to give us some sign that we were thinking straight. We were very young Christians and were just learning what it meant to walk by faith and faith doesn't require signs in order to move ahead.

We shared our thoughts with our parents and some trusted friends. They were all in agreement that we would be making a serious blunder.

The desire to know more about the Bible persisted. Should we abide by the judgment of our parents and friends? We asked God that question. His answer?

Silence.

Our pastor referred us to two Bible verses for our consideration as backup for his previous advice. We had to exercise our faith and yet be at ease about any move we made.

**Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. (Hebrews 11:6, NKJV)**

**May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13, NKJV)**

This verse in Romans is one of my favorite Bible verses and if I understand it correctly, hope is entwined with joy and peace. These are the fruit of the Spirit. So we can hope, or expect, to handle the circumstances that come our way with an inner calm, free from agitation, untroubled by conflict or commotion.

The more we thought about expanding our biblical knowledge and serving people, the better we liked the idea and we became excited about going back to college. To do this meant that we had to sell the house and the boat. We could then finance two to three years of study time.

Again we asked God for a sign. His answer?

Silence.

## **RUNNING THE RACE**

We decided to sell the house and the boat. All of our friends just shook their heads at our folly. Even the young pastor expressed doubts about our decision. As it turned out, we spent three of perhaps the most important years of our lives at Houghton College. It was there that we met many hundreds of fellow Christians who were also exercising their faith, studying to understand the Bible, and learning to live joyful, peaceful lives.

This experience sounds like a contradiction. On the one hand, my wife and I benefited greatly from the teachers, pastors, and friends we made along the way. On the other hand, there were times when we had to go it alone by faith in a loving God.

The Olympic atmosphere is the same. The athletes strive diligently to develop minds and bodies. Preparation involves following the advice of teachers and coaches. But while the race is run, the athlete must go it alone and draw on past training and experience. Hopefully, the time of preparation will enable the athlete to perform better than ever before in the actual event. Everyone realizes that present performance is a compound of continuous preparation plus drawing on past experience. Even then, perfection is an illusive goal.

There is always a chance to start over when you fall on your face. The person who

wants to improve works on developing and maintaining a wholesome personal life. A person needs some biblical principles and some teachers and coaches who will help him locate himself and guide him along the way. No one can maintain perfection, to be sure, but everyone can point toward perfection and work on getting closer.

When an athlete enters a contest that requires physical strength, he must have built up strength before the event. It's too late to start it when the contest begins. Practicing faith is also an exercise. It builds confidence in God just as surely as physical exercise builds muscle. This faith in God must be built up before a crisis, just like muscles must be built up before an event.

We were in for a surprise.

A professor at Houghton College challenged me to go on for a master's degree in clinical psychology. I prayed and told God that I would want the best training available if that was the direction we should go. I asked Him to allow me to go to one of three universities that had what I believed to be good programs: University of Michigan, University of Minnesota, and University of Chicago. I also reminded God that my financial resources were dwindling and I was trusting Him to show me what to do about it. All three universities turned me down. In asking God for an explanation, His answer?

Silence.

I had received several good job offers, but it seemed to me that it made more sense to continue my education. From January through August, I made many attempts to get God's attention for some specific guidance. I yelled at Him and expressed my anger and disgust at what I perceived to be His lack of attention to my problems. I even threatened to turn my back on Him and to tell people how He had treated me as I pouted for a while. His answer?

Silence.

In August, I moved my family to Detroit, my home town, and temporarily moved in with my folks. There was a new school in Detroit, Wayne University, that met in a condemned high school building. Reluctantly, I contacted the head of the clinical psychology department. He looked at my transcripts and commented that he did not like the Bible courses listed there, but he finally said that I could study at Wayne on academic probation for the first year. When I paid my tuition, I had exactly one dime left to my name, a wife, and three children. I flipped the dime into the air with my thumb, caught it with the same hand and crossed the street to buy a Coke.

"That's what I get for putting my faith in You," I prayed. "I'm broke, on probation, and in a dump of a school." God's answer? You guessed it—

Silence.

One of the biblical principles that I had been depending on was that if we put the Kingdom of God and His righteousness first, all these things would be added to us. To my mind, I had kept my end of the bargain. Right then it seemed to me that God had not kept His side of the deal.

My first class at Wayne State was in test administration. The professor paired us up in groups of two. We were to take a test and see which one of us could do it faster. My partner, Bill, was a dull, sleepy looking person who didn't seem very bright. I beat him easily. I was getting more disgusted by the minute. He asked me my name and what I did. Reluctantly, I told him, "Nothing." Disinterested, I asked him the same questions. He said he was the head of the Psychology Department at General Motors Institute. I thought to myself, "Yea, yea, what a big liar. This guy couldn't even head up sharpening the pencils at General Motors." He asked me, "Do you want a job?"

"Huh! Do I want a job?"

It turned out he *really was* what he said he was. In a matter of weeks, I was teaching in the psychology department at General Motors Institute. In addition to a job, my benefits included a new Pontiac car, when cars after World War II were as scarce as hen's teeth. In addition, all my tuition was paid to work on a master's degree.

I told Bill, my new boss and angel, that all this was an answer to prayer. He replied, "The *heck* it is! I'm an atheist. I needed a teacher and you're qualified."

## **GOD IS FAITHFUL**

After teaching there for six months, my boss asked me to prepare some courses in Marriage and the Family for General Motors engineers because the company realized that an engineer couldn't work at his best level if problems in his marriage and family were on his mind. He told me I could consult with any sources anywhere in the world. This assignment gave me instant credibility with people that I contacted and the opportunity to learn from some of the finest teachers in the world, which was just exactly what I had asked God to do for me.

Some of these teachers, with whom I came into contact during this project, later opened doors for me to study for a Ph.D. degree at Cornell University. He knew better than I where to get the finest training.

Once more, I learned that God is faithful. We can trust Him. Although God is sometimes silent, that never means He is not there.

I also believe God let my bank account dwindle to nothing because I really did not trust Him. At the time I wouldn't admit, even to myself, that I didn't really trust God. He waited until I was totally out of my own funds before He stepped in. He let me know that He could replenish my funds in His way and in His time.

Again, I asked God why He didn't explain to me what He was doing. His answer?

Silence . . . but things were happening during His silence.

This experience helped me put my faith in the power of God. Perfect faith? Perhaps a few people attain it; the rest of us can work toward it.

As I look back over the years, I see that developing a real faith in our living God is one of the most important pillars that has sustained me. The events of life raised many unanswered questions. God was silent over and over again for long periods of time—even years—when I thought He should speak. There was sickness, death, financial problems, dishonesty, deception, and on and on. I wasn't exempt. When God was silent, I often looked to human wisdom or human sympathy, which were both readily available.

The Bible says:

**All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28, NKJV)**

We rest in this hope as we yield our lives daily to God by faith and as we experience the Holy Spirit's control of our responses. If, for whatever reason, we turn away from a daily yielding of our hearts to the Holy Spirit, we begin to think or say things such as: Why me? Why am I being singled out? Is God punishing me? That's what I get for trusting God. It's not fair. What's the use? Nothing turns out right.

These hopeless statements and questions are like a warning light on the dashboard of a car. It's time to stop as quickly as possible and find out what went wrong.

The hopeful person will calmly wait to see how things turn out. This picture in the Bible of a hopeful person is entwined with faith, peace, and love:

Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us. (Romans 5:1-5, NKJV)



If we put the Bible passages of Romans 5:1-5, Romans 15:13, and Hebrews 11:6 together, they tell us that walking with hope and faith while experiencing difficult times in life produces perseverance, character, love, joy, and peace.

But tough times do not always produce perseverance, character, and hope; it only happens when we put our faith in the Lord. Turning away from the Lord produces hopelessness, anxiety, worry, anger and rebellion. If that is our position, we do not benefit from experience, we only suffer when we go through it alone.

My first attempts at helping people go back to 1942. Since that time, I've listened to many stories of people's problems. Pain, death, financial loss, personal inner struggle, family struggles, interpersonal struggles: no matter what the problem was, each one was resolved sooner or later, one way or another.

The way a person approaches problems depends greatly on whether he is hopeful or hopeless and whether or not the person is familiar with the work of the Holy Spirit. It also depends on whom you seek to please, and often our faith is illogical to bystanders in our world.

When a person is in the middle of a problem it is usually a major issue to that person. I've watched people who are as frightened over a minor scratch as others who underwent major surgery. I observed someone create as much of a tense, anxious emergency over a missing dog as came from another person's son missing in combat. I watched someone become as uptight over buying a toaster as others over purchasing a house. I watched someone get as upset over losing a car key, as did another person whose car was stolen.

Response to the trouble that comes our way on any day will reveal our spirit, not cause it. If we fail to respond by faith and hope, we can always start over again. No one is perfect. God understands us and deals with us where we are now. The Bible says:

**There is none righteous, no, not one. (Romans 3:10, NKJV)**

We can't change our past failures, and God will forgive us of those sins if we ask Him. But, all of us can let the Holy Spirit control our lives today and in the future. This hopeful opportunity can be a pleasant, stimulating experience. God has made us to improve our performance and to enjoy the process; in the middle of the process, we can see His loving plans come together in His timing.

***Lesson: God is like a loving coach who forgets the past; we can trust Him to train us for life.***

## DISCUSSION STARTERS

- Review the thought starter at the beginning of the chapter. What thoughts were started?
  - Review the lead Bible verse. What does it say to you? Did you observe yourself in relation to the verse? Did you observe others in relation to the verse? Did you find any additional verses?
  - What is your response to the lesson at the end of the chapter?
1. Note Isaiah 26:3. How do you achieve perfect peace?
  2. Have you presented your body to God as a sacrifice? What has happened since?
  3. Have you had any "coaching" along the way?
  4. Has Bible study caused you to change anything in your lifestyle?
  5. Have any attempts to perfect your relationship with God left you confused?

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<sup>1</sup> *Time*, September 19, 1990, 49-50.

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