



Keys to Happy Family Living

Christian Living Series

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Lesson 4 – Steps to Spiritual Strength

"...and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God." (Romans 6:13, NASB)

Lesson 4 presents a series of steps that will enable you to love your neighbor as yourself. These steps are as follows:

1. Evaluation of your behavior
2. Acceptance of your condition
3. Forgiveness received from God
4. Surrender to the power of God

It is assumed that the student of this course is a Christian. That is, he or she recognizes and accepts the truths set forth in Romans 3:19-28, Colossians 1:12-14, and John 3:16 that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, and that the sinner is saved through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Accordingly, this lesson, addressed to the Christian, seeks to show you how to take this series of steps in order to bring your life into continuous subjection to the will of God--to love your neighbor as yourself.

I. Evaluation of Your Behavior

Laws need to be considered

Before you can solve a problem, you must first find out what the problem is. This is an orderly world. It operates according to definite, dependable laws.

For example, we take care to make allowance for the law of gravity. A dear, elderly gentleman put up a ladder to do some work on his roof, but he placed it so that it was crooked. When he climbed up the ladder, it began to slide. He fell and broke his hip.

Here was a man, a devout Christian, who was careless about observing the law of gravity. He fell just as the worst criminal would have fallen if he had gone up that ladder.

We take the laws of friction into account. A student took a curve in the road too fast on an icy day. His car went end over end and he came out of the wreckage with a battered head. He had ignored the laws of friction. He did not do this intentionally. He was not deliberately reckless. Yet the same thing happened to him as would have happened to the most reckless of drivers.

All of us know the importance to our safety of abiding by the laws of gravity and friction. These laws have been gathered together in books. As we study them, we learn what to expect if we abide by them and what to expect if we violate them.

The laws of human behavior are likewise gathered together in a Book--the Bible. To understand why people behave as they do, to understand why you behave as you do, you must understand the laws contained in the Bible. The apostle says of the Bible:

"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (II Timothy 3:16-17).

The cause of inner unrest, conflict between people, and separation from God is the violation of the laws found in the Bible. (See Isaiah 59:1-2; I John 1:6-7.) The violation of these laws is called sin. The Bible defines sin as "lawlessness." "Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). Whether done deliberately or in ignorance, we reap the results of violating God's laws just as we reap the result of violating the laws of friction or gravity.

To understand the cause of inner unrest, conflict with people, and separation from God is to understand the effect of sin. To understand God's solution is to understand the preventives that keep us from sinning.

Now sin has two aspects: the tendency to sin and specific acts that are sin.

a. *The tendency to sin* is described by Paul:

"For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members" (Romans 7:15-23).

To illustrate, a student tells of this experience: Night after night, before he went to sleep, he determined that he would go through the next day with a wholesome, positive reaction toward circumstances and people. One morning he was particularly determined to have a good day. He left his room, raced for the elevator, and just as he got there the door closed, and he was forced to wait a few minutes. When he did get on the elevator, another passenger accidentally stepped on his foot. He walked away very conscious of being annoyed at both incidents in spite of his determination to react in a wholesome, kindly way toward all such happenings.

Again, a mother of two pre-school children tells of her struggle with her attitude toward her children. Two specific tasks that faced her daily caused her much annoyance. She hated herself for it, but no amount of determination, will power, or good intentions could give her control over her annoyance at feeding the children or changing diapers. It is granted that these are trying tasks. The point is that this woman was unable to achieve the desired attitude toward these tasks.

Every man finds himself sooner or later doing, saying, feeling, thinking in a way that is distasteful to him. Every man, sooner or later, finds himself not doing, saying, or feeling as he would like. This is the tendency to sin--something within you that is beyond your control. To recognize and accept this tendency within you is the first step toward a solution to the problem.

b. *Specific acts that are sin.* The tendency to sin within you makes itself known to you by specific inner reactions or outward actions toward others. We use the Bible to identify these. Let us look at some of these passages: James 2:9; 4:17; 1 John 3:15; Proverbs 10:19; Ephesians 4:18-32; 2 Timothy 3:1-5; James 3:14-16; Matthew 5:43-48; Luke 17:3-4; Philippians 2:1-3.

Anger, bitterness, wrath, pride, and hate are inner reactions to circumstances. These are invisible and can be concealed. Any man who will compare himself with the Bible standard must declare himself a sinner, unable to eliminate from his life the inward reactions or outward responses toward others, undesirable to him and described in the Bible as sin.

We tend to overemphasize the value and importance of outward behavior and to minimize--or fail to realize--the emphasis, the importance, the value given in the Bible to inward behavior. It is impossible for another to see within you, and you are prone to hide even from yourself. James says, "But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic" (James 3:14-15, emphasis added).

Consider also the following passages: Matthew 5:8, 21, 22, 27, 28; 23:25-26; Mark 7:14-23; Luke 16:13-15; Acts 8:18-23; Romans 2:28-29; Ephesians 6:5-8; 1 Samuel 16:7; 2 Chronicles 16:9; Job 42:2; Psalm 34:18; 51:6-10; Proverbs 3:1; 23:7; Jeremiah 17:5; 29:11-13; Ezekiel 33:30-33; 1 Timothy 1:5; Matthew 18:35; 1 Thessalonians 2:3-4; Psalms 38:8; Jeremiah 9:8.

The law of life

To bring into sharper focus the meaning of sin and its terrible result to you, you should consider another important law -- "... the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:2). "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:22-23). Consider also James 3:17-18; Ephesians 4:31-32; Luke 6:35-37. Again, these are inward, invisible qualities. You can act this way in your own strength, at least part of the time; but you can't be this way without the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. If you doubt it, just pay attention to your inner responses to people or circumstances for one week.

2. Acceptance of Your Condition

It is easy and common to find a reason outside of yourself that keeps you from loving your neighbor as yourself. It seems reasonable that missing an elevator, getting a toe stepped on, handling wet diapers, doing messy tasks with small children, living with a mother who can't understand, associating with people who have undesirable habits, living with an uncooperative wife, are justifiable reasons for being disturbed. Under such circumstances anger, wrath, malice, bitterness, resentment, and the like seem normal.

This reasoning seems to be sound. However, the Bible calls such reactions sinful. In other words, these circumstances are not putting these reactions into you; they are bringing these reactions out of you. Note Mark 7:20-23.

Many people find this to be a shocking idea. It seems clear that the circumstance or the other person is the cause of their distress. It is hard to realize that their distress is a response to the circumstance or person. Many say: "Do you mean *you* would react differently? Anyone would be annoyed under these circumstances!"

The answer is that you can find peace and serenity without changing your circumstances or the people in your life. To do so involves recognizing that the situation you are in is not causing your distress. You must accept or acknowledge personal responsibility for your distress--for your sin. Note Romans 6:23; Isaiah 57:21; 59:1-2. You need a power outside yourself if you are to respond differently the next time you find yourself in your trying circumstance. You must accept personal responsibility without reservation. Dependence and faith in willpower, resolutions, insight, or determination are not the answer. A lingering thought that another person must be at least a little bit to blame is not the answer.

It is amazing how many people prefer to find a reason for justifying anger, wrath, malice, envy, and similar emotions rather than finding freedom from them. People prefer to change the circumstance or the person rather than to seek a source of peace, joy, and comfort in the circumstance or with the person.

For example, consider a young woman who had habits that her mother believed were

bad. The mother kept insisting that her misery was caused by her daughter's behavior. Accordingly, this mother felt quite clear in her own mind that the solution to her problem was to see a change in her daughter. Further, this woman believed that, being a Christian, she should not be agreeable toward her daughter lest she seem to be giving her blessing upon her daughter's unacceptable habits. She was being a good Christian, she thought, by being angry and impatient with her daughter. The daughter in turn felt quite justified in being bitter, rebellious, hostile, and stubborn. She wouldn't give in if it killed her. If there was a source of strength that would enable this girl to have a spirit of love, tenderness, gentleness, and compassion toward her mother, she would turn away from it. She insisted that her mother was the cause of these reactions.

The woman who had the task of handling wet diapers and teaching two small children how to eat preferred to be annoyed. According to her, you *should* be annoyed at such tasks. There is nothing wrong with being impatient with such a task. It is quite normal to be disgusted, tense, and dissatisfied at the end of the day. The children are the cause of these reactions. In her opinion, being a Christian has no bearing on the matter.

Many Christians find comfort in speaking of nerves, tension, anxiety, distress--any term but sin. Many Christians feel that they have long ago settled the matter of living in sin. They are saved. They are sanctified. But remember our definition of sin! "Sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). If it applies, then it applies. It matters not who you are, how much responsibility you have, what your status is, or who your family is.

You may have been trained to believe that to grin and bear it, even though you are seething inside, is evidence of piety; to speak in a well-modulated voice, even though you feel like screaming, is a mark of culture; to perform the task assigned, even though you rebel inwardly, is evidence of determination.

Such behavior is surely to be expected from a social standpoint. However, from a personal standpoint you benefit nothing. Your inward reaction is evidence of sinfulness. Jesus warned the Pharisees:

"Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the platter; but inside of you, you are full of robbery and wickedness. You foolish ones, did not He who made the outside make the inside also?" (Luke 11:39-40).

You have seen that acceptance of your condition implies accepting personal responsibility without reservation. If you feel that you can and will conquer your circumstances, then you are not yet ready to accept the tendency to sin. It is best for you to try yourself out. Expose yourself to your circumstances and pay attention to your inner reactions and your outward actions. Acceptance means that you are convinced beyond the shadow of a doubt that you are subject to your tendency to sin, and that this causes you to react the way you do not want to react--and prevents you from reacting in a way that you would like to react. This applies to thoughts, feelings, desires, actions, and speech. These must be identified in detail and dealt with separately. Acceptance or acknowledgment of the presence of sin in your life opens the way for you to avail yourself of a better way of life as defined by Paul: "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death" (Romans 8:2).

3. Forgiveness Received from God

Christ died to make forgiveness available to us: "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace" (Ephesians 1:7).

Thus far you have seen that acceptance of your tendency to sin is often a difficult step to take. Seeking forgiveness is a more difficult step to take. At first glance this step seems easy. In practice, the arm of the flesh is a useful tool and not easily laid down. To illustrate, one wife is fearful that if she does not display jealousy, she will lose control over her husband's affection. A mother is fearful that if she does not threaten to be angry with her children, she will lose control over their behavior. A young man does not want to give up the pleasure of lusting after women. A girl feels that to cease her rebellion against her parents is evidence of weakness. To acknowledge these reactions as sin is a step very difficult for many people to take. To seek forgiveness for sins is harder yet. To ask for forgiveness implies repentance and a willingness to forsake sins. Read 1 John 2:1-6; Isaiah 55:7; Proverbs 28:13.

Many people insist that a period of depression, self-condemnation, sadness, remorse, or weeping is evidence of repentance. In Quebec, one can see people climb five hundred cathedral steps on their knees as evidence of repentance. In India, a man may be lying on a bed of spikes. It is true that conviction of sin causes some people to react emotionally or to show evidence of repentance. However, repentance is not the emotion or the action. It is rather being sorry for sin enough to hate and forsake it. Repentance involves following God's plan and believing His Word: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

The simplicity of receiving forgiveness is hard to accept. It does seem that we ought to help God out somehow. Nothing is required of you apart from acceptance of your sinfulness and of God's forgiveness on His terms, not yours. To repeat, this must be done from the heart. There is no other way. You must be completely sincere. You will not find forgiveness until you are convinced that you need it, that you are undone, that there is no other way.

Yes, acceptance of your tendency to sin, confession of specific sins, and seeking forgiveness are contrary to our normal way of doing things. But the next step--surrender to the power of God--is hardest of all to accept.

4. Surrender to the Power of God

At first glance, it would seem that to submit to the strength and power of God is something that everyone would gladly do. As Paul expresses it, "Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God" (2 Corinthians 3:5). On the contrary, man rebels against accepting his weakness or insufficiency. However, even if you acknowledge failures of the past, you will not necessarily acknowledge your inability to please God in the future. Man tends

to feel that since he understands the reason for past failures, he can now do better. He tends to seek the answer to his sinfulness in *two* ways--to repent for past sins and to retain confidence in himself not to repeat past sins. He tends to retain his faith in self-discipline, willpower, training, self-sacrifice, and the like.

The tendency is to treat people as they deserve to be treated, rather than as they should be treated. To surrender to God implies a lifetime study of His will for every detail of your life. It means recognizing your inability to do His will apart from His power and your need to submit to Him daily for His power. To quote Paul further:

"For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves" (2 Corinthians 4:6-7; compare also vv. 8-10).

Note three basic truths in these verses: (a) Christ is the treasure; (b) the earthen vessels are our bodies; (c) the excellency of the power is of God, and not of us. Therefore, this treasure is from God, and we experience the power of God in our lives as we recognize its source and submit to Him who gives it.

Yes, the power to please God comes from God. Paul says of the Lord Jesus:

"But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, 'LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD.'" (1 Corinthians 1:30-31).

The apostle's prayer for the Colossians was that they "will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously" (Colossians 1:10-11). Note Romans 15:13; Job 34:29; Isaiah 32:17; 26:3; Philippians 3:9; 2 Corinthians 1:2-7.

Again, turning to Romans 7:24-8:4, we read:

"Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! ...

"Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

To surrender to God is to seek His power in order to react to life as He would have you to--to want His comfort *in* tribulation (2 Corinthians 1:2-4) ; to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44); to be "kind to ungrateful and evil men" (Luke 6:35).

One day the wife of a devout, dedicated young Christian man left him. There had been strains in the marriage, but this move surprised and hurt him. He was very unhappy over it. He lost interest in his business, had trouble sleeping, didn't care what or when he ate, and was bitter toward his wife. His statement was that his first concern was to do God's will. He would be most happy to see wherein he was out of God's will.

It is God's will that whatever we do, we do it heartily, as for the Lord (Colossians 3:23). Yet this young man was letting his business run down. It is God's will that we go to Him for peace and comfort *in* all our tribulations. This man explained that it was hard to find comfort and peace in his circumstances. Is it too hard for God to give him peace and comfort? Granted that his wife had left him. Will not God provide comfort and peace under such circumstances? Is this too hard for God?

Here is a man who speaks in very general terms of surrendering his life to God, but he fails to bring the details and circumstances of his life to God. In a sense, he is dissatisfied with what God has allowed and doesn't want to be happy.

To surrender to God involves both a crisis and a daily process. There needs to be a clear, definite yielding of one's self completely to God, followed by day-by-day experience of that surrender. Note Paul's word in Romans 6:13: "... present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God." And again, in Romans 12:1-2: "... present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice ... [and] be transformed by the renewing of your mind." What do these passages mean? Simply this: that we are to give ourselves—body, mind, and soul—unreservedly to God. This is a matter of the will. Are you willing? Then how is this to be accomplished?

Again the Word of God is clear about this matter. It is by the work of the Holy Spirit. We must not only thank God for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our hearts (John 14:16-17; Romans 8:9), but we must heed the command of the Word that we are to "be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18, emphasis added). Here is the secret of God's power--the Holy Spirit expressing Himself through us! He works in us only as we let Him. This is the very reason that Paul has said, "Yield yourselves unto God" (Romans 6:13). The yielded life is the life of peace and victory.

Now one further thought: the Holy Spirit is a Person--One of the Godhead (Acts 5:3-4; 2 Corinthians 13:14). As a Person, He can be grieved or pleased; rebuffed or obeyed; ignored or acknowledged. As one of God's children, you are to be the vessel through whom He works. He will produce in you and through you His fruit--if you permit Him to do so.

A young woman was married to a man who refused to give her spending money. This disturbed her to the extent that she was always feeling sorry for herself and angry with her husband. She went to an older woman in the church who was known to be a calm, peaceful soul. The older woman said to the younger one: "Let me tell you my story. My husband keeps all the money. He rules me with an iron hand. I never can express my opinion. Now that the children are married, he gives all his time to them and has no room for me in his life. This has gone on for thirty years. It will probably go on as long as I live. All these years I have prayed daily for patience and every day God answers my prayer."

Yes, to surrender to God is to bring each circumstance of life to Him and receive from Him the strength to face it by His Spirit. It is one thing to make a broad, thoughtless statement that you will submit to God, and another thing to surrender each detail of life to Him.

When you are impatient, you lack patience; when you are unhappy, you lack joy; when you are tense and anxious, you lack peace. You must continuously go to the Source of supply. Comfort, mercy, grace, peace, joy, patience, long-suffering with joyfulness will be yours only when you recognize that you lack them and when you let God give them to you.

Just as you need your food and water supply daily, so also you need your supply of joy, peace, and other spiritual qualities daily. Read Psalm 103:5; 2 Corinthians 4:16. Ten years from now you will still need to draw your strength and power from God just as you will need to eat food and drink water.

To understand this and to act accordingly is the key to a life that will enable you to love your neighbor as yourself and to do it consistently.

Study Assignment--Review Questions on Lesson 4

This assignment is intended to help you fully understand and remember what this lesson teaches.

1. What are the four steps to spiritual strength? (Learn to recite these from memory.)
2. What is the difference between the tendency to sin and the specific acts that are sin?
3. What are some sinful inner reactions to others and why are they so significant?
4. What does acceptance of your condition involve?
5. How must God's forgiveness be received?
6. What is the practical outworking of a surrender to the power of God?

Consider your own life--your inward and outward reactions. Follow the four steps suggested in this lesson in order to experience peace and victory in your life.

PERSONAL EVALUATION TEST 2

Check Up on Your Progress

Answer Yes or No in the space provided.

- _____ 1. Do I help others even if I find it inconvenient?
- _____ 2. Do I insist on having my own way?
- _____ 3. Am I thoughtful for the well-being of those with whom I live?
- _____ 4. Am I easily irritated?
- _____ 5. Am I patient when people treat me unkindly?
- _____ 6. Do I seethe inside when I am ill-treated?
- _____ 7. Since the laws of human behavior are in the Bible, do I read God's Word regularly?
- _____ 8. Do I think evil desire is less serious in God's sight than open immorality?
- _____ 9. Do I recognize within me a tendency to commit sin?
- _____ 10. Do my circumstances discourage me?
- _____ 11. Have I surrendered to God, seeking His power to overcome sin?
- _____ 12. Do I try to justify myself when I have said or done something wrong?

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Self-Check Test 4

Recall what you have learned.

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

- _____ 1. The Bible contains laws which will help you to understand your own behavior.

- _____ 2. All conflict results from sin.
- _____ 3. The tendency to sin is well within a person's power to control.
- _____ 4. Outward behavior is more important than inward behavior.
- _____ 5. A person's normal reaction against irritating circumstances, while often normal, is just as often sinful.
- _____ 6. Outward calm masking inward turmoil is evidence of piety.
- _____ 7. Repentance can be equated with a sense of sorrow for sin.
- _____ 8. God's will can be done by Christians only with God's enablement.
- _____ 9. The Holy Spirit expressing Himself through us as we yield to Him is the secret of God's power for the believer.
- _____ 10. It is less necessary to constantly look to God for spiritual enablement once spiritual behavior becomes the normal habit of life.

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