



THE JOURNEY HOME

A BIBLE STUDY FOR THE INCARCERATED



LUTHERAN HOUR MINISTRIES

THE JOURNEY HOME

written for Lutheran Hour Ministries
by Rev. Leroy Johnson



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LESSON 1

INTRODUCTION

Jesus used this account of a well-known family in His day to provide His listeners (then and today) with a graphic illustration of the Heavenly Father's love. It's His delight to give us our desires, and He wishes to accept us fully into His heart and graces. Even when we have committed all manner of sin, He still accepts us when we acknowledge our waywardness, and turn to Him. He is always there waiting for us—to come to or return to Him without any reservation.

LESSON OUTLINE

1. The Story of the Lost Son (Luke 15:11-32)
2. Questions: Applying What You Have Learned
3. Summary

THE STORY OF THE LOST SON

LUKE 15:11-32

1 THE STORY OF THE LOST SON

¹¹ To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: "A man had two sons.

¹² The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now before you die.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.

¹³ "A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living.

¹⁴ About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve.

¹⁵ He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs.

¹⁶ The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ "When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger!

¹⁸ I will go home to my father and say, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you,

¹⁹ and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.'"

²⁰ "So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him.

²¹ His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.'

²² "But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet.

²³ And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast,

²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So the party began.

²⁵ "Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house,

²⁶ and he asked one of the servants what was going on.

²⁷ 'Your brother is back,' he was told, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.'

²⁸ “The older brother was angry and wouldn’t go in. His father came out and begged him,
²⁹ but he replied, ‘All these years I’ve slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends.
³⁰ Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!’
³¹ “His father said to him, ‘Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours.
³² We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!’”

2

QUESTIONS: APPLYING WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

I want to encourage you to read the above verses again and think about them slowly—and thoroughly. I took them from the New Living Translation of the Bible. It’s an easy-to-read and user-friendly version. In this passage Jesus is presenting a wonderful life lesson in these Scriptures. Whatever your situation is at the moment, rest assured that God loves you and has sent Jesus to give you hope and eternal life. As you read, give answers to the questions below. Each question will be addressed in the lessons to follow. I have given 15 here, but as you go through each lesson you will discover the answers to these and many more. You will even find answers to questions you’ve asked yourself.

1. Who was this son?
2. How did the son see his father?
3. Why was he dissatisfied?
4. Was he selfish? Impulsive?
5. Why do you think he chose to leave home?
6. Can you see yourself in any of his choices?

LESSON 2

INTRODUCTION

We are all where we are today because of choices: choices made by others for us, and choices we've made for ourselves. From the beginning of time, men have blamed others for the negative outcomes in their lives, which are really the result of selfish choices. In Genesis 3:11-13 we see how Adam blamed Eve; whereas Eve blamed the serpent—each blaming their predicament on someone or something else. Any selfish choice will always hurt you and others. In this lesson you will learn about the choices made by the lost son, and what could have led him to making these choices. You will also learn from his mistakes, in order to make better choices for your life.

LESSON OUTLINE

1. Selfish Choices Always Hurt You and Others (Luke 15:11-12; 1 Kings 12:6-14)
2. The Spirit and the Mind in Decision-Making
3. Questions: Applying What You Have Learned

SELFISH CHOICES

LUKE 15:11-12; 1 KINGS 12:6-14; ROMANS 8:14

1 SELFISH CHOICES ALWAYS HURT YOU AND OTHERS

¹¹To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: "A man had two sons.

¹²The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now before you die.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.

The younger son does the unthinkable: he asks for his inheritance from his living father. We must assume he was of age and yet, his father, because of his love for his sons, had not required them to leave his home. Instead, he was allowing them to live on his estate, which was customary. Yet the younger son was not happy. Why is this? As the lesson unfolds, we will find out the results of his selfish choices.

It was not customary in Bible days for a son to ask for his inheritance while his father was living. For the young son to be influenced in leaving home someone had to initiate, plant or present this thought to him. Who was he listening to? It appears he was receiving bad counsel.

To illustrate how bad counsel can influence the decision to make a bad choice, let's look at a passage from 1 Kings 12:6-14.

⁶ Then King Rehoboam discussed the matter with the older men who had counseled his father, Solomon. "What is your advice?" he asked. "How should I answer these people?"

⁷ The older counselors replied, "If you are willing to be a servant to these people today and give them a favorable answer, they will always be your loyal subjects."

⁸ But Rehoboam rejected the advice of the older men and instead asked the opinion of the young men who had grown up with him and were now his advisers.

⁹ "What is your advice?" he asked them. "How should I answer these people who want me to lighten the burdens imposed by my father?"

¹⁰The young men replied, "This is what you should tell those complainers who want a lighter burden: 'My little finger is thicker than my father's waist!'"

¹¹Yes, my father laid heavy burdens on you, but I'm going to make them even heavier! My father beat you with whips, but I will beat you with scorpions!"

¹²Three days later Jeroboam and all the people returned to hear Rehoboam's decision, just as the king had ordered.

¹³But Rehoboam spoke harshly to the people, for he rejected the advice of the older counselors

¹⁴and followed the counsel of his younger advisers. He told the people, "My father laid heavy burdens on you, but I'm going to make them even heavier! My father beat you with whips, but I will beat you with scorpions!"

In these Scriptures we see Rehoboam, son of Solomon and heir to the throne, refusing the wise counsel of his father's advisors, and instead adopting the counsel of his peers. What's wrong with this picture? Rehoboam's choice was selfish and prideful. In fact, it caused him to lose part of his inheritance.

A verse from the book of Proverbs works well here: "Where no wise guidance is, the people fall, but in the multitude of counselors there is safety" (Proverbs 11:14). From this verse we see that wise counsel is always good and provides safety for us. It can save us and our loved ones from a life of heartache and pain, that is, if we pay attention to the wisdom it has to offer.

Can you imagine a five-year-old child successfully crossing a busy street, using the advice of another five-year-old? The answer is no, of course. Rehoboam's peers had no life experience of running or operating a nation, but his father's peers had years of experience by sitting in the counsel of the wisest man ever known, yet Rehoboam rejected their counsel. This example should speak clearly to us about the guidance we receive from others.

I believe we can gain a better understanding of why the younger son made the selfish decision to request his inheritance early from his father. This much we can say about him: First, he likely received unwise counsel from someone. In other words, the thought and idea about leaving home came from somewhere. It didn't originate with his father or his brother. When he decided to leave, it appears he didn't take time to evaluate his decision and count the cost for his future actions. He acted on impulse; he made the choice and quickly left.

Second, he had minimal experience about life and surviving in the world on his own.

We can clearly see from the above Scriptures and examples that the choice this younger son made was not a good one. In essence, *he set himself up for failure*. It's vitally important who we listen to and take advice from. One mistake can cause us a lifetime of pain. I realize those of you reading and studying this material come from many different backgrounds. Not everyone grew up in a happy, well-adjusted, and loving home with abundance, so you may have started your life without solid training and counsel.

Maybe you're the person who had to make it the best way you could, and no one took the time to show you how to actually make a correct choice about anything. Not everyone is taught the skills necessary to make good choices in life. You're not alone; we've all blown it. The good news is God offers us a way out, and we will show you from His Word how to make corrections in your life. You will learn how to balance your decisions by what the Bible says in reference to the choices set before you.

2

THE SPIRIT AND THE MIND IN DECISION-MAKING

Maturity is a process of growth from one's childhood through one's adult life, and the information we allow in our mind and heart—and how we use it—determines our success or failure. Take this verse from Romans, for instance: "Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect" (Romans 12:2).

From the information we have in Scripture concerning the lost son and his father, we can assume the father was wise and wealthy. In his heart he knew it wasn't in his son's best interest to take his inheritance at this time in his life and leave his home and country. "The LORD's light penetrates the human spirit, exposing every hidden motive" (Proverbs 20:27).

The father may have sensed that someone had influenced his son's decision. If that was the case, his son was following his own destructive desires and shunning the wisdom the father had tried to teach him all those years (see Proverbs 4:14; 5:1). This son came to realize his father's love and wisdom when his inheritance had been squandered and he was in dire straits in a foreign country.

God wants to protect us from the pitfalls of our desires and the world's lurid temptations. In Jesus, He forgives our selfishness and sin, and in Baptism He fills us with His Holy Spirit to renew and transform our mind and guide our everyday life by God's Word (see Romans 8:12-15).

Here's another key passage, reminding us of the true nature of the battle we face: "For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

3 **QUESTIONS: APPLYING WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED**

Please take time to answer the following questions. I have given the answers to some, but I encourage you to answer them all. This exercise will help you become more skillful in your decision making.

1. Why do you think the younger son was unhappy?

Many times when we look at others it appears they have exciting, problem-free lives. They appear happy; things are happening for them. But things are not always as they seem, are they? It's quite possible the lost son may have worked in the fields or around his father's estate. He could have easily had an image of his peers living it up and partying, dating pretty girls, and enjoying life. Consequently, he found himself longing for that type of life. Because he didn't understand the potential for danger and the sin that goes with it, he made decisions based on what he saw and thought he knew. Again, the book of Proverbs has something to say: "Don't envy sinners, but always continue to fear the LORD. You will be rewarded for this; your hope will not be disappointed. My child, listen and be wise: Keep your heart on the right course. Do not carouse with drunkards or feast with gluttons, for they are on their way to poverty, and too much sleep clothes them in rags" (Proverbs 23:17-21).

2. Who do you think the son was listening to when he made his choice to leave home?

3. What are the similarities between the lost son and Rehoboam? Was it their age and/or their immaturity?

4. Who's helping you make choices in your life?

5. Have you made any selfish and impulsive choices? What were the results?

6. How will this lesson help you make better choices?

7. How can you apply God's Word in making better choices?

LESSON 3

INTRODUCTION

In the last lesson we discussed the choices the lost son made. We also looked at the possible circumstances that could have led him to make those choices, and how you can learn from his mistakes to make better choices in your life. The younger son has now received his inheritance from his father, but is he happy? Is he peaceful? It often proves true that when people seek happiness in material things or try to “find themselves” or some elusive inner happiness, they end up in even more pain and turmoil. “For sound advice is a beacon, good teaching is a light, moral discipline is a life path” (Proverbs 6:23).

The lost son reminds us of many of the super-rich superstars who seem to have it all, but still they go from marriage to marriage, rehab to rehab, and sometimes even commit suicide. Why? Proverbs 16:32 offers an answer here: “Better to be patient than powerful; better to have self-control than to conquer a city.” Without God in control of our lives or following His path for our lives, we end up empty and unhappy. Only through Christ can we have access to truth (see John 14:6). The young son was trying to escape; he didn’t have a clear vision and purpose for his life.

LESSON OUTLINE

1. Why Was the Lost Son Dissatisfied? (Luke 15:12-13; Philippians 4:11)
 - a.) Life without Purpose and Direction Brings Disappointment
 - b.) God’s Purpose for Your Life Doesn’t Have To Be Hindered by Your Past (Judges 6-8; Exodus 3; Acts 8-9)
2. Do You Know You Can Have Peace? (Psalm 116:7; John 14:27)
3. Questions: Applying What You Have Learned
4. Summary

YOU CANNOT ESCAPE YOURSELF

LUKE 15:12-13; PROVERBS 6:15; JOHN 14:6; PHILIPPIANS 4:11

1 WHY WAS THE LOST SON DISSATISFIED?

“The younger son told his father, ‘I want my share of your estate now before you die.’ So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons. A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living” (Luke 15:12-13).

The younger son made a selfish choice; he was only thinking of what would make him happy at that moment. He didn’t have the inner peace that would sustain him to be patient, until his father was ready to divide his estate between his sons. In Psalm 55:6 we read, “I wish I had wings like a dove, so I could fly far away and be at peace.”

In our last lesson we explored the lost son’s decision to ask his father for his inheritance. We also looked at some possible reasons why he made the choices he made. We then concluded it was not the right choice for his life at that time. In this lesson, however, we want to dig a little deeper because I believe there is a hidden message for all of us.

a.) Life without Purpose and Direction Brings Disappointment

The lost son was dissatisfied with his life. He was discontent and unhappy. These feelings could have come from any number of things, but I believe the main reason was he didn’t have a sense of purpose for his life. God created each of us for a specific purpose in this life. “I knew you before I formed you in your mother’s womb.

Before you were born I set you apart and appointed you as My prophet to the nations” (Jeremiah 1:5). In this Scripture God created the prophet Jeremiah as a prophet to the nations; that is why he was born. We are here to complete a task, which God has designed us for. Most people live and die and never discover why they were born or what they were created to do.

The word “purpose” means the original intent or plan for which something exists or for which it has been done or made. The Scriptures do not give us any indication of the lost son’s talents or exactly what he did while at home. In biblical times, and even today in many Jewish families, children usually work in the family business. This may have been his father’s plan for his life too.

A life without purpose causes inner emptiness, frustration, discouragement and disappointment. Purpose is a motivator. It gives you hope and a sense of direction for your life. It gives an answer to that *why* question for your life. The lost son lacked all this. As a result, he had no direction for his life. Ecclesiastics 3:1 says, “For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven.” Purpose and fulfillment were what he was looking for. Do you have purpose in your life? Are you clear in your mind on the path God has for you? My hope is that as these lessons unfold you will know God’s purpose for your life, and not only will you know what it is, but you will also know how to walk in it. In fact, I will devote a part of this teaching to help you understand how to find your individual purpose. It is very important you progress with us through each lesson to work toward this goal.

b.) God’s Purpose for Your Life Doesn’t Have To Be Hindered by Your Past

If you have made decisions that have hindered the fulfillment of God’s purpose for your life, He has a rescue plan to restore you and get you back on track. Let’s look at some examples from the Scriptures to see how God rescued others. Gideon (see Judges 6-8), was a coward. He was a young man with no vision, but later God revealed His purpose and plan for his life through an angel. Ultimately, Gideon became a mighty leader. God called him a “mighty man of valor”! Moses (see Exodus 3) was a murderer, but ended up being a great deliverer. You may be asking, “Are you telling me God will use me in His plans for my life, even though I’ve messed my life up?” I can only say yes if you will get into the plan He has designed for your life, and you allow Him to work His plan through you. Paul persecuted the church (see Acts 8-9), and God used him—mightily. Paul had many great talents and abilities, but he used them negatively in the beginning. After God transformed his life, however, Paul used those same talents and abilities for the glory of God. Your purpose is built into you. That’s how God designed all of us. It is our responsibility to pursue our purpose, develop it, and live it out. God is always trying to get us back into that original plan He designed for each of our lives even before we were born.

2

DO YOU KNOW YOU CAN HAVE PEACE?

“Let my soul be at rest again, for the LORD has been good to me” (Psalm 116:7).

“I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don’t be troubled or afraid” (John 14:27).

The message for us in these Scriptures is to learn to rest in the Lord. Jesus said He was leaving us a gift and that gift is peace in our mind and heart. You cannot and will not ever receive true peace and happiness apart from God. Listen to what it says in Philippians 4:11: “Not that I am implying that I was in any personal want, for I have learned how to be content (satisfied to the point where I am not disturbed or disquieted) in whatever state I am.”

The moment Adam and Eve sinned and abandoned the Word of God they lost their peace; they became fearful. Likewise, the lost son’s peace diminished as he forsook that which he knew was right. Sin beckons us like the unfaithful wife (see Proverbs 5:1-23) to seek comfort by doing wrong. Sadly, it’s the wrong that really only increases dissatisfaction and the hurt we bring to self and others. In *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*¹ there’s an account of a woman who was going to be burned at the stake for her Christian beliefs. As family and friends departed, they asked her to hold up one finger if God’s grace (truth and Word) was sufficient. As the smoke and flames were about to consume her, in defiant triumph she held up two fingers. How could she do this? She could do this because before the test came she had made a quality decision.

¹John Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*. Thomas Freeman, ‘The Life of John Foxe,’ section 1.4, in John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* [...]. *The Variorum Edition*. [online] (hriOnline, Sheffield 2004). Available at: <http://www.hrionline.ac.uk/foxe/>. [Accessed: 09.12.2004].

In Romans 3:4, it says, "By no means! Let God be found true though every human being is false and a liar, as it is written, 'That You may be justified and shown to be upright in what You say, and prevail when You are judged.'" God and His Word are true and will not change. "Truthful words stand the test of time, but lies are soon exposed" (Proverbs 12:19). If right and peace go hand in hand, then she would have peace in this circumstance.

Peace and happiness are not the same things. The woman was not happy leaving her family or with evil seemingly triumphing in her life, but because she chose the way (see John 14:6) she could have peace no matter what was happening in her life. That's where we all should want to be in our lives.

3

QUESTIONS: APPLYING WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

Take time now to test your knowledge of what you have learned in this lesson by answering the following questions. The answers are in the lesson. You may want to reread it, and I encourage you to look up each Scripture and read them.

1. What does the word "purpose" mean?
2. Where does purpose come from? (Does Jeremiah 1:5 give us any indication?)
3. Did the lost son know his purpose?
4. Do you know your purpose? If yes, what is it?
5. What is life like without a sense of purpose?
6. How does one find his or her purpose?
7. Did anyone in the Bible ever miss their purpose? Who?

8. Do past mistakes thwart God's plan and purpose for your life?

9. What is the difference between peace and happiness?

SUMMARY

In this lesson we came to the conclusion the lost son was a young man seeking his purpose in life. We concluded it is possible his life was already planned by his father, but he may have gotten ahead of the plan. He actually got completely out of the plan his father had for his life. He may not have even had any desire to do what his father had planned for him. Without wisdom he acted foolish and made wrong choices for his life. We defined purpose as the original intent or plan for which something exists or for which it has been made. We also looked at men in the Bible who stepped away from their purpose, but later found their way back into God's plan for their lives. My encouragement to you is that you too can find your way back as you continue on this journey. Join us in our study of Lesson 4 titled, "Good Times! Are They Really?" We're going to get a bird's-eye view of what riotous living *really* means.

LESSON 4

INTRODUCTION

The lost son finally travels to his new location. He's far from home by now, and he begins his new life, thinking all along that his dreams and desires have finally come to pass. We picture him as he says to himself, "I only have one life to live, I know maybe it was wrong leaving home as I did, BUT!" We fast forward, and now he's asking himself, "How in the world did I get here? What did I do wrong? What happened to my money, health, family and my career? Everything happened so quickly. What have I done?"

What happened to the lost son is what happens to so many of us as we fall into temptations set before us by the tempter (see Matthew 4:3). Doing wrong always looks good to our senses, but oh the cost of the journey for selfish pleasures—pleasures that hurt us and others (see Genesis 3:6).

LESSON OUTLINE

1. Riotous - Wild Living
 - a.) What Are Good Times?
(Proverbs 20:21; Ephesians 4:19; 2 Samuel 13:28; Proverbs 21:17)
 - b.) Oh No! He Lost It All!
2. Does God Desire That We Enjoy Life?
(Numbers 36:8-9; Ecclesiastes 3:12; Ecclesiastes 5:18)
3. Questions: Applying What You Have Learned
4. Summary

GOOD TIMES! ARE THEY REALLY?

LUKE 15:13-14; PROVERBS 9:13-18; PROVERBS 5:1-23; HEBREWS 11:25

Here's a passage from a version of the Bible called The Message. It's entitled "Madame Whore Calls Out, Too."

"Then there's this other woman,
Madame Whore—
brazen, empty-headed, frivolous.
She sits on the front porch
of her house on Main Street,
And as people walk by minding
their own business, calls out,
'Are you confused about life, don't know what's going on?
Steal off with me, I'll show you a good time!
No one will ever know—I'll give you the time of your life.'
But they don't know about all the skeletons in her closet,
that all her guests end up in hell" (Proverbs 9:13-18).

To catch fish you present them with a bait that appeals to their senses, but don't forget to disguise the hook. As we see in the above Scriptures, doing wrong is "oh so sweet" in its season (see Hebrews 11:25), that is—behind closed doors,

in the next state, in the other man's bed, spending the bank's money you stole—but the end is always painful (see Proverbs 9:18). As we journey with the lost son, we'll see what appear to be good times and where they lead us.

1 RIOTOUS – WILD LIVING

"A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve" (Luke 15:13-14).

a.) What Are Good Times?

These are those times in life when we seek to have the most fun and just live it up! For many people it's a false sense of pleasure: an imitation of the real. The price often paid is very high for the brief amount of fun people experience.

Proverbs 21:17 says, "Heavy drinkers and others who live only for pleasure will lose all they have." These good-timers often live to party, dance, drink, smoke cigarettes, marijuana, and shoot up dope. Rap music would fit in here too with its demeaning messages to women, and its negative rants about society and culture.

For many pleasure-seekers, good times mean going to Las Vegas to get bombarded by all the lights, glitter, booze, bets and slots they can take in. Sometimes they win, but mostly they lose. It's having sex outside marriage, raping someone, and gang-banging that ends in unwanted pregnancies, and finding out you have AIDS. It's driving under the influence, wrecking your car, and finding out everyone died, or maybe worse, no one lived but *you*. More "good times" are joy-riding in a stolen vehicle, gambling away all their money, or stealing someone's credit card and running up a tab—or maybe even maxing it out. Having a good time for others might be abusing the elderly or children or even animals, just for the fun of it. Then again it might mean stealing someone's identity, hacking their computer, or breaking into their home. And let's not forget the disasters caused by pornography and molestation. Ephesians 4:19 says, "They have no sense of shame. They live for lustful pleasure and eagerly practice every kind of impurity."

There is a right and wrong way to have a good time, and sometimes abundance can cause big problems, if we're not careful. "An inheritance obtained too early in life is not a blessing in the end" (Proverbs 20:21). In previous lessons we saw how the lost son made wrong choices by listening to bad counsel, and moved out too early. He did not seek his father's counsel or wisdom. The same thing happens in our day when people live for the moment. Just like the lost son they do not have any life experiences under their belt, so they think they know more than what they actually know. Sometimes too they feel parents or persons in authority do not want them to experience and enjoy life. Often, in reality, this is far from the truth.

Real or true fun never hurts anyone or puts them at a disadvantage. So in the future when determining if something is right, ask yourself this question: will this hurt me or someone else? Be honest with your answer too. If it's cigarettes, drugs, or some sexual partner you have to have, it will likely negatively impact you and, quite possibly, somebody else. And what about God? Will it hurt God? (See Genesis 6:6.) Sin hurts God. Most people never think that way, but thinking that way and asking yourself these types of questions will save you a lot of heartache and pain.

Over the years that we have visited jails and prisons we have had thousands of men and women say, "If I could just live my life over, I would do everything differently." The lost son soon came to that point in his life. He was at the height of his good times when trouble came. The Scripture says a **great famine swept over the land**, and he began to starve. Good times for him ended suddenly.

b.) Oh No! He Lost It All!

“About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve” (Luke 15:14). Isn’t that the way things usually happen? People in the world call it “bad luck,” but as Christians we see how the person usually falls into sin, and falls for Satan’s trap, and Satan steals from them (see John 10:10).

The lost son is now in trouble. “You have had enough in the past of the evil things that godless people enjoy—their immorality and lust, their feasting and drunkenness and wild parties, and their terrible worship of idols” (1 Peter 4:3). Sin carries a high price tag. What will he do now?

2 DOES GOD DESIRE THAT WE ENJOY LIFE?

In John 10:10, the thief’s purpose is to steal and kill and destroy us, but Jesus said His purpose is to give us a rich and satisfying life. The writer of Ecclesiastes had this to say: “Here is what I have seen: It is good and fitting for one to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for it is his heritage” (Ecclesiastes 5:18) and “So I concluded there is nothing better than to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we can” (Ecclesiastes 3:12). So if you are wondering if God wants you to enjoy life the answer is yes. But this is to be done in a godly manner (as discussed above), and your good times should *never* hurt you or anyone else.

3 QUESTIONS: APPLYING WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

It’s time to see what you have learned in Lesson 4. The answers are in the lesson.

1. Where did the lost son move to when he left home?
2. The Scripture says he wasted his money on _____ living.
3. How can you tell if something is good for you? What questions should you ask yourself?
4. In determining if your good time is right, see how you respond to these questions: does it hurt you? Does it hurt someone else? Is it pleasing to God, or does it hurt God?
5. What is delayed gratification?
6. What caused the lost son to lose all of his inheritance?

7. What happened to him when all his money ran out?

4

SUMMARY

Good times! Are they really? We can conclude this lesson by saying they really aren't as good as we like to think they are. It's probably more accurate to say the so-called good times—as they are portrayed to us—are really a false sense of pleasure, an imitation of the real. It's fake and folly and a trap set by Satan that many young and old alike fall into. The lost son finally hits rock bottom. In fact, maybe you're at the lowest point in your life, and you don't have any hope right now. Regardless of where you're at in this point in time, God in His loving kindness and mercy always gives us a way out of our pain. It may not always be as fast as we would like, but He provides a way out for us, and that way out is through His Word. My question to you is will you take His way out? Join us in Lesson 5, "The Lost Son Hits Rock Bottom" as we continue our Bible study.

LESSON 5

INTRODUCTION

The lost son is at the lowest point of his life right about now. He says to himself, "I cannot believe this is happening to me. How did I go from owning servants who took care of our family, livestock and the fields to feeding, living with, and eating with—of all things—PIGS!?" (Jews will have nothing to do with swine.) Surely, he's saying to himself, "This is not happening to me! I am going to wake up, and it will all be a bad dream. I can't keep fooling myself that this is real. Oh my goodness! What have I done? Was it so wrong to want to enjoy life? Was it wrong to want to venture out on my own?"

There is just something for many (not all) in their youth that says, "I want my share. I want it all, and I want it now—no matter how I get it, or who I hurt to get it." These people think the world owes them something. They seem to possess tunnel vision when it comes to life; they live life in a vacuum—not necessarily on purpose—but they live life as they see it.

LESSON OUTLINE

1. Down and Out (Luke 15:14-16; 1 John 2:15-17)
2. Where Are My Friends Now? (1 Samuel 20:17; Proverbs 19:4)
3. Means of Survival (Luke 15:15)
4. Questions: Applying What You Have Learned
5. Summary

THE LOST SON HITS ROCK BOTTOM

LUKE 15:14-16; 1 JOHN 2:15-17

1 DOWN AND OUT

Things went from bad to worse for the lost son: "About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything" (Luke 15:14-16).

In previous lessons we've talked about the lost son and the things he did that brought him to this point in his life. Many people tend to say when bad things happen in their lives it's God's will, or they want to blame God, their family, the system, and everyone else for their misfortune. But we can see from the previous lessons and Scriptures that what happened in his life was a direct result of his choices.

How did he get here? Well, part of it is he fell in love with the world. "Don't love the world's ways. Don't love the world's goods. Love of the world squeezes out love for the Father. Practically everything that goes on in the world—wanting your own way, wanting everything for yourself, wanting to appear important—has nothing to do with the Father. It just isolates you from Him. The world and all its wanting, wanting, wanting is on the way out—but whoever does what God wants is set for eternity" (1 John 2:15-17).

Persons who violate God's purpose for their lives always find themselves down and out. For help in understanding this important principle, read the life story of Sampson in Judges 13-16. Some of us know our purpose; some of us don't. No matter who you are it takes time to find and understand your direction. However, rest assured if we violate God's principles of life by following the lust of our eyes and the wrongful desires of our flesh, we will find ourselves like Sampson, falling from a prince among men to a state of utter disgrace: blinded, enslaved and doing the work of a lowly beast of burden.

Note how the Scripture says **a great famine swept over the land**, giving an indication that possibly a famine or some degree of food crisis (a severe shortage, perhaps) was already present. The lost son being young, inexperienced and unwise in economic affairs completely missed the signs. He comes to town flashing his money, and people took advantage of him, even encouraging his wild living as the Scripture calls it. When the big famine hit, to him it was overwhelming. And why wouldn't it be? He had made no preparations for his life, no savings for a rainy day, no place to stay, and this scenario happens to people all the time. What happened to his new friends?

2 WHERE ARE MY FRIENDS NOW?

What is a friend? That's a good question. According to a dictionary definition, a friend is a person you know well and regard with affection and trust. A true friend is one who loves you as himself. "And Jonathan made David reaffirm his vow of friendship again, for Jonathan loved David as he loved himself" (1 Samuel 20:17). Jonathan took sides with David against his father when his father was wrong because of his friendship with David.

Throughout these lessons we can assume the lost son had friends who influenced his life, but what kind of friends were they? Did they exhibit the character of friendship David and Jonathan shared? Probably not. It's likely the friends the lost son had were like those portrayed in the Scripture that says, "Wealth makes many 'friends'; poverty drives them all away" (Proverbs 19:4). As long as he had money and influence, he had friends, but when the money was all gone so were his friends. In life we see this over and over, and the Scriptures verify this hard reality in respect to the lost son: "But no one gave him anything" (Luke 15:16b). We also see that when famine and adversity arrive, his friends depart. Why? He had no one to turn to for help.

In which one of these examples do you see your friendships? Many of you reading this may be behind bars or have recently been behind bars. When you were out and roaming free, you had lots of friends when you were flush with money and the means to a good time. But now you may find yourself down and out as your friends have all vanished, and the good times, glitz and glitter are gone now too. If that's the case, what do you do? Hopefully, you will follow the lost son's example of recovery. Did he recover and make a comeback? Continue with us on this journey to see his outcome.

3 MEANS OF SURVIVAL

Now being down and out doesn't mean we can't drop lower yet. Such was the case for the lost son. "He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs" (Luke 15:15).

The lost son grew weary in his search for work, trying to sell himself and his abilities to prospective employers and farmers who just weren't interested. Remember he was a Jew and very much disliked by other races of people. It was a disgrace for him to get to the point where he had to beg for a job and food. But that's where he ended up. His options were either starve or steal. He had enough decency to not steal. "So he went and forced (glued) himself upon one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed hogs" (Luke 15:15). This was pretty much rock bottom for the lost son. We can applaud him for doing something to survive and remember the Bible says if a man doesn't work he shouldn't eat (see 2 Thessalonians 3:10).

God has always wanted man to prosper and increase. God gave man a magnificent garden and told him to guard it and take care of it. When Adam didn't take care of the Garden of Eden, God could not help him increase. It's similar with the lost son. He had the benefits of a wealthy family, a loving father, and solid future prospects, but he took things into his own hands, and that spelled disaster. Ultimately, he knew he had to do something so he grabbed the nearest farmer and said, in essence, "You are going to hire me." Another biblical character, Jacob,

with all the things he had done, from lying to his father to stealing his brother's birthright (see Genesis 27:25-38), arrived at a similar crisis point. When he was at the end of his rope, he grabbed hold of God's representative and said, in effect, "You're going nowhere until you (empower me to prosper, enable me to do better) bless me" (see Genesis 32:25-32).

What are you doing to overcome your present state? Are you sitting there (in purely survival mode), pitying yourself and saying, "It's too hard, too rough, too late. I'm too far gone" (see Proverbs 26:12-14)? Or are you persistent and determined in your heart to not only survive, but overcome? The choice to come out of your present state victoriously and with a newfound/re-found purpose is all yours.

I want to remind you right now, at this exact point in your life, that God has a purpose and plan for you, but He needs you to cooperate in carrying it out. I know, I hear it all the time: "But, I'm incarcerated." That's true. And so were many others before you who chose not to allow their time in prison stop them from moving forward.

4 QUESTIONS: APPLYING WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

1. The title of this lesson is "The Lost Son Hits Rock _____."
2. Sometimes people, especially young people, feel the world owes them something. True False?
3. What is a friend?
4. Do you have any friends like Jonathan?
5. Do you have friends like the lost son?
6. Whose fault is it when bad things happen to us?
7. Persons who violate God's purpose for their lives always find themselves down and _____.

8. The lost son went to work for a
- shepherd
 - farmer
 - doctor
 - restaurant

9. Are you a survivor? Yes No

5

SUMMARY

The lost son finally gets over the shock of losing all his money. The beautiful women are gone; the booze has dried up; his friends are history. He pawned away his clothes and jewelry; his lavish lifestyle is gone, and as he looks back, he sees it all left him very quickly. He's in somewhat of a daze. He feels numb all over. He wonders how a famine could come without warning and take everyone off guard. He scratches his head and wonders how in the world his life has come to this.

What a lesson he's learned about friendships. He knows somehow he must survive or die. He also gained valuable insight into prejudice when he looked for work. He tried to find a high-paying job with a sound business, but there was none to be found. Everywhere he went the answer was the same: "Sorry, we don't have any openings." By now he was very hungry, tired and not a little disgusted. He thinks that *somebody* must have some work he can do, but all he gets is the run-around.

Finally, after much persistence he swallows his pride, taking any work that is available. Doing this, he persuaded a pork farmer to hire him. This was the lowest of the low for the lost son; he couldn't go any lower. He took a job feeding the pigs, and he was very humiliated.

LESSON 6

INTRODUCTION

It's the nature of man to stray from God's path for him. We see this in Genesis 3:6 with Adam. We believe God's desire is to return man to that perfect place of fellowship. We will see this more clearly in our next lesson: "A Father's Unconditional Love." In that lesson you will see by the father's actions he was looking for and expecting his son's return (see Mark 11:22-23).

To enter our Father's grace and fellowship, an individual must take action in order to help him- or herself. The lost son has come to a place in his life of such utter despair, it has caused him to see the light, as well as see where he has fallen to (see Proverbs 4:18). We call it a "reality check." Have you ever noticed how bars, taverns, juke joints, dives, and honky tonks are always so dark? As light dawns upon his spirit (see Proverbs 31:7), the drinks and drugs are wearing off, and he is truly seeing how miserable he really is. He begins to remember all he previously had (see Psalm 145:3), as he thinks about the good life he left behind. When he fully comes to his senses, he is like Joshua and Caleb, he says, "Let me immediately go home" (see Joshua 14:6-15; 15:13-19). There is something about immediate action that stops the devil from stealing truth. The fact is when the light comes, Satan soon arrives too, trying to steal it (see Mark 4:15). In this instance, the lost son knew he had to act—and now!

LESSON OUTLINE

1. The Great Awakening (Luke 15:17)
2. Vision Regained (Luke 15:18; 2 Corinthians 7:10; Psalm 130:4)
3. Taking Responsible Actions (Luke 15:19; 2 Corinthians 4:4)
4. Comparing the Lost Son to Present-Day Sons and Daughters
 - a.) How People in Our Society Go Wrong
 - b.) How to Recover
5. Questions: Applying What You Have Learned
6. Summary

HE CAME TO HIMSELF: A REALITY CHECK

LUKE 15:17-19; 2 CORINTHIANS 7:10; PSALM 130:4

1 THE GREAT AWAKENING

"Then when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father have enough food, and [even food] to spare, but I am perishing (dying) here of hunger!" (Luke 15:17).

This lesson marks the turning point in these Bible studies. Often referred to as "The Story of the Prodigal Son," we refer to him as the lost son because he had strayed far from home, had gotten himself mired in terrible problems and, quite simply, was *lost*. His father represents God and his love for mankind. This son represents mankind and how he runs from God and chooses the world and its ways. The lost son was a sinner full of pride and full of himself; he just knew he could do a better job of running his life than his father.

From the first day he left his father's house, the lost son's wrongdoing was leading him straight to disaster. And isn't that what sinners do—sin? We've talked previously about the things he did, blowing his inheritance on harlots and wild, reckless living. He bought fine clothes, spent a great sum on meat and drink, and found some new friends (no surprise here!) who helped him part with his money in record time.

Along the way, he finds himself in the middle of a “great famine.” As a result he took to begging, but people refused him because they knew he had brought all this misery upon himself. They saw him as being young and foolish. He is now at the point of starvation. He went and joined himself to a citizen of that country (see Luke 15:15), and the farmer sent him into the fields to work. His task, however, wasn’t to feed sheep, which was an honorable job. No, his job was to feed swine—the lowest most despised form of employment.

We see he is lost (deep in sin). He’s starving, lonely, sorely disappointed in himself and the state of affairs he’s gotten himself into. He’s devastated. He knows he did it to himself but feels unable to turn things around. Yet, something happens to this lost son while he’s in this lost, destitute state. What happened? The Scripture says that “he came to himself.” And what brought about this wake-up call? Was it affliction, suffering, misery? There was something that jolted him back into reality.

He finally realizes how bad his situation is and that he could perish in this state. He’s experiencing gut-wrenching hunger, which has left him considering any alternative. He’s looking at his surroundings. It looks like pigs; it sounds like pigs; it most definitely smells like pigs. *He* even reeks with the smell of pigs. While he sees no future in this, he can’t see a way out either. It’s like he’s in a trance, a stupor, and his thinking is foggy. Have you ever been in a state like this?

After much pondering on his present state, probably crying out to God for help and mercy, it’s like a light bulb goes off in his mind: “He said, ‘How many hired servants of my father have enough food, and (even food) to spare, but I am perishing (dying) here of hunger!’” (Luke 15:17b). He’s looking homeward now. The family estate is in view. There, even the servants have plenty, and he wonders why he is here dying? He thinks to himself, what purpose am I serving sitting here with these pigs? This whole venture has been a total waste. How foolish of me. What was I thinking?

2

VISION REGAINED

“I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, Father, I have sinned against God and in your sight” (Luke 15:18).

The lost son in the *far country* was *dead* to his father and his family, cut off from them, as a branch from a tree, and therefore *dead in sin*, and he did it to himself. Now he says, I know what I’m going to do; I’m going home. He’s breaking his ties to both this far country and sin.

He comes to repentance, but what is **repentance**? What does it mean to repent? To repent means you feel remorse for; feel sorry for; be contrite about. Evangelical repentance consists of (1) a true sense of one’s own guilt and sinfulness; (2) an apprehension of God’s mercy in Christ; (3) an actual hatred of sin (see Psalm 119:128; Job 42:5-6; 2 Corinthians 7:10) and turning from it to God; and (4) a persistent endeavour after a holy life in walking with God in the way of His commandments. The true penitent is conscious of guilt (see Psalm 51:4, 9), of pollution (see Psalm 51:5, 7, 10), and of helplessness (see Psalm 51:11; Psalm 109:21-22). Thus he apprehends himself to be just what God has always seen him to be and declares him to be. But **repentance** comprehends not only such a sense of sin, but also an apprehension of mercy, without which there can be no true **repentance** (see Psalm 51:1; Psalm 130:4).¹

Repenting of our sin against God always includes an admission of guilt. It also includes a solemn promise or resolve not to repeat the offense, an attempt to make restitution for the wrong or, in some way, to reverse the harmful effects of the wrong wherever possible. The apostle Paul had this to say: “Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance; for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing” (2 Corinthians 7:9). The Greek word for repentance is “*metanoia*,” which means “change of mind.” This meaning is exemplified by the repentant person who not only has profound regret for his past sins, but who also seeks to bear the fruit of healing and true reconciliation in himself, with others, and most especially with God.

¹ *Easton’s (1897) Bible Dictionary*

One of the Hebrew words for repent means “to turn.” The prodigal said, “I will arise . . . and he arose” (Luke 15:18a, 20a). He took the initiative; he got up and he went home. Making confession to God is another aspect of repentance. “For I will declare mine iniquity: I will be sorry for my sin” (Psalm 38:18). The publican beat upon his breast, and said, “God be merciful to me a sinner” (Luke 18:13b). The prodigal said, “I have sinned against heaven” (Luke 15:21b).

3 TAKING RESPONSIBLE ACTIONS

“I am no longer worthy to be called your son; (just) make me like one of your hired servants” (Luke 15:19).

The lost son is like so many who lose their way in life; they don’t understand what has happened in their life. The Bible tells us there are many voices in the world (see 1 Corinthians 14:10). Not only did the lost son listen to the voices of his friends, but he allowed the demonic spirits to darken his mind against his father’s instructions (see 2 Corinthians 4:4; Proverbs 1:18), which would have helped him in times of trouble.

The words that God spoke to man in the beginning were words of life, but because of disobedience, the vision was lost. Mephiboseth, who because of words spoken to him by those around him, was living in a place called “Lodebar” (no one wanted to live in Lodebar), but he had a birthright to the king’s palace, (see 2 Samuel 9:1-13). Even when escorted by the king’s royal guard and given a permanent seat at King David’s table he called himself a dog! Like Mephiboseth the lost son had a distorted image of himself because of his sinful actions. He must have wondered, was he even worthy to be called his father’s son?

4 COMPARING THE LOST SON TO PRESENT-DAY SONS AND DAUGHTERS

We stated this is the turning point of our lessons. We’ve seen how a young man who was living at home doing well by all standards chose to strike out on his own to live and enjoy his life. We talked about the things he did that could be termed *wild living*. Ultimately, this wild living brings about the ruin of his young life, losing it all he ends up tending to and feeding swine. While down and out in the hog pen, however, two very important things happen to the lost son:

- 1) He comes to his senses—finally. He rejects his pride; he realizes he is a sinner, and he admits he has sinned against God and his father.
- 2) He repents.

If he had not made these two important moves in his life, he would have stayed in that hog pen—or worse—he would have possibly died. Now taking a look at people in our day:

a.) How People in Our Society Go Wrong

The same thing happens to men and women today, they make bad choices in life, over and over again. They neglect to seek good counsel, and they don’t know God’s will and purpose for their lives. Lacking the knowledge they need, and coupled with pride, stubbornness, hurt, abuse and many other woes, they continue in their sinful, destructive lifestyle, blaming others for their problems, all along the way. While it may be true that in some circumstances the root cause of their problems or issues began with someone else, at some point in time they must take responsibility and say, “Enough of this!”

b.) How to Recover

When people today take a similar approach as that of the lost son, they also experience a positive outcome. The Bible says, “He came to himself;” meaning that in the middle of his affliction, his misery, and his suffering, he arrived at a realization of his true predicament. It is at this point that reality dawned on him.

It’s at this point, sadly, that untold numbers of men and women in our society *do not come to themselves*, do not *get it*. They don’t realize for one reason or another that “I’ve got to get out of this revolving door, this rut I’m in.” They continue on the same path. You see them in prison; they serve their sentence or a portion of it; they’re released, and very shortly thereafter they’re back in prison again, continuing the cycle. The question is “Why?” Maybe you fit this profile; maybe you don’t. Maybe you want to break free.

You've tried to break your cycle of crime, but you're constantly pulled back. Current U.S. Department of Justice statistics say that "Two-thirds of those released from prison will return within one to three years." It's happening as you read this lesson. That means two out of every three individuals will go back to prison for a new offense. My question is, will you be that one who makes it and is successful on the outside? You can be, but it's entirely up to you to break the cycle in your life.

Just like the lost son your turning point can start right here and now. If you are sick and tired of living in the hog pen of life, Jesus Christ is ready to transform your heart and life. By His Word, He is already working in your heart, helping you recognize your failings, assuring You of His willingness to forgive you and help you change your life. In Baptism, He washes away all your past failings and adopts you into the family of His Heavenly Father. He fills you with His Holy Spirit to replace your selfish, destructive desires and motivations with His godly ones. It's very easy and simple.

If you are already baptized, you can take confidence that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross has already washed away your sins. If you are not baptized, you can look forward to the time when you can be baptized—either in prison, or after you are released. We have also included a short prayer here for you. We encourage you to show your serious desire to change the direction of your life by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer

Dear God in heaven,

I come to You in the Name of Jesus. Your Word says, "Him that cometh to Me I will never cast out" (John 6:37b). I believe You will not cast me out, but as Your Word says You take me in, and I thank You for accepting me.

Your Word also says, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, 'Everyone who believes in Him will not be put to shame.' For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing His riches on all who call on Him. For 'everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved'" (Romans 10: 9-13). Remind me daily of my need for true repentance and of the blessings of Baptism, even as the apostle Peter proclaimed on the Day of Pentecost: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the Name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). I believe in my heart that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. I believe He was raised from the dead for my justification. I am calling upon His Name—the Name of Jesus, so I know, Father, You save me now.

I do believe with my heart, and I confess Jesus now as my Lord and Savior.

Thank You, Father. I am saved!

Signed: _____

Date: _____

My dear friend, it is that easy. I thank God for you. Allow me to be the first to welcome you into the family of God. Your next step is to grow spiritually, becoming wise in His Word and mirroring the Savior's life in your own. Continue with us in these Bible studies, and you will learn and steadily mature in your faith.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS – APPLYING WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

1. What does this statement in Luke 15:17 mean? “Then when he came to himself ...”

2. What caused the lost son to come to himself?

3. What did he do wrong?

4. When the lost son realized he had sinned against _____ and his father, he _____.

5. Did the lost son repent? Yes No

6. What does repentance means?

7. Did the lost son take responsibility for his sin? Yes No

8. Have you taken responsibility for your sins? Yes No

9. Whose decision is most important for you coming out of the hog pen of life?

10. Did you pray the prayer for salvation? Yes No

SUMMARY

What an exciting Bible study! Let’s look at what we have learned so far. We see a young man who has had a rude awakening in his life. He lived his life fast and furious, without regarding the consequences, but life dealt him a terrible blow. He was young and foolish. He found himself devastated, destitute, hungry and all alone, but he chose not to remain in that beaten-down condition. He came to the realization that just as he had decided to go to the far country and live his life, he now had to backtrack, swallow his pride, go home and say, “Dad, I’m sorry. I made a terrible mistake. I have sinned against God and you.” Now the lost son did indeed repent. And this is a crucial and necessary step, which so many people miss. Instead, they blame others for their misfortunes and never change, never owning up to the role they played in their own disaster. They go around in circles, moving from one bad mistake to another. But that downward cycle doesn’t hold true for everybody. There are some who emerge stronger and wiser and willing to accept the responsibility they know is theirs. It has been exciting to see someone turn their life around in this Bible story, and our prayer is that this has also been a turning point for you, the reader. May God ignite a fire in you for serious and lasting change. The lost son made a decision in this lesson, but in our next lesson, Lesson 7, “A Father’s Unconditional Love,” we’ll see him following through on his decision and returning home. We will also see his father’s reaction and reception.

LESSON 7

INTRODUCTION

The road back home is not an easy one for the lost son; he's gone through a lot, both physically and emotionally, but he's made a good choice at this critical point in his life. He honestly assessed his condition in the pig pen and came to the conclusion he could either stay there and die or go home, correct his mistakes, and live a happy, productive life. Note that he had a plan and acted on it (see James 2:17). That's important.

So he goes home. As he gets closer to his father's estate, after his long and tiresome journey, he realizes the pitiful state he's in. His clothes are dirty and worn out; he stinks; his feet have blisters; he's hungry and he's thirsty. This won't matter to his father though. Throughout his son's absence, his father's faith remained strong as he watched and waited for his son to return. God is faithful and He answered this father's prayer. Searching the horizon one day, the father sees a person far off in the distance. He looks again, and excitement swells in his heart. There is no mistaking what he sees. He shouts, "That's my boy! I knew he would come back." As he runs to meet him, he starts thanking God for answering his prayer. What a glorious reunion!

LESSON OUTLINE

1. Love Knows No Boundaries (Luke 15:20, Luke 3:8)
2. The Benefits of Repentance (Luke 15:21)
3. Love, Compassion and Restoration (Luke 15:22)
4. Celebrate New Life – A New Beginning (Luke 15:23-24)
5. Questions: Applying What You Have Learned
6. Summary

A FATHER'S UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

LUKE 15:20-24; 3:8

1 LOVE KNOWS NO BOUNDARIES

"So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him" (Luke 15:20).

The journey home for the lost son was long, and Satan surely used his past failures against him. It probably seemed to the returning son that every tree, bird and blade of grass was shouting words of discouragement, defeat, fear and doubt against him. The thoughts raced in: How can you even think of going back home after what you've done? Your father is not going to accept you. Look at you! Look at what you have done to the family name. You're a disgrace! Why don't you just hang yourself and make everybody happy?

Even though the thoughts were coming faster than an arrow through the air, he pushed them aside and kept going. As he makes that last turn and is now standing on the family's estate, his heart feels like it's in his throat. He hears his heart beating faster. He grows weary, but he keeps going because he's almost home now. He is apprehensive, but delighted at hearing his father's voice in the distance, saying, "That's my boy! Thank God, my son is alive, and he's coming home." Is the son guilty? Did he sin? Yes, he did. But all that matters now is his father's eagerness to see him, desperately wanting to hold him. When the father finally reaches his lost son, he hugs him with outstretched arms and kisses him, in all his filth, and shows him unconditional love.

Here the lost son's father imitates our Heavenly Father, even as He so yearns for His wayward children and sinners to come to Him.

2

THE BENEFITS OF REPENTANCE

"And his son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven (God) and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son'" (Luke 15:21).

In Lesson 6 while in the pig pen, the lost son found himself in a despicable and sinful state. He was lost and all alone; he was at the point of death—not just physically, but also spiritually. He was disconnected from his earthly father and his Heavenly Father. He said, "I have sinned against both heaven (God) and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son." It's important to note here what young people often forget: their sins against their parents are sins against God. Why? Because God gives their parents authority over them. Parents are responsible to God to raise their children according to the Word of God. You may have come from a family where your parents didn't do what God commanded them to do in providing for you, or in teaching and training you. (Please note these Scriptures for God's instructions to children and parents: Ephesians 6:1-4; Proverbs 6:22). On this count, parents will answer to God for their actions. Whether parents or children, we must all remain vigilant against the wiles of the devil. In John 10:10, Jesus' words as our Good Shepherd should be a constant reminder to all of us: "The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life."

When the lost son found himself in great need of the bare necessities of life he came to himself. He reasoned in his heart what the best course of action was. He then concluded that swallowing his pride, going home, and asking his father for forgiveness was his best option. He thought about everything he would say. He must have rehearsed it over and over in his mind. He knew he had made a grave mistake and sinned against both his earthly father and his Heavenly Father, and he was determined in his heart to make it right by repenting to both. Oft times people think about doing the right things, but they never put action to those thoughts. That, however, is not the case with the lost son. Here we see him making plans and following through. He knew he had given up all his rights when he left, but that didn't stop him. The Scripture indicates he did not vacillate back and forth; he quickly decided and took action.

The lost son's father shows him love even before he asks for forgiveness. "You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for He forgave all our sins"(Colossians 2:13).

It's just like God who loves us and made provision for us while we were sinners, sending Jesus to die for us (see John 3:16).

The lost son's confession of his sin was an important step for him. "I am not worthy to be called your son, just a servant" (Luke 15:19). Was he worthy? Evidently, his father thought he was; he didn't even let him finish the statement. He didn't mention one word about the money he wasted, the harlots, the booze, or the riotous lifestyle. Just like our Heavenly Father, he didn't remind him of his sin, or where he went wrong, nor did he place him under guilt and condemnation. Rather, he showed him grace and mercy. Are you worthy to be called a son or daughter of God? Yes, you are—and why are you worthy? Simply because God says so. "But God showed His great love for us by sending **Christ** to die for us **while we were still sinners**" (Romans 5:8). Jesus paid your debt and my debt. He took the punishment we so deserved. This He did so now you can walk in—and *live in*—FREEDOM.

When you find yourself out of fellowship with God, run to Him and confess your sins to Him. Here's what the apostle John has to say about this: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (John 1:9). When you take the steps in this Scripture (confess and turn away from sin), it brings you back into fellowship with God. It's just that easy.

3

LOVE, COMPASSION AND RESTORATION

“But his father said to the servants, ‘Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet’” (Luke 15:22).

Notice what the father wants his servants to bring his son. It’s not just a robe, but the very finest robe. The robe represents his position as a son; he is resuming his original position as a son, not a servant, but a son. It represents *righteousness*. We read in Isaiah 61:10 these words: “I am overwhelmed with joy in the LORD my God! For He has dressed me with the clothing of salvation and draped me in a robe of righteousness. I am like a bridegroom dressed for his wedding or a bride with her jewels.” For believers (Christians) that righteousness is in Jesus Christ. Servants didn’t wear fine robes and sandals; in fact, servants didn’t wear shoes. The lost son was cleaned up, shaved and dressed in his father’s finest robe. *Welcome home!*

“Get a ring for his finger” is a line that has to do with authority—the son’s position in the family. In Bible times and even in some hierarchies today rich families wore signet rings that bore the family seal. This is another sign the lost son was restored and once again has access to the family’s wealth and resources, as if he never left. “And sandals (shoes) for his feet”—the last sign of his restoration.

4

CELEBRATE NEW LIFE – A NEW BEGINNING

“And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found! So the party began” (Luke 15:23-24).

The lost son thought he saw what partying and celebrating was like when he was in the far country, but he’s about to see what a true celebration is really like. He feels overwhelmed by now with how he has been received into his family, for it’s nothing like he had imagined. The joy and excitement was not only for the lost son, but for the entire family, including the servants.

A feast, implies a large social event, with an abundance of food. A feast is a meal with a plenteous supply of food and drink for a large company. The father instructs the servants to prepare a celebration to honor the return of his son to the family. The father was deeply thankful to God for having his son back home again, safe and sound. He was a sinner living among thieves and all manner of evil. He was prey to Satan, but God took care of the lost son. The father had no earthly guarantee he would ever see him again, but he held onto his faith in God. I believe he knew how to pray and rely on his faith in God, for his son’s safety and protection.

I wonder how many people are praying for *you* and standing on the promises of His Word for your safe return. For many of you it may be a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, pastor or friend. It could be someone you don’t even know because God has people interceding for us daily. Jesus intercedes for us; the Holy Spirit intercedes for us; so you are covered in prayer. Take a look at the Scriptures below; read and meditate on them for comfort and strength.

(Jesus said) “In the same way, there is more joy in heaven **over one lost sinner who repents** and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven’t strayed away!” (Luke 15:7).

(Jesus said) “In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God’s angels when even one sinner repents” (Luke 15:10).

“And the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don’t know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit **prays for us** with groanings that cannot be expressed in words” (Romans 8:26).

“And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit **pleads for us** believers in harmony with God’s own will” (Romans 8:27).

“Who then will condemn us? No one—for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God’s right hand, pleading for us” (Romans 8:34).

“Therefore He is able, once and forever, to save those who come to God through Him. He lives forever to **intercede** with God on their behalf” (Hebrew 7:25).

Do you see it in Luke 15:7 and Luke 15:10 the joy and celebration that goes on in heaven when a sinner repents? Also notice in Roman 8:26, 27, 34 and Hebrew 7:25 the intercession that goes forth for us by Jesus and the Holy Spirit? So rather than feeling down and out when things go wrong, remind yourself of what His Word says. Thank God that He has others praying for you.

The lost son’s father had a lot to be thankful for: “‘This son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.’ So the party began.” This Scripture has added significance in that while it shows the son’s safe return home, it tells how he was dead in sin and trespasses, being now alive to God. He is spiritually alive. He is back in the family, as if he never left.

That’s the place the Father wants you to be. If at some point you broke fellowship with Him, He wants you to come home and receive His love, along with all the rights and privileges of being a son or daughter. God loves you, and He proved it by sacrificing His only begotten Son for all of us.

5

QUESTIONS - APPLYING WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

1. The father in this story showed unconditional love to his son.
 True False
2. How did the father show his love?
3. Is restoration a benefit of repentance? Yes No
4. The lost son sinned against his father and _____.
5. We should use 1 John 1:9 when we _____.
6. In Luke 15:22 what were the three items the father told the servants to put on the lost son?
7. Was the lost son worthy to be called a son again? Yes No
8. According to Romans 5:8, who made him worthy?
9. The Bible says that Jesus, the _____ _____, and other people intercedes for us.
10. Why wasn’t the father angry with his son?
11. Was the lost son surprised at the reception he received from his father? Yes No

SUMMARY

There is a part of mankind's sinful nature that loves to boast it has all the answers. When we're not walking closely with God, we leave ourselves open to the devil's deceptions, and stoking our pride is one of his most predictable strategies. Without a doubt, long before the lost son was anywhere near slopping pigs, financial destitution, and starvation, he should have turned around and went back home, but he didn't. The question is "Why not?"

One of the biggest struggles the lost son had to deal with in his return home was the matter of his father's consistent and *undeserved* goodness toward him. He also had to face the opinions of others who clearly saw that *he blew it* by his reckless and wanton lifestyle. It's very hard to face this negative public opinion sometimes. It's what the child who runs away from a good home, or the husband/wife who left a good mate for an affair, or the minister who left a good church, or the bitter believer who has gone into sin, has to deal with. In each of these instances, the person must face the fact that it was not the parent, the mate, the church, or God who changed—it was person who went off the deep end.

True Love (God's love) doesn't change. He will never leave you or think differently about you—just as the lost son's father showed him, and God has always shown us. Always remember that just like the lost son you can repent and turn your circumstances around. You don't need to lose everything before you turn back to God and His eternal promises for your life.

As you continue on your journey, we invite you to study Lesson 8. It's entitled "Overcoming Family, and Societal Rejection Eliminating Unforgiveness and Learning Principles of Forgiveness."

LESSON 8

INTRODUCTION

Lesson 7 ended with a big celebration in full swing. Everyone was excited; food was prepared; and the lost son was all cleaned up dressed in fine clothes. He even felt so much better because the guilt was gone. There was one question on his mind now: where's my brother?

In the book of Nehemiah there is an account of a man with a purpose given to him straight from God: he is to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Like all of God's plans there will always be opposition. Note the words of criticism that came from the mouth of one who opposed Nehemiah's rebuilding project (see Nehemiah 4:3).

In this Bible study, the central character is frequently referred to as the "lost son," and that's how we have referred to him throughout. Now you would think the older brother would have expressed joy and elation over his brother's return, but he doesn't; rather, what we see is rejection. Even though the older brother seemed to be doing the right thing and may, in fact, have even been the big brother hero of the younger, the older brother's heart wasn't right. Something is wrong here. Love covers one's faults and accepts one's past mistakes (see Proverbs 10:12), but this doesn't seem the case with the older brother's attitude. We should do everything to the glory of God, from a heart directed to Him (see Colossians 3:17). It was the desire of the younger son to leave home, but the older son stayed and worked on their father's estate. He may not have stayed because he wanted to; he may have stayed out of duty.

LESSON OUTLINE

1. The Older Brother's Surprise (Luke 15:25-27)
2. The Older Brother's Anger (Luke 15:28)
 - a.) What Is Anger?
 - b.) What Are the Signs of Anger?
 - c.) How to Diffuse Anger
3. Rejection
4. Unforgiveness
5. Learning to Forgive
6. Questions: Applying What You Have Learned
7. Summary

OVERCOMING FAMILY AND SOCIETAL REJECTION, ELIMINATING UNFORGIVENESS, AND LEARNING PRINCIPLES OF FORGIVENESS

LUKE 15:25-30

1 THE OLDER BROTHER'S SURPRISE

"Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house. and he asked one of the servants what was going on. 'Your brother is back,' he was told, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return'" (Luke 15:25-27).

Our lesson begins with the older brother coming home from working in the fields. He hears music and celebration and wonders what's going on? Is it a holiday? Not knowing what was going on, he asks the servants, and they happily respond: "Your brother is back. Your father has killed the fatted calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return." Until now, the older brother has been silent, but that is about to change.

The story of the lost son is one of contrasts and how clueless people can be sometimes. Upon his return, the lost son wants his father to accept him simply as one of the servants. This shows us his lack of knowledge of the depth of his father's love. The older son, on the other hand, rejects his father's excessive rejoicing and merry-making over the less-than-perfect younger son, especially considering his wanton behavior. The Bible tells us to do all things from a pure and willing heart, but this is impossible when the heart is full of trifling jealousies and bitterness. The older son stayed home and worked for his father's approval based on a sense of tradition (like many in church). He didn't do it motivated by love.

2

THE OLDER BROTHER'S ANGER

"The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in. His father came out and begged him, but he replied, 'All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!'" (Luke 15:28-30).

a.) What Is Anger? The dictionary defines it as

1. feelings of strong displeasure;
2. fury, indignation and rage, implying deep-seated feelings aroused by injury, injustice or wrong;
3. a strong emotion; a feeling that is oriented toward some real or supposed grievance.

b.) What Are the Signs of Anger?

1. Resentment
2. Bitterness, strong displeasure
3. Hurt and pain

The older brother is angry at his father and his brother, and we have to ask why? We can clearly see his resentment, bitterness, hurt and pain. He seems to have been harboring it for quite some time because when his father approached him about coming inside to join the celebration he refused—even after his father begged him. The older son was adamant and determined not to comply with his father's wish. He then told him how he truly felt: "All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to do. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends." You can hear the hurt and pain. The older son saw himself as a servant when in fact he was a son who had access to all the rights and privileges of a king, but didn't use them. This very thing happens to many Christians. God gives us everything we need to accept and enjoy the benefits of being His children. Unfortunately, sometimes older Christians—people who have been Christians a long time—get jealous when a new Christian who hasn't gotten his or her life together, prays to God and gets a prayer answered quickly.

In this passage the older brother refers to his younger brother as "this son of yours," when speaking to the father. At that point, he didn't even want to acknowledge him as his brother. He then reminds his father how his brother squandered the family's money on prostitutes, and *still* "you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!" He could not understand the rationale behind his father's actions. He appears to have no real sense of love and forgiveness. In a previous lesson we inquired if the father had a right to give the younger son his inheritance. We agreed that it belonged to the father, and he could do as he wishes with his money. From our study of the Scriptures in Jewish tradition, it was customary for the older son to receive a double portion of his father's inheritance. If that was the case, what reason did the older son have to be angry? He had it all!

The Scriptures tells us a king who controls his anger is more powerful than a king who can conquer a city (see Proverbs 16:32). (Jesus said) "A good person produces good things *from* the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. What you say **flows from what is in your heart**" (Luke 6:45). Anger was stored in the older brother's heart and with his brother coming home, the celebration—and all the festivities around it—caused his pent-up anger to erupt.

As you can imagine, anger that is not properly handled can have some devastating effects on a person's life. Anger sours your attitude; it can negatively impact your physical health, prompt depression, and hurt you spiritually.

It will hinder or halt your growth in godly things. Instead of moving forward, you will falter or fail at what you're attempting to do because you're holding onto anger and unforgiveness.

(Jesus said) "But when you are praying, first **forgive** anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in heaven will **forgive your sins**, too" (Mark 11:25). Unforgiveness will stop the answers to your prayers from coming forth.

c.) How to Diffuse Anger

- 1.) Acknowledge your anger.
- 2.) Learn to identify the things that make you angry.
- 3.) Deal with your anger quickly. If you are a Christian, you have the Holy Spirit inside you; simply ask God to help you.
- 4.) Forgive others as God forgave you. (Jesus said) "If you **forgive** those who sin against you, your Heavenly Father will **forgive you**" (Matthew 6:14).

3

HOW TO HANDLE REJECTION

Rejection means refusing to accept another. We all have experienced rejection at some point in our lives. It's those times, when, for no apparent reason, another person turned against us, refused to accept us, or made some thoughtless or hurtful comment. People of all ages can experience rejection. This exclusion can cause great emotional strain on an individual. It can make him or her feel helpless, sad and depressed.

In this Bible study we see the older son rejecting his father and his brother. We've talked at length about the events in this account of a family's struggle, which has led us to this point.

You may be experiencing rejection from someone dear to you. Possibly you made a terrible mistake and were at fault, and they're holding that mistake against you now. We talk to many men and women who are or have been incarcerated, and they often tell us how saddened they are by family members who have completely turned their backs on them because of past mistakes. Some of these individuals are Christians now, and they cannot understand how their loved ones reject them, even when the Bible says to forgive. They express their sorrow over their error, but it's not enough. In other instances, the family member is not a Christian and feels no need to offer forgiveness. In fact, they believe they have a right to feel this way toward this person. They see it as a form of justice for the wrong they suffered.

Societal rejection is another blunt and harsh attitude incarcerated men and women face constantly. Often a person is released from prison after they have served 10, 15 or 20 years in prison for a crime they did—or perhaps—did not commit. When that person goes home, he or she has to live with the "ex-offender" label for the rest of their lives. Society in general isn't too quick to forgive them for the crime they committed and paid for. Many times they cannot find a job; employers see their applications and disqualify them immediately for their past offenses. Neighbors and people in the church shun them too. What are you supposed to do in situations like this?

So how do you get past this rejection? It's not always easy. First, if you haven't done so already, ask your loved ones for forgiveness. Don't internalize rejection from other people. If you allow it to become implanted in your heart and belief system, a picture of defeat and unworthiness will grow inside, and you will develop a poor self-image. Many of those who have done jail time or otherwise acted very badly toward others already have difficulty with a poor self-image, which results in extreme amounts of guilt. In fact, you must fight extra hard at not seeing yourself as unworthy. You must take God's Word as true, trusting in the price Jesus paid on the cross for you. Your value is not tied to another person. It comes through Christ; you must always remember that. Give your loved ones time, and show them by your actions you have changed. Don't push them; instead, show them love and be patient with them.

Work on yourself as you grow and mature in the Lord. **You grow by learning and applying His Word to the situation you face at that moment.** Read and meditate on the Scriptures concerning the particular challenges you're facing *right now*. This is an excellent way to begin learning how to overcome rejection through God's Word.

When you understand how God views you, it will not matter so much how others see you, and in time you will see yourself just as God sees you right now. These Scriptures will help you in your growth: John 14:18; Psalm 107:6, 91:4, 84:11; Ephesians 1:3-6; Jeremiah 29:11. These are just a few. There are many more you can find as you study this topic on overcoming rejection.

4 UNFORGIVENESS

Unforgiveness can cause some real problems in our lives. It means deliberately holding on to an offense or resentment towards others, which injures or hinders them, all because you feel like someone has to pay for a hurt you've endured. Unforgiveness opens the door to bitterness. And out of that springs anger, resentment and hostility. You might keep bitterness stuffed down for a while, but eventually it will trickle out, little by little. Then again, it might erupt like a volcano. We see a good example of this with the older son. He had unexpressed anger, and in time he exploded when his father was insistent he join in and celebrate his brother's return.

If we withhold forgiveness, we're basically passing judgment on that person. We don't have a right, according to Scripture, to pass judgment. God instructs us to trust Him for the execution of justice. The Scripture says, "Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord" (Romans 12:19). As God's children, we must submit our desire for justice to Him and trust it is in His hand.

So how do we take care of unforgiveness? When we hang onto an unforgiving attitude, it grows and gets bigger like a cancer or sore. It will damage your health and impair you mentally and spiritually. It actually hurts you more than it does the other person. You may have been the victim in a particular situation, but you can choose *not* to hold onto the offense. I didn't say it was easy, but you can overcome it. Let's look at a few Scriptures that will help.

"Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:31-32).

5 FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness is a choice. God expects us to forgive others just as He has forgiven us. God, who is perfect, sent His Son Jesus to live a perfect life, die on the cross for our sins, and rise from the dead—all so that our sins would be paid. Because of our faith in Christ (and His complete sacrifice), God forgives us from our sin. If we then refuse to forgive another person for an offense, we are dishonoring the forgiveness God has given us. God will hold us accountable for this as Jesus illustrated in the parable of the unforgiving servant (see Matthew 18:21-35).

In addition to forgiving others we must examine our attitude toward God and ourselves. Many times when bad things happen to people they blame God for not protecting them, or for failing to keep them from their self-destructive behaviors. The Bible makes it clear that God is never the cause of the evil choices we make: "And remember, when you are being tempted, do not say, 'God is tempting me.' God is never tempted to do wrong, and He never tempts anyone else. Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away" (James 1:13-14).

Other times, we find it hard to truly receive God's forgiveness, and keep blaming ourselves. Many times people do bad things or make terrible mistakes, and they are unable to give it to God and apply His total forgiveness to themselves. In addition to forgiving others, we seek to embrace God's will and trust Him. In His forgiveness we must accept ourselves as His forgiven child as well.

Here are some key Scriptures that address our need to forgive:

- "If you forgive those who sin against you, your Heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matthew 6:14-15).

- “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions” (Mark 11:25).
- “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you” (Ephesians 4:32).

Feelings may or may not have anything to do with forgiveness; some people mention a *sense of release* when they forgive another. Forgiveness, however, is exercised by faith; you trust God to help you in the forgiveness process and you know, based on His Word, He is there to see you through.

The Father’s Heart toward You

Always remember first and foremost that God loves you. His love goes beyond our understanding. He does not approve of all your past mistakes and actions, but as you grow in Him, He will change you little by little, showing you the things you need to address. He will never *make* you change; rather, He helps you—if you will receive His help—through different means such as Bible study, Holy Communion, attending worship services, visiting with your pastor and people who are mature in His Word, and so on. God will never reject you as a person. When you come to God, you never come alone. Jesus Christ is your Advocate (see Hebrews 7:25), and you can always be assured of His love and acceptance. Take a moment right now and pray this prayer, seeking God’s power to help you forgive yourself and others.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, I thank You that You understand me and my feelings of hurt and pain. Help me to accept myself as well as those around me. Forgive me the times I have lashed out at others because I have felt unloved and unworthy. I forgive others because You first forgave me through Your Son Jesus Christ. For His sake, I claim my position before You today as Your dear child, a joint heir with Jesus Christ, according to Your Word in Titus 3:7. Help me to put aside any self-righteousness within me and, instead, empower me to claim the righteousness of Jesus Christ as my strength. Thank You for having promised to live each day in me and through me. Therefore, I can rest in the security of Your loving care and promise of Your eternal provisions for me. In Jesus’ Name I pray this. Amen.

6

QUESTIONS – APPLYING WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

1. The older brother welcomed the lost son back home with open arms. True False
2. Anger is a strong feeling of _____.
3. One way to diffuse anger is by identifying its _____.
4. Matthew 6:14 says, “Forgive others just as God forgave _____.”
5. The older brother held unforgiveness against his father and brother. True False
6. Ex-offenders may face rejection from family, neighbors and _____.
7. Romans 12:19, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says _____.
8. Unforgiveness can damage us physically, mentally and _____.
9. We must forgive others because God first _____.
10. Forgiveness is a choice. True False

7

SUMMARY

In this lesson we focused on the anger, hurts, unforgiveness and misconduct the older brother showed his father and younger brother, whom he hasn't even seen since he returned home. Coming up next in Lesson 9 in "Restore or Destroy?" we'll explore how the lost son (i.e. the one incarcerated or the person who has committed a serious offense) will interact with people, as he seeks to follow God's Word for his life and actions. Along the way, he'll encounter people who are spiritual, like his father (see Galatians 6:1), and are like his older brother, who are immature (non-spiritual).

LESSON 9

INTRODUCTION

The scene of our family has changed dramatically within a few hours. There is a spirit of merry-making throughout the estate. Can you picture the scene? Friends and neighbors are dropping in; the son who was lost is enjoying his newfound sonship; the father's heart is experiencing moments of elated joy. All is well until he finds his older son has placed himself out of fellowship with him, the household, and his younger brother.

What a terrible situation to be in. This father has to provide a memorial (an anchor) that will last a lifetime for his younger son's new birth (return) and a renewal of mind and heart for his older son, without dampening the festivities of his younger son's return. Will he do the right thing in the sight of God to gain both sons? What picture is painted here in Scripture? Our goal in this lesson is to restore both sons to their rightful place in the family just as God wants to restore us in our place in His family.

LESSON OUTLINE

1. A Father's Plea to His Son (Luke 15:28-30; Proverbs 10:12)
2. Love Persists (1 Corinthians 13:7; Luke 15:31; Proverbs 10:12)
3. The Significance of Celebrations and Memorials (Luke 15:8-10, 32; Isaiah 53:6; Romans 10:9)
4. Character Traits of the Father and Older Son
5. Questions: Applying What You Have Learned
6. Summary

RESTORE OR DESTROY?

LUKE 15:28-32; GALATIANS 6:1-2; LUKE 15:8-10

1 A FATHER'S PLEA TO HIS SON

"The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in. His father came out and begged him, but he replied, 'All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!'" (Luke 15:28-30).

In our last Bible study we talked a lot about anger, what it is, and how it can negatively affect us if we don't put a stop to it. We will recap here briefly and then go deeper into our study. We went into details about the older son's anger, the characteristics he displayed, and some of the reasons why he held this resentment against both his father and brother. In verse 30 he vented his anger. In Proverbs 10:12a we read, "Hatred stirs up quarrels." He was like a walking time bomb ready to explode. We also see this truth in James 3:16, "For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and evil of every kind." Part of his unhappiness must have stemmed from his envy of his younger brother. I believe he also wanted to venture out and leave the estate as his younger brother did, but because of fear and feeling it was his responsibility to stay with his father, he chose to remain home. It's quite possible during the time his brother was gone a resentment was brewing inside of him. He kept imagining the exciting things his brother was experiencing. I believe he had an inner monologue with himself that went something like this: "You should have _____. Here you are the oldest son and you're stuck here; you may never have an opportunity to leave." It would be natural for him to feel this way.

"The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in. His father came out and begged him." The older son's father is so much like God. Think back to when Adam lost fellowship with God. God immediately made a provision for Adam's fellowship to be regained. The father in our story leaves the presence of his guests and the recently returned son to be a mediator (Scripture says Jesus is the mediator between God and man) and restore fellowship between his elder son, his younger son and himself. One can see the father using an approach similar to what the apostle Paul offered believers in the church in Galatia: "Dear brothers and sisters, if another believer is overcome by some sin, you who are godly (i.e. those who are responsive to and controlled by the Spirit) should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path. And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself. Share each other's burdens, and in this way obey the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:1-2).

2 LOVE PERSISTS

"Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance" (1 Corinthians 13:7). This father stood in faith, waiting a long time for his younger son's return. God is so faithful to us. He blesses the younger son, allowing him a safe return home, and the father regains his lost son. He enjoys having him home, but it isn't long before his faith and love is tested again.

The father listens quietly as his older son says, "All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!" (Luke 15:28-30).

The father realizes his son does not understand the significance of this celebration. He looks at his son and I believe he feels his pain as he tenderly explains, "Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours." I believe the father tells his older son how much he loves him and how he appreciates all he has done for him and the family. I can hear him saying, "I apologize for not taking the time to tell you how much I love and appreciate you." He relates how he has not taken him for granted and emphasizes to him how all that he does and everything he has already belongs to him. "Son," he says, "when something belongs to you, you can do as you wish with it. All that I have is yours; it's always been that way and will always remain that way. Nothing or no one can ever change that. When you speak a command or make a decision on my behalf, it's as if I said it. I back you up."

3 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CELEBRATIONS AND MEMORIALS

The father feels in his heart that his older son is now receiving his love and forgiveness. He feels that he can now fully explain to him the spiritual significance as to why he must come inside to welcome his brother home. "We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!" (Luke 15:32).

I believe in his heart this father is praying, "Lord, You have been faithful to me, and I thank You so much. I am asking You to give me the right words now." Sharing the words of Isaiah 53:6 with his older son would be appropriate here: "All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the LORD laid on Him the sins of us all."

To that he might well have added the following: "Just like those sheep, your brother wandered away; he left God's plan for his life. He did his own thing, but God protected him and bought him back to us. Son, you know the Scriptures and you understand farming. Think about this: "If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won't he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it?" (Matthew 18:12).

Another wonderful example supporting the necessity of celebration and restoration is found in Luke 15:8-10 where Jesus said, "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Won't she light a lamp and sweep the entire house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she will call in her friends and neighbors and say, 'Rejoice with me because I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents."

Some times the more emotional and immature a person is, the more a tragedy will impact his or her life. Today God uses His Word as an anchor to assure us of our place in Him. What is an anchor? It is a source of security or stability. It's something that holds someone or something steady (see Hebrews 6:18-20). When we are unsure of His love or provisions for us we can go to the Bible. The Bible tells us that God does not lie (see Numbers 23:19), so we are assured He will do what He says in His Word. He will meet our needs.

In the old covenant God would have the children of Israel gather large stones and make memorials to get their children's attention so they could rehearse what God had done for them in the past (see Joshua 4:6). David encouraged himself by testifying about how God had delivered him from the bear and the lion, and would do the same for him with the giant. These memorials are a form of testimonials to God's goodness.

This father understood this principle. He knew he had to establish a memorial for his son. That's why he went all out, killed the fattened calf, called all the neighbors, and declared this a "restoration day" for his younger son, giving him full access to all the rights and privileges of a son once again. This was done so in the future when the son's past tries to discourage and condemn him (see Romans 6:23), he will have memories of this lavish feast his father had for him. This son who was once lost, but now is found, who was dead in sins, but is now alive unto God. He will be assured of his father's love, and his right standing with the family.

Today you will use a similar principle as you journey home from your state of confinement or whatever major difficulty you find yourself in. God said in His Word, "If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9). You may remember in Lesson 6 we gave you a short prayer. When you prayed that prayer you confessed Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. When you filled out the card in Lesson 6 you set an anchor in your life. You can look back and remember your salvation experience. God gives you a new life if you will receive it and follow His plan for you. Now how can you anchor this into your heart? You anchor it by purposely studying God's Word for you and putting it into your heart. There will be times (and they may be many) when Satan will bring thoughts to your mind, saying you have not changed. He will bring your past back to you, throw it in your face, and try to condemn you. It is your responsibility to learn what God says about you in His Word and apply it to your life. It's similar to planting seeds and waiting for the harvest. It takes a little time for seeds to grow up and produce a harvest, but be patient and trust. God will deliver.

When you plant God's Word in your heart by hearing, reading and studying, it grows the same way seeds grow in soil. God's Word grows and produces fruit in your life. God's Word becomes your anchor when you're unsure about a situation and doubts begin to surface. It's here that you go back to the anchor. Remember the anchor holds you steady.

4 CHARACTER TRAITS OF THE FATHER AND OLDER SON

What can you learn from this father and his older son? Let's take a few minutes and compare the two. In doing this it will help you understand yourself and others.

Father	Older Son
Displays godly love	Selfish, self-centered
Forgives	Harbors hatred, bitterness, anger
Longsuffering	Holds unforgiveness
Gives freely, generous	Character of a baby Christian
Kind, tenderhearted	Immature
Persistent	Jealous, insecure
Displays the character of God	Hypercritical
Shows maturity	Mean, short-sighted
Has godly wisdom	Stubborn
Compassionate, sympathetic	Hardhearted

In order to become spiritually mature so you display the characteristics of both the lost son's father and God our Father, you must be established in a Christ-centered, Bible-teaching church or fellowship of believers. You learn to grow in God's Word by reading, studying and meditating in it. As you journey through life you will meet people who fit both profiles above. It may appear that more people are like the older son in our lesson. Many will say they are a Christian, but their actions will be completely opposite of what the Bible says a Christian is. You will see these people in your family, in the work place, at church, and in other places throughout your life. Some are self-centered; everything is about them. They do not consider others. They hold resentments and bitterness. They're negative and bring others down for the ride. They'll will talk about you, curse you, steal from you, lie to you and, sometimes, do it with a smile on their faces. You may be asking how this can be since they say they are Christians.

They can act this way because they have not grown up spiritually. The fruits of the Spirit are not in operation in their lives. Romans 12:2 tells us to renew our minds with God's Word and not to be conformed to this world. The better you understand this the more successful you will become in your relationships and in your personal life. Knowing why people act the way they do will help you live more peacefully with them. There are times when you'll want to be angry or retaliate against a suffered wrong, but knowing this information and the information that follows in upcoming lessons will help you live a more peaceful and God-pleasing life.

5 QUESTIONS - APPLYING WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

1. The father in this story was persistent. True False
2. Please check the correct response(s) below: Love
 - never gives up
 - never loses faith
 - is always hopeful
 - endures through every circumstance
 - all of the above
3. From our lesson write three words to describe the older son in this story:
1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____
4. Write three words that describe the father:
1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____
5. Isaiah. 53:6 says that "All of us, like sheep, have _____ astray. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the LORD laid on Him the sins of us all."
6. Whose character is more like God's—the father's or the older son's?
7. An anchor is something that holds someone or something _____.
8. Romans 12:2 tells us to be transformed by the _____ of your mind.
9. In your own words, answer the following question: why is there joy and celebration when something lost is found? (Hint: see Luke 15:8-10.)

SUMMARY

This lesson's title is "Restore or Destroy?" Was this father able to restore his newfound son to his rightful position in this family, without destroying his relationship with his older son who was angry and selfish? Can we conclude this Bible study by saying both sons needed restoration? The Bible passage ended with Luke 15:32 and the father explaining why he had to celebrate his younger son's return. Throughout these lessons we see God's character displayed in the father's actions toward both his sons. We know God was working with him because the father was doing the right things toward both sons. Likewise in our lives God always wants us in fellowship with Him and others. I believe it was because of this that God blessed him and restored both sons to him. This father faced trials and tribulations and he triumphed through them. It's a good example for you to see how important it is to do the right thing and persevere in every situation. We want to thank you for staying with us through the past nine lessons, and we invite you to join us as we continue this journey home with Lesson 10: "Living Life Successfully One Day at a Time." Life is a journey, and you can be victorious in it by following the right principles for your life.

LESSON 10

INTRODUCTION

Living life successfully may sound impossible for some of you reading this lesson. That's because you find it difficult to look beyond your present situation. This is especially true for men and women who are incarcerated. It may be all you can see right now are prison walls, blue, grey, tan or white. The truth is living life successfully is achievable for anyone who desires to change his or her life. The key is living one day at a time and living it through Jesus Christ. In previous lessons we followed a young man, the lost son, who had it all but lost it. He lived his life recklessly and made some terrible mistakes, just like many of us but, in the end, he changed and turned his life around. Notice I said he changed. He hit rock bottom and came home because he could no longer care for himself. As a result of the actions he took his life turned around. Many of you are on your way home. In this lesson we want you to get some biblical principles you can use to turn your life around. Regardless of your present state, God can change your life. He wants to help you. Remember in Mark 9:23b Jesus said, "All things are possible for one who believes."

LESSON OUTLINE

Steps to Successful Christian Living:

1. Salvation
2. Reading Your Bible
3. Learn Who You Are in Christ
4. The Holy Spirit Is Our Guide and Teacher
5. Faith: What Is It and How to Use It
6. The Importance of Prayer
7. How to Overcome Temptations
8. How to Find a Good Church
9. Questions: Applying What You Have Learned
10. Summary

LIVING LIFE SUCCESSFULLY ONE DAY AT A TIME

STEPS TO SUCCESSFUL CHRISTIAN LIVING:

As our first steps to successful living, it is important to build a strong and firm foundation. If you talk to any builder he will tell you a building is only as strong as its foundation. If it's built cheaply and carelessly, it will not stand or endure the elements of nature. This principle also applies to our lives. In Luke 6:48 Jesus tells us, "He is like a man who built a house, and digged deep, and laid the foundation on a rock: and when the flood arose, the stream beat vehemently upon that house, and **could not shake it**: for **it** was founded upon a rock."

The rock you want to build upon is Jesus Christ. The storms of life are coming upon each one of us, but the question remains—can we survive them? Have you ever noticed people and how they handle adverse situations? Take two people facing similar situations. Maybe it's a death in the family, the loss of work, divorce, abuse, sickness, disease or financial loss. One person is devastated, while the other overcomes the situation reasonably well. Frequently, the better-equipped person has a stronger foundation in his life. In John 16:33 Jesus says, "I have told you all this so that you may have peace in Me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I **have overcome** the world."

We've outlined some key topics below that will help you build a strong foundation for your life. This is a beginning for you, and we hope you will continually seek to learn and grow in the Lord. You will not learn all there is to know about this Christian life from this one lesson, but build on this lesson. Learning is a lifelong experience. Isaiah 28:10b tells us it's "one line at a time, one line at a time, a little here, and a little there." Be sure to utilize the resources at Lutheran Hour Ministries. Personally, we've been learning, growing and ministering nearly 30 years, and we are still not where we want to be in our growth and walk with the Lord, it's a lifetime process.

1 SALVATION

Living your life successfully begins with a relationship with Jesus Christ. In John 3:3, Jesus told Nicodemus, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." What did He mean by that? He was speaking of God's work in Baptism, where God changes our inner nature (man on the inside). He wipes away all our past and makes us *new creatures*, according to 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Galatians 6:15. We all are born sinners. When Adam disobeyed God and obeyed the devil, he took on the devil's nature (see John 8:44; 1 John 3:8). God is loving and kind and did not leave mankind in this fallen state. Instead, He sent Jesus to rescue us. Jesus came and sacrificed His life for all mankind, and our part is receiving Him and what He did for us as stated in Romans 10:9, "If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."

If you've completed lessons 1-9 you'll remember in Lesson 6 we gave you the good news of God's forgiveness and salvation in the life, death and resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ. Through that good news the Holy Spirit has saved you. In Baptism He gives you rebirth and adoption as God's own child. We included a prayer thanking God for His salvation. If you are new to this study and didn't pray that prayer, we have included it at the end of this section. If you prayed the prayer for salvation, but are uncertain in your heart that you are saved, we encourage you to read 1 John 5:11-13.

In His perfect life and innocent suffering and death, Jesus Christ has met every condition for your salvation. It doesn't depend on how perfectly you change; it depends on His perfect life, death and resurrection. When Jesus was dying on the cross, He was flanked by two convicted criminals who were being executed for their crimes. One acknowledged his failings, admitting his punishment was just. He also rightly said that Jesus didn't deserve to be punished for He had done nothing wrong. He then asked Jesus to remember him and bring him into His kingdom. Jesus answered, "I assure you, today you will be with Me in paradise" (see Luke 23:39-43). On that very day the criminal died. He had no time to make amends, yet he was completely forgiven and promised a place in heaven—all because Jesus had done everything required to make him right with God. He did the same for you and me, and everyone. So you too can know and rest assured you are completely saved because of what Jesus has done for you. You can depend on what the Bible says. Believe and have faith in it and do not rely on your feelings or anything else. Jesus made you righteous; it's a free gift you cannot earn it. You can only have a right standing with God based on Jesus' merit (worth). He gave His life for us so He can remake us in the nature of God (see 2 Peter 1:4).

2 READING YOUR BIBLE

Prayer
Dear God in heaven,

I come to You in the Name of Jesus. Your Word says, "Him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37b). I believe You will not cast me out, but as Your Word says You take me in, and I thank You for accepting me.

Your Word also says, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, 'Everyone who believes in Him will not be put to shame.' For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing His riches on all who call on Him. For 'everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved'" (Romans 10: 9-13). Remind me daily of my need for true repentance and of the blessings of Baptism, even as the apostle Peter proclaimed on the Day

of Pentecost: “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the Name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts2:38). I believe in my heart that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. I believe He was raised from the dead for my justification. I am calling upon His Name—the Name of Jesus, so I know, Father, You save me now.

I do believe with my heart, and I confess Jesus now as my Lord and Savior.

Thank You, Father. I am saved!

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Please allow us to be the first to welcome you into the family of God. Your next step is to grow up spiritually.

To continue building your foundation and making strides toward a successful life, it’s important to read and study your Bible. The Bible is God’s Word. It reveals God’s will, His character, and what He is really like. It also conveys His plan for us. The Bible gives us wisdom and shows how we are to live the Christian life as well as life in general (see 2 Peter 1:3-4; James 1:21-24; 2 Timothy 3:16). Reading and studying your Bible is vitally important because it allows God to speak to you. It also corrects you when you’re wrong, guiding and helping you to make quality decisions. It helps you stay on the right path in life.

When you begin it is important to find a quiet location free of distractions. Pray before you begin and ask the Holy Spirit to help you understand what God is saying to you. Ask God questions as you read and expect to receive your answer. Don’t forget your pen and note pad. You’re reading words that are alive and will work on your heart (see 1 Thessalonians 2:13). You can take God at His Word because He does not lie (see Titus 1:1-2). He does not deceive us. He means exactly what He says. When you read and study your Bible, pay close attention to Bible characters such as Abraham, Moses, David, Peter, etc. See how they lived their lives. If they were successful, then do what they did. If they failed at some point, find out what caused them to fall and avoid what tripped them up (see 1 Corinthians 10:11).

Which Bible should you use? That’s a good question. We are blessed with many strong versions to read. We recommend a Bible that is both easy to read and clear as to meaning. The New International Version, New Living Bible, New Kings James Version, Amplified Bible, Contemporary English Bible, and Life Recovery Bible are a few good choices. You will also find numerous Bible dictionaries, concordances and other study aids are available to help you expand your study.

3

LEARN WHO YOU ARE IN CHRIST

Who are you really? Many people struggle with not knowing who they are and why they are here. Failure to know who we are in Christ can cause frustration and lead us to search for truth in all the wrong places. Genesis 1:26 says you are made in the **image** and **likeness** of God. Knowing that will help you want to be more like Him as you take on His character traits. Remember now, through faith you are a Christian and that makes God your Father. Since Jesus made you righteous through faith (see Romans 5:17), you are free of guilt, condemnation, fear and inferiority. Be sure to take some time to read, study and mediate on these Scriptures on righteousness: Romans 3:21-24; 10:10.

I am the righteousness of God through Jesus Christ.
Righteousness is my **FREE GIFT** (see Romans 5:17).
Righteousness is by faith (see Romans 10:10),
and is for all who believe (see Romans 3:21-24).
Righteousness sets me free from the following:

Guilt	Condemnation	Fear	Inferiority
Romans 5:9	Romans 5:9	Romans 8:31	Romans 8:17
Romans 8:1	Romans 8:1	Psalms 27:1	2 Peter 1:4
Romans 6:18	Romans 6:18	1 John 4:18	Galatians 2:20
Colossians 1:12	Colossians 1:12	Hebrews 4:16	
	2 Timothy 1:7		

Knowing who we are in Christ Jesus gives us confidence and boldness since we now know that Jesus truly sets us free through the sacrifice He paid. Because of that we are no longer guilty. When we make a mistake in the future, we ask God for His forgiveness (see 1 John 1:9), and that puts us back in fellowship with Him. Also, knowing and doing this helps us in our prayer life.

To continue growing stronger in knowing who you as a child of God, take note of all the Bible verses you find that have **"in Him"** or **"in Christ"** in them and personalize them. Here's an example: 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "Therefore, if anyone is **in Christ**, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." We can personalize it by saying: I am a new created being **in Christ Jesus**. I have the life, nature and ability of God in me now. Another Scripture is Ephesians 2:10, "For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things He planned for us long ago." Now take a minute and personalize it here:

Remember to search out other Scriptures just like those above and personalize them too. To do this means you make them yours, you take ownership, and then start confessing them daily, until they are rooted in your heart. Then you will truly know who you are in Christ Jesus.

4

THE HOLY SPIRIT IS OUR GUIDE AND TEACHER

Who is the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit is a Person. He is the third Person of the Trinity of God. The Holy Spirit's desire and purpose is to help us, but first we must ask for and invite Him into our lives (see Luke 11:9-13). Whatever your struggle is, He can help you. Just ask Him for His help. The Holy Spirit is a Counselor, Helper, Intercessor, Standby, Advocate and Strengtheners. There is nothing He cannot do.

When Jesus completed His work here on the earth He said He would ask God the Father to send the Holy Spirit.

John 14:16-18 - (Jesus said) "And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever, so we are never alone, but always right with us, waiting for us to call on Him for His help, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you."

John 16:7 - (Jesus said) "Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you."

John 15:26 - (Jesus said) "But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me.

The Holy Spirit helps us in our prayer life:

Romans 8:26 - "Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered."

The Holy Spirit guides us in every aspect of our lives:
Romans 8:14 - "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God."

The Holy Spirit will teach us all things:
John 14:26 - (Jesus said) "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My Name, He will teach you all things."

Want to be a good parent, student, spouse, and employee? In whatever you need help, He's there to help you. He will also help you make better choices in life.

The Holy Spirit reminds us of God's Word:
John 14:26 - (Jesus said) "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit ... He will ... bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you."

The Holy Spirit will tell us things to come:
John 16:13 - (Jesus said) "When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth, for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak, and He will declare to you the things that are to come."

The Holy Spirit will proclaim to us the things of Jesus:
John 16:12-15 - (Jesus said) "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth, for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak, and He will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for He will take what is Mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is Mine; therefore I said that He will take what is Mine and declare it to you."

So just like salvation and righteousness, the Holy Spirit is a free gift from God that we receive by faith (see Luke 11:13). There is a deeper experience with the Holy Spirit that Jesus told the disciples to receive once He was gone (see Acts 1:4, 5, 8).

5 FAITH – WHAT IS IT AND HOW TO USE IT?

What is faith? "Now faith is being sure we will get what we hope for. It is being sure of what we cannot see" (Hebrews 11:1). It believes God will never lie to us or break a promise to us. He will do exactly what His Word says. We grow and increase our faith by hearing God's Word (see Romans 10:17). We act on our faith by confessing and speaking God's Word (see 2 Corinthians 4:13). To confess means we say the same thing God says about us. We agree with Him. Once we've heard the Word we put it into action by acting on it (see James 2:17, 20). God has given each of us a measure of faith (see Romans 12:3), but it is our responsibility to use it. We can never please God without faith (see Hebrews 11:6), so it is important we have it, and exercise it in accordance with God's Word.

How do I use my faith? We've learned that faith comes by hearing God's Word. You use your faith by meditating on God's Word (see Joshua 1:8). When you have needs in your life, search God's promises that apply to your need. This will build the faith we need to receive from God.

- A. Use your faith in prayer (see James 1:26; Mark 11:24).
- B. Confess God's Word and not the problem (see Hebrews 4:15; 10:23).
- C. Take action on those Scriptures by doing what they say (see James 1:22; Matthew 7:24-27).
- D. Live like it's yours and give God thanksgiving for your answer (see Mark 11:24).

6 THE IMPORTANCE OF PRAYER

What is prayer? Prayer in simple terms is talking to God. We have a right to talk to God because of our relationship with Him (see Hebrews 10:19, 22). Does He hear me when I pray? 1 John 5:14-15 says, "And we are confident that He hears us whenever we ask for anything that pleases Him. And since we know He hears us when we make our requests, we also know that He will give us what we ask for." This is good news for a Christian.

It gives us confidence to approach Him, not only knowing He hears us, but that He answers our prayers. One prerequisite, however, is that we ask according to His Word. In John 14:13-14, Jesus says, "You can ask for anything in My Name, and I will do it, so that the Son can bring glory to the Father. Yes, ask Me for anything in My Name, and I will do it!" In James 5:16b, it says, "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much."

There are seven different types of prayer:

- (1) Prayer of Petition and Supplication - John 16:23
- (2) Prayer of Praise and Thanksgiving - Psalm 100
- (3) Prayer of Agreement - Matthew 18:19
- (4) Prayer of Intercession - Ezekiel 22:30; Romans 8:26-27
- (5) Prayer of Binding and Loosing - Matthew 18:18
- (6) Prayer of Dedication - Matthew 26:39
- (7) Prayer of Faith - Mark 11:23

When you pray, have a Scripture to give to God that states the reason your prayer is going to be answered (see Isaiah 43:26). God is not forgetful, but giving His Word back to Him helps you, and it builds your faith. Make your request to the Father in Jesus' Name. Pray in faith, trusting His Word and not overly distracted by your problem. Thank Him for the answer as you receive it by faith and rejoice with thanksgiving (see Philippians 4:6).

Listed below are prayer promises for deliverance and victory. Personalized into confessions, these are especially helpful to men and women who are in deeply troubling circumstances or who may even be incarcerated.

Isaiah 43:26 - "Father, I put You in remembrance of Your Word concerning me: I set forth my case, that I may be proved right."

Isaiah 55:11 - "I speak forth Your Words from my mouth, and they (Your Words) do not return to You without doing everything You sent them to do."

Psalm 35:9 - "I am joyful in the Lord; I shall rejoice in my deliverance!"

Zechariah 9:11-12 - "Father, I thank You for Your covenant promise to deliver me and to restore double unto me all that I have lost."

Psalm 107:19-20 - "I cry unto You Lord in my trouble and You deliver me out of my distresses. You sent forth Your Word, and healed me, and rescued me from destruction."

Psalm 32:7 - You are a hiding place for me; You Lord, preserve me from trouble, You surround me with songs of deliverance!

Ephesians 1:7-9 - "In You I have redemption, deliverance, and salvation, through Your blood, the remission of my offenses, in accordance with the riches of Your favor, which You lavished upon me in every kind of wisdom and understanding, making known to me the mystery of Your will!"

Psalm 34:19 - "Many evils confront the righteous, but the Lord delivers me out of them all!"

Psalm 41:11 - "By this, I know that You favor and delight in me, because my enemy does not triumph over me."

7

HOW TO OVERCOME TEMPTATIONS

Temptation! Yes, it is true. Satan will not leave you alone now that you are saved and living your life for the Lord Jesus Christ. He will try and tempt you with the same things he used before. If that doesn't work, he will look for other areas to tempt you. Beware of his tricks! Scripture says he goes about as a roaring lion **looking for someone to devour** (see 1 Peter 5:8).

Satan will try to win you back. He will tempt you with sins of the flesh; he will tempt you in your mind with doubt, worry and fear. He will use subtle little tricks against you. Just remember: in order to live your life one day at a time for God, stay away from those things or areas you are weak in. For instance, if it's drugs, alcohol, etc., don't put yourself in that environment. If you do, you can easily fall back into the temptation and his trap. Choose your friends wisely. If you know a particular person is a bad influence, keep your distance because the Scripture says, "Do not let anyone fool you. Bad people can make those who want to live good become bad" (1 Corinthians 15:33). Learn to resist the devil, and start spending time with other Christians. Learn from Christians who are living differently than people in the world. We're not saying to never interact with non-Christians, just be selective because this is an area you could be tempted in.

8 HOW TO FIND A GOOD CHURCH

Finding a good church is vitally important to your spiritual growth. God ordained the church, and He tells us not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together with other believers (see Hebrews 10:25). Acts 4:23a says, "As soon as they were **freed**, Peter and John returned to the **other believers**." After being put in jail these men were freed, and wanted to be with other like-minded believers; this too should be your desire.

We need a good church to fellowship with other believers (see Acts 2:42, 46-47; 1 John 1:7). We need to encourage one another (see 1 Thessalonians 5:11; 1 Corinthians 14:26). We also need a church for good Bible teaching (see 1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11-16; 1 Peter 5:2; Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 3:2; 1 Timothy 3:2).

It is reported by Christian ministries that up to 90 percent of men and women who find a good Bible-believing church—and stay connected to that church—remain free from returning to jail. Your first step is to pray and ask God for directions to the church He would have you be a part of.

You can then visit a few churches in your area and follow up by learning more about them. Accept an invitation from those that display a solid Christian character in their attitudes and worship content. You can also contact Lutheran Hour Ministries for recommendations to a good church in your area.

9 QUESTIONS - APPLYING WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

1. If you want your life to change you must make the decision to change it? True False
2. Living your life successfully begins with having a relationship with Jesus Christ. This is also known as
 - salvation
 - being born again by God
 - trusting Jesus as Lord and Savior
 - all of the above
3. When Adam disobeyed God and obeyed the devil instead that caused sin to come upon all of mankind. This statement is True False
4. Righteousness is a _____ and it is by faith (see Romans 10:10).
5. Knowing we are righteous sets us free from
 - condemnation
 - guilt
 - fear
 - inferiority
 - all the above
6. John 14:26 tells us the Holy Spirit will teach us all _____.
7. Prayer is talking to _____.

8. Who prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour (see 1 Peter 5:8)?

- Satan
- Devil
- both

9. Attending a good church is very important for your spiritual growth. True False

10. To locate a good church you should

- pray
- ask another believer
- contact Lutheran Hour Ministries
- visit several churches
- all of the above

10

SUMMARY

Life is just that: life. It can be successful: one minute, one hour, one week, one year, or one decade. A person is successful one moment at a time. In the book of Ecclesiastes there is a time and season for all things. As you pursue your life in God, you will encounter Bible-based decisions along the way, handling them one at a time, over and over again. When you miss the mark, when you *sin*—as we all do every day—confess your wrongdoing to the Father and ask Him for forgiveness, according to 1 John 1:9. Trust in His forgiveness, repent of your error, and move on with your life.

In Christ Jesus you are more than a conqueror (see Romans 8:31-39). Life is a journey. You now have a basic foundation for your success. Join us for the next lesson in this series—Lesson 11: “Growing Up Spiritually.” In that lesson we’ll look at moving beyond the basics. We’ll learn how to renew our mind, how to grow up spiritually, how to hear God’s voice, and much more.

LESSON 11

INTRODUCTION

In these lessons we endeavor to give you the larger pieces of the plan of God for your life (some would say the pieces of the puzzle of life, but God has already given us the picture and the instructions for life). There is a vast difference between a meal at a fast-food restaurant and a five-star establishment. Hopefully, these lessons—as spiritual meals—fall somewhere between the two. In our last lesson we started you off with a course in salvation; next was a feed-yourself course; then there was a Bible study course; finally, we ended with a course in finding a good church. Those eight sections (spiritual meals) are part of the bigger picture. In this lesson we will be adding more to the picture (your spiritual foundation) of your Christian walk. You will not arrive overnight to the place God has for you; however, if you apply the biblical principles presented here, you will fill in the gaps as you continue your growth. In Luke 2:40 the Bible tells us about Jesus that “the Child grew up healthy and strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon Him.” If Jesus Himself had to grow stronger, gain wisdom, and do what was right to cause the grace of God to come on Him, what must the rest of us do? Just like Jesus, as we grow in the things of God, we will live life successfully one day at a time.

LESSON OUTLINE

1. Renew Your Mind for Lasting Change
2. Developing in the Fruit of the Spirit
3. How to Grow Up Spiritually
4. How to Apply the Words of the Bible to Your Life
5. How to Be Led by the Spirit
6. How to Find Your Purpose in Life
7. Sharing Your Faith with Others
8. Building Lasting Relationships
9. Questions: Applying What You Have Learned
10. Summary

GROWING UP SPIRITUALLY

1 RENEW YOUR MIND FOR LASTING CHANGE

“We do not use those things to fight with that the world uses. We use the things God gives to fight with and they have power. Those things God gives to fight with destroy the strong-places of the devil. We break down every thought and proud thing that puts itself up against the wisdom of God. We take hold of every thought and make it obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:4-5). Strong-places or strongholds mean those beliefs, opinions, prejudices, etc. mentioned earlier. You don’t want them; you don’t want to think or feel like you do, but it’s like you can’t shake them off or free yourself. Satan’s strongholds are thoughts. If the devil can get you to entertain his thoughts: fear, anxiety, doubt, apprehension and so on, he obtains a doorway to control your mind. Focused study of God’s Word is how you cast down evil imaginations in your mind from the devil. You confess or say what God says about you in the Bible. For example, when the devil says you’re a two-time loser and you will never make it when you go home, you confess the Word of God for your life: “I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:13).

Beware of becoming trapped into ways of thinking, believing and acting that are contrary to others and non-productive for you. Strongholds of fear, anger, defeat, and abuse can hold you firmly captive in your mind.

“Throw off your old sinful nature and your former way of life, which is corrupted by lust and deception. Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. Put on your new nature, created to be like God—truly righteous and holy” (Ephesians 4:22-24).

How do you renew your mind for lasting change? Philippians 4:8 gives us this instruction: “And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.” Change is not easy, but it is possible. First, we must become aware of what we believe and how we think; next, we should compare that to what God wants us to think; then we can focus our thoughts on God’s thoughts.

We do this by **practicing** His thoughts as shown in Scripture and by **doing** what His Word says. In time they will become part of our inner being; then we **live** them out in our lives. This process must be repeated over and over and over for lasting change. Our transformation to becoming more like Jesus—God’s perfect example for us—is a continuous process. When your mind is renewed, your lifestyle will back it up. Right now it’s like you have this in reverse with an un-renewed mind. Take inventory of where you are in life today. What are you thinking on a daily basis? If you are defeated in life, your mind is in defeat. You *can* and *must* reverse that by renewing your mind with God’s Word.

2

DEVELOPING IN THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law” (Galatians 5:22-23).

The fruit of the Spirit is a physical manifestation of a Christian’s transformed life. There are nine biblical attributes (characteristics or qualities of the Spirit) that should be in operation in the life of a believer. God’s nature in us can be seen in our lives through the fruit His life produces in us. Our fruit either grows and develops or dies; it depends on how we grow and fellowship in Him. The nine fruits are these:

1. **Love:** “Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance” (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).
2. **Joy:** Knowing we our God’s and He loves us completely is empowering. “For the joy of the LORD is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10).
3. **Peace:** There is tranquility in our heart knowing we are in fellowship with the Father. “Therefore, since we have been justified we have been made right in God’s sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us” (Romans 5:1).
4. **Patience:** Being long-suffering is the ability to stay steadfast and immovable during trials because your faith and trust is in the Lord. “Patient endurance is what you need now, so that you will continue to do God’s will. Then you will receive all that He has promised” (Hebrews 10:36).

“For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing” (James 1:3-4).

5. **Kindness:** Being warmhearted and considerate are characteristics of the Christian life. “We have proven ourselves by our purity, our understanding, our patient, and kindness, by the Holy Spirit within us, and by our sincere love. We faithfully preach the truth. God’s power is working in us. We use the weapons of righteousness in the right hand for attack and the left hand for defense” (2 Corinthians 6:6-7).

6. **Goodness:** “So we keep on praying for you, asking our God to enable you to live a life worthy of His call. May He give you the power to accomplish all the good things your faith prompts you to do” (2 Thessalonians 1:11).

“For this light within you produces only what is good and right and truth” (Ephesians 5:9).

7. **Faithfulness:** God can count on you. In other words, you keep your commitments. You’re dependable and trustworthy. “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service” (1 Timothy 1:12).
8. **Meekness:** This means having a calm temper of mind, not easily provoked. “Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other’s faults because of your love” (Ephesians 4:2).
9. **Self-Control:** This is your ability to take hold of your emotions, desires and actions. Especially important here is controlling what we say—and how we say it. “A fool’s mouth is his ruin, and his lips are the snare of his soul” (Proverbs 18:7).

As a Christian, you should seek to develop the fruit of the Spirit in your life, which is the nature of Jesus being produced within you. When we have the fruit of the Spirit operating in our lives, we find ourselves able to get along with others and, in turn, they will be able to get along with us. We mentioned this in a previous lesson, but many people struggle with the fact that people say they are Christians, but don’t live their lives as a true Christian should. They live in the flesh while attempting, supposedly, to do things in a spiritual manner, and it’s all backwards. Consequently, their lives are the opposite of the nine gifts listed above; instead, you see questionable motives, temper tantrums, broken promises, lying, cheating, stealing, cursing, impatience and unkindness. To top it all off, there’s little to no shame for these behaviors. Suffice it to say, when you see these negative attributes in yourself or others, you know the Spirit’s help is needed. It’s difficult to love the unlovely without the Holy Spirit’s help. When you learn this, it will make life a whole lot easier for you.

3

HOW TO GROW UP SPIRITUALLY

As a new Christian there’s so much to learn. Where do you start? Successful growth is a process of learning to trust your own spirit and not just continuing to live by impulse, habit or tradition. Growing up is learning to make choices and to take responsibility for them, not blaming your mistakes on your parents, God, society or the system. Spiritual maturity is a life-long process; as long as you live you should be growing.

Spiritual growth is outlined in 2 Peter 1:3-8 where it says, “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness. Through these He has given us His very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

“For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

God wants us to grow up spiritually. In 2 Corinthians 13:9 Paul writes, “Our greatest wish and prayer is that you will become mature Christians.” The ultimate goal of spiritual growth is to become like Jesus. That has always been God’s plan for mankind, “For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son” (Romans 8:29). Here are some opportunities for you to grow with us in Christ-likeness.

Growing up spiritually is similar to growing up naturally. A baby must have things done for them; they cry when there’s a problem, and they’re easily spoiled. As they grow and become older children, they usually talk a lot; they have short attention spans; they are usually selfish and don’t want to share with others.

Baby Christians sometimes display these same characteristics too: they are talkative when they should be listening; they are sometimes labeled “know it alls” by others; they are easily offended, often lack discipline, are hit and miss with church attendance and Bible reading, and they are up and down in their emotions. Growing up spiritually means getting past these and other natural hindrances. It also means growing in the things of God and becoming a *doer of God’s Word*.

So, growing up spiritually means

- (1) growing in the knowledge and understanding of God’s Word;
- (2) being disciplined and staying committed to the things of God;
- (3) practicing self-control in your life;
- (4) staying steadfast in your commitment to God;
- (5) eliminating sin from our lives;
- (6) walking in love and being kind toward others.

4

HOW TO APPLY THE WORDS OF THE BIBLE TO YOUR LIFE

We thank God for His Word and the blessed opportunity to grow in it. So far we’ve learned the importance of renewing our minds. Now we want to put into operation what we’ve learned because there’s no benefit in learning it if we don’t apply this life-changing knowledge to our everyday lives and relationships. So our next question is how do we apply God’s Word to our lives?

“Commit yourself to instruction; listen carefully to works of knowledge” (Proverbs, 23:12).

To give of yourself means you do something; some action is taken on your part. You are taking the time on purpose to apply what you are learning to your life on a daily basis. In Hosea 4:6 it says, “My people are being destroyed because they don’t know Me. Since you priests refuse to know me, I refuse to recognize you as My priests. Since you have forgotten the laws of your God, I will forget to bless your children.” As you can see we cannot afford to ignore God’s Word and wander through life doing our own thing. Doing so hurts us and can destroy not only our life, but the lives of others. So how do we apply God’s Word to our lives? Colossians 3:16 tells us what to do: “Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom He gives.”

You open your heart to receive it. We talked about how we do this in our last lesson. We read it, study it, pray it, mediate on it, and confess it (“it” being God’s Word, of course). As we apply the Word like this, it’s like a mirror for our lives. When we look in the Word, it reflects back to us a picture of what we look like in Christ (see James 1:23-24). If we sincerely want to grow, the Holy Spirit will show us where we are and what needs changing. We in turn follow His instructions through reading, prayer, meditation and exercising faith in the Word. As a result, our lives will change as God works through us. No, it’s not instantaneous, but nevertheless change does occur when we stay close to Him. This takes us to another important aspect of Christian growth. That’s to be a doer of the Word. James 1:22-25 says it perfectly. He writes, “But don’t just listen to God’s Word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. For if you listen to the Word and don’t obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don’t forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it.”

The Bible is our guide, and it has many wonderful promises like 2 Peter 1:4. Still, if we don’t know what they are or how to access and use them to bring the blessings into our lives we will continually live defeated lives. So if you want to become a good husband, wife or parent, then search out Bible passages dealing with “husband,” “wife” or “parent” and study those Scriptures. Take time with them, write them down, and receive God’s wisdom in how to be the spouse or parent you know you *can* and *should* be. This is how our lives are transformed by the power of God’s Word.

HOW TO BE LED BY THE SPIRIT

How can I be led by the Spirit of God? How can I hear His voice? Will He really talk to me? How can I stop struggling in life? If you asked these questions, you are like many other Christians who have sought answers to these same questions. God gives us the answers to these and many similar questions. “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God,” Romans 8:14 tells us. Better than anyone else, God knows we need wisdom and direction in our lives to be successful and make good decisions. Jeremiah 10:23 puts it this way: “O Lord, I know that a man’s way is not known by himself. It is not in man to lead his own steps.” Proverbs 4:11-11 says, “I will teach you wisdom’s ways and lead you in straight paths. When you walk, you won’t be held back; when you run, you won’t stumble.” And then there are the words of the apostle John: “When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on His own but will tell you what He has heard. He will tell you about the future” (John 16:13).

The Holy Spirit will guide you. Isn’t that great! You don’t have to be in the dark concerning your future. The Holy Spirit will lead you based on what is yet to come. Let’s look once again at Romans 8:14: “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.” How does the Spirit of God lead us? It is one thing to say the Holy Spirit leads us; it is another thing to know *how* the Spirit leads. The following verses tell us how: “So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God’s Spirit when He adopted you as His own children. Now we call Him, ‘Abba, Father.’ For His Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God’s children” (Romans 8:15-16).

Notice that the Spirit Himself testifies (which means He bears witness to, or verifies) with our spirit. The Holy Spirit speaks to our spirit. Our spirit then echoes the voice of the Spirit. In other words, the Holy Spirit uses our own spirit to lead and guide us. Proverbs 20:27 confirms this: “The Lord’s light penetrates the human spirit, exposing every hidden motive.” The Holy Spirit communicates to us *wisdom, understanding* (discernment), and *counsel* in our decision making. The question is are you listening to Him? The Holy Spirit spoke to your heart about receiving Jesus as your Lord and Savior. You were prompted by the Holy Spirit toward faith; you had the choice to receive Jesus or reject Jesus and by receiving Him you made the correct choice. Think back to your decision and remember what that was like. We have the mind of Christ, and that means we have His thoughts, and as we grow in God’s Word and learn more about Him we will hear Him more clearly when He’s speaking to us through the Scriptures. “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

The Spirit of God is the Spirit of love; as such the voice of God is the sound of love. It is our hope that our actions will be motivated by love as we do the will of God and become a blessing to our fellowman. It is putting God and others first. God’s voice—His Holy Spirit—will always lead us in the direction of love. Having God’s love, joy and peace in your heart is a sign you are hearing and obeying the voice of God. Isaiah tells us, “For you will go out with joy, and be led forth with peace” (Isaiah 55:12).

The Holy Spirit reminds us of the truths in God’s Word, on our behalf. That’s why Bible reading and consistent study are vitally important. For instance, when you need direction from God on a decision in your life, the Spirit will bring one or more Scriptures to your recall. The Scriptures inform the new man or woman we are becoming through God’s grace in our lives. The Holy Spirit bears witness with our spirit, according to Romans 8:16. A passage from the book of Acts may give us a clue as to how He works: “Now when much time had been spent, and sailing was now dangerous because the Fast was already over, Paul advised them, saying, “Men, I **perceive** that this voyage will end with disaster and much loss, not only of the cargo and ship, but also our lives” (Acts 27:9-10).

Notice the words “I perceive” in the above passage. No one told Paul of the coming danger, but he *perceived* (recognized, saw or identified) it in his spirit. The Holy Spirit warned him through his human spirit, and because he was sensitive to the Holy Spirit he took note of it. That’s an example of how we are to receive directions in our spirit. God assures us we can know His voice, “When the shepherd walks ahead of them, they follow him because they know his voice” (John 10:4).

The Holy Spirit is talking, and we must listen and take note of what He is saying to us. Prayer, of course, is an important part of our relationship with God. We can learn more about prayer through our pastor's teaching, through radio and television ministries, through books and devotionals. You may be talking to a friend or family member and they mention prayer. This is an excellent opportunity to share your thoughts and get some feedback on the subject. Is the Holy Spirit trying to help you here? It could be. Here's an example: you feel you should call a friend or family member, but you continue doing what you were doing and ignore it. Later, that person comes cross your mind again, and again, you dismiss it, saying you'll call them later. Is it the Holy Spirit? Do you sometimes have an urgency in your heart to pray for someone? Learn to stop and take note when this happens in your life.

6 FINDING GOD'S PURPOSE FOR YOUR LIFE

What is my purpose? Why am I here? Why is it so hard knowing what I am supposed to do with my life? Is there greatness inside me? People wrestle with these types of questions every day. The good news is you can know, and we will tell you how, backed by Scripture. You truly can know God's plan for your life.

The word purpose means the original intent or plan for which something exists or for which it has been done or made. *Purpose* is a *motivator*. It gives you hope and a sense of direction for your life. It gives an answer to that all-important *why?* in life. Know this: you are well on your way to your purpose because you have taken the most important steps. You understand and believe in the salvation God offers the world through His Son Jesus Christ. You're learning and growing in the things of God. Your ultimate purpose is to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ—to know and be like Him so you can bear fruit for His kingdom.

God has a divine plan for your life, and He wants you living in it. He told the prophet Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5) and "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart. I will be found by you,' declares the LORD" (Jeremiah 29:11-14).

God has you on His mind, and He has wonderful plans for your future. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says, "Yet God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end." Regardless of your past, God is trying to get you on course and following His plan for you. He created you to be a conqueror in Him, but up to this point you have fought to maintain control of your life. Sad to say, but it may be in a mess right now. Still, God can turn it around. Are you interested?

God not only wants to transform you, He wants you to bear the image of His Holy Son Jesus. "For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things He planned for us long ago" (Ephesians 2:10). God has given you gifts, talents and abilities to serve Him and the world around you. What do you think your particular talent(s), abilities and gifts might be?

What are some things you like doing? Singing? Sports? Working with children? Cooking? Weightlifting? Tending to animals? Music? Writing? Working with your hands? Gardening? Painting? Driving? Art? Teaching? Reading? Helping others? Nursing sick people back to health? Construction? Public speaking? Swimming? Flying? Hiking? Leading others to Christ?

What have you always longed to do? Is there one thing that tugs at your heart in an irresistible sort of way? Is there something you've always longed to do, but you've pushed it out of your mind? Even so, do you find it coming back, urging you to action? Maybe you did it as a child or acted it out when you were younger. Name it _____, **because knowing what it is will help reveal your purpose.**

Only you can answer these questions for yourself. How do you feel inside as you write the answers down? What burning desire comes to mind? Don't bog yourself down with doubts that it's too late or it's impossible because *nothing is impossible with God*, especially if He gave you the desire and placed His purpose inside of you.

To better understand what God has placed inside you and wants you to do, ask **Him through prayer** to reveal it to you; then **listen to the Holy Spirit** to hear what He says, and **write it down** (see Habakkuk 2:2). After you have sincerely gone before the Lord in prayer, keep your heart and actions right toward others, operating in the fruit of the Spirit, and God will open His plan for your life.

What to do after you've clearly defined your purpose? Once you know your God-given purpose, take a look at your gifts, talents and abilities. What can you do to more effectively develop your gift(s) in order to maximize your work? Do you need formal training and education? If so, then pursue it with all your might! (See Ecclesiastes 9:10.) Continue praying and seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Ask God for His favor and blessings upon your life. To state the obvious here, don't take your gifts, talents and abilities with you to the grave! Take action and fulfill His purpose for your life! Give your all unto the Lord. He has entrusted you with the gift(s) He has given you. He wants you to succeed.

7 SHARING YOUR FAITH WITH OTHERS

Sharing your faith means you take time to speak to others about Jesus Christ. Tell them what He means to you, and how knowing Him has changed your life. You must take the time to understand what salvation is and how to lead others to Christ to be effective in witnessing. Relaying the truths of the Gospel isn't about arguing with others or trying to push your faith off on them. It's about genuine love and concern for another human being's eternal welfare. Most importantly, allow your lifestyle to be a powerful witness to the value of knowing Jesus as your Lord and Savior.

Sometimes you will find it's hard to share your faith with friends and family because they only remember the *old you*. Therefore, with these folks simply show your love and live your faith out before them. Many of you will go back into home settings where family members will not want to hear or have anything to do with Christianity. Please don't be offended by this attitude, and don't allow it to move you off your stand for Christ. This is actually a good time in your life to exercise love and patience and exhibit the fruits of the Spirit. Continue walking in love and growing in your faith-walk with Jesus. You will especially need to continue in prayer, finding Scriptures to stand on and confessing the Word of God for their salvation. Never give up on your loved ones.

On the other hand, you will find others who are open to hearing about Christ. When you do, simply share your faith with them. Each time you do it will become easier. You don't have to be a great Bible scholar or pastor to share your faith. There are people for whom you will be the best witness possible. You will reach many people your pastor can't reach, so freely share Jesus with others.

8 BUILDING LASTING RELATIONSHIPS

There are many different types of relationships. The ones we will address here are mainly those of family and close friends. Many of you may have poor associations with your family, particularly your parents, spouse and children. A good relationship is one that is motivated by love, and it should help the other person draw closer to Jesus in the process.

You have learned the importance of walking in love and forgiveness, but your loved ones may not have gotten to that point in their lives. When and where necessary, ask others for their forgiveness, especially where you have wronged them. Apply 1 Peter 4:8 to your life and in your relationships: "And above all things have fervent love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins." Work hard at getting rid of selfishness, pride and strife in your life, remembering that this is a lifelong spiritual practice. When dealing with offenses against you, consider Matthew 18:15-17. Be patient in these sometimes difficult human interactions, and always correct another in love. Strive to be a peacemaker for this is a blessed approach toward life in general (see Matthew 5:9).

Parents, show your children love and be honest with them. Apologize to them for the pain you caused. Many of your children have been deeply affected by your incarceration or previous bad behavior. These things have a devastating effect on children. They feel hurt, abandoned, unloved, guilty and shamed due to the record of your past. Many of them are acting out in school because of your absence. They are learning to disrespect the law. Some of them may have even been present when you were arrested, so in their minds they feel you were treated unfairly, and they are angry.

Their acting out is rebellion against circumstances they don't fully understand. Listed below are some alarming statistics on children of prisoners from Prison Fellowship:

Statistics on Children of Prisoners

- There are 2.7 million children of prisoners.
- Overall, 7.3 million children have a parent under some form of correctional supervision.
- Twenty-two percent of children with a parent in prison are under five years of age; the majority of children are under ten; the average age is eight.
- One in five children is present at their mother's arrest.
- Children of prisoners are six times more likely to go to prison than their peers; they are seven times more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system.

I want to highlight the last statistics given above. They say children of prisoners are six times more likely to go to prison than their peers and they are seven times more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system. You can halt future imprisonment in your life—and the lives of your children—by following some basic instructions. As a parent you have a responsibility to God to provide for your children spiritually, physically and mentally. Proverbs 22:6 says, "Direct your children onto the right path, and when they are older, they will not leave it." Directing or training your children, however, is more than taking them to church. It's living and speaking Christian principles daily. It's admitting your shortcomings and treating them with respect—just the same way you would like to be treated. This is especially helpful with older children.

Will your child become another statistic? You can help change the course of his or her life. If you don't know how to be a good parent, consider taking some parenting classes. You can also access valuable resources from community outlets, and check out support groups in your area or at a local church. This will require effort on your part, so tell your children you are determined to make it right. Put in quality time with them. Teach your children godly principles for living and help change the course of their lives, so they will not follow the same path as you and become a statistic. Teach them to be law-abiding citizens and to have a healthy respect for the law. Make sure they attend school; help them with homework; go with them, when possible, on one of their field trips; attend PTO/PTA meetings; join them in after-school games and activities.

Connect with your children on as many levels as you can. Practice healthy communication with them by talking to them, listening to them, and telling them you love them. Take them to church, teach them the Bible, and pray for them. Live a godly life before them and show them good examples. Keep them safe and provide a safe environment for them. The benefits from doing this are enormous—for them and for you.

9

QUESTIONS - APPLYING WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

1. **HOW WE THINK** leads to how we **FEEL** and _____.
2. Romans 12:2 says, for lasting change we must _____ our minds with the Word of God.
3. Can you locate the nine fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23?
_____ is not easily angered
_____ God can count on you
_____ tranquility in our heart
_____ the ability to stay steadfast, immovable during trials
_____ crucified

- _____ you know how to control your actions.
- _____ Jesus Christ
- _____ a calm temper of mind
- _____ fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness
- _____ be glad
- _____ warm-hearted and considerate, humane and sympathetic

4. Self-control is the ability to manage your emotions, desires or actions.
 True False

5. Growing up spiritually means growing in the knowledge and understanding of God's Word.
 True False

6. Colossians 3:16 says we apply the Word of God in our lives by allowing the Word of Christ to _____
 _____.

7. The Holy Spirit communicates to us _____, _____ and counsel in our decision making.

8. Romans 8:14 says, "Those who are led by the Spirit of God are _____ of God."

9. Don't take your gifts, talents and abilities to the grave. What does this statement mean?

10. What should you do when others are not open to hearing about Jesus or Christianity?

11. Children of prisoners are ____ times more likely to go to prison than their peers.

10

SUMMARY

To be grown up spiritually is the place we all want to be, but as we have seen, it is a process. We've listed many of the steps necessary to grow up as well as the most important areas to grow in. The Bible is a wonderful guide for the new and more mature Christian because it offers divine guidance on living a successful, Christ-centered life. Still, sometimes reading and studying Scripture can seem daunting because you see all the things you so desperately need in your life and don't have. Don't be discouraged though. If you follow the plan outlined in this and previous lessons, you will have a solid, workable strategy for overcoming those things that derailed you before.

Keep in mind these lessons only serve as a guide. They do not include everything you will need to know. What they do is set a foundation for your growth right now and in the future. The most important thing is to remember that Jesus is first and foremost in your life.

Your life in God requires your continual effort to grow in biblical knowledge and that you put into practice the truths you learn in Scripture. Lean on the Holy Spirit in times of trouble and difficulty and search the Word of God for answers to your problems. Refer back to these studies as you move forward. There is one more lesson in this series Lesson 12 entitled, "Possessing and Keeping Your Freedom."

LESSON 12

WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT

*Dear student: in reflecting on life it sometimes seems unfair. I say this because in most instances we learn life as we live it. We've not had the luxury to sit in Life Class 101. It would be nice if every child was nurtured and given the same strong foundation from his or her beginning, but that's not the case and even if it were it would not guarantee our success. In our study of the Scriptures we've learned that God intended each person to start out correctly, but because of sin—and the sin nature man was born into—we **must fight the good fight of faith to get to God's ultimate and best for us, regardless of our background.***

We want to encourage you as you plan your future and move ahead in life. We believe you will do very well because we believe you will build upon your foundation here, persisting through prayer and effort to do and become all that God has for you. You have the edge; you are acquiring knowledge—both spiritual and natural—and you need them both to succeed.

In this final lesson we will look at areas where people who are released from prison have succeeded and failed. We want you to learn from their situations so you can have more successes in your life. We have also highlighted significant areas that require your attention as you grow into the Christ-centered man or woman you were meant to be.

POSSESSING AND KEEPING YOUR FREEDOM

GOING HOME

Many of those who are incarcerated go home without a home plan, which can be a big problem. For those exiting prison, a home plan significantly helps in making this transition. In fact, many more prisons are working to help their residents as they prepare to leave the institution. It's important you have guidance and support. Life on the outside is an adjustment. Things have changed since you were home, and they are changing constantly. So it's imperative to think about things like where you will live, where you can find the information for the services you will need, and will your family be there to offer any support. Some will be there for you; others will not or won't be able to. Will you have a mentor? What about your parole and reporting to a parole officer? You will need important documents too (birth certificate, Social Security card, State ID or drivers' license). You should have a social worker assigned to you at the institution. Be sure to ask them these questions. Where will you work? Do you have a resume? Do you know how to create one? Don't forget the classes you took and the jobs you worked while incarcerated can be included in your resume. Some of you will have to develop your own home plan; these questions will help you as you develop it.

Be sure to attend classes that are offered at the institution. Among these are getting your GED, Pathway to Change, Life Skills, parenting classes (even if you don't have children), and job-readiness classes. Each institution is different. Some require you take these classes; others leave it up to you; some may not offer them at all. This will be easier for some of you than others, but you can make it. Remember to be patient, pray to God for help, and seek assistance, when necessary. Asking for help can prove difficult for many and lead them to fail. What happens is they hit a road block, become discouraged, and quit. But not you; this won't happen with you.

We believe you will continue to move ahead in your pursuit and ask for the help you need. And where can you go for help? You can get several of your questions answered while you are incarcerated. After you are released, there are many churches that can help or direct you to the proper agencies for assistance. Some agencies include the Division of Family Services, the Urban League, the Salvation Army, and the Division of Employment Security.

In many cities the latter agency is now known as a Career Center. Don't forget that many of the larger agencies may not be available to you in rural communities, so use what's available wherever you're located.

EX-OFFENDER – HANDLING STEREOTYPING

You've paid your debt to society. Sometimes, however, society will not let you forget your past. That's because you've been given a label like "ex-offender," "ex-con," "felon," or something similar. Stereotyping is a fact of life, and we all pretty much do it to some degree or another. It's an oversimplified, often biased, way to look at groups of people, which tends to lump them all together, without taking into account the individuals who are in the group.

Now that you are a new Christian, the Bible says, "Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a **new creature**: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become **new**" (2 Corinthians 5:17). The Bible speaks truth. You are a new person, but society doesn't know it yet. It's your responsibility now to show the world at large the man or woman you're becoming in Christ, by your new lifestyle. Remember your study in renewing the mind? This is one of the places you must constantly renew your mind and agree with God.

1. How much of your incarceration will you hold onto?

You have spent time in confinement inside an institution where everything around you represents captivity—from the clothes you wear to where you live to the food you eat. You are not allowed to make any decisions; they are made for you. A certain amount of incarceration becomes a part of you, and it takes a steady, diligent effort on your part to resist the negative aspects of being in prison. It's not easy because it's in your thoughts: defeat, discouragement, fear of failure. Mulling these negative things over can lower your self-esteem—as well as your resistance to negative impulses. Watch out.

2. Letting go of the past

It's true you made a mistake, or maybe you didn't. Either way, you're paying for it. Some things are self-inflicted; others come as a result of what someone else did. To succeed in life we must all learn to let go of the bad, the negative, and the *stinking thinking*, and embrace the new. You are a new creature in Jesus Christ. You have asked God for His forgiveness, and the Bible says He forgives, removing our sins from us as far as the east from the west (see Psalm 103:12). Therefore, in God's eyes your sin is completely gone. It's now up to you to let your past go and forgive yourself. Move on, because you have a good future ahead. It's time for you to take your life back. With God's help, you can make it count for something truly good.

WHY EX-OFFENDERS FAIL

The biggest hurdles for ex-offenders are obtaining employment and housing. Other difficult areas include fear of failure, not believing in themselves, lack of confidence in their abilities, low self-esteem, not being persistent when it counts, and inadequately selling their skills to employers. Never lie about your incarceration if you are asked. However, you don't have to voluntarily disclose this unless you are asked, or if the question appears on an application; then you **MUST** disclose it. An excellent selling point is letting prospective employers know you have been busy taking available classes. If they do know about your incarceration, be sure to tell them about the Employer Opportunity Tax Credit that is available to employers who hire ex-offenders. Today more employers are hiring ex-offenders, and that is very good for you. Some jobs will be off limits to you depending on your offense, and you will know what they are. In cases such as this, you will have to make adjustments and shift into other areas.

If times get tough on the outside, don't fall into the trap of trying to make **fast money** by selling drugs, gambling, stealing, selling your body and/or your children's bodies, etc. It will never work. Prisons are full of people who tried that.

Don't fall victim to these traps again. You simply must resist. It'd be better to work two minimum wage jobs (see Psalm 1:3) than fall prey to so-called **easy money** like that. Will you face discrimination? Many of you will. It's a fact of life, so face it. Some employers will look at your applications and put them in the trash can. You may very well be prejudged on the fact that you spent time in prison. Is that discouraging? Absolutely, but it should not stop you. *It can't stop you.* You must learn that there is a job out there with your name on it, and what you need is the Holy Spirit leading you to it, and He will if you ask Him. So ask God for His favor and ask the Holy Spirit to help you.

We talk to hundreds of men and women in and out of prisons. It is true that many don't make it after incarceration, and they soon find themselves back inside. What we've seen consistently in the lives of those who do succeed is that they usually are Christians. These are the individuals who sincerely want to change their lives and do what it takes to succeed. They make the tough changes that are necessary, and yes, it's hard for them, but most of the time *they succeed and remain free*. They learn how to handle pressure, anger and rejection. They know how to move ahead under mounting opposition. They ask lots of questions, and they never accept no as the final answer, in any situation. They find a way and they find the answers they need. Some of these individuals have had to cut ties with old friends and even with family members because they know for them to succeed this step is necessary. One life—*your life*—can make a difference. You can overcome your past. Rahab the harlot did (see Joshua 2-6).

WHAT IT MEANS TO...

be a good person

The very first step toward being a good person is living your life according to the principles outlined in the Bible. It is treating others the way you want to be treated. It is refusing to take shortcuts in life, and trying to get one over on others. It is being honest, a person of your word. It's living with dignity, integrity and respect. It's having a good character, and being known as a person who can be trusted.

be a good spouse

Love your spouse, and don't take them for granted. Build them up and help them. Put them first, and don't be selfish. Husband, provide for your wife. Wives don't nag your husbands. Our happiness is greatly affected by how successful we are in our marriage relationships. Our prayers can be hindered by how we treat our spouse (see 1 Peter 3:7). Ask your spouse for forgiveness for not being there (your incarceration). Grow in God's Word together, pray together. If you don't have a spouse, but earnestly want to be married, ask God for that perfect mate. Marriage is God's idea.

be a good parent

Good parents love their children. They provide for their spiritual, physical and emotional needs. They follow these instructions: "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it" (Proverbs 22:6). Ask your children to forgive you for being away from them. Communicate with them by talking to them, listening to them, and telling them you love them—often. Take them to church; teach them the Bible, and pray for them. Live a godly life before them and show them good examples. Keep them safe and provide a safe environment for them. Be their protector and the one they can lean on.

be a good student

Many of you will want to, and should, go back to school to get a GED. Some will go on to get a college degree or master a skill or trade. We commend you on your decision and encourage you in your efforts. By now you should have some idea of God's plan for your life. If you are still not sure, there are tests that will help guide you. A good counselor can help you locate your gifts, talents and abilities. Be as clear as you can be in your heart about the direction you are taking. Have clearly understood goals—both for the long and short term. Write them down. Refer to them often. Remember to reward yourself on small accomplishments. Always keep your goals where you can see them.

Along the way, be sure to stay positive, and practice good behavior and good study habits. When problems arise, and they will, don't give up and quit. Instead, pray, talk to your mentor, a friend, your pastor, or take a walk and get a fresh perspective on what is happening and how you can change it.

be a good citizen

What is a citizen? Responsible citizenship means understanding we have been given certain rights and privileges from our government. Good citizens know they have a responsibility to their community, the environment, and the law. As a Christian, to be a good citizen also means you represent Jesus Christ in all your actions. You cannot live your life just any old way, doing things that are sinful and bringing shame to Him. Pray for your country, abide by the laws of the land, and treat people according to biblical principles. It means we do the right thing, even when no one is looking or when it seems difficult. For those of you who can exercise your right to vote, be sure to do it.

be a good neighbor

Love your neighbor. Treat your neighbor with respect. Be courteous and kind, and help them whenever possible. Every situation is different, but if you have an upright relationship, and they appear good and honest, then offer your assistance when it's needed. If there is a problem with your neighbors, take it through the proper channels for a positive solution. For example, if you live in an apartment complex and a problem arises, go to your landlord. If there is no resolution, then go to the police for assistance.

be a good employee

Do you want to be a good employee and enjoy job security? It is possible even after incarceration. As with the preceding examples, seek God and His wisdom to guide your occupational efforts. Pray about your involvement in the workplace and seek to do the best job possible.

KEY ELEMENTS TO YOUR SUCCESS INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING ITEMS TO REMEMBER:

1. Dress appropriately for the job.
2. You are always on time for work.
3. You follow company rules and policies.
4. You take responsibility for your mistakes.
5. You are dependable.
6. You are considerate of others.
7. You work to develop good speaking and listening skills.
8. You take extra on-the-job training courses offered to you.
9. You work well with your co-workers.
10. You cooperate with your supervisor.
11. You always give your best to the job.
12. You use your time at work to best advantage.
13. You get the job done.
14. You work well without supervision.
15. You never neglect your responsibilities.

Being a good employee is an art that is learned. A good employee is the heart and soul of a business, and a savvy employer will seek out the best applicant for his or her company. Give your employer your very best, and you will be rewarded by him and God. Be honest and don't steal from your employer.

Another key to your success in the workplace is developing your "soft skills." And what are soft skills? Soft skills are essentially people skills: the non-technical, intangible, personality-specific skills that determine your strengths as a person.

Are you an agreeable person? Are you conscientious (hard working and reliable)? Do you communicate effectively? Do you solve problems efficiently? These are the types of questions aimed at uncovering the strength of your soft skills.

Employers value soft skills because they consider them to be an excellent indicator of job performance, ranking them as valuable in some instances as traditional job qualifications or “hard skills.” They believe if you come to the job with good soft skills—things they can’t really teach—they can always school you on how to perform the job.

“Hard skills,” on the other hand, are more along the lines of what might appear on your resume: your education, experience and the level of expertise you possess.

Let’s look again at the soft-skill side of things. These are those character attributes you possess outside of the workplace. To start with, here’s a couple of the most important soft skills you want to have in your *employee toolkit*.

1. Have a “Winning” Attitude—Be a Positive, Can-Do-It Person.

2. Be a Team Player—Work Well and Get Along with People.

Here are some examples of soft skills you should work on and include in your resume. The better you are at these, the better job you will acquire and keep.

- Problem solving: be good at solving personal problems as well as those on the job.
- Effective communication: both verbally and with body language; verbal is better.
- Team player skills: learn to work cooperatively with other people on the job.
- Conflict management: develop coping strategies for dealing with difficult people and situations.
- Interpersonal skills: understand how to work well with others who are like and not like you.
- Planning and organization: exhibit an ability to plan and organize.
- Leadership and motivational skills: develop good leadership qualities, motivate yourself, and then you are ready to take them to the workplace.

QUESTIONS: APPLYING WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

Your assignment in this lesson is to do the following:

1. Write a brief summary of what you have learned from this lesson and how you will apply the principles to your life.
2. Write out a “life plan” for yourself, including things like where you will live, work, church, school, and how you will access the resources you need for success.
3. Set one-, three- and five-year goals for your future; make these short- and long-term goals.
4. Write down the soft skills from the lesson, listing those you need to develop or improve.
5. Design a current resume and in it include your soft skills, classes you have taken, and your work experience while incarcerated.

TESTIMONIES

We stated earlier that we’ve been blessed to see many men and women come out of prison and lead happy, productive and successful lives. Many have returned home to supportive families. You can learn from the successes and failures of others. We are hopeful and prayerful that you will make a quality decision to succeed in your life. The individuals below, and many just like them, are succeeding and doing well.

Marty Bross

Marty is 47 years old and absolutely loves Jesus. He was brought to faith in Jesus Christ in prison when he was 24. He says he knows who he is in Christ now. "God has a plan for my life that is continually unfolding. God blessed me with a godly wife, two younger daughters, and two adult step-daughters. I live in a nice home, attend a wonderful church where my pastor has helped me most of my Christian life, since 1984." He says, "I am planted there. I volunteer a lot in my church mission program in the area of 'disaster relief.' I own my own business in HVAC.

I am licensed in the St. Louis metro area. I don't do any advertising. Jesus is credited for the success of my business. I receive all my customers through referrals. My most rewarding experience now is having my customers say 'I Trust You.'

"I own a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, which I use in ministry for the Lord. I ride today to share my testimony and faith with others. I am a member of the 'Christian Crusaders.' I am in training for my license to be an ordained minister. We are men who are called to reach a specific culture: the last Vikings, the last Frontiersmen, the last Mountain men, the last Pirates, and the last of the Wild West Outlaws today; they are known as Bikers.

"God has also placed in my heart another outreach; the outcast in prison. I share my faith in God as a volunteer in prison. I'm in my 20th year. It actually is not about me and my accomplishments. It really is about what God will do through your obedience and faithfulness to Him. I have learned over the years to bury my past. I led a self-inflicted, destructive lifestyle of alcohol, drugs and wild parties. I was a two-time convicted felon. I was a thief, a burglar. I robbed—of all places—a church. Back then I used my motorcycle to carry drugs and alcohol. I even carried a .45 caliber Colt lightweight automatic pistol, but my motorcycle now packs Bibles. I spent time in jail, served time in Missouri prisons. I had parole violations, but thanks to God, Jesus called me out of my darkness. I was born again [John 3:3, 5]. Jesus renewed my mind, erased my sin, and best of all helped me forgive myself. I am and remain free!"

Rev. Kelly Roades

Kelly got himself tangled in drugs, sex, alcohol and motorcycles. He always found himself in trouble with the law. He says, "All my relationships were like tornadoes—destructive." No one trusted him. He says he cried himself to sleep many nights; he went to rehab so many times he lost count. He was always in and out of jail or prison, time and time again.

People were faithful to share the love of Jesus Christ with Kelly and not judge him. God worked with Kelly throughout his whole life, trying to get him into His plan for Kelly, but drugs had such a strong hold on his life it was hard for him naturally to break free. But one day God delivered Kelly from drugs, and death. He saved Kelly, filled him with the Holy Spirit, and restored his marriage.

Kelly learned how to grow in his faith, trust God, and his life changed forever. Kelly loves God, faithfully attends church, and is an ordained minister of the Gospel. Kelly has written a book about his life, his struggles, and how he overcame. I believe it will bless your life; the title is *Drugs, Death and Deliverance: an Autobiography*.

Tim Kepler

"Not in my worst nightmare did I ever dream I would be sharing a 10-foot by 10-foot cell in Folsom State Prison with a man convicted of murder. But there I was behind bars surrounded by nearly 4,000 inmates, some of whom had committed unspeakable crimes. My story is not unique. In fact, it is unfortunately all too common in the world today. However, the ending is full of hope, and hope is in reality more important than any amount of money or drugs."

Tim like so many others became entrapped in drugs. He said, "I was possessed, and I was homeless! No more fast cars, fast women, and life in the fast lane. I pawned or sold everything expensive that I owned. I wandered the streets of Riverside, California, for months looking for my next fix and sleeping in cockroach-infested abandoned buildings or in crack houses. You would think I would have come to my senses, but I didn't. Nothing mattered but getting high."

Tim said something else that is interesting; he said he desperately wanted to quit, but couldn't.

"Yet God met me right where I was at. He exposed me because He loved me. From the moment his pastor prayed, 'Lord, deliver this brother from drugs!' The urge for drugs was completely gone! A miracle? Beyond question—I have been completely free of drugs now for 12 years. The healing power of Jesus Christ changed my life!"

Freedom Is Hard Work

"And as for me, I worked at temporary jobs, from unloading furniture to doing construction. It was a struggle. Nothing came easy. I managed to get hired installing pipeline, where the hours were long and the work was very hard.

But I never once had the desire to go back to the easy drug money of the past. In my spare time, I composed, sang and played music on my wife's piano. I began singing for free and giving my testimony at churches in the area on evenings and weekends. I finally scraped the money together and bought a keyboard. I was in for a big shock: all the technology was new and everything was computerized. Having never touched a computer before, I started from scratch, reading the manuals, and paying for private tutoring. At the same time, by faith, I started my own home-improvement business, beginning at the bottom, from changing light bulbs to tenant clean-up. I bought cassette tapes and studied for the contractor's test. God blessed my businesses. My painting business grew from simply painting over graffiti until I was working on million-dollar homes. While continuing to sing, I invested every spare dollar in recording equipment. I was determined to have my own studio, sing and produce my own CD."

Today and Forever

"Today, my wife and I own a new home and have two beautiful, intelligent sons who love the Lord. God has also allowed me to do that which I believe He always wanted me to do: sing for His glory. I own my own record company and produce other Christian groups. I've been able to tour the United States and even go overseas, ministering both in churches and prisons. Why do I tell you this? Do I deserve some kind of praise? I was and am completely lost without Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord. He gave me my life back and set me free. I'm writing my story for you because I know without a doubt that you too can experience the healing and cleansing of Jesus Christ."

We highlighted three testimonies, but we have letters from hundreds of persons like these listed here, who are excelling in their walk with Christ and their life of freedom. We thank God for them and their victories. We thank God for His steadfast love and kindness to us and for giving us such an awesome responsibility to share His Gospel with men and women in prisons. Matthew 25:35-40 is a reality for us. We are walking in His plan and purpose for our lives. We are sharing His Gospel—the Good News—with others, and He is setting the captives free!

RESOURCES

For a variety of ministry resources and booklets—many of which are FREE—please contact Lutheran Hour Ministries.

Lutheran Hour Ministries
www.lhm.org
1-800-876-9880
660 Mason Ridge Center Drive
St. Louis, MO 63141

The Journey Home by Rev. Leroy Johnson was written for all of us. Using Luke's "Parable of the Prodigal Son," Johnson takes the reader through this unforgettable story told by Jesus to a few of those who liked to frequent His impromptu monologues: tax-collectors, sinners, Pharisees and scribes.

The narrative follows a storyline of wanton, rebellion (the lost son); desperate heartache and longing for his safe return (the father); and jealous resentment over the father's warm welcome (the older brother). It's a story where each of us can fit ourselves into the cast of characters. In this parable Jesus does more than turn the mirror on us, showing us our selfishness and self-absorbed natures (the brothers); rather, he paints a moving portrait of the father—our Father—who "pulls out all the stops" to celebrate his lost son's return.

The Journey Home is a 12-lesson Bible study packed full of insight on the nature of God's love for us and how we can responsibly live our lives as Christ-followers. Outlines chart the direction of each lesson and questions reinforce the material covered. Along the way, Scripture verses highlight and drive home the biblical points made, adding clarity to the discussion.

Just like the father in Jesus' parable, our Heavenly Father seeks our safe return from those places we have gone without Him. *The Journey Home*—there's hope for all of us in the shelter of God's grace.



Rev. Leroy Johnson answered God's call to the Gospel ministry over 38 years ago. An ordained minister with The Missionary Church International, he ministers the Word of God in jails and prisons in Missouri and Illinois. An experienced Christian counselor, Johnson facilitated and taught support groups at halfway houses, ministered to the homeless, and consulted with pastors and churches on establishing successful jail and prison ministries. He is also the founder and presently heads Carriers of the Covenant Ministries. A native of St. Louis, Johnson attended St. Louis University for two years and has studied at Brooks Bible Institute and Christian Outreach School of Ministries. He is married to Carol, who ministers with him; they have one adult daughter.