



Keys to Happy Family Living

Christian Living Series

By Henry Brandt, Ph.D.

Lesson I – Personal Peace

"In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men." Acts 24:16 NASB.

"I want to be the best parent that I can possibly be" -- this is no doubt the heart cry of everyone who begins this course. We say this, thinking back over a multitude of incidents that make up the history of our families. Some of them were funny when they happened; others were funny only as we looked back at them. Still others were gravely serious. Some were puzzling.

A family was entertaining an important guest at dinner. The youngest child, a happy-go-lucky, mischievous girl of four, addressed the guest, "Hey mister, pass the salt or I'll get mad." What do you do when this happens? Do you laugh or do you cry? Do you ignore it or do you make an issue of it?

Then there are the times when mother is certain that the children should wear jackets and dad is just as certain that mother is unreasonable.

Or there are times when the family is entertaining a family of missionaries who have just returned from five years on the field. The son has always been generous with his bicycle. Anyone could use it. To the parents' consternation, the boy refuses to let any of the missionary children ride it.

On the other hand, you have the minister and his family over for dinner, and your three children who have been noisy and active all day long are "perfect angels" throughout the entire evening.

There are months on end when husband and wife get along beautifully; and then, out of the clear, blue sky, there are frequent disagreements. For weeks they suffer this way; and then, just as mysteriously, things clear up.

This is the ebb and flow, the fascination, the never-ending variety, the multitude of moods that make up family living. How can we do our part better? It is our prayer that this course will put you on the proper pathway.

In order to be the kind of parent you want to be, you must first be the kind of person you ought to be. To do so, you must (1) be willing to understand, appreciate, and use your strong points; (2) with true humility, be willing to identify your weaknesses and seek to strengthen them; and (3) aspire to be the kind of partner that will contribute your share to a mutually satisfactory marriage. It is such experience that will allow you to enter the gates of parenthood, and go on to build your wholesome personality into the lives of your children as you lead them to the Source of power that has been your strength, even God Himself.

You must first be the kind of person who has found a personal, inner peace. You must be at peace with yourself. The pathway to personal peace is clearly marked for you in the Bible.

To follow the teaching of the Bible is to become an adequate, peaceful person.

The First Step

A lawyer once asked the Lord to state a basic principle of wholesome living: "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" (Matthew 22:36). If you were to answer that question, which commandment would you select? We look eagerly for the Lord's answer:

"And He said to him, 'YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF'" (verses 37-39).

Then the Lord Jesus added, "On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets" (verse 40).

"The great and foremost commandment" tells you to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind. To say the least, this means to love Him through and through. When two people are in love with each other, they delight in each other's presence. They go out of the way to be with each other, to talk together, to please each other, to make each other happy. They do favors for each other, give gifts to each other, write to each other. They think about each other when apart, and long to be together forever and share in all details of their lives.

Accordingly, your love for God can be measured by the time you spend talking to Him in prayer, reading and meditating on His Word, seeking to please Him. Jesus said to His disciples:

"If you love Me, you will keep My commandments" (John 14:15). And the apostle John wrote: "...but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked" (1 John 2:5-6).

The first step in finding peace with yourself, then, is in declaring and demonstrating your love for God. This is the fulfillment of the first and great commandment.

The Second Step

Jesus said that the second great commandment is this: "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF" (Matthew 22:39). Let us consider this commandment.

You should love your neighbor! Surely your closest neighbor is your marriage partner. How much are you to love this partner? "...as yourself"! This may be a difficult concept to grasp. Are we not to crucify self, to be abased, to lose our lives, to humble ourselves? By all means! Then what does it mean to "love yourself"? It means that in the quietness of your own soul there is a consciousness that your behavior is acceptable to God and, therefore, to yourself. You can think about your behavior and say to yourself, "I believe God was pleased with what you said today, the tone of voice you used, the way you acted today, the desires that stole into your heart, the feelings that you had toward others, the thoughts that occupied your mind." This is neither pride, nor conceit, nor selfishness. This is a wholesome spirit when combined with sincere repentance in times of failure, and a constant hunger to find strength for weakness. A healthy, wholesome regard for your inner life is a key that will enable you to love your neighbor.

In the first two lessons, we are to consider proper speech, proper actions, proper desires, proper feelings, and proper thoughts as the basis that *will* enable you to be at peace with yourself--to be properly adjusted personally--and to love your neighbor as yourself. Our real textbook will be the Bible.

How Can We Have Peace with Self?

Proper speech

We use speech to communicate with the people in our lives. This is one way whereby others can know what is in our hearts. Paul asks the question: "For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him?" (1 Corinthians 2:11). No man knows what goes on within you unless you reveal it. Otherwise, he must guess, or attempt to "read between the lines." No matter how closely people are associated with you, or related to you, they cannot know clearly what goes on within you unless you communicate with them. To the extent that you reveal yourself to a person, to that extent he has a true picture of you. God said, "...man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7). Man is limited in what he can know about you--limited by what you will reveal. However, "The LORD looks at the heart."

Knowing this, David prayed: "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my rock and my Redeemer" (Psalm 19:14). Again, David set proper speech as a goal for his life when he said: "I have purposed that my mouth will not transgress." (Psalm 17:3).

Kind words

How should we speak to one another? The story of Joseph provides us with a good example. His brothers, who despised him and determined to get rid of him, sold him into captivity. Joseph, however, achieved a place in Egypt second only to the king. When a time of famine came, he was given charge of distributing food. His brothers also had to go to him.

They were greatly concerned when they discovered Joseph's identity. They went to him, asking for mercy. This was Joseph's answer:

"Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive. So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones." So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them" (Genesis 50:19-21).

Comforting, kindly words--backed by appropriate action, and based on Joseph's faith in God, not on the behavior of his brothers--what a relief this must have been to them!

Children need to be reared in an atmosphere of kindly words. To illustrate, a small child had accidentally spilled her milk. She looked anxiously up at her mother, who quietly said, "You put your glass too close to your elbow, didn't you?" One could see the relief on the child's face because of the kindly treatment she received, because of the understanding words spoken by mother, who recognized that this was an accident. Her words were meant to teach the child how to avoid repetition of the accident, not to cause a scene.

Later that same evening, however, the same child was reluctant to go to bed. Quietly, but firmly, the mother said, "You are to go to bed!" The child still did not go, so mother took her by the arm and firmly directed her toward the bedroom. One could see the child stiffen, and then give in as mother continued, "You need a good night's sleep." One is reminded of the proverb: "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." (Proverbs 15:1). This mother set the tone in her family by her soft answers that issued from a kind heart, again backed by appropriate action.

Biblical emphasis

Pleasant words, kindly words, a soft answer, a wholesome tongue, simplicity, godly sincerity, gracious words, pleasing God with our words, sound speech--these are terms used in the Bible. (See, for example, Proverbs 15:4; II Corinthians 1:12; I Thessalonians 2:3-5; Titus 2:7-8.) Is it not obvious that such conversation is necessary if we are to have good relations with others?

A child was given to much screaming. The annoyed parent's response was a scolding demand: "Stop screaming!" or, "You embarrass me the way you act!" He was screaming at the child to stop screaming. Without realizing it, he was providing the example for the child. Once he became aware of the power of his own example, and began speaking to the child as he should, he began making progress toward quieting the child.

On the negative side, the Bible cautions us to speak evil of no man, to put away a froward mouth (that is, "crooked speech") and perverse lips, to refrain from whispering, flattery, lying, and tale-bearing. (See Titus 3:2; Proverbs 4:24; 16:28; 26:20, 28.) The truth of such verses as Proverbs 26:20 is obvious: "For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, contention quiets down."

Recently a newspaper columnist reported a conversation with a taxi driver. He said he had just taken two women to a hotel. He had picked them up in the suburbs, and all the way to town they were talking about two other women who were to meet them in front of the hotel for a cup of tea. "If those two other women had been standing at the curb without a stitch on, I wouldn't have been surprised," he said. "My fares had stripped them down to their very souls during that ride."

"Don't misunderstand me," one of the fares was saying. "I love Margaret, but" After that, Margaret emerged as about the most despicable female since Lady Macbeth. The other fare said she knew all this and she, too, loved Margaret as well as Lynn, for whom she'd do almost anything in the world. "But," she continued, "it stands to reason that Lynn can't be any better than Margaret since the two are so thick, and everybody knows that birds of a feather flock together."

When the cab reached the hotel, the two fares got out, rushed up to the two women standing under the marquee, hugged them, and squealed: "Darling, you look wonderful!" "Oh, what fun to see you again!" And there were more fond embraces.

How different such a conversation is from the standard that is set by Paul! "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear" (Ephesians 4:29). Our goal, then, as Christians, is to avoid the kind of communication that does not edify, but to speak those words that are constructive. How could the two women in the cab benefit from their destructive criticism? In the privacy of each one's soul there must have been a sense of unwholesomeness.

"Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 1:13; compare Proverbs 17:27-28; 2 Timothy 2:16; James 1:19).

One step toward inner peace and a sense of personal wholesomeness has been taken if you are able to review the day, knowing that your speech was acceptable to God because you have used words that edify and satisfy.

Proper actions

Your love for God will influence your behavior. Paul says:

"Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father" (Colossians 3:17).

In the words of A. W. Tozer:

We must offer all of our acts to God and believe that He accepts them, then hold firmly to that position, and keep insisting that every act of every hour of every day and night be included Let us practice the fine art of making every work a priestly ministrations. Let us believe that God is in all of our simple deeds and learn to find Him there.¹

Again, Paul says:

"Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve" (Colossians 3:23-24).

How wonderful to enjoy what you are doing—to do it heartily—to do it as an act of worship! This should be true whether your work is at the desk, at the bench, in the shop, behind the pulpit, in the home. The poet has aptly put this thought into words:

Let me but do my work from day to day,
In field or forest, at the desk or loom,
In roaring market place or tranquil room;
Let me but find it in my heart to say,
When vagrant wishes beckon me astray,
"This is my work; my blessing, not my doom;
Of all who live, I am the one by whom
This work can best be done in the right way."
Then shall I see it not too great, nor small,
To suit my spirit and to prove my powers;
Then shall I cheerful greet the laboring hours
And cheerful turn, when the long shadows fall
At eventide, to play and love and rest,
Because I know for me my work is best.

-HENRY VAN DYKE

¹Tozer, A. W., *The Pursuit of God* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Christian Publications, Inc., 1948), p. 123.

If you are to have a wholesome estimate of yourself, you must give consideration to the quality of your actions. One important reason for this is that actions which fall short of your own standards will cause you unrest, anxiety, worry, and tension.

To illustrate, a fine, clean-cut young man approached his college dean. "Sir," he said, obviously embarrassed, and speaking with great difficulty. "I have a confession to make. I must tell you my story because every time I see you coming toward me—every time you stop to talk to me—I think you have found out what I have done. I am tired of the suspense of hiding and want to make this confession."

The young man had broken a rule that required students who had cars to have liability insurance if they transported other students. The dean had no knowledge of the violation of this rule, but the young man was reaping the harvest of improper actions—a bad conscience.

An example to others

Our behavior ought to be such that it can be imitated with profit by others. A goal for you might be one that Paul gave to Timothy: "Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe" (1 Timothy 4:12). Then you can say with Paul, "Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1).

What you do should stand up favorably under the scrutiny of others. Otherwise, your actions will cause you to be a stumbling block and will give you a sense of dissatisfaction with yourself. This is illustrated by a student in a seminary. The practical work director had summoned him to tell him of an opening for an assistant pastor. Before sending him to this assignment, however, the director wanted to clear up a rumor that this student had been seen doing something that was against the rules of the school. The latter denied the rumor and was given the assignment. A week later he returned to confess that the report was true. He had been in torment for a week. Even if it meant losing the opportunity, he wanted to set the record straight. He realized anew that in order to be an example to others he needed to follow Christ in his own life. This young man has gone on to have a fine ministry since his decision to "show yourself an example." "Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the LORD, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon" (Isaiah 55:7).

Personal peace

A young man walked into the dean's office to say that others were spreading the rumor that he had been seen in a tavern. He wanted the dean to know that this was not true. The next day he returned to say that he had lied, but that he had taken only one drink. A short time later the dean learned that this confession was incomplete. The student had taken several drinks and had danced as well. Both actions were against the rules. After some questioning, the student admitted that he had made only a partial confession. He was afraid to tell the truth for fear of the consequences.

One questionable act often leads one to commit another in order to cover up the first one. Many people suffer terrible pangs of conscience because of unwholesome acts.

The following couplet expresses this thought well:

There is a secret in his breast

That will never let him rest.

How good it is to forsake your wicked ways--to repent--to be able to say with Paul, "The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you" (Philippians 4:9).

The following are newspaper accounts of people who found it necessary to correct improper actions:

Harry Jorgenson of South Dakota bought a dog for ten dollars. About a year later the pet disappeared. He made every effort to find it, with no success. More than twenty-five years passed. Then recently a car bearing a Nebraska license drove into the Jorgenson yard. The driver went to the house and said, "I am the fellow who took your dog many years ago. It has bothered me, and I want to pay for the animal." He paid Mr. Jorgenson twenty-five dollars for the dog he had stolen nearly twenty-five years previously.

Harold Ashby, a Coca-Cola truck driver, received the following note at one of the places he served on his route: "Mr. Coca-Cola Man, my brother and I are very sorry that we took the Coke that was missing and we want to pay you." In the envelope was cash to pay for the drinks.

Recently a large Detroit hotel received a small amount of cash in the mail. This note was attached: "Here's a donation to help my conscience."

One woman wrote to a hotel last year and asked to make restitution. She had taken a bedspread fifteen years previously. The souvenir still haunted her conscience.

These examples illustrate the importance of proper actions. You must live with yourself. Before you can live at peace with your neighbor, you must be at peace with yourself. 1 Corinthians 6:12 and 10:23 provide a standard for measuring the quality of your actions. Every act of every day, every simple deed, is or is not an act of obedience to God. As you retire at night and meditate upon the day, you will realize that the quality of the multitude of deeds done that day will determine whether God could say to you, "Well done, good and faithful slave" (Matthew 25:21, 23). "Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary." (Galatians 6:9).

In this lesson we have considered two steps toward personal peace--proper speech and proper actions. Lesson 2 will continue this subject, dealing with proper desires, proper feelings, and proper thoughts.

Study Assignment for Lesson 1

Take your Bible and look up each Scripture verse referred to in Lesson 1. From these verses make a list of the characteristics you would like to show in your life. Make another list of the things that should not be a part of your life. Keep these lists before you as reminders for your words and actions and as helps in seeking the guidance of the Lord in being the right kind of person.

Self-Check Test 1

How much have you learned?

Before taking this test read again the instructions and follow the SQ3R formula. (See <http://biblicalcounselinginsights.com/keys-to-happy-family-living-series/>). You can also use the questions given in this test as a basis for reading, reciting, and reviewing the lesson.

In the space provided, mark the following statements "True" or "False."

- _____ 1. Good marriage partners recognize their weaknesses and try to strengthen them.
- _____ 2. The first step to true peace is found in loving God and in telling Him so.
- _____ 3. Proper speech and behavior contribute to personal peace.
- _____ 4. Gentle words are sufficient for enforcing proper discipline of children.
- _____ 5. Under certain conditions, destructive criticism is a legitimate form of conversation.
- _____ 6. A polite, pleasing conversation is necessary if we are to have good relations with others.
- _____ 7. Anxiety, unrest and tension result from falling short of our own standards.
- _____ 8. Proper actions will eliminate a bad conscience.
- _____ 9. We must ignore criticisms others make of our actions in order to have personal peace.
- _____ 10. A person can live at peace with his neighbor even though he is at war with himself.

Visit <http://biblicalcounselinginsights.com/keys-to-happy-family-living-series/answers/> for the answers to these questions.

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