



From Coping to Cure

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LESSON 4:

GOD'S SHARPEST TOOLS, MY BIGGEST PROBLEMS

THOUGHT STARTER:

Can you explain the change in some people's lives when they become Christians?

"Men can only reproduce human life, but the Holy Spirit gives new life from heaven; so don't be surprised at my statement that you must be born again!"
John 3:6-7, LB

Now if I am doing what I don't want to, it is plain where the trouble is: sin still has me in its evil grasp.
Romans 7:20, LB

I have spent over forty years counseling people from a biblical perspective. I work with disturbed people. My first serious encounter with a disturbed person was with myself.

I grew up in a church environment. During my late teens, I said to myself, "I don't need a bunch of rules to run my life, let alone a bunch of rules that keep me from having fun!"

I had some friends who taught me how much fun I could have with alcohol. I hit the bars, the parties, the streets, and the homes of my friends (when the parents were gone!). Mixed in with all this was considerable girl chasing. My mission in life was to entice "religious" young people away from church and into the "good life." I had been successful with my share of converts at the bar. Those were wonderful fun-filled years, but such a life was also the broad road to destruction.

My way of life came to an abrupt halt. Three of my drinking buddies burned to death in a fiery head-on collision. One of my friends, a brilliant young lady, committed suicide. The heavy-drinking, kindly man who ran the pool room, one of my local hang-outs, slammed his car into a telephone pole one night and was killed instantly. Lastly, I was fired from my job because I returned from lunch drunk one day.

Right after all this happened, Bill, one of my best friends and the heaviest drinker of all, suddenly announced that he had become a Christian. He had wandered into a

Christian meeting by accident and stayed to hear the speaker. God's Holy Spirit touched his heart. He went forward at the end of the meeting and publicly invited Christ to take over his life and heart and to deal with his sin. He told me later, "I felt like I was the only guy the speaker was talking to!"

Virtually overnight, Bill demonstrated that he was finished with my kind of life. He went to church twice on Sunday and every Wednesday. He dated only "Christian" girls. He limited his activities to swimming, hiking, tennis, ice-skating, and skiing. In order to continue my friendship with him, I was forced to accept his way of life.

For a few months I lived on both sides of the fence. Bill and I had long arguments about his faith and his changed life. I argued fervently on behalf of the old way of life—the rollicking nights, the warmth of kindred spirits, and good fellowship in our favorite bars! I could just as well have been talking to the wall. Bill's change wasn't temporary. He turned a deaf ear to my fervent, earnest efforts to save him from a restrictive, limited, narrow life.

ENCOUNTER WITH THE STOVE MAN

One afternoon I staggered home drunk and dropped off to sleep on a couch. A Christian businessman, who had come to sell my mother a stove, shook me awake. He read me a simple tract about receiving Christ. I had heard this familiar old story all my life. He asked me to pray with him, and in a drunken stupor, I asked the Lord to come into my heart. I then rolled over and went back to sleep!

Later in the evening, when I awoke, I didn't remember the encounter with the stove man and I was not aware of any change. My only thought was to return to my favorite bar; however, that night the people around the bar seemed to be babbling, slurring their words, and talking foolishly. The bartender was carelessly sloshing the glasses in dirty water. The room was smoke-filled and unbearably noisy. I didn't have fun that night.

I found myself at the beginning of the end of my drinking days. In a matter of weeks, I longed for Bill's way of life. The old way simply died away. I didn't even remember the encounter with the stove salesman until I began looking back later on my changed behavior.

What followed in my life proved to me with abundant clarity that God will answer a sincere call for help even if the prayer is mumbled by someone who drinks too much, who slurs his words, and whose memory is blurred. Looking back on that event years ago, all I can remember of the discussion with the man in our living room is that what he said seemed to make sense.

I have a Ph.D. in marriage and the family and have spent my life studying, teaching, and counseling in the area of Christian living. Today, forty years later, I still cannot totally explain what happened to me when I was "born again," or even why it happened to me. When Nicodemus, one of the smartest and most educated men of his day, asked Jesus,

"What in the world are you talking about when you say, 'born again'?" Jesus replied:

"What I am telling you so earnestly is this: Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God. Men can only reproduce human life, but the Holy Spirit gives new life from heaven; so don't be surprised at my statement that you must be born again! Just as you can hear the wind but can't tell where it comes from or where it will go next, so it is with the Spirit. We do not know on whom he will next bestow this life from heaven." (John 3:5-8, LB)

"Now if I am doing what I don't want to, it is plain where the trouble is: sin still has me in its evil grasp." (Romans 7:20, LB)

MY BIGGEST PROBLEM

Several dramatic changes occurred in my behavior when I first became a Christian, but over a period of several years my sense of closeness to the Lord began to fade. Marriage, parenthood, and job revealed deeper life problems of anger, bitterness, hostility, and pride.

My boss was a harsh, cussing man. Day after day he would scowl as he scanned the engineering department from his glass-walled office. Stuffing his mouth with a huge chunk of tobacco, he would yell, "Brandt!" And that was all it took! Anger would well up within me and I was a goner! It worked every time; I was helpless. Even before his merciless tongue-lashings, I would be brimming with hostility and wounded pride.

How could I vent my feelings toward him? I would have found myself out in the street! As a result of keeping my anger inside, it spilled over into my relationships with my wife, my son, and my associates.

I was filled with regret over the things I said and did. Telling myself to stop didn't help. I tried everything I could to find relief: taking a walk, griping to a friend, playing tennis, yelling at my wife or tiny son. I even consciously thought about swearing and drinking again—typical regressive behavior! I even tried looking into my neglected Bible.

I quickly found out that Bible reading was not easy. I couldn't scan the Bible and ignore parts of it like reading a newspaper. What I read was disturbing, but some of it slipped into my mind and I found myself comparing my behavior to the verses that I read.

I came upon a verse that got my attention:

Stop being mean, bad-tempered, and angry. Quarreling, harsh words, and dislike of others should have no place in your lives. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God has forgiven you because you belong to Christ. (Ephesians 4:31-32, LB)

I spent several months contemplating those verses. They made me mad! The more I thought about forgiving my boss, my family, and my associates, the more reasons I found for *not* forgiving them. I easily justified my hatred and anger. Why should I be kind and tenderhearted toward them? Such an idea infuriated me!

Eventually I came to the conclusion that the Bible was right. I told myself: "I will quit being hateful and angry toward these people." But as the days passed, I made a scary and frustrating discovery: I couldn't quit! When my boss yelled at me or my wife didn't do what I asked her to do, my response was automatic: intense anger! I could cover it up, put a smile on my face and control my speech, but just underneath the surface was a furious response.

My resentment toward the Bible intensified. Here was a book that required something I didn't want to do and couldn't do *even after I decided to do it!*

I identified with the Apostle Paul when he described himself:

When I want to do good, I don't; and when I try not to do wrong, I do it anyway. Now if I am doing what I don't want to, it is plain where the trouble is, sin still has me in its evil grasp. (Romans 7:19-20, LB)

As I continued to thumb through my Bible, I stumbled upon some verses which hit me right between the eyes:

Not that we are in any way confident of our own resources—our ability comes from God. It is He who makes us competent administrators of the new agreement, and we deal not in the letter but in the Spirit. The letter of the Law leads to the death of the soul, the Spirit of God alone can give life to the soul. (2 Corinthians 3:5-6, Phillips)

My response to those verses was troubled. Why couldn't I depend upon my own resources for living? *I* earned an education without God's help. *I* obtained a job and promotions. By my own will *I* managed to meet the demands of life. It appeared to me that *I* could do some things *on my own!*

MY STRENGTH COMES FROM HIM

After a long struggle, I realized that what *I could not do* is live up to the *spirit* of Christianity. I could live up to "the letter" by acting kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving. But I found that *acting* killed something in me; it was death to my soul. The Christian life was not the development of my acting ability! The Christian life was God's Spirit living His life in me.

After admitting that my own resources were not enough, I faced other spiritual obstacles: Why did my fellowship with Jesus fade after my conversion? Why did God seem so distant, so unconcerned? Worst of all, why did God sometimes seem not to

exist at all?

The Bible met all my questions with a single answer:

Listen now! The Lord isn't too weak to save you. And he isn't getting deaf! He can hear you when you call! But the trouble is that *your sins have cut you off from God*. Because of sin He has turned his face away from you and will not listen anymore. (Isaiah 59:1-2, LB, emphasis added)

The Bible put the finger on the problem: sin was keeping me at a distance from the Lord. Those verses that disturbed me said it all:

Stop being mean, bad tempered, and angry. . . harsh words and dislike of others have no place in our lives. (Ephesians 4:31, LB)

These were the sins that made God seem so distant to me. My boss and family didn't cause them; they were only used to reveal them in me.

Since only God could cleanse me from sin, I asked Him to cleanse my heart. I also asked the Lord for help because I knew I couldn't help myself. I couldn't love my boss or my wife or my little boy. Oh, yes, I could *seem* loving, but that's not the same as *being* loving on the inside. The turning point came when I admitted to God that I was helpless and asked Him to give me His love for my boss *when he was yelling at me*. The next day on the way to work I again appealed to God to take away the intense anger when my boss yelled at me and give me His love for my boss.

Although I could not see any outward changes in my life, I remember very well the day when my boss, his jaw loaded with tobacco, shouted, "Brandt!" and to my surprise, I wasn't mad at him. For the first time that I could remember, the smile on my face reflected my spirit. What an incredible experience for me! I'm not trying to say that I entrusted every day to the Lord. But every day that I did, I found the Lord was always there.

A few weeks later, my boss yelled at me again: "Brandt! Come in here!" By now he amused me. I actually enjoyed watching him! Let me tell you! What a different experience it was when there was joy in my heart! I could watch an old crab and not become a crab myself! It was wonderful to be released from that trap. I walked into his office feeling friendly and relaxed. I asked, "What do you want?" And he said, "What's gotten into you? You've been in a good mood lately!"

As the days went by my boss still yelled, but I was not mad at him. It was a miracle. First came cleansing; then came strength—a strength not my own but God's.

I cannot change what I am deep down inside; only God can. I can only change surface actions. I have a human tendency to idealistically view myself: I think I can change my behavior if I am just determined enough. This thinking leads to some great acting, but

not to a changed and *cured* heart. I may feel that I must add to the finished work of Christ, but when Jesus said, "It is finished!" (John 19:30, NKJV)—He meant it.

Only Jesus lived the Christian life. Only Jesus in control of our hearts will enable us to live the Christian life today. Every day that yielded to Him, I found the Lord was always there. And across these years, the principle that we can live the Christian life with God in control and win against sin has made a tremendous difference in my life.

Lesson: The Christian life is not difficult, but impossible to live on our own.

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. What is the difference between the letter and the spirit of the law?
2. Do all your problems go away when you are "born again"?
3. Why did I use the word "revealed" instead of "caused" when I said that my marriage, parenthood, and job revealed my anger, bitterness, hostility, and pride?
4. What is wrong with self-control?
5. In 2 Corinthians 5:17, what is new? Can you find the answer in 2 Corinthians 5:18?
6. What can you do to find relief from sin?

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