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**"For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord.
"They are plans for good and not for disaster,
to give you a future and a hope."**

Jeremiah 29:11 ^(NLT)

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INTRODUCTION

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As part of the introduction to this course we feel it is important to lay a foundation for what we expect of you and what you can expect from us. We are aware that your life of incarceration already involves a lot of rules. It is our opinion that these rules are adequate on their own and us adding to such would hinder the overall experience of this course.

The lessons are not structured in a conventional manner. We will not be giving you assignments to read and then ask for true or false / multiple-choice responses. We will be asking you to write out your answers in sentence form. Our purpose for this approach is to better understand what you personally are learning from the course.

Our goal is to communicate to you in a conversational manner and for you to respond as you would if we were sitting across from each other having coffee or conversing over a meal. Learning about life is not memorizing information. The original disciples did not learn from Jesus by sitting in a classroom. They walked alongside Jesus. They observed His life and His responses to the day-to-day challenges. They endeavored to model Him. They developed a trust in Jesus that grew into a healthy friendship. They could be themselves around Him, yet they knew who He was... no ordinary man but the Son of God. Even in the midst of their friendship with Jesus, they often referred to Him as "Master."

In light of the fact that this course is biblically based, and is first and foremost intended to be about following Jesus Christ, it is our assumption that you already have somewhat of a relationship with Him. Therefore, we will be approaching our communication with you from the perspective of brothers or sisters in Christ. But, if you are not currently in a relationship with Jesus Christ, you are not disqualified. You will be the one to decide if this course is a good fit for you.

The following are some of the benefits of what we hope you will gain by participating in this Lessons for Life course.

- Develop a strong personal relationship with Jesus Christ
- Develop an understanding of what God's purposes are for your life
- Develop a plan and strategy to accomplish those purposes
- Successful preparation for reintegration into society

We only ask for two things in return, honesty and cooperation. Our ability to advise and help you can only be as effective as the information you give. Our ability to teach is only workable to the extent you are willing to be taught. Ultimately you will determine your level of success.

If you have any questions about the course or the process, feel free to ask anyone of our team. We are very excited about the possibilities God has for you. We are praying for God's best in your life.

Lessons for Life Ministry Team

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LESSON 1 PRISON IS NOT AN OPTION

Almost everything begins with a decision. Without much thought we can all come up with examples of poor decisions from our past, and more than we would like to remember. It is important to note, however, that the same basic mental process is involved in both good and bad decisions.

1. We find ourselves in a circumstance that requires a decision.
2. We gather information about the situation.
3. We evaluate our options.
4. We choose the option we determine to be the best.
5. We act on that choice and thereby make a decision.

There are a variety of things that can contribute to a poor decision.

1. We feel we need to act immediately and make a quick decision, when waiting longer to make that decision will often provide us with a better perspective.
2. We receive incomplete information.
3. We receive bad information.
4. We make a decision based on selfish motives.
5. We make a decision based on convenience.

It is true that there are some decisions that have to be made in a split second and without the luxury of contemplation. For instance, if you are driving a car and someone swerves into your lane, you must act quickly and decisively to avoid an accident.

When it comes to decisions that involve some kind of process, moving quickly is not usually the best method. Often, the best place to begin is before the circumstance is upon us. In other words, sometimes we need to have a plan for making a decision about our decision. The first thing to do is to determine if the decision is long term or short term. If it is long term, there needs to be a process. If it is short term, we can probably handle it quickly and simply.

Most of our decisions in life can be made in the moment and without a process. Things like going to bed, eating, and brushing our teeth are just a few of the dozens of decisions we make through the course of a day that need no special attention. We just decide and do. There are, however, matters such as whether we should go to college, take a job, quit a job, marry someone, or move somewhere that will affect our lives and those close to us in a significant way. In these instances it we need to use wisdom to make the right choices.

Before we get into some of these details, we thought it would be important to explain why we are starting this course with a topic as simple as making decisions. Let's face it: we have all been confronted with choices for as long as we can remember. Choosing is not something new. But a good question to ask ourselves is why some people seem to be so much better at making

good choices while others do it so poorly. One would think it has something to do with intelligence, yet some of the smartest people in the world end up in bad situations because of poor decisions. Intelligence can contribute to better decision-making, but it is not a guarantee.

There are usually two types of influences that determine our habit patterns regarding decisions.

1. External
 - Parents and other relatives who have played an important role in raising us as children
 - Teachers
 - Coaches
 - Peers
 - Religious Leaders
 - Media (Television, Movies, Internet)
2. Internal
 - Intelligence
 - Conscience
 - Convictions
 - Discipline
 - Self-centeredness
 - Self esteem

Once again, we are not going to go through all of these in detail in this course, but we encourage you to take some time and think about these influences and how they have played a role in molding your life, and in particular, how they have helped establish the pattern of how you make decisions.

After you have thought about these, the first thing to do is let go of any feelings you may have about what you have had or not had in your life to this point. For example, you may feel you were dealt a bad hand with the family or families you grew up in. But even if this is true and you've suffered that disadvantage, using it as an excuse will not help you move forward in your life. Besides, there are plenty of people who were raised by lousy parents in lousy environments who turned out to be very good people and who have lived their lives making mostly good decisions.

Something that you will need to remind yourself of is that however terrible your past has been, it is not an excuse for your future. Our philosophy in helping those who are incarcerated, or have been incarcerated, is that we do not care where you have been or what you have done. We are only interested in where you are now and where you are going. You must adopt this same philosophy for yourself or your progress will be severely hindered. You can learn from your past, but you must not dwell on it or let it continue to determine your future. You may think you are too old or that you've made too many mistakes in the past to change your future. That is a lie and you must stop believing it. God has a plan and a purpose for your life and He can work a miracle in your life just as He has in many others.

In closing, we would like to share a simple story that we hope will give you some perspective about this concept of making decisions.

Years ago, there was an eighty-year-old lady being interviewed by a journalist from a local newspaper. She had recently finished walking from New York City to Miami, Florida. The journalist asked her how a woman her age could walk such a distance.

The elderly lady looked at the journalist as if it was a silly question and said,

“It wasn’t that difficult, actually. I just got up every morning, made sure I was facing Miami, and started walking. I would walk until I got tired and then rent a motel room. I’d get up the next day and do the same thing. Then one day I arrived.”

This may seem a little oversimplified to you, but it is the right attitude for you have to get where you need to go. Just make the decision about what direction you are going to face and then start moving in that direction.

There are two decisions we would like you to consider making at this time. The first is a spiritual decision. Are you tired of living life your way? Are you ready to begin living your life with Jesus Christ as your Lord? Once you decide to follow God’s plan, then all you need to do is wake up each morning and remind yourself that you are going to follow His ways. It doesn’t matter if you stumble and flounder along the way, just keep getting up and facing Him.

The second decision is something we have found to be very practical and necessary for those in circumstances similar to your own. Make the decision every day that once you are released you are not going back to prison. You must eliminate prison as an option. There are many who have said the following shortly after they had been released:

“I’m going to try to do the right thing this time, but if it doesn’t work out, I know how to do my time in prison.”

That kind of rationalization and those kinds of thoughts must be eliminated from your thinking. Prison can no longer be an option if you really want to be successful, just as the elderly lady did not make giving up and going back to New York an option.

If you will commit to making these two decisions, we are not only hopeful that you will be successful, we can guarantee you will accomplish more than you ever dreamed possible, regardless of your past mistakes or present circumstances.

LESSON 1: QUESTIONS

Please answer the following questions to Lesson #1. If there is not enough space in the blanks, feel free to use a separate sheet of paper for your answers. Please write or print legibly.

1. Describe a situation that you faced in the past that you can look back on and see that you made a good decision.

2. Describe as best you can how you came to that decision. (What questions did you ask yourself or what was the step-by-step process you went through to come to that decision?)

3. Choose **2 External** influences (parents, relatives, teachers, coaches, peers, religious leaders, or media) that have contributed to your life in a positive way.

A. _____

B. _____

4. Describe an incident where each of these influences have helped you.

A. _____

B. _____

5. Choose **1 Internal** influence (intelligence, conscience, convictions, discipline, self-centeredness, self-esteem) that contributed to your life in a positive way.

6. Describe an incident where this influence helped you do the right thing.

7. **THIS QUESTION IS OPTIONAL. YOU DO NOT HAVE TO ANSWER IF YOU PREFER TO KEEP THESE THOUGHTS TO YOURSELF.**

What are your thoughts regarding the two decisions we asked you to make in this lesson?
(2 Decisions: 1. Prison is not an option. 2. Tired of living life my way, I choose to follow Jesus Christ and live my life His way.)



LESSON 2

DECIDING TO LIKE PEOPLE

In the last lesson we talked extensively about decisions, and at the end of the lesson we emphasized the importance of making the following:

1. Deciding to follow God’s plan—living your life with Jesus Christ as your Lord.
2. Deciding to never go back to prison—not even considering it as an option.

In this lesson we are going to address another category about making good decisions. It may seem odd that this would be a subject all its own, but we have found it to be a lot more important to a person’s growing and changing than one might expect, and that subject is deciding to like people.

In interviews with scores of inmates and former inmates we have seen a pattern of narcissism. Narcissism means excessive love of oneself, and if you study psychology this term will be listed as a personality disorder.

We are not talking about having a healthy self-image, which is a good thing. We are referring to what the Bible describes as “Thinking more highly of oneself than they should.” A true narcissist is someone who likes people—or pretends to like them—only to the degree they can be manipulated for the narcissist’s advantage. Not all narcissists end up in prison, but almost all who are in prison have a tendency toward this personality disorder. Down deep they don’t like people, they don’t trust people, and they don’t respect people. People are to be used.

Often, the narcissist is not aware of their condition. They have been using people in this manner for so long, they’re not even conscious of it. The test for narcissism can be made by evaluating one’s decisions and the consequences that result from those decisions. Can you honestly say that the decisions you’ve made regarding other people have been decisions that benefited them as well, or did they just benefit you?

The first step in changing is to recognize that change is needed. Can you get honest and admit to yourself that you have been living a life of selfishness? It might take a few minutes or hours or days to be able to look in the mirror and say, “As much as I hate to see this side of me, I’m really a lot more selfish than I’d like to admit.”

Once you’ve taken that first step the next one comes much easier. Simply decide to like people. You might have to get alone somewhere and say it out loud. “I’ve decided to like people.” You may have to repeat this many times before you see the results.

Shortly after you’ve made this decision, the following changes will begin to take place:

1. You will begin to respect and see the good in others.
 - a. You will see others differently.
 - b. You will see their families in a different light, or you might notice they don’t appear to have any family that cares or any true friends.
 - c. You will see those in authority over you from a different perspective.

2. When you decide to like someone you'll find that you want them to succeed.
 - a. You'll begin to get satisfaction in seeing good things happen to other people.
 - b. You'll truly be happy for those who are having good things happen to them, even if you are not.
3. When you decide to like someone, you will instinctively begin serving them.
 - a. You will find yourself wanting to help others, who, before you decided to like people, were of no interest to you.
 - b. You will begin to help them anonymously.
 - c. You will find that those moments bring you the greatest joy.

The following is a true story:

Joe, who worked at a large organization, spent much of his time getting to know new people in the community. In fact, a big part of his job was to make them feel welcome and encourage them to be a part of the many volunteer programs his organization was sponsoring. One day, a man named Bill stopped by Joe's office and introduced himself. He was intelligent, energetic, and full of ideas. At first, Joe took a liking to Bill and was thankful Bill had volunteered to join their team.

After a couple of weeks, however, Joe began to resent Bill. The more time they spent together, the more Joe despised him. You see, Bill was extremely self-centered and Joe found this to be very irritating.

"Bill is so manipulative. His smile is not genuine. Everything about him is to benefit himself."

It wasn't long before Joe began avoiding Bill at all costs. If he saw Bill across the room, Joe would either pretend not to see him or look for the nearest exit.

One day a co-worker of Joe's mentioned that he reminded him of Bill. "You two could be twins."

The co-worker wasn't aware that this was an insult to Joe. He was simply making conversation. But Joe practically bit his head off for making such a comment.

Later that day, Joe found himself contemplating what had taken place earlier. "Was he really like Bill?" The longer he thought about it, the more he realized what he didn't want to believe. He and Bill were very much the same. In fact, Joe realized that the reason he despised Bill so much was because Bill reminded him of those parts of himself that he hated.

Joe decided to take some action. The first thing he did was to choose to like Bill... not Bill's actions or attitude, but to simply like Bill for what good qualities were there. As Joe began this process, he began to realize that he had a bigger problem than just Bill. The truth was he didn't really like anyone very much. Joe also realized that once he was able to like Bill, he found it easier to like others, and over time Joe began to like himself, as well.

The big secret about those who are self-centered, and manipulative of others, is that their actions are a reflection of how they feel about themselves.

LESSON 2: QUESTIONS

Please answer the following questions to Lesson #2. If there is not enough space in the blanks, feel free to use a separate sheet of paper for your answers. Please write or print legibly.

1. Almost everyone has a little bit of narcissism in them. On a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being very little and 10 being very much, where would you say you would score five years ago?

2. Give an example of an action or reaction to a situation that helped you determine this score.

3. Where would you score yourself today? _____

4. Give an example of an action or reaction to a situation that helped you determine your current score.

5. Give an example of where you changed your attitude toward someone who, at one time, you disliked, and how you've either become friends or have at least increased your respect for them.

6. Does it make sense as to why choosing to like other people will help you be more successful, especially once you are released from prison? _____

7. Whether you answered "Yes" or "No" to question number 6, please explain why.

8. THIS QUESTION IS OPTIONAL. YOU DO NOT HAVE TO ANSWER IF YOU PREFER TO KEEP THESE THOUGHTS TO YOURSELF.

Now that you've had time to think about and apply what you learned in Lesson #1 (deciding to follow God's plan and deciding not to go back to prison), do you have any thoughts you'd like to share regarding changes you've noticed in yourself?



LESSON 3

DECIDE TO LOVE TO WORK

In the last lesson we continued with the theme of decisions, with respect to choosing to like people. In this lesson we will touch on another aspect of decision-making that we believe is critical to achieving success in life. It is the decision to love to work. The reason it is called a decision is because if we are all honest with ourselves we will probably admit we don't love to work. While there are exceptions in life where we get to the place of doing something we really love and get paid for it, this rarely happens right away. But by deciding to love to work we not only have the anticipation of someday being able to do what we love, we can enjoy the process along the way.

With respect to work it is important to know that it does not define success in itself. Yet, work is always involved to some degree. Now, success means many different things to many different people. Success for our purposes is the following:

- a) To know, love and obey God
- b) To become a productive member of society
- c) To embrace the joy of being a giver instead of a taker

One of the foundational truths about becoming a giver is that you must have something to give, and in this world, much of what we are able to give comes to us through compensation for the work we've done. Volunteer work is also a means of giving that should not be overlooked. The key is choosing to love what you do.

Before we go any further, there is a question we would like you to ask yourself: What do you do when finances get tough? Do you beg, borrow, steal, or work?

It doesn't matter what your answer has been to this point, but what your answer will be going forward. As we've stated in previous lessons, we are not interested in what you have done, but what you will do. We learn from our pasts, but we do not live in our pasts.

If in your past you have had a tendency to prefer laziness over work, or goofing off before work, or anything but work before work, this can change by simply deciding to love to work. Notice we said simply, not easily. Choosing to love to work is a simple idea, but implementing it can be very challenging.

Some might say, "I understand the importance of work, but with my age, and my background, I might not be able to find work."

We are not encouraging you to think about finding work just yet. We are encouraging you to decide to love it. Everyone who loves to work can get some kind of work. The opportunities are not limited for such a person, but endless. To help ourselves make this decision we need to know why we should love to work. What are some of the benefits?

1. Better Opportunities

By choosing to have the right attitude toward work you will find that it is easier to get a job. Once you have a job, more opportunities will become available. You will meet people you would not have met had you not been working, and they can help you find a better situation.

2. Work breeds work

Often the higher paying, better position job you are hoping for will come as a result of how well you are doing in your current job.

In Gary Skinner's book *Plain Vanilla Wrapper*, you might recall the segment when he had just gotten out of prison. He owed over \$500,000 in restitution and the only job he could find was working as a construction laborer for \$6.50 per hour. His minimum restitution payments were almost twice as much as his take home pay, yet, that was the only work he could find. It was very physical, he hated the smallness of his paycheck, and he felt like he deserved better. But he reminded himself daily that he wasn't in prison, and he learned to be thankful he had any job at all. Over time, he began to apply what the Bible says.

Colossians 3:23

“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters.”

As a result, he found himself sincerely trying to do the best job he could for his boss, and in time, his boss began to give him some raises and helped Gary pick up some side work. Within a year Gary was earning \$9.50 per hour. Plus, because of some of the skills he was learning on the job, he would sometimes make as much in one day with some side work as he did for an entire week.

As things continued to improve, Gary kept his mouth shut and didn't complain. He let his hard work do his talking for him and he continued to gain favor with his boss. As it turns out, his boss ended up being the catalyst for Gary getting his next job, window cleaning, which was easier work and an increase in pay to \$15.00 per hour. After a year or so in this new job, Gary's new boss introduced him to a friend of his with a larger window cleaning company, Gary went to work for him, and his pay doubled again to \$30.00 per hour. After a couple of years with this latest boss, he helped Gary start his own window cleaning business, Gary became his own boss and started earning even more. This entire process took about five years, but none of it would have happened had Gary not made the initial decision to love to work.

3. You gain the respect of those you love the most.

There were other problems with Gary's small income in those early days after prison besides the fact that his checks weren't very large. Gary was embarrassed that he wasn't making the kind of income he knew he was capable. Gary hated showing his check to his wife at the end of the week and then sitting down to see how they could make it stretch. However, Gary's attitude began to change once he realized that the amount was not as important to his wife as his commitment and faithfulness. She knew what Gary did not know yet. She knew that in time his consistency and good attitude would pay off.

The problem with so many people is they don't stick with something long enough and maintain a positive attitude consistently enough to reap the benefits of a raise, a promotion, or

a new door of opportunity. Often they are only weeks or days away from something that is about to improve their circumstances profoundly. They develop a poor attitude. They choose to hate their job. They start whining about what is not right or not fair. They start doing the job poorly, showing up late, looking for reasons to leave early, and either get fired or quit. This is one of the biggest reasons why they're always in difficult circumstances.

4. You feel good about yourself.

There is something about doing a job and doing it well that improves our self-worth. We all need encouragement. We all thrive on accomplishment, and for some reason getting paid for a job well done seems to make everything in life go a little better.

5. Many of your secret fears begin to disappear.

We all have them. The fear of failure; the fear of disappointing the ones we love. Most of the fears we deal with are tied in some manner to how we see and feel about ourselves. Going to work, doing a good job, and deciding to love your work will annihilate many of life's worries without you even having to think about them.

This all begins with a decision. You must decide to love to work every day and sometimes several times in the same day. Yet, it is something that will expand your options and opportunities for success in greater measure than you've ever dreamed.

LESSON 3: QUESTIONS

Please answer the following questions to Lesson #3. If there is not enough space in the blanks, feel free to use a separate sheet of paper for your answers. Please write or print legibly.

1. Everyone has been in the position to have to force themselves to do work they do not like. In regards to loving work, on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 being very little and 10 being very much), where would you say you would score five years ago? _____

2. Give an example of an incident you remember that helped you determine this score.

3. Where would you score yourself today? _____

4. Give an example of an incident that helped you determine your current score.

5. Give an example of a time when you wanted to quit a job but somehow you were able to force yourself to do the right thing by making yourself follow through.

6. Describe how you felt about yourself after the job was done?

7. Does it make sense as to why choosing to love to work will help you be more successful, especially once you are released from prison? _____

8. Whether you answered "Yes" or "No" to question number 7, please explain why.

9. We have a theory that has proven for many to be true. The theory is that if you do the following consistently, you will advance quickly in both pay and position:
- a) Go to work early
 - b) Be willing to stay late
 - c) Don't complain about the work or the boss
 - d) Don't steal from the company

Why do you think these four simple actions would gain a person favor in such a short time?



LESSON 4

HAVE A PLAN... AND A PLAN FOR THE PLAN

Over the years of working with ex-offenders there is one question that seems to cause the person we are interviewing great anxiety:

“What is your plan?”

Very few who fall into a life of crime have a plan. If they do, needless to say... it is a bad plan. We have yet to meet someone in prison who said it was their goal to end up there. In this lesson we are going to address two important ideas.

1. To be successful at anything in life, you must have a plan.
2. To be successful at planning you must have a plan for the plan. In other words, there must be specific directions for how to implement the original plan.

In Lesson One, we talked about the decision to surrender and follow Jesus Christ. We also talked about deciding to never go back to prison. Both of these decisions are a plan. To only mention them or even to make an initial decision will not bring about a successful result. We must have a plan for how we are going to fulfill these goals.

One of the important elements of following God is to live a life of obedience. In our efforts to obey we need to understand what our role involves. In a sense we are in a partnership with God. He has his part and we have ours. God gives us purpose, information, direction, desire, and His help to accomplish and fulfill His plan for our lives. It is our role to embrace our purpose, follow His directions, and accept His help.

The first question we need to ask ourselves is “What is God’s plan?” Rarely does the Lord give us a clear understanding of His plan for our entire lives. Most of the time it comes in generalities and steps. As we take the steps as best we understand, the generalities become more specific.

A common mistake made by many Christians happens early on in their relationship with God. There are two requirements involved when a person comes to God and receives the new birth. The first is to embrace Jesus Christ as Savior. The second is to acknowledge Him as Lord. Many are excited to embrace Him as Savior. This is the part of the relationship everyone likes because it involves the promise of eternal life, the forgiveness of sins, and seems to mostly be about what we get. Acknowledging Jesus Christ as Lord, however, puts a greater emphasis on what our participation will be in the relationship. It has to do with surrender and obedience, neither of which sound like much fun. Yet, for the relationship to be complete we need to embrace the entire package.

You may recall in Gary Skinner’s book, *Plain Vanilla Wrapper*, he shared about how he was raised in a Christian home, went to Bible studies, attended church, read the Bible, and prayed often. Yet, Gary still ended up in prison. In his quest to figure out how this could happen he realized that for most of his life up to the time of going to prison, Gary had embraced Jesus as Savior, but not Lord. Gary loved Jesus but followed Him on his own terms, not God’s.

It is not uncommon for Christians to take the approach of thanking God for salvation and then going about their life trying to make good decisions and then asking God to bless their efforts. It is not that this approach is motivated from a platform of evil, but that it is simply wrong.

Some would say, "Well, God gave me a brain and He expects me to use it. I will make my plans based on my wisdom and understanding and then ask God to bless them." This seems reasonable and you might find over time that God's plans for you are similar to the plans you come up with by using your brain. Yet, by not involving God in our planning from the start, we shoot ourselves in the foot by having the wrong plan, the wrong motivation for the plan, or the wrong timing.

Proverbs 3:5-6 (NLT)

Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. 6 Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take.

Isaiah 55:8-9 (NLT)

My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts, says the Lord. And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. 9 For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.

Knowing and following this perspective will make the planning and the implementation of the plans a lot easier. We are either working with God or against Him. Even if our intentions are good, if we are working in any other manner than parallel with God's ways, we will find ourselves in a state of frustration, confusion, and failure.

For our purposes in this lesson we are not going to tackle the big picture of your life. There will be plenty of time for you to do this on your own. The point we want to make is to encourage you to realize that the bigger picture will always require adjustments along the way. This is what keeps the journey exciting and interesting.

We also want to address two ideas. The first is to tell you to put out of your mind the past mistakes of improper planning. There may be some benefit to evaluating your past for the purpose of learning from your mistakes, but dwelling on them will only make it more difficult to move forward with the right attitude.

The second is to encourage you to begin making planning a part of every area of your life. This will help you develop the habit and lifestyle of being a planner.

The first step in planning is to get quiet before the Lord and reaffirm your commitment to do things His way. Your prayer could simply be, "Lord I'm tired of doing life my way; I want to do it Your way. Please show me Your way."

Next, take out a sheet of paper and start writing down different categories of your life. Some of those categories might include **spiritual goals, physical goals, financial goals, educational goals, and career goals**. These are just a few suggestions. As you will soon learn in the process of planning you might add sub-categories. The level of detail is up to you. Some people function well with very detailed plans while others do better with less. Over time you will learn what works best for you and how to hear God's direction more clearly.

A great way to get started is to simply pray “Lord I want to be submissive to Your leading in my life. What is Your plan for me in these areas?” From there start to write out what comes to your mind. Nothing becomes a real plan until it is written out. Once you write it out the plan then starts taking form and direction. Your mind, as the Holy Spirit leads you, will help you discern how to adjust the plan, change the plan, or perhaps throw the plan out and start over. This may seem difficult in the beginning, but you will find it easier and more enjoyable as you continue to develop this process. Remember: this is a whole new way of living, so don’t be harsh with yourself if it doesn’t fall into place right away.

The next step is to take a clinical approach to this planning exercise. What we mean by “clinical” is to remove as much of your emotions from the process as possible. A good method we’ve found is for you to approach your planning as if you were giving advice to someone else, walking them through the steps, asking them the questions, and evaluating their responses. This may seem silly at first, but when you get the hang of it, you will find you are able to have better discernment of what God is showing you than you would if you kept your emotions involved. Taking a clinical approach will also help you be more honest with yourself. It prevents you from putting your goals and plans into expectations that are unrealistic. Remember, God will not ask you to do anything He has not already equipped you to accomplish. (He won’t ask you to be a center for the Lakers if you are five feet tall.)

We are going to close this lesson with an outline for you to reflect upon regularly.

Outline For Successful Planning

- I. Ask for God to help you learn His plans.
 - A) Set aside your agenda and seek God’s direction.
 - B) After taking a moment to get quiet, begin writing out your thoughts.
 - C) Review what you have written and try to determine if there is anything in the plan that contradicts the Bible (as best you know).
 - D) Share your ideas with someone who has been following the Lord and with whom you trust to give you honest feedback.
 - E) Begin the process of planning “how” to put the plan into action.
 - F) Ask God to help you with this step as well. Include Him in all aspects of this project.
 - G) Write out your plan for the plan
 - H) Take a clinical approach (pretend you are helping someone else) to evaluating what you have so far.
- II. Put your plan into action
 - A) Take the first steps
 - B) Evaluate as you progress
 - C) When you run into obstacles, try to determine if these are just a part of the learning curve or are you making some mistakes along the way. (Remember, there will be challenges that will try to discourage you from following through. Sometimes we need to back up and regroup. Sometimes we need to simply press through)
- III. Write out your results.
 - A) What is working?
 - B) What is not?
 - C) Why?

We realize this process may seem overwhelming in the beginning, especially if you have never made this a lifestyle. We encourage you to keep at it. In time you will find that you will be able to put a plan together, a plan for the plan, and begin implementation right away. In the beginning it might take hours, or even days. Be patient. Stay steady.

LESSON 4: QUESTIONS

Please answer the following questions to Lesson #4. If there is not enough space in the blanks, feel free to use a separate sheet of paper for your answers. Please write or print legibly.

1. Place a check mark in front of **all the phrases** that describe your current actions toward planning.

- I never plan
- I plan in my head
- I write out my plans
- I pray about my plans
- I ask God to bless my plans
- I ask God to show me His plans for me
- I plan but do not follow through

2. In a few sentences, explain why you checked the phrases you did and why you currently think what you checked is either good or bad for planning.

3. Choose at least 2 out of the 5 categories listed on page 2 (**spiritual goals, physical goals, financial goals, education goals, and career goals**) and give an example of your process and write out your results. (You will probably need to do this on another sheet of paper to give it the proper attention.)

4. Do you think planning is an important element in becoming successful? _____

5. Why or Why not?

6. How do you think you are doing with this course so far?

7. What do you like best about the course?

8. What do you like least?



LESSON 5 HOPE

So far, we have put much of the emphasis of this course on areas in life that may not seem very spiritual. Yet all of the themes regarding decisions and planning are very critical to a person's success in life and have spiritual implications.

In this lesson we are going to shift to a very important concept: hope. It is essential in this life that you embrace hope. If a person does not have it, they will lose all motivation to continue forward in life. To lose hope is to fall prey to the lie that says there is nothing to look forward to, now or ever, when God tells us the opposite is true.

To understand the importance of hope you need to realize that we all have an enemy that desires for us to fail.

John 10:10 (NIV)

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

These statements were made by Jesus and He is referring to Satan in this passage. Whether we like it or not, we are all involved in a spiritual battle. In simple terms it comes down to good vs. evil.

If you choose to not believe this enemy is real you are setting yourself up to believe the other lies that can take root in your heart and mind to the point where you believe you are worthless, you have nothing good to look forward to, and there is no reason to continue living. By ignoring the enemy, you open yourself up to the possibility of losing hope.

The truth that must be embraced is that no matter what, there is always hope. Even if a person is sentenced to life in prison, if they believe in Jesus Christ, they have hope. They can still live out His purpose for their lives now and they can look forward to an eternal freedom after this life is over.

The term "hope" is very loosely thrown about in today's society. Phrases like "I hope I get to go to Disney World," "I hope I get an A on my history test," "I hope I make the basketball team this year," are common. These kinds of hopes are about the fulfillment of a desire, a dream, or ambition. The kind of hope we are referring to is about the fulfillment of a promise. For those of us who have embraced Jesus Christ as Savior and acknowledged Him as Lord we have the promise of eternal life with Him in our future and we have the promise of a personal relationship with Him now. This gives us hope for each day.

When we have our hope in other people or ourselves, we no longer have a hope that is dependable. Other people, regardless of their good intentions, will at some point let us down. We, regardless of our good intentions, will at some point let ourselves down. When we disappoint ourselves or become disappointed in others we can very easily slip into despair. Despair is the opposite of hope.

The key to maintaining hope when life doesn't seem fair is rooted in our point of view. I call this the "mountain perspective" and the "ditch perspective." Obviously, a mountain view provides a lot more information. You are able to view the world around you from a completely different vantage point while looking down from above than you would be if you were looking at things while stuck in a ditch.

From the ditch perspective you might feel trapped and fearful that you can't get out, that nobody will find you, that you will be eaten by a bear, or die from lack of food and water. From the mountain perspective you might see that there is a search party coming your direction and only minutes away. Depending upon which perspective you are observing, it will determine how you respond. If you were only able to see from the ditch you might panic. But if you were able to see from the mountain you might take a nap.

Without hope the smallest of challenges can suck the life out of us. With hope we can endure anything. When we give our lives over to Jesus Christ, we are His and nothing can separate us from His love and His promise of eternal life. The world can take away our family, our possessions, and our freedoms, but it cannot take away what is in our hearts. Satan, the thief (of whom Jesus referred to in the Scripture above) can't touch that.

When we get this reality deep into our hearts and minds we begin to lose fear. We do not become arrogant, but confident in our relationship with God, knowing deep within our being that we are His. As we understand more clearly what this idea of hope involves, we will begin to see life from God's perspective and not our own or the world's. This new view of life will not only inspire us for our eternal destiny, but God will reveal to us the great hope he has for our lives here on earth. As we grow in our relationship with God and embrace this hope, He will begin to reveal amazing opportunities and purpose... even if we are in prison.

There is a person you may have heard of at some point. Her name is Joni Ereckson Tada. Her life is an amazing story of what God can do in and with a person who has extreme limitations. Joni had a diving accident when she was younger that left her paralyzed from her shoulders down. She has lived many years in this condition, yet her accomplishments are numerous. Joni is an accomplished artist (she paints with a brush between her teeth), speaker, and international ministry leader. Thousands have been inspired by her life's example. Joni would be the first to admit there have been many, many difficult days. She very candidly shares about those times when she wanted to give up. It has been the hope of her purpose in the here and now and the hope of a better, healthier life eternally that has given her the strength to continue to encourage others. Her life and testimony is a good reminder for all of us to keep our eyes on Jesus Christ, our eternal hope.

From here we need to address two more questions. First, how do we keep this hope, and second, how do we get it back if we get discouraged and fall into despair?

The answer is really one and the same. It involves some action on our part, but nothing that is very complicated. The following are some suggestions that we have found helpful:

- Find someone you trust who has a strong relationship with God to talk out the issues that are bothering you. To talk through challenges with someone who is as doubtful as you are is simply the blind leading the blind.
- Meditate on Scriptures that talk about this hope and remind you of God's love for you and His purpose for your life.
- Read inspirational stories about others, like Joni, who have gone through tough times and have overcome with God's help.

There are probably other ideas you might come up with on your own, but these are a good beginning to help you keep your head on straight during times of depression or disappointment.

4. Would you do anything different now? _____

5. If yes, what?

1 Peter 3:14-15

But even if you suffer for doing what is right, God will reward you for it. So don't worry or be afraid of their threats. Instead, you must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if someone asks about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it.

6. In your own words, describe and explain your Christian hope.



LESSON 6 FREEDOM IN HONESTY

After you have finished this course, you may find a few lessons stand out more prominently than others. This lesson is among the most important to learn and implement. Everything that has to do with growing in our walk with God, everything that is connected with having healthy relationships with others, and everything associated with success in life hinges on the value of honesty.

No one will truly advance in knowing or understanding God until they are prepared to embrace honesty as a starting point.

There are many places in life to implement honesty. For it to be effective, though, it must begin with you. You must determine to be honest with yourself.

This can be much more difficult than you might think. There are two things that often hinder our ability and willingness to be honest with ourselves: rationalization and justification. For those who have not yet embraced honesty as a key value in their life, the following is a very simple story that should clarify this point.

Little Tommy and his mom made some cookies one Saturday afternoon. After they were finished, and the cookies had cooled, they put them in a large cookie jar on the counter next to the sink. Tommy's mom explained to him that he was not to have any of these cookies without permission, as they were to be shared with the rest of the family after dinner.

Later that day, Tommy saw his brother, Tony, walking outside munching on a cookie. Tommy decided he also wanted a cookie. Instead of asking for his mother's permission, though, he waited until she was busy on the phone and then snuck into the kitchen and took one. Tommy didn't realize that his mom saw cookie crumbs stuck on the corners of his mouth shortly after he ate the cookie.

Tommy's mom didn't say anything at first. She waited until after supper and then confronted him.

"Tommy, did you take a cookie out of the cookie jar today?"

"No, Mom. Remember? You told me they were for after dinner," Tommy said.

"Now, Tommy, you know how I hate it when you don't tell the truth. I saw you with cookie crumbs on your mouth this afternoon. Would you like to revise your answer?"

Tommy decided to confess. He dropped his head and said, "I'm sorry, Mom. You're right. I did take a cookie this afternoon. But so did Tony, and I figured if Tony could have one, I could too."

"But Tony asked me before he took one," Tommy's mom replied.

"Well, I don't see why I should have to ask," Tommy said, getting flustered. "I helped make the cookies and I deserved to have one!"

You may be thinking several things. You might be thinking this is a silly example and doesn't apply at all to your life. Perhaps you have not experienced this exact situation, but there is a high probability you have a similar story of your own that involved taking something or doing

something that was not allowed. Regardless, the principle is the same, and we hope one of your thoughts right now is not that you could have come up with a better lie than Tommy did.

It is important to understand that before Tommy lied to his mom, he worked out the rationalization and the justification in his mind first.

The process started with his thoughts. Once the thought of getting a cookie entered Tommy's mind, he was faced with a choice: Would he ask his mom or just take one? If he asked, she might say no and that would complicate the situation; whereas if he planned it just right, he could take the cookie and no one would be the wiser.

Once confronted, Tommy decided to lie. In Tommy's mind he thought it would be worth the risk. Then, once he was exposed for the lie, Tommy moved into damage control. He rationalized by telling his mom about Tony to minimize his guilt. After all, if Tony did the same thing, at the least Tony should share in the blame. What Tommy didn't know is that Tony had asked permission. At this point, all that was left was to justify why he deserved the cookie he had stolen.

In the real world, lying is usually tied to most crimes. The first crime Tommy committed was to steal. He was a thief first and a liar second. Some might say that is a rather harsh judgment on a kid for just taking a cookie from his own home and family. But what a lot of people fail to understand is that the definition of stealing is taking something without permission. Sometimes the word "borrowing" is used to explain why we take something. This is just another way of rationalizing, which is all a part of the lifestyle of thieves and liars.

The following is a quote from Gary Skinner regarding his own experience with honesty.

"If you remember reading my book, *Plain Vanilla Wrapper*, I explained how I never intended to steal money from anyone. In fact, I was keeping track of how much was taken and I had every intention of putting it all back. This was rationalization. I then said I didn't use the money for myself, but only to keep the business going (which would be good for my partner in the long run). This was justification. The truth is I had become a thief and a liar.

The good news is that later in the book, I began making honesty an important value in my life. I started by becoming honest with myself; then honest with God. The fruit of dishonesty led me to prison, but the fruit of honesty led me to freedom—not only from prison, but freedom in life."

It would seem that being honest with ourselves would not be a difficult task, yet it can be among the most demanding. Once we learn how to be honest with ourselves and then honest with God, honesty with everyone else comes naturally.

Choosing and embracing honesty as a lifestyle will dramatically change your life for the better, and the changes will be quicker than just about anything else you could do. As we all know, the need to be on guard, or looking over our shoulder to see who's watching, or all the remembering of the last lie to cover up the previous ones can be exhausting.

Obviously, the best method against lying is to make good choices and do the right thing. When faced with telling the truth or a lie, the truth is what matters most in God's eyes, and a huge part of living a transformed life for Christ is to live according to what pleases Him. There may be times when telling the truth will result in an outcome that is unpleasant for us, but God has His own ways of rewarding our obedience.

LESSON 6: QUESTIONS

Please answer the following questions to Lesson #6 and. If there is not enough space in the blanks, feel free to use a separate sheet of paper for your answers. Please write or print legibly.

1. In this lesson we have talked about honesty on three levels: honesty with ourselves, honesty with God, and honesty with others. On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being very honest and 1 being the least honest, how would you rate yourself regarding each category?

- A) Honesty with yourself _____
- B) Honesty with God _____
- C) Honesty with others _____

2. Give an example for each as to why you gave yourself these ratings.

A) Example for rating honesty with yourself:

B) Example for rating honesty with God:

C) Example for rating honesty with others:

3. In your own words, explain what the word “rationalization” means.

4. In your own words, explain what the word "justification" means.

5. Give an example of where you remember using rationalization or justification to try and get you out of a situation where you knew you were wrong.

6. Some people would say that being honest with God is more important than anything. Why do you think we put an emphasis on honesty with yourself BEFORE we mention honesty with God?

7. Which do you think is more problematic, deceiving other people or deceiving yourself?

8. Why?



LESSON 7 HUMILITY

There are three ideas that we have found to be of great help in everyone's spiritual growth. The first is honesty—which was covered in the last lesson—and the other two are humility and surrender. Most Christians are familiar with the concepts of humility and surrender, yet they are qualities that few master in their lifetime.

The opposite of humility is pride. The opposite of surrender is defiance. Both pride and defiance do not work well in our relationship with God.

James 4:6

“God opposes the proud but favors the humble.”

It doesn't get much clearer than this. Yet how often have we found ourselves motivated by pride? We all have a tendency to want to think of ourselves as a little better than someone else. Pride drives us to buy things we can't afford. Pride drives us to put other people down. Pride drives us to take advantage of others. Pride drives us to think more highly of ourselves than we should.

In light of the fact that this world is difficult at times, it only makes sense to follow the path that will lead to God's favor and avoid the path that opposes Him. It is important to know that God is for us. He wants us to do well and He has a specific path He knows is best, yet this conflict of pride vs. humility is upon us daily.

Pride is the root of self-deception. If we are evaluating circumstances in our life through a lens of deception, it makes it impossible to make good decisions. If we have stated something or done something that is clearly wrong and let pride take hold, we end up defending foolishness. When we realize we have done something wrong, it is best to own up to the mistake and move on. Trying to hide it, trying to make it seem less than it is, or trying to pretend that wrong is right is not fooling anyone. Most of the time everybody knows the truth.

Pride never brings out the best in us. No one enjoys being around someone who is bragging all the time.

Proverbs 16:18

Pride goes before destruction, and haughtiness before a fall.

Several years ago there was a football game on TV where the player carrying the ball was on his way to what should have been an easy touchdown. But around the five-yard line he got a little carried away and began celebrating prematurely. He raised the ball in the air and started dancing his way into the end zone. Before he could get there, though, the ball slipped out of his grasp, an opponent was able to recover the fumble, and the showboating player soon found himself on the bench getting an earful from his coach. Now this action could be attributed to

foolishness or poor judgment, but from the replay it looked like pride may have played a strong role in the mishap as well.

When discussing humility it is important to note that there is nothing wrong with feeling good about ourselves when we accomplish our goals or see our plans come to fruition. This is a healthy response. It is when we move from that place of gratification to arrogance that we set ourselves up for a fall.

The obvious solution to pride is humility. Humility is never the wrong response, yet it is important to know the difference between false humility and true humility. Some people are very good at putting on a front of humility. When they are congratulated or praised for doing something notable, they pretend to be humble. This can be as repulsive as pride—in reality, it is a form of pride. False humility is often used to manipulate a circumstance. It is being dishonest with ourselves and with others. It is a sign of insecurity.

True humility is refreshing. It is a place of honesty and honor. There is nothing wrong with winning a contest and receiving a blue ribbon, or a trophy, or applause. If you have worked hard at achieving something, it is appropriate to accept your reward with gladness. The issue is not in the receiving of accolades, but in the state of our hearts. It is a great feeling to know we've done something well. That is not pride.

You may be wondering how it's possible to accomplish great things and still remain humble. It can be challenging at times, for sure. The key is in having a healthy understanding in knowing your life and talents are a gift from God. This does not mean we always have to bring God's name into the conversation, as this can also be a form of false humility. But as we grow in our relationship and understanding of God we will have that knowing of what to say and when to say it.

The solution to maintaining a lifestyle of humility is in understanding the following verses. In John 15:5, Jesus tells us we will not be able to accomplish anything for the Kingdom of God without His involvement.

John 15:5

"Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing."

In Philippians 4:13, the Apostle Paul expresses his faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

Philippians 4:13

For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength.

When we know that our source of strength and help comes from above, we will automatically develop an awareness of our weaknesses. Everybody is weak. Some can mask it better than others, but at the end of the day, when we take the initiative to be honest, we become very aware of our frailties. This is why calling upon God is not a sign of weakness. This is why depending upon God is not a sign of weakness. This is why prayer is not a sign of weakness. These are all signs of wisdom. The only people who view these as signs of weakness are those who have not come to a place of honesty with themselves and God.

LESSON 7: QUESTIONS

Please answer the following questions to Lesson #7. If there is not enough space in the blanks, feel free to use a separate sheet of paper for your answers. Please write or print legibly.

1. Everyone struggles with pride in some regard in their life. Give an example where you let pride get the upper hand.

2. Knowing what you know now, how would you try to handle that situation today?

3. How can you live a life of humility while you are incarcerated? Or do you think it even matters while you are in prison?

4. Explain how you view keeping the balance between a healthy sense of accomplishment and an unhealthy attitude of pride.

5. In your own words, explain false humility, and give an example of an incident where you have seen it. (Does not have to be an example in your life, but if you use someone else's example, please do not use their name.)

6. Can you think of someone you feel you will have difficulty in demonstrating humility toward after you are released from prison? (No names, please) If yes, how do you plan to deal with this challenge?



LESSON 8 SURRENDER

In the first lesson we talked about and encouraged you to make the decision to live life God's way and not your way. This lesson follows up on that theme. The reason we are focusing on surrender is because it is not something that is easily applied, yet it is critical to living a successful Christian life.

We all like to have our own way. We all like to be in charge and we all like doing whatever we want whenever we want. We were born this way. If you observe the behavior of a baby you will notice there are basically three things they want: to be fed, have their diaper changed, and be the center of attention. As we get older we learn that, aside from the diaper, there is not much difference between a baby and an adult.

As the baby grows he learns to talk. One of the first words he learns is "mine," and one of the first phrases is usually something like "I want it now." If you were to tell this child that selfishness and impatience is wrong, you would likely get resistance or a blank stare in response. These are attributes that many times can only be discouraged through the threat of consequences. "Tommy, you must learn to share, or you won't get any ice cream."

The root issue is control. The desire to be in control progresses from those early stages of having things when and how we want them, to more advanced stages where we want to control others. When we are in control over others we feel like we have power, which feeds back into another problem we discussed in an earlier lesson: narcissism.

If something doesn't change early on, the child will become someone who doesn't play well with others. If nothing changes by the time they are adults, they won't work well with others. If by some chance they get into a position of authority, they can ruin everyone and everything around them.

There is a famous maxim that says "Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely." This is why it is not good to give authority to someone who is immature, foolish, or evil. It is sometimes thought that as long as the person in authority means well, all will be fine. But good intentions or even a good heart does not always translate into wise management of power. There are historical accounts of dictators who started their rule with good intentions, yet, as good as those intentions may have been, by having absolute power (no accountability), over time, they either became foolish or evil or both.

You might be wondering what this has to do with someone who is incarcerated. If there ever were someone who had very little or no control over others it would be someone in prison. In fact, prisoners have someone monitoring and controlling their lives most of the time. The reason is that people who are in prison are there because they either did not learn to control themselves within the rules of society, or they took it upon themselves to control others without being given the authority (or a combination of the two).

If you live your life out of control (driving under the influence of alcohol, stealing, losing your temper and becoming violent, or various other out-of-control behaviors) you may eventually end up in prison. For those already in prison, it was because you, the dictator of your own life,

were either immature, foolish, evil, or all three. But the truth be told, you are not alone in this because every person on earth has had their challenges with the issue of control. The main difference between them and you is that they so far have stayed within the boundaries society has set up.

The following is a quote from Gary Skinner regarding his experience with surrender.

“In my book, *Plain Vanilla Wrapper*, I talk about my first day in county jail and how I was trying to figure out how things had gotten so far to where I had gotten myself locked up. My conclusion is best explained in the title of that old Frank Sinatra song, “My Way.” Once I realized the problem, I not only understood that I was the one at fault, but I became aware that doing things my way and not God’s way was the root of my criminal behavior. I then turned to God for direction and understanding, my eyes were opened, and I realized the solution was simple: I needed to surrender control of my life to God. Though this seemed like a simple answer, it was a very difficult thing to do. Nobody wants to stop being the dictator of their own life.”

And now we turn to you. We encourage you to surrender control of your life to God. Surrendering to Him does not mean you become weak and spineless, it simply means you give up the right to yourself; that you embrace Jesus Christ as Lord of your life. It means you will trust that He knows what is best for you and for others.

Isaiah 55:8-9 (NLT)

“My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,” says the Lord. “And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. 9 For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.

The following is a step-by-step process we have found to be helpful in the pursuit of a successful Christian life. It is an explanation of the application of three foundational elements of this life: honesty, humility, and surrender.

Much of how we think, act, and respond is based upon patterns we’ve developed over the course of our lives, and we must work to break these patterns and develop new ones. So what we are asking you to do is take some time to evaluate your thoughts, actions, and responses in accordance with Scripture, and then go through these steps. You may find you only have a few things that need to be changed.

1. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you recognize your need for surrender. (A simple prayer of “Holy Spirit, help me” will work.) This is HONESTY.
2. Ask God to forgive you when you become aware you have taken back control. This is HUMILITY
3. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you how to fix the situation and then obey. This is SURRENDER.

Do this in a clinical manner. By this we mean for you to keep your emotions out of the process as much as possible. It is true that we always need to be honestly sorry, but sometimes

we get emotional and beat ourselves up for our mistakes. This leads to condemnation, which can be just as damaging as the original mistake. When we drive our lives into the ditch, we need to ask for forgiveness, and then ask the Holy Spirit to help us get out of the ditch. Too often though, we not only drive into the ditch, but feel so badly about being there that we get emotional and start slashing the tires, bashing in the windshield and setting the interior on fire. This only delays God getting us back on the road.

In the beginning surrender may seem like a lot of work. Over time, though, it will become as natural as getting out of bed. When we give our lives over to the Lord, we are agreeing that the Creator of the universe knows what is best for us. This develops our faith and we begin to live a life of inner peace and confidence like we've never known before. We no longer rely upon our own strengths. We instead rely on the same power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead, and on the love of a God who desires His best for us.

LESSON 8: QUESTIONS

Please answer the following questions to Lesson #8. If there is not enough space in the blanks, feel free to use a separate sheet of paper for your answers. Please write or print legibly.

1. Describe how you viewed your life before incarceration. Were you someone who lived most of your life inside the boundaries, on the edge of boundaries, or did you ignore them all together?

2. Give an example of why.

3. Have you changed any since you've been incarcerated? _____

4. If yes, describe. If no, why do you think you haven't?

5. Before this lesson, did you look at surrender as a positive idea or a negative one? _____

6. Describe how you view the concept of surrender now and explain why you see it the way you do.

7. Have you ever made a mistake and then because of your response (not surrendering) actually made it worse? _____

8. If you answered yes, describe what took place.

9. Explain in your own words how you see honesty, humility, and surrender working together and/or why they are all important in our Christian life.



LESSON 9 UNDERSTANDING COMPROMISE

Some other terms and phrases used for the word compromise are: Cooperation, Negotiation, Concession, Finding middle ground, Give and take.

There can be both good and bad associated with the concept of compromise. It should be understood that it is almost impossible to go through life without some form of it. Without it, we would all be at each other's throats. So, it is not a matter of should there be compromise, but what should be compromised, and when should we compromise.

In our observations over the years and in talking with hundreds of inmates we have discovered a challenging imbalance on this topic. Either they compromise on almost everything or they compromise on the wrong things. Those who are in prison are not the only ones who have this difficulty, but we are highlighting them because it can be one of the reasons they have ended up in the situation they are in. Gary Skinner, the writer of these lessons, has spoken many times of how his wrong use of compromise helped land him in prison as well.

In one of the earlier lessons we talked a little about narcissism. When a person has this kind of outlook and behavior they are very self-centered and often self-righteous. They think they are not only the most important person in the room but the most enlightened as well. They are not interested in compromising anything that would infringe upon their own plans. They only look out for themselves and their plans are selfishly motivated.

This behavior puts everyone else in an uncomfortable situation. Getting along with someone like this will require quite a bit of concession on all who come in contact with this person. If concessions are not made with this type of personality it can easily turn into a heated argument, some regrettable comments, and in some cases even violence.

If you find yourself in this kind of conflict on a regular basis, you should take some time and evaluate if it is because you are the cause or you are hanging around the wrong people. If you are the cause, you need to learn how to compromise. If you are hanging around with temperamental, argumentative, and stubborn people, it would do you well to find new friends.

The following are a few things you can do to prevent or defuse a volatile situation.

Here are some things to think about. When a conflict arises, take a moment and honestly consider the other person's view. Could they be right? Is this worth fighting over? Is there a way to compromise without giving up your own convictions about this particular matter? Is silence appropriate? Is now the time to make your thoughts known, or would speaking about it later be better? Is this something you need to address with this person in front of others, or would a discussion privately be more productive?

Only you know the answers to these questions, but what we have noticed is that those with a narcissistic personality never consider other people's opinions or outlooks. In their world, if they didn't think of it first, it isn't worth knowing.

The solution to understanding compromise requires two primary concepts. The first is honesty. Facing up to the possibility that you have some narcissistic tendencies is a good beginning. When we honestly face the truth, we open the door for change. The second concept

is in knowing what our morals are and then holding fast to them. When we compromise on things that are honorable and good, we are demonstrating weakness and a serious character flaw. When we refuse to compromise on things that are foolish, we are demonstrating foolishness. It is critical that we each take time to establish our convictions. Everyone should know what they believe and why.

We have all had that sick feeling in our stomach of what it feels like to compromise on something we know we should not have given in on. The key is to recognize it for what it is and then work to not let it happen again. Sometimes the problem is simply a matter of not thinking things through or taking the easy way out. This again is where honesty will help you. Evaluate the situation and your response for what it was, fix what you can, and move on.

To keep things in the context of the Lessons for Life Course, we have decided to evaluate compromise with respect to the first 8 lessons.

Lesson 1: Prison is Not an Option – The number one way to prevent going back to prison is to simply follow the rules. Following the rules is a great place to begin holding firm and refusing to compromise.

Lesson 2: Decide to Like People – Whenever we make a decision to do something that is right and good, the long-term benefit will pay off. Don't compromise on good decisions. Holding to these decisions is what develops character.

Lesson 3: Decide to Love to Work – Once again, sticking with the decision and making it a conviction. Once you know and understand why this is a good idea, it will be easier to carry out.

Lesson 4: Have a Plan and a Plan for the Plan – This one is a little different. We should not compromise on having a plan, but we might have to do a lot of compromising as the plan is developed and implemented. Almost every plan needs to go through some adjustments to make it better. Being flexible through this process is a great example of compromising by using wisdom.

Lesson 5: Hope – The point of not compromising here is to refuse to give up hope. Maintaining an eternal perspective will help keep hope alive in our hearts.

Lesson 6: Freedom in Honesty – As we learn to stand firm on honesty, we will experience what true character is all about.

Lesson 7 and 8: Humility and Surrender – Both of these present the greatest challenge. Essentially what we are asking you to do is to give up everything that is motivated by selfishness. True humility is the giving up of all pride. Surrender is giving up our agenda for God's agenda, which could mean giving up things we have valued for a long time. A good reminder, however, is that if God wants us to give something up, we were giving it too much value in the first place.

When it comes to understanding compromise and knowing what you should or should not be willing to compromise on, is simply a matter of thinking it through. Your convictions should be based upon God's perspective of life and truth.

In all other situations it is a matter of wisdom, common sense, and kindness. Taking the time to process the positives and the negatives of a situation along with a willingness to be merciful to those who oppose you, will solve those issues where compromise is necessary.

LESSON 9: QUESTIONS

Please answer the following questions to Lesson #9. If there is not enough space in the blanks, feel free to use a separate sheet of paper for your answers Please write or print legibly.

1. On a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being very easy and 10 being very difficult, how would you rate yourself when it comes to a willingness to compromise on things that should not matter?

2. Why is it important to be willing to compromise?

3. When is it wrong to compromise?

4. Give an example from your life where you did not compromise on an important issue and you can look back now and see why that was good.

5. Refusing to compromise can sometimes be nothing more than stubbornness. On a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being very little and 10 being very much, how much of a role would you say stubbornness played in your current reason for incarceration? _____

6. Explain why you rated yourself the way you did.

7. Give an example of something you can change to handle compromise more wisely in the future.



LESSON 10 FORGIVENESS

If there ever was a topic that can make a dramatic difference in how a person lives their life, forgiveness is that topic. It affects our attitude, our relationships with others—even how we view ourselves. Many believe forgiveness is an emotional response, and while it is true emotions are many times in the middle of the process, forgiveness is primarily a decision.

The people you need to forgive fall into three categories:

1. You—decisions you've made that have hurt yourself and others.
2. Others—circumstances where others have hurt you.
3. God—for things you believe He has let happen to you or to those you love.

In past lessons, we have talked about the need to handle certain situations in a clinical manner. When we say clinical, what we mean is for you to remove your emotional responses and replace them with clarity of thought and wisdom. Too often, our emotions stir within us a reaction that does not lead to a positive result. For instance, if you were having heart surgery, you would want a surgeon who knew what to do and how to do it in a calm, professional manner. You would not want a surgeon who was out of control. If they were crying, yelling, or shaking all over at the sight of blood, you would be wise to look for a different surgeon.

As odd as it might seem, forgiveness requires a similar approach. Nobody feels like forgiving. You have to decide to forgive and then have the determination to follow through with it. You can't wait until you are emotionally ready before making the decision to forgive. The reason is because you may never actually feel like it. There is no such thing as a better time to forgive at a later date. The only good time to forgive is now. Once the decision is made to forgive, the emotions will follow.

This is not to say that there is not a process involved. Sometimes the wounds, particularly emotional, are very deep. True forgiveness is a decision of your heart, and there will be conflicting feelings where, even after you have made the decision to forgive, the wound can reopen. The process might involve lengthy discussions with God about what is fair or not fair, what is right or not right, and possibly even about thoughts where you feel you deserve to hold a grudge. Yet, in the end, all of these feelings need to be resolved and the decision made to forgive.

Several years ago, there was a man who had been incarcerated for a few years and he was in a very close relationship with his son. They had big plans about what they would do and where they would go once the dad was released from prison. On the very day the dad was released and expecting to see his son, the son was murdered. The person who killed his son was unknown.

The dad had become a Christian while incarcerated and had already worked through many past issues of forgiveness, so when this tragedy struck, though difficult, he decided to choose the path of forgiveness—despite his broken heart.

A couple of years later, the dad decided to go back to prison as a volunteer and facilitate a weekly Bible study. He faithfully met with the men every week and was enjoying his opportunity to teach others about the love and forgiveness of God. One night, he shared his personal story with the group, and when it was over, a young man came up to him—trembling, crying, and barely able to speak.

“I’m so sorry about your son. I was the one who killed him. Will you please forgive me?”

Though it was the toughest decision of his life, the dad forgave the young man.

In this tragedy, the dad had to deal with all three categories of forgiveness. He had to forgive himself for getting into trouble and going to prison in the first place—because he believed that had he not been incarcerated, he would have been with his son and the murder would not have happened. Next, he had to forgive the young man who had murdered his son because that is what God requires. Finally, he had to resolve his thoughts of why God had let this happen.

Matthew 6:14-15

“If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. 15 But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Luke 6:37

37 “Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn others, or it will all come back against you. Forgive others, and you will be forgiven.

When it comes to forgiveness, God does not give us any wiggle room. In fact, there is no circumstance where we are given a pass on this requirement. It is one of the things we signed up for when we decided to follow Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself—though innocent—was beaten, cursed, spit upon and crucified, and yet He responded with, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

The following is a sample prayer for you to implement. As you can see, there are blank spaces for you to put the name of the person or persons that have hurt you. We recommend that you take some time and get quiet before the Lord and then make a list of every person you can think of who has offended or hurt you. Ask God to remind you of who they are or the incidents that took place. Then, one at a time, forgive them. The choice to forgive is the most healing action anyone can take, and God will bless you for your obedience.

Dear Heavenly Father,

It is my choice today to forgive (Write in name) _____ for the offense that he/she brought against me. (Describe offense briefly)

I forgive him/her unconditionally for the things done that brought hurt in my life.

I drop every charge that I have brought against him/her and give up the right to ever charge him/her again for this offense. I cancel every judgment I have made against him/her.

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ I release him/her from all responsibility for the hurt that his/her behavior provoked in me, and I assume all responsibility for having chosen to be offended.

Heavenly Father, I drop every charge I've had against You for permitting this to happen to me and ask You to please forgive me for any way that I have blamed this offense on You.

I drop every charge I've levied against myself for every wrong attitude, action, and reaction associated with this offense.

Heavenly Father, as I have forgiven (Write in name) _____ for the hurt I have experienced, please forgive me of my hurt, bitterness, anger, and unforgiveness.

Holy Spirit, please come and heal my thoughts, my emotions, and my memories from all the damage and defilement caused by this offense.

Thank you, Father, for my healing.

(It may be necessary to pray more than once regarding a particular issue. Continue until you have peace.)

One more point we would like to make: forgiveness does not mean trust. There are people you will need to forgive, but you are not required to trust them afterwards. They may not be safe. If you loan your car to someone and they wreck it, you must forgive them, but you are not required to loan it to them again.

Sometimes there are people we need to avoid being around because they continue to hurt us. We must still forgive them and have a clean heart about our attitude toward them, but continuing to spend time with them is not wise.

LESSON 10: QUESTIONS

Please answer the following questions to Lesson #10. If there is not enough space in the blanks, feel free to use a separate sheet of paper for your answers. Please write or print legibly.

1. Name the three categories of people you need to forgive.

- A) _____
- B) _____
- C) _____

2. Though forgiveness is important in each of these categories, explain in your own words how they are different.

- A) _____

- B) _____

- C) _____

3. Using a scale of 1 – 10, with 1 being extremely difficult and 10 being extremely easy, how would you honestly rate your ability to forgive? _____

4. Do you believe forgiveness is based more on feelings or a decision?

5. Explain why?

6. Write an example of an incident where you were able to forgive and how it affected some area of your life in a positive way.

7. Of the three categories of those you need to forgive, (yourself, others, God) which would you say has been the most difficult?

8. Why?

9. Do you agree or disagree with our advice about forgiving but not necessarily trusting?

10. Why? (You can give a real life example if this helps)



LESSON 11 RECONCILIATION

To reconcile means to settle, reunite, resolve, or, in more common terms, patch up. It is a companion to forgiveness. Though there are instances where you might be doing all you can to ask for someone else to forgive you, they may not cooperate—which blocks the ability for reconciliation to take place. In such instances, the most common response is, “I did all I know to do. Now the ball is in their court.”

At first glance, this seems like a reasonable response—and in some cases there is absolutely nothing you can do—but the question that needs to be addressed in these situations is *do I really want to reconcile or am I a little glad they are not cooperating?* Reconciliation can often be more challenging than to walk away and not have to deal with them over the long term. So, before you jump to conclusions, here are a couple of things you should consider:

- Perhaps you have taken advantage of the person you are asking to forgive you, and they are uneasy and unsure of your motives. Simply saying you are sorry might not be enough. We mentioned in the last lesson how trust is not always immediately restored. To rebuild trust, it takes time and consistency of changed behavior.
- Perhaps the person you have asked to forgive you has been taken advantage of by others, and though their feelings are not justified, they may have lumped you into the same category as these others. It may have nothing to do with you directly, but they do not feel safe.

The key reason we feel it is important to pursue forgiveness and reconciliation is because it is the only way to have complete restoration in a damaged relationship. It ties up the loose ends of what has been strained. God is very big on relationships. When mankind sinned and became separated from God, He provided a path for reconciliation. Jesus Christ sacrificed His life so that all who believe are reconciled to God. In the same way, we should do all we know to do, to restore our broken relationships with others.

Since everyone taking this course should have access to the book, *Plain Vanilla Wrapper*, you should already have some context regarding this next story we’d like to share regarding a circumstance of reconciliation that God walked Gary Skinner (the author), through.

“It was approximately three years after my release from prison, and I was in a time of prayer and fasting. On the third day, I was getting close to finishing up when I unexpectedly got a vision—a picture in my mind. What I saw was myself as a little boy of about five years old. I was playing with a favorite toy of mine when it suddenly broke. I tried to fix it but I couldn’t. I began to cry because I felt so awful about it. Then I got an idea: my dad can fix anything—I’ll take it to him. In this vision there was an overstuffed chair in the room and my dad was sitting in it. I ran over to him and said, “Dad, I broke my favorite toy and I can’t fix it. Can you fix it?” As I looked up at Dad, his form changed and he was no longer my father but Jesus. Then I looked at myself

and I was no longer five years old; I was now at my current age. The toy that was broken was no longer my toy but a relationship I knew was ruined.

With that realization, the vision was over. I knew this was a message from the Lord because what came to mind immediately was a wrecked relationship between an old friend and me.

This friend was my partner in a financial business that I wrote about in the book. He is the person who lost the most in the financial debacle that brought about the consequence of prison for me. As I mentioned, I had been out of prison for over three years, but our relationship was not fully restored, and I didn't know how to fix it. I had violated this friend's trust and I didn't know how to make it right. Though I had been paying restitution during this time, we hadn't spoken or corresponded at all.

This is a prime example of what is involved in rebuilding trust. I do believe my former partner and friend had forgiven me, but he still did not trust me—and rightly so. And so my prayer became, "Lord, what do I do? How do I fix this? I can't fix it, but You can fix anything. Lord, will You please fix this?"

After taking more time to process what had just taken place, I sensed the Lord directing me to write a letter to my friend. I did not know what to write, but as I began, it was as though the Lord was giving me just the right words, and I soon finished it and mailed it.

A month passed without a response. My first assumption was that the letter had no impact on my friend at all. A part of me was relieved at this—as I was hoping I might be off the hook now—but it turned out God had more for me to do.

Soon after, I was in another time of prayer, when I sensed the Lord telling me to go see my friend—face to face. I did not react well to this urging. I told the Lord that this wasn't making any sense. Then I doubted that I had really heard Him in the first place and that I should probably just learn to go on about my life without reconciliation. But the more I tried to get it out of my mind, the more the Lord continued to impress on me how necessary it was that I obey Him in this matter.

Around this same time, I received an advertisement in the mail about a Bible seminar being held in Ohio, the same city that my friend lived in. Coincidentally or not, one of the sponsors listed in the ad was this friend of mine. I can't tell you why, but that settled it for me. I stopped resisting the Lord on this, and the following month I flew from our home in Colorado to the seminar.

I can still remember being in the parking lot of where the seminar was being held, feeling a lot of apprehension about seeing my friend and wanting to chicken out the entire time. I don't know how I finally mustered the courage to go inside, but I did, and the first person to greet me was my friend. He walked over to me, put his arms around me, and gave me a hug. It wasn't a hug of greeting but of forgiveness. I said I was sorry, he said he was sorry, and we were both in tears. Despite all the damage done to our relationship, God had restored it."

There are a few things we believe are very important when pursuing reconciliation. Some of these have to do with a preparation of your mind and heart. Though your process may be a little different than Gary's, the following is a step-by-step method of what he found to work for him:

1. Gary took the situation before the Lord and asked for His help.

2. Gary did the best he knew to follow God's leading.
3. Gary approached the person he had offended with humility.
4. Gary did not put any expectations or demands on how the person should respond.
5. Gary prepared his mind to accept that the person might reject him.
6. Gary prepared his mind to accept any lecture, correction, or anger the person might need to express.
7. Gary did not try to justify or rationalize his actions and reminded himself that the goal was forgiveness and reconciliation—not to minimize the wrong he had done.

There is no guarantee that the person or persons you are trying to reconcile with will respond like Gary's friend did. They may not be ready and you need to respect that. Our advice in such cases is to keep praying for them and keep seeking the Lord to see if there is anything else He wants you to do. You cannot make someone else reconcile, but you can keep your heart clean between you, God, and that person.

If the situation is reversed and you are the one who was wronged and the person who offended you wants to reconcile, then you must obey God and respond with kindness, understanding, and a willingness to reconcile.

There is, however, one possible wrinkle in this last part, and that is if the person asking for forgiveness and reconciliation is not being sincere. There are people in the world who use some very clever means to manipulate and abuse others. There are some people out there who are just not safe. With these people, you should be willing to give them the benefit of the doubt and forgive them and be reconciled, but that does not mean you have to become close with them. This is not a negative attitude but a wise one. In life, there are those who are dear and close friends, and then there are those you have to keep at a distance because in one way or another they are not safe. You do not want to allow those who are angry, bitter, unforgiving, manipulative, selfish, or mean to be in a close relationship with you. You should pray for them, respond to them as Christ would have you respond, but it would be foolish to trust them. On the other hand, if they are truly trying to change, try to remain openhearted to them as you seek the Lord's guidance as to how you should interact with them.

Aside from this last example, making reconciliation a priority will bring you much peace and satisfaction in your own heart for doing the right thing in God's eyes.

LESSON 11: QUESTIONS

Please answer the following questions to Lesson #11. If there is not enough space in the blanks, feel free to use a separate sheet of paper for your answers. Please write or print legibly.

1. How would you describe the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation?

2. Without naming names, can you think of anyone you believe God would want you to pursue reconciliation with? _____

3. If your answer was yes, what is your plan to accomplish this goal?

4. What is your plan of response if they refuse?

5. Why do you think reconciliation is important to God?

6. Write an example of an incident where you have experienced reconciliation and how you felt about it.



LESSON 13 OVERCOMING SHAME

Shame is a powerful influence that can destroy the hope we have to become the person God has called us to be. Before we talk about how to overcome shame though, it is important to understand its role in our lives from both a positive and a negative perspective. Every person who has ever made a foolish decision or a wrong judgment, has experienced shame. This is actually a good thing.

Feeling ashamed for something we have done wrong is good. In this sense shame has a healthy place in our life. Everyone has done something wrong. Everyone has made mistakes. Everyone has given in to temptation. Everyone has said or done something to unjustly cause pain toward someone else. If we did not feel shame or were not ashamed of our wrong actions, there would be something seriously wrong with our hearts. We could be correctly evaluated as cruel, calloused, and mean. To be ashamed is a sign a person wants to change.

A hard-hearted person is selfish, self-centered, egotistical, and narcissistic. They are a drain and burden on everyone around them. They are a danger to themselves and a danger to society. There is no limit to the evil they can produce. However, if they have even a small sense of shame, there is a glimmer of hope toward becoming a better person.

From the negative perspective, we must not remain ashamed or allow shame to rule our lives. Once we have experienced the healthy response of shame after a foolish action, we are not to wallow in our failures or it will move from a healthy response to an unhealthy result.

The following is an outline of a constructive approach in dealing with mistakes and shame.

1. We recognize we did something wrong.
2. We are ashamed of our foolishness.
3. We respond to God with Godly sorrow. (Godly sorrow is simply being honest and sincere about what we did wrong.)
4. We recognize that because of Jesus Christ and His payment for our wrongdoing (sins), we are on the right course.
5. We can confidently move forward in our life as a follower of Jesus Christ.

1 John 1:9 (NLT)

... if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.

Romans 8:1-2 (NLT)

So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. 2 And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death.

Once we understand that all is well between us and the Lord, we can advance with boldness for His purposes. If, however, we continue to live in shame it will lead toward a victim mentality. We will fall into self-pity, selfishness, and self-absorption. In time, this will lead us to hard-heartedness toward the Lord, others, and life itself. At this point the issue of shame can lead to something as bad as the original mistake. We need to avoid this because God desires that we be free from the bondage of sin—and that includes living with a sense of feeling condemned.

John 8:36 (NLT)

So if the Son sets you free, you are truly free.

None of us know how long we are going to live on this earth. While we are here we are to glorify God in how we live and respond to the challenges of this life. Our ability to make mistakes is nothing new or surprising to God. Jesus died that we might have eternal life. It is through Christ that we are made righteous. We are to humbly, graciously, and thankfully accept this gift. If you are having trouble receiving God's forgiveness and shame continues to prevail, I recommend you take this to the Lord and ask for His help and healing.

The following is another example from Gary Skinner's life. It is a short story of how he received his breakthrough and healing from shame.

"Several years ago I went through a difficult season where shame would sneak up on me and throw me into a downward spiral of self-pity. It would seem to come around at times when certain words were said, and these words would trigger it. Even when these words would be mentioned casually and were not directed toward me, feelings of shame would well up inside nonetheless. A few of these words were "divorce," "felony," "prison," "bankruptcy," "judge," "court," and "criminal." I would try to counter these feelings by reminding myself that I had already been forgiven for the things I had done in my life. I would read Scriptures about God's forgiveness and the promises of what Jesus Christ had done for me. Even still, the shame would remain. Then, to make matters worse, I would start feeling shame for feeling shame. It was pathetic.

One day I was praying about this and asked the Lord for some extra help. I apologized for my weakness in not handling shame very well. In this place of helplessness, I called out to Him and said, "Lord, if you could help me out with these feelings, I sure would appreciate it."

Immediately, He gave me this picture in my mind. It was like a vision. I saw myself sitting in a hallway with about ten other people. I asked one of them where I was. He said that we were all dead and waiting to go into the next room where we would be judged. He pointed to a set of double doors and explained that when my name was called I would go through those doors to meet the judge.

I wasn't afraid because I knew my judge was Jesus and that this was going to be a good day for me. Jesus and me were on good terms. All of a sudden the doors opened and my name was called. I got up, walked through the doors and was astonished at what I saw. I was expecting something like a courtroom or even a classroom. It was a stadium. It was filled with thousands of people. In fact, it was so crowded there were chairs on the stadium floor with a long aisle

between that led up to a podium. Still at the entrance, I was told to walk to the podium and wait.

As I was walking down that long aisle I could hear people whispering. They were talking about me. They were saying things like, "Uh oh... do you know who that is? That's Gary Skinner. Do you know what he did?" And they started telling each other all the things I had done wrong in my life. What bothered me the most was that everything they said was true, which started making me nervous. By the time I reached the podium I was shaking with fear.

I looked ahead of me and there was an empty chair behind the judge's bench where the judge was to sit. The room was full of murmurings as I stood there waiting. Suddenly a door located behind the chair opened and in walked Jesus. He looked at me, walked around the judge's bench, opened his arms, and gave me a big hug and said, "Gary... it is so good to see you."

I was in tears as I responded, "It is good to see you too, but I was worried this wouldn't turn out so well. As I was walking down the aisle I could hear a lot of accusations and they were all true. They said this wasn't going to go well for me."

Jesus said, "Gary, don't pay any attention to them. They don't understand. They don't know about you and Me. You see, they weren't there that day when you got on your knees in that jail cell and asked for My forgiveness. They weren't there when you called out for My help. I was. And I forgave you of everything. You and Me are just fine."

Instantly the vision was over and the shame was gone. Since then, those trigger words have not affected me. Though this was something special the Lord gave to me that day I do not believe it was for me only. I think this vision is for everyone who is struggling with shame. If you are struggling, it is for you.'"

The apostle Paul had to deal with some very difficult things in his past regarding the church. He persecuted the church. He pursued those who were following Jesus Christ to have them arrested and beaten and imprisoned. Yet, when he turned his life over to Christ, he too was forgiven. The following verses are a good encouragement and reminder of how we are to live our lives from this point forward.

Philippians 3:12-14 (NLT)

I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me.

13 No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead,

14 I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.

LESSON 13: QUESTIONS

Please answer the following questions to Lesson #13. If there is not enough space in the blanks, feel free to use a separate sheet of paper for your answers. Please write or print legibly.

1. Explain how being ashamed or feeling shame can be a good thing.

2. At what point does shame move from being a positive response to a negative one?

3. Give an example of where you think shame has been an obstacle in your own life at some point.

4. Explain what you have learned about shame from this lesson that you had not thought of before.

5. If someone were to ask you how to overcome shame, how would you explain it?



LESSON 14 REJECTION

Rejection is a tough thing for everyone to deal with. Nobody enjoys being left out, ignored, or looked down upon. It is impossible to avoid dealing with rejection at some point in our lives as there is always going to be someone who doesn't approve of what we do, what we believe, or even who we are. Rejection can affect how we see ourselves, how we deal with others, and how we make decisions.

It is important to understand the difference between criticism and rejection. It is not unusual for a person to interpret criticism as rejection and therefore overreact. It is true that few people appreciate criticism even when it is meant to be constructive, but distinguishing the difference can make or break a relationship.

Criticism has to do with a person's behavior. If it moves into an arena of judging, it has now become personal and will often lead to rejection. A key is to be able to take emotion out of the equation and give the situation an honest evaluation.

A beginning question could be, "Who is criticizing me?" If it is someone you know and trust, there is probably a good reason for the criticism. If you know them and trust them it is unlikely they are being critical of you so as to be hurtful. In such instances you need to toughen up and find out what you might need to consider changing. In reality, they are trying to help not harm you.

At the same time, it is important to know that there are people in this world who do not have your best interests in mind and their criticism is not healthy, and they will often use rejection as a means to manipulate or hurt you. This is why it is important to evaluate each situation and correctly assess motives as best you can. This way you are less likely to overreact.

Being turned down for a job, not picked for a team, not accepted into a particular school, or being overlooked for a promotion are just a few of the many ways a person can be rejected in this world. When it comes to performance or qualification issues, there are some things to consider.

First, are you really qualified?

Here is another example from Gary Skinner's personal life.

"I remember as a kid being picked close to last when teams were chosen for basketball. The first few times this happened I felt horrible. What's wrong with me? I thought. After discussing the situation with a friend of mine, however, he pointed out that the problem was I was shorter and slower than the other kids in my class. He told me that I could perhaps work on getting better and faster, but I couldn't make myself taller, a trait that is important to the game. Then he reminded me of the things I was good at and encouraged me to focus on them instead. I took his advice and moved on."

If you are qualified and are still rejected there may be other things involved in the situation. For example, if a person is not given a promotion they are qualified for, there might be prejudices involved with the person making the decision and that is completely out of your

control. The decision maker might be jealous of you, or doesn't like your personal views on something, or has ulterior motives for giving the promotion to someone else.

Ultimately the most important thing to consider is that it simply might not be God's best plan for you. He knows everything and He might even be protecting you from something that will be a lot more devastating than you not getting what you wanted. There have been several occasions in people's lives where, when they look back, they can see that what they thought at the time was rejection and disappointment was actually a blessing.

If, when you feel rejected, you can accept all of these possibilities (not qualified, or the decision maker is making a mistake, or it is not God's best plan for you) then you can begin living your life in a healthier manner. Rejection will no longer ruin your day. We call this being comfortable in your own skin.

Perhaps you are uncertain about this idea of rejection playing a role in your life. Maybe rejection itself does not resonate as a problem but you have responses that are unknowingly connected to it. Often there are behaviors in people's lives that can be traced back to rejection as the root cause. Typically there are two: passive and aggressive. Symptoms of someone responding in a passive manner include loneliness, misery, self-pity, depression, and despair. Symptoms of someone responding in an aggressive manner include resentment, hatred, and rebellion. Rejection may not be the only cause but should definitely be considered at least in part.

The ultimate solution to overcoming rejection is in understanding and believing that God accepts us. The opinions of men have no value from an eternal perspective. The world has been rejecting followers of Christ for centuries. Yet, every person born again of God's spirit is completely accepted by God regardless of what the world may think. Our only interest in being accepted should be according to what God thinks. This is challenging because we tend to judge our worthiness of God's acceptance according to our actions. The important truth for us to embrace here is that we are worthy because of what Jesus Christ did for us, not because of how well we perform for God. Jesus Christ paid for our sins, which has made God's acceptance and love for us a reality.

Romans 8:38-39 (NLT)

And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. 39 No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Our frailties are never stronger than God's work within us. We cannot save or fix ourselves. Once we belong to Jesus Christ we cannot ruin ourselves either. Even in our weakest moments, God is working within us.

Philippians 2:13 (NLT)

For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him.

There are many things you can try to do to overcome rejection by positive thinking or mental gymnastics. In the end, however, rejection is a spiritual problem and can only be overcome by the spiritual intervention of God's love. A key to remember is that this is God's acceptance because of Jesus Christ, not something we have achieved on our own.

Ephesians 1:3-6 (NKJV)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, 5 having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved.

We believe the beginning point for overcoming rejection is to simply thank God you are accepted in the Beloved.

It is always good to pray your own prayers when speaking to God, but we are including a template for you to work from. We encourage you to get alone with the Lord and pray this prayer from your heart.

“Heavenly Father, I thank You that You loved me and You gave Your only Son, Jesus Christ to bear my sin, to bear my shame, to bear my loneliness, to bear my rejection and to die in my place. I have received Jesus as my Savior and I believe His blood has cleansed me from all my sin. Lord, I now forgive my parents for any harm or any wrong they have done to cause me to feel rejected. I forgive everyone else who has ever said or done anything toward me that has caused me to feel rejected. I forgive them, Father, as I would have You forgive me. I now lay down all bitterness, all resentment, all hatred and all rebellion. I thank You for Your forgiveness and Your acceptance in Christ. I thank You that You are my God, that You are my Father, and that You love me. I am not unwanted. I am not rejected. God is my Father and Heaven is my home. I am a child of God, a member of God's family, accepted in Jesus Christ. For this I thank You and praise You in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.”

LESSON 14: QUESTIONS

Please answer the following questions to Lesson #14. If there is not enough space in the blanks, feel free to use a separate sheet of paper for your answers. Please write or print legibly.

1. Everyone has to deal with rejection. Before this lesson would you say you have a tendency to withdraw and isolate or become angry when you are rejected?

2. Do you agree that removing one's emotions when analyzing a feeling of rejection can help a person evaluate it better? _____

3. If you agree, explain why.

4. Usually people will respond to rejection by either isolating themselves, or by getting angry. Give two examples, one where you have observed isolation and one where you have observed anger. This can be a personal experience or something you have seen in someone else.

Example of isolation:

Example of anger:

5. In this lesson we talked about two behaviors (passive and aggressive), where the root cause can be rejection. List some symptoms of each of these.

Passive: _____

Aggressive: _____

6. Ultimately our ability to feel accepted needs to come from God. All other acceptance is empty and we will find ourselves on an emotional roller coaster by looking to other people for validation. Explain in your own words why this is so important to know and understand.



LESSON 15

RESPONDING TO DISAPPOINTMENT

One of the most difficult challenges of being incarcerated is dealing with the reality of prison. Often the first glimpse of this reality takes place in county jail, as it is the first stop after the removal of freedom. Several thoughts may come to mind in the beginning, and for some, these thoughts are never reconciled—thoughts such as “I can’t believe I’m in jail,” “I didn’t deserve this,” “I don’t belong here,” “This is too harsh,” “This isn’t fair,” “I know other people who have done a lot worse things than me and they aren’t here.”

We can spend a lifetime analyzing the fairness or the harshness of the punishment. Doing so, though, is a waste of time, energy, and will do absolutely nothing to improve the situation. In the introduction of this course, we said that we are not interested in where you have been or what you have done but in where are you headed. Yes, there is value in evaluating our mistakes and there is value in learning from them, but to dwell in the past will not help the future.

In dealing with the circumstance of prison, some are caught up in their past life. Though it would seem that to do so would create a constant sense of regret, there are many who are actually proud of what they’ve done—how they “got one over” on their probation officer, or how they stole a large sum of money, or how they were a big time dealer on the street. Yet, when these people are alone and take the time to be honest with themselves, regrets usually surface. The side of them that the rest of the world sees when they are out on the yard or at chow is a lot of talk, and that talk usually contains more than some minor embellishments.

Those with this type of outlook also have a tendency to talk about the future and how they are going to “get back in the game” once they are out. They talk about money, their friends on the outside, and their old life back on the street. Aside from a few sobering moments from time to time, nothing has really changed. They have embraced the life of a criminal and no matter how smart they think they are, it is an empty, hopeless life, even if they never get caught (but they probably will).

In light of how far you have come in this course, we are assuming that these are not your ways. As a result, your thoughts of the past are more of regret and your future more of a concern about the changes ahead. But before you can truly move forward in a constructive manner, we believe it is imperative for you to learn to embrace where you are right now.

One of the toughest lessons that Gary Skinner learned in prison (as described in Plain Vanilla Wrapper) was how to embrace where he was once he realized there was nothing he could do to change that reality. When Gary finally did (which took about a year), everything began to look better despite no improvement in his circumstances.

When we talk about embracing where you are, we are not talking about your location only. We are also addressing your spiritual and emotional state. The following is another example from Gary Skinner’s life.

“In the early days of my incarceration, I was on the phone with my wife several hours each week. I was writing several letters every month and expecting others to respond. I was doing everything I could to not lose touch with the outside world. This was not by any means a bad

thing to do, but in my case it was unhealthy, as it kept me in a mindset of being trapped, stuck, and frustrated.

If you remember, there was that moment when I had to deal with the disappointment of losing my parole. I had been granted parole and was told I would be going home in sixty days. Three days before I was to be released from prison though, the parole board informed me that my parole had been delayed, and that I would have to come back for another review in thirty days. At that review, I lost my parole. I felt confused and abandoned by God. Yet, I was eventually able to come to grips with the situation to the point where my response to Him was “Lord, if I lose everything: my wife, my family, my friends...If it’s just you and me, it’s ok. I trust You, and You are ultimately all that really matters.”

There is a verse of Scripture where the Apostle Paul writes about a secret he learned.

Philippians 4:12-13

I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

Being content keeps our outlook in a positive perspective, as it is actually an attitude of trust that God will work things out. This may seem difficult or even impossible because it means we have to agree to let go of our plans and desires and give it all over to Him. For those who have been following their own path for many years, this is a big leap of faith.

To actually mean it when you say “If I have to stay in here for the rest of my life, if it’s just you and me Lord, it’s okay” is a much bigger concept than one might want to admit. Yet, that is exactly what we are asking you to consider in this lesson. We are asking you to make the decision to embrace where you are and to process the possibility that your location and your circumstances will never get any better. If you choose to make this decision, we are also asking you to live the rest of your life in abandoned surrender to Jesus Christ—to be His, and to do the best you know to follow His example and become the person God He has called you to be.

Most of you will not spend the rest of your days in prison. But if you can adopt the concept of embracing where you are while you are incarcerated, just think how much easier it will be to live for Christ on the outside. It will help you deal better with your family, your parole officer, the court system, perhaps the job you don’t like, or the halfway house you don’t especially enjoy. The secret of embracing where you are is something you will need to employ time and time again in the course of your life. The sooner you learn this secret, the sooner your circumstances will stop dictating your happiness.

LESSON 15: QUESTIONS

Please answer the following questions to Lesson #15. If there is not enough space in the blanks, feel free to use a separate sheet of paper for your answers. Please write or print legibly.

1. Describe as best as you can remember how you responded to your first few days in county jail or prison.

2. Would you agree or disagree with our advice in applying this concept of embracing where you are and learning to be content? (check one, please)

Agree _____

Disagree _____

3. Please explain why you checked the one you did. (This is not a matter of a right or wrong answer. We want your honest perspective on this topic. You may have other insights that we have not considered.)

4. Describe an incident in your life where you have seen your outlook on a situation improve once you accepted that you did not have the power to change the circumstance.

5. What benefits do you believe will accompany learning the secret of being content in any and every situation as described in Philippians 4:12-13?

6. An important point that we did not talk about in this lesson was that being content is not the same as being complacent. As best you can, explain how you see them as being different.



LESSON 16

THE VICTIM MENTALITY

An ironic thing we've noticed with inmates is the overwhelming number of them who seem to have a victim mentality. This is ironic because the main reason they are in prison is because they have made other people victims by their decisions and actions.

Playing the victim is a trap that all of us as humans have a tendency to fall into. For some this is encouraged at a very young age. For others it is squelched at a very young age. There are many perspectives in life that contribute either positively or negatively to our overall well-being which in turn effects how well we do in society. Having a victim mentality will ruin your life. Unfortunately, we live in a time in history where this is fostered through our educational system, media, politics, and culture.

Society is very anxious to either shift blame or impose blame onto almost anything or anyone besides the person who is to blame. Personal responsibility is often looked upon as some out-of-touch, insensitive, outdated philosophy. At least this is how it is talked about and promoted. There are even some who have made it their mission in life to misinform, mischaracterize and sometimes blatantly lie to keep people in a mental state of feeling like a victim.

This is how it is talked about and encouraged on the larger scale of things. Yet, this is not how people see it, or believe it should be on the smaller scale of day-to-day interaction with others. When someone we know personally does something wrong and they respond with a victim mentality we see them as morally weak. We might not say anything to them personally, but this does not change the fact that down deep we view them as whiners. Down deep we wish they would just grow up and act like an adult.

At the same time, when someone we know does something wrong and steps up to the plate and takes responsibility for their actions, we admire them. Once again, we may not say anything to them personally or even to someone else, but down deep we have great respect for their honest and mature response. Everyone makes mistakes. Everyone makes foolish decisions from time to time. The issue is not just a matter of doing what is right or wrong, but how we respond to our failures. Are we going to respond to what we have done wrong by making the decision to own it? Or are we going to compound what we've done wrong by choosing to be a victim?

The words or phrases of the victim mentality are familiar: "I was mistreated," "born this way," "can't help it," "I've been singled out," and the list goes on and on. At some point in all our lives we have found that we have certain limitations in learning, concentration, talent, or something physical. The following is another example from Gary Skinner's life experiences.

"When I was a freshman in high school I wanted to play football. At the time I was about five feet tall and weighed a hundred and fifteen pounds. After getting run over a few times by guys ten inches taller and a hundred pounds heavier I figured it out. Football was going to be a spectator sport for me. This didn't make me any less valuable, I just simply needed to spend my efforts on doing the things that I was better equipped to handle."

The common attitude of playing the victim among those incarcerated is something that I fell prey to during my time in prison as well. I found myself stuck between two worlds. In one world, I was honest and responsible. In the other, I felt sorry for myself and displaced blame. It was most prevalent while I was in county jail. I would mentally flip from one world to the other and back again several times each day. In one moment I would see how foolish the decisions I had made that had gotten me locked up had been and I would call out to God for forgiveness. A moment later I would think of others who had done worse than me and were not being punished at all. Or, I would blame others for my incarceration, rationalizing to myself that they were the ones who were really corrupt. This outlook continued for over a year. I call this attitude being "stuck in county jail."

The turning point for me came when I received a letter from a friend. The letter was not a normal letter but actually a sermon that they had transcribed. The text was from 1 Corinthians 13, known as the love chapter. The following is the part that got my attention."

1 Corinthians 13:4-5 (NIV)

4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

"After reading this, I realized that when it came to my thinking about the people I was blaming for my situation I had not been patient or kind. I had been angry and I had been keeping a long list of the things I felt they had done to hurt me. I had chosen to be a victim. It was at that moment that I sensed the Lord speak to my heart."

Gary, you are not in prison because of your former partner, or your attorney, or the prosecutor, or the judge, or the parole board. You are in here because of you. Now I want you to get rid of all this bitterness and unforgiveness and take responsibility for your actions.

"It was a defining moment for me. I knew these words were true. I knew I was in the wrong. So I asked God to forgive me and decided to stop playing the victim from then on. I decided to stop being "stuck in county jail." It is important to emphasize that this was a decision, a decision I had to make for myself. Over the years I have talked to many people who have the "stuck in county jail" mentality. Some of them have never even been to jail, but have chosen to live the life of a victim."

It may be very true that you have been mistreated, misjudged, and are serving a sentence that is unreasonably harsh. Regardless, you do not have to accept or choose to be a victim. God knows your heart and your circumstances and He will help you through your challenges. Your role and mine and every other person who calls themselves a follower of Jesus Christ must be to learn to accept who we are, where we are, and how we got there. And from there we must learn how to change what we can and in the meantime stop feeling sorry for ourselves.

Life on earth is not fair. This is why it is called "earth" and not "heaven." The good news is that this evil and unjust world is temporary and the perfection of heaven is eternal. God has a plan and a purpose for each of our lives. For us to fulfill His plan we must take responsibility for our decisions.

LESSON 16: QUESTIONS

Please answer the following questions to Lesson #16. If there is not enough space in the blanks, feel free to use a separate sheet of paper for your answers. Please write or print legibly.

1. Describe what having a victim mentality means to you.

2. Choose one of the following; educational system, media, politics or culture and then give an example of where you have seen one of these influences encourage others to be a victim when it was really just an excuse for failure or bad behavior.

3. Explain from your perspective what we mean when we say that a person is “stuck in county jail.”

4. Give an example of one time in your life where you were tempted to play the victim, (blaming others or circumstances for something you did wrong) but decided to take responsibility for your own actions.

5. Do you respect others more when they own up to their mistakes or does it really matter?

6. What do you believe are the long-term consequences of not taking responsibility for our own actions even if others let us get away with it?



LESSON 17 AMBITION

Most people consider ambition to be a noble attribute. It represents hard work, determination, and achievement. Although all of these things sound like they are good, it is critical for them to be directed toward the right things. A person could work hard at stealing. A person could be determined to get revenge. A person could strive to achieve fame in the world and neglect their family. The following is an explanation from Gary Skinner as to how he changed his perspective on ambition.

“During my time of incarceration I spent a lot of time thinking about how I had ended up in prison. I started to realize I was ambitious for the wrong things. After asking scores of inmates in prison about ambition, most of them agreed with me: most of them had spent countless hours putting energy toward the wrong goals.

In my quest to follow my decision to stop living life my way and endeavor to live it God’s way, I decided to see what the Bible said about ambition. As I began to read all the verses that used that word, there were only two instances that represented ambition in a positive light. All the others included the word “selfish” in the context. Many of those verses also explained the consequences of selfish ambition and how much God detested it.

As I got honest with myself, I realized that my ambitions were selfish and the results practically ruined my life and my family’s. There were two verses, however, that referenced ambition in a positive manner.”

Romans 15:20 (NIV)

It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known...

“Desiring to preach the gospel of Christ to those who have never heard is definitely a good goal. This is an example of ambition pursued for good purposes.”

1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 (NIV)

... make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, 12 so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

“These two verses in 1 Thessalonians especially resonated within me as I read and thought about how they applied to my life. I read and re-read them several times, practically taking each sentence apart word by word.

“Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life.” That had never been the goal of my heart. I didn’t want to lead a quiet life, I wanted to accomplish things, own things, be in the spotlight, and have the admiration of others. I thought, “How could leading a quiet life even be a goal? It seems like that would be easy.”

What I found was that being content with where God wanted me to be and doing what He wanted me to do was not as easy as I thought. Living quietly can be a huge challenge. We have a tendency to think that if our life is quiet, we are failing in some manner. We think we are not

accomplishing anything. Many of the jobs I did when I was first released from prison were low-paying, non-eventful, and went unnoticed by practically everyone. Yet, in retrospect I see many ways that the hand of God was on me, blessing and teaching me the value of simplicity and integrity.”

In the early years before David became King of Israel, he was nothing more than a shepherd. Hanging out in a field waiting for the sheep to grow some wool could be a dull existence. Yet, it was in those circumstances that God was training and preparing David to one day be a king.

Christ’s disciples, Andrew and Peter, were lowly fishermen. The Apostle Paul was a tentmaker. Jesus Himself was a carpenter. They all lived a secluded life until God brought them to a place of prominence. What is important to note is that it was up to God as to when, where, how, or if they would be in the spotlight. David, though a king, suffered many hardships in his personal life. Christ’s disciples were martyred. Jesus was crucified. Unless God chooses for you to become well known, a quiet life definitely has its benefits.

“Mind your own business.” How often have we gotten into trouble by making other people’s business our business? There are a lot of situations in life where we allow ourselves to speak out or get in the middle of something that really is none of our business. We throw our opinion in, or choose sides in an argument when we should have just kept our mouths shut.

“Work with your hands.” This is not to say that every Christian is supposed to only do jobs that require physical labor. You might be in sales, or communications, or counseling. It is not the working with our hands that is important, but that we take care of the work that is before us. Often our hands are involved in the work we do in some regard. What is important is that we quietly, diligently, and honestly go about our work and business faithfully each day without having outlandish goals that feed some selfish ambition. Goals are good and critical in planning, but when they are misdirected and selfish, they lead to other things that are not healthy for our future.

Along with the previous three instructions (lead a quiet life, work with your hands, mind your own business), Paul addresses another issue that ties into the concept of living a simple and honest life; laziness.

2 Thessalonians 3:10-11 (NIV)

For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: “The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.”

11 We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies.

Many of the men and women we have interviewed in prison have confessed that it was their laziness that led to committing crimes that hard work would have diverted to more constructive uses of their time. Often we are not lazy alone. We hang out with other lazy people and ideas are kicked around that promote activity leading to lying, stealing, and substance abuse. Many have agreed that if they were working a full day they would be too tired to get into trouble when they got home.

As verse twelve in 1 Thessalonians 4 says, **so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.** Being respected and not always having to rely on others is a good feeling. Respect takes a long time to earn and whether anyone actually says it or not, they respect others who quietly and humbly work.

No one enjoys being around a loudmouth. No one is fond of a busybody always nosing into other people’s business. And no one respects a lazy person.

To do well and to enjoy this life requires healthy relationships. For them to remain healthy we need to live our lives in a manner that warrants the respect of others and is honorable before God.

LESSON 17: QUESTIONS

Please answer the following questions to Lesson #17. If there is not enough space in the blanks, feel free to use a separate sheet of paper for your answers. Please write or print legibly.

1. Would you say that your ambitions in life before coming to prison were probably tied to selfishness? _____

2. Regardless of whether you answered yes or no, please explain why you gave this answer.

3. "Leading a quiet life," as mentioned in 1 Thessalonians, is not a popular concept. Do you think it is a good idea in this day and time, or is this instruction outdated? If so, why? If not, why not?

4. In prison, "minding your own business" can often be the only safe way to live. When it comes to living on the outside, however, life is usually not as dangerous. How do you see this instruction being valuable on the outside?

5. Do you think your life would be different if you had lived according to these instructions?

6. If yes, why? If no, why not?

7. Give an example or illustration of one thing you plan on changing that will help you gain the respect of others and is pleasing to God based on the things mentioned in this lesson.



LESSON 18

MONEY MATTERS

One of the most important topics that is sometimes overlooked when it comes to working through the process of reintegration from prison to the outside world, is money. There have been hundreds of books written on the subject and we recommend you look into some of those for a more in-depth study, but for now we are going to cover some basic concepts that will be helpful to you.

Many years ago, the founder and president of a successful corporation was speaking to a group of several hundred people. He was invited to share some of his secrets about becoming wealthy. The gentleman had traveled a long way to be at this function and the first thing he said was, "I don't know why you all paid me to come so far to tell you what I know about becoming wealthy. It's really this simple. Spend less than you make."

There is a crossroads we all come to with regard to money where we are faced with the decision to either deal with money God's way or man's way. It is impossible to follow the path of man without getting into gray areas regarding honesty. Man's way will usually lead to compromising values, which in turn will lead to greed and selfishness. Both greed and selfishness are issues of the heart and only you and the Lord know when you've crossed the line from managing finances in a wise and prudent manner to managing them from motives of greed and selfishness.

A person can be greedy and selfish whether they are poor or wealthy. There is not a magic financial number where you move from being generous to being greedy. Despite what might be said of wealthy people, there are many who are very generous. One would think that poor people would not be greedy and self-centered, but they are just as vulnerable to these attitudes as someone who is very well off. It is not about how much money you have or don't have, it is about the values you place on it. To emphasize this one more time: greed and selfishness can only be determined between you and the Lord.

Since most people already know how to be greedy and selfish, we are not going to give any further attention to those issues. What we are going to focus on has to do with looking at finances in a positive way from God's perspective and how you can begin to manage money in a Godly manner.

Let's begin with understanding who owns your money. God owns your money. In fact, He owns you. We are either a slave of money or a slave of the Lord. In Matthew 6, Jesus says the following.

Matthew 6:24 (NLT)

24 "No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

To be a slave of money is to have a life of turmoil, bondage, oppression, and deceit. At best, living as a slave of money is a deception. A person is deceived into thinking all is well. All the

good experiences tied to money and power are only satisfactory for a short time. There are many millionaires who are miserable. They are in bondage to fear, depression, and loneliness.

To be a slave of the Lord is really freedom because Jesus Christ has made us free. In the eyes of the Lord we are not His slaves but His children. We are sons or daughters of God. The world may view us as slaves of God and we at times may even describe ourselves as sold-out, bond-slaves to the Lord. But from God's perspective we are in His family and we are His children.

Once we embrace this concept that we belong to God and all that we have is His, everything in life becomes easier. We simply need to learn how to manage our time, money, and resources according to His leading. By doing so, giving becomes natural. Making good financial decisions becomes a matter of wisdom. Earning income, spending wisely, saving prudently, and giving generously all become a lifestyle as a son or daughter of God. Over time, it becomes simple and easy. The reason this takes time is because it often goes against the grain of how we have handled things in the past. We are not only endeavoring to change our habits, but our outlook. Therefore, it is a process.

There are essentially two ways to improve your financial circumstance.

1. Increase what you earn
2. Decrease what you spend

The optimum is to look at both and utilize God's wisdom and direction. Both have limits and therefore finding the right balance is important. Since each person is different in personality, potential, and circumstances, this process will vary depending upon many factors. But there are some basic things everyone can do to get moving in the right direction.

We have already covered some of the important ideas of this in previous lessons. The lesson on work and the lesson on planning complement each other and can help you with the issue of money. Also, the lesson on ambition provides some good boundaries to consider.

Since our overall goal is to deal with money from God's view and according to His will, it is very important to determine the method by which you are going to receive income and the kind of work you should do. Obviously, anything that is illegal, deceptive, or manipulative must be disregarded as an option. There is a phrase that says it well. "All honest work is honorable." Starting with honesty will give you a strong beginning.

Making a plan is critical. Nobody improves their financial circumstances randomly. Thought goes into every step. The basic steps include the following:

- Finding honest work
- Understanding your expenses
- Planning your income to meet those expenses
- Adjusting your expenses to be able to live within a budget

- A budget should include:
 - A) Giving – a principle often overlooked but spiritually sound.
 - B) Fixed expenses – things that are constant each month and necessary such as rent, utilities, food, and transportation.

C) Variable expenses – purchases you might like but don't need. As your financial circumstances improve you will have more spendable income and you should plan how excess will be used.

D) Savings – Both for the purpose of emergencies and sound financial practices.

- Developing and maintaining discipline to stick to a budget and the overall plan
- Staying steady

The following is an important verse regarding money. We have included three different versions of this verse to help give emphasis to a good point about this subject. This verse was written by Solomon, known as one of the wisest and wealthiest men in the Bible.

Proverbs 13:11 (NIV)

Dishonest money dwindles away, but whoever gathers money little by little makes it grow.

Proverbs 13:11 (NLT)

Wealth from get-rich-quick schemes quickly disappears; wealth from hard work grows over time.

Proverbs 13:11 (NRSV)

Wealth hastily gotten will dwindle, but those who gather little by little will increase it.

As we mentioned at the beginning of this lesson, there is much more to learn regarding money, but this is a great start. We encourage you to review this lesson often and apply these basic ideas immediately. You can learn wisdom and discipline with money even when you are in prison.

The following is a word of encouragement from Gary Skinner regarding how he dealt with this subject while he was in prison.

“During my incarceration I never asked my family to put money on my books. They never did. I got along just fine. I never ran a store. I never gambled. I always followed the rules. God always took care of me. He will take care of you.”

LESSON 18: QUESTIONS

Please answer the following questions to Lesson #18. If there is not enough space in the blanks, feel free to use a separate sheet of paper for your answers. Please write or print legibly.

1. What percentage of your reason for going to prison was tied in some way to money or your outlook toward money? _____

2. The Bible says that the love of money is the root of all evil. It does not say that money is the root of all evil. Do you agree or disagree with either of these statements?

3. Please use the spaces below to explain and give an example of why you agree or disagree.

4. Which do you think is easier, increasing income or decreasing what you spend?

5. Explain from your perspective why balancing both of these is important?

6. Name two things covered in this lesson that you have never applied in your own life, but you wish you had.

A) _____

B) _____

7. Why do you think the verses in Proverbs emphasize accumulating money “little by little” as a better way than getting rich quick?



LESSON 19 GIVING AND SERVING

Selfishness is not a learned trait. It is something we are all born with and will have to battle with on one level or another for most of our lives. Even in the observance of babies we can see this in their attitude of wanting to have attention given to them immediately. Their utilization of crying and screaming are innate methods of fulfilling this desire. It is true that they have legitimate needs that they cannot fulfill on their own, yet, as they get a little older they often continue using these methods to try to motivate adults to give in to their every whim.

Giving and serving rarely become part of anyone's character until they are old enough to understand their value. Even those who seem to have a cheerful and kind disposition fall prey to the temptation of selfishness.

The following is an account that Gary Skinner likes to refer to when teaching on this subject.

"I remember several years ago watching a five-year-old boy manage the responsibility of sharing some candy with his younger sister. There were seven pieces and he even announced his intention of being fair in his distribution.

"I'll pass out the candy so nobody gets cheated," he said, divvying it up. "One for you and one for me. One for you and one for me. One for you and one for me..."

Then the boy hesitated as he realized there were an odd number of candy pieces and somebody was going to come out a little short. But he quickly resolved the situation in his favor and said, "...and one for me."

Unfortunately, it is not only babies and children that are so determined to have their own way or make decisions that bring the greatest benefit to them. Adults are the same. In most cases they have progressed beyond the crying and screaming stage, but manipulating circumstances for personal benefit is still a part of their character.

Incarceration is the consequence of those who have taken selfishness to a whole new level. It is usually the attitude of being a taker that has landed them in this predicament. This is not to say that everyone in prison is a thief. Yet almost everyone in prison has taken considerable advantage of others. It might not be an outright theft of someone's possessions. It might simply be taking advantage of someone's kindness or trust. To soften the offense, some justify their actions by admitting they took something, but that they did it for a good reason. Regardless of why we do it, if we are takers we are in the wrong.

Since we live in a world where the dominant trait is to be a taker, we do have the challenge of discerning when to give, how much to give, and to whom. The best way we have found to determine the answers to those questions is to develop giving and serving as a lifestyle.

It begins with an understanding that we do not own anything. We may have a large bank account, but at the moment of death it is out of our hands as to how it will be spent from then on. We may have some paperwork that says a particular car or house is owned by us, but the moment we die, it is no longer ours.

Many people describe their place of residence with somewhat of a shameful tone because they are renting and not buying. Technically, everyone is just renting. Even if a person owns their home free and clear, it is a temporary situation. The reason it is important to understand that everything is temporary is so we can approach the ideas of giving and serving with the right perspective.

Jesus showed us the way of giving by giving His own life that we might have eternal life. He showed us the way of serving by serving the disciples. After doing so, he instructed them to do likewise, which is a model He would have us to follow. In Mark 10:45, Jesus clearly states our role as His disciples by what He says about Himself.

Mark 10:45

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

In reality, once we decide to follow Christ by embracing Him as our Lord and Savior, we no longer belong to ourselves. He owns us. Of course, since God created us, we never really did own ourselves. So when we surrender our lives to Jesus Christ we are saying that we trust His ways above our ways, and we no longer desire to live for our purposes but according to His.

The challenge is to keep this attitude and live it as a lifestyle. It requires that we deliberately choose to die to ourselves and be the living sacrifices the Bible instructs us to be every day—sometimes several times every day. By realizing we own nothing, not even our own lives, we then begin to move into the lifestyle of being better stewards of the money, time, and resources that we now understand are not ours but God’s. This will automatically cause us to want to manage things well.

When we live a lifestyle of giving and serving we begin to see ourselves in that light. The fifty dollars in my pocket is not mine, it is the Lord’s. I need to steward it the way He would have me steward it. This does not mean we can never buy anything for ourselves, just that our top priority in all things must be God and His interests. Knowing when and how God would have us spend His money is hinged upon our personal relationship to Him, and if we are growing in our walk with Him, we will become more sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit within us.

The following is another example from Gary Skinner’s life. He states,

“I have had times when I was carrying some cash on me and knew that if I gave twenty dollars to the person I was talking to it would change their whole week in a positive way. My first thought was to give them the money, but the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit told me not to do it. I sensed the Holy Spirit say it was not for me to give this person money as there was something else going on between them and the Lord that I did not know about. On other occasions, I have been talking with someone in need and I had no cash on me whatsoever. My thinking was that since I had no money with me I didn’t need to consider giving any to this person. But then the Holy Spirit impressed upon me to walk across the street to an ATM, withdraw some cash, and give it to them.”

This concept can be applied to how you spend your time and other resources as well. It also can be applied to serving. We are not to live lives of service out of obligation or guilt but

because of our freedom in Christ. We don't have to give money in every circumstance where we are asked for it. We don't have to give time or resources to every situation where someone asks. We are to have an attitude of giving and serving, but we have a responsibility first to obey the Holy Spirit.

As far as those times when we are uncertain about what the Holy Spirit wants us to do, a good philosophy is to err on the side of giving and serving. In other words, if you have the money, time, and resources to give and there is a need and you can't figure out what the Holy Spirit is saying, be the giver. This will help prevent selfishness from dominating your responses.

LESSON 19: QUESTIONS

Please answer the following questions to Lesson #19. If there is not enough space in the blanks, feel free to use a separate sheet of paper for your answers. Please write or print legibly.

1. On a scale between 1 and 10 with 10 representing extreme selfishness, how would you rate yourself five years ago? _____

2. On a scale between 1 and 10, how would you rate yourself today? _____

3. If there has been a change, explain why you think it has changed.

4. Prison can be one of the most difficult places to live a life of giving and serving because very few have anything to give and there are very few volunteer opportunities. Give at least one way you can be an example to others by living out this lifestyle of giving and serving while you are incarcerated.

5. Do you understand why living a lifestyle of giving and serving is a good policy for society and your own personal well-being? _____

6. If you answered “yes” on question number 5, explain why.

7. One of the principles we endeavor to inspire in those of you who are taking this course is to encourage you to give back to society in some way after you are released. Now that you know this, write out at least two ways you would like to give back in time, money, or resources.



LESSON 20 THE VALUE OF TIME

We only have one day at a time—actually, one moment at a time. Therefore, we need to take full advantage of making time work for us. There is a common phrase used among those incarcerated—“I’m just doin’ time.” We want to encourage you to move from “doin’ time” to *utilizing* time. In other words, instead of sitting around waiting for your release, determine to make each day valuable—now and for the future. Your participation in this correspondence course is an example of you taking a huge step in the right direction. Although your actual time in reading these lessons and answering the questions may not require a large quantity of time, the fact that you are following through with each lesson helps to develop a good habit pattern toward utilizing your time wisely. It is our prayer that these lessons will be an encouragement for you to do other constructive activities as well.

As we mentioned in the introduction of this course, we are interested in helping you develop in all areas of your life: mentally, physically, and spiritually. One of the core themes of this ministry is our belief that if you spend time each day with the Lord, endeavor to be honest, pursue humility, and surrender your will to His will, many of the details of your future will unfold in the right ways.

When it comes to the value of time, it is good to understand what it is and how it relates to all aspects of your life. Whenever we attend a funeral, we are clearly reminded of just how short life is. The following is Gary Skinner’s perspective on the value of time and how he worked through the changes of his attitude during his incarceration.

“When I was in prison, sometimes people on the outside would ask for my perspective of how time passed. I would say, “Minutes seem like hours; hours seem like days; days seem like weeks; weeks seem like months; and months seem like years.” This was my outlook when I was first incarcerated. All I thought about was getting out. In light of the 4-15 year sentence I was facing, this wasn’t the wisest place to put my focus.

After I began to embrace where I was, and after I started to learn the lesson of being content in any and every situation, both my perspective and attitude changed. I decided to start making time work for me instead of having the attitude of a victim. This is not to say there weren’t days when depression was a real challenge. This is not to say there weren’t moments of regret and disappointment. Yet the more I took charge of utilizing my time, the less it dictated my outlook on life.

One of the first ways I began making time work for me was by developing a routine for living each day. I began to plan my days with small goals and realistic expectations, and every day I asked myself two important questions:”

1. *How can I make this place as tolerable as possible?*
2. *What can I do in here to help prepare me for when I am released?*

“As I looked around the prison I estimated the total area that I had access to within the razor-wire fences, was a radius of a few hundred yards. If I was on the outside and did not own a car, I would probably only walk a few hundred yards each day anyway, so instead of looking at the fences as retention, I decided this was merely a boundary that made sense to live within.

If I was on the outside without transportation, I would try to get a job within walking distance, find a place to do my shopping within the same, and confine myself to simplicity. In other words, I stopped looking at what prison was taking away from me and started seeing these restrictions as a wise way to live my life.

In the beginning of this change, I would have a lot of thoughts throughout the day of wanting things I couldn't have or going places I couldn't go. But then I would remember two important verses from the Bible.”

Psalm 23:1

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

Philippians 4:19

And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

“As I contemplated these verses I would then ask myself, Gary, do you really want such and such? Do you really need it? The longer I would think about it the more I would conclude that I didn't really need it, and the longer I thought about not needing it, the more I was able to eliminate wanting it.

Sometimes as I went through this process I would conclude that I did need a particular thing—and sure enough, God would get it to me. Sometimes I would conclude I didn't need a particular thing and God would get it to me anyway, just for fun. What I didn't realize then was that I had begun to cultivate a deeper relationship with God because I was trusting in Him more and relying on myself less.

The second thing I started developing was preparation for the day I would be released from prison. The following are a few of the specifics implemented. This is an example only. You should design your own system according to what makes sense for you personally.”

- 1. Quiet time each day – Bible reading and prayer.*
- 2. Workout schedule – At different times I was more strict and aggressive with this, but found in the long run it was better for me to do a routine that was simple and steady (I was never an Olympic athlete).*
- 3. Paid attention to what I ate – Worked as best I could with the food from the cafeteria and tried to not eat too much junk from the canteen.*
- 4. Signed up for school – My options were limited, as the prison didn't really have a program with a degree, but it was still effective in keeping my mind engaged. Over time, thinking can stagnate without deliberate activity.*
- 5. Read a lot – Sometimes for learning and sometimes for fun. I personally tried to choose books that would push my vocabulary, but this was a personal preference.*
- 6. Took time each week to plan and evaluate my strategies for becoming successful once I was released – I tried to appraise my ideas by asking myself hard questions. At first, I*

would come up with some very wild ideas that weren't realistic. But as time went on, I discovered how to be honest and realistic in my future planning as well as my daily living.

7. Spent time each week thinking about how to restore relationships I had ruined – In some cases this meant writing some letters. In others, I knew a letter would not be sufficient or believable, and I would need to wait until I could meet the person I had wronged face to face and hope for the best.
8. Prayed for God's leading and wisdom in all these matters.

“Obviously there are a lot of good things we can choose to implement to make the best use of our time in prison. One of the saddest things I hear from many of the men incarcerated is their intention to change their ways and thinking after they get out. This is both foolish and unrealistic. Life on the outside is very busy, very distracting, and very alluring in its temptations to draw us away from wisdom and a new life with the Lord. Establishing good habits and developing good foundations are more easily done in times of solitude or respite. In light of this, prison could actually be viewed as a gift—a gift of time.”

Matthew 7:24-27 (NLT)

24 “Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. 25 Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won't collapse because it is built on bedrock. 26 But anyone who hears my teaching and doesn't obey it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand. 27 When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will collapse with a mighty crash.”

“Prison is an ideal time to learn how to let the Holy Spirit produce good fruit in you. Prison is an ideal time to listen and learn the teachings of Jesus Christ and begin the building of your house (your life in Christ) on the rock.

At the beginning of my incarceration, I realized I had very little good fruit in my life. Prior to prison I thought I had built a fine-looking house, but after I began to turn back to God, I realized that hadn't been true at all. Regardless of how good it had looked, it had still been built on sand and had collapsed.

I encourage you to take to heart the suggestions of this lesson and embrace the gift of time that has been awarded you. God will bless you eternally regardless of how long you are in this season.”

LESSON 20: QUESTIONS

Please answer the following questions to Lesson #20. If there is not enough space in the blanks, feel free to use a separate sheet of paper for your answers. Please write or print legibly.

1. Using a scale of 1 – 10 with 1 being very poor and 10 being very good, how would you honestly evaluate your use of time before arriving at prison? _____

2. Write a description of an example or write an explanation of how you arrived at this conclusion.

3. Using a scale of 1 – 10, how would you honestly describe your use of time since incarceration? (This is not meant to make you feel bad, but to face reality. Honest evaluation is positive not negative.) _____

4. Write a description of an example or write an explanation of how you arrived at this conclusion.

5. What are some of the things you've done up to this point to help you deal with keeping your sanity through incarceration? There are no right or wrong answers to this question. We are curious to learn how you have survived so far. We know it is not an easy place to live.

6. Do you agree or disagree with this concept of utilizing time to work for you in this season?

7. Regardless of your answer, please explain why you answered this way.

8. If you agreed with number 7, list at least three things you have decided to implement in utilizing your time better during the remainder of your incarceration time ahead.

A) _____

B) _____

C) _____



LESSON 21 CHOOSING FRIENDS

The term “friend” is loosely thrown around in today’s world. Few people know what it’s like to have a true friend, and even fewer seem to know how to be one. When it comes to developing friendships, it is important that we do so with the right people. There is such a thing as bad company. Gary Skinner explains how he views this important topic regarding the friends we choose.

“Though I was the one who ultimately made the decisions that ended up leading me to prison, there were some people who I had spent quite a bit of time with over the years who had contributed to the molding of my wrong thinking.”

1 Corinthians 15:33 (NASB)

Do not be deceived: “Bad company corrupts good morals.”

“This did not give me a pass. I couldn’t blame my poor decisions and behavior on them. The responsibility for my crime was mine alone. But as I evaluated the years leading up to my incarceration, I could easily pinpoint some relationships that were not healthy or good. One by one I started thinking about how I met each of these people, what it was that we had in common, why we spent the time together that we did, and then asked myself if they were good for me or not.

As I did this, I noticed that there were a couple of friends who were not only bad for me, I was bad for them. Whenever we got together, we’d push each other into poor decisions and these decisions would lead to terrible consequences. But as my desire to change and follow Jesus Christ grew, I realized that I needed to make changes in these relationships as well as in my behavior.”

Evaluating who we are going to be friends with is more about figuring out what a good friend is than becoming critical. Every person has flaws; there is no such thing as a perfect friend. Developing good, lasting friendships takes a lot of time and patience. The following are scriptures that give us some wisdom regarding what makes a good friend.

Proverbs 18:24 (NLT)

There are “friends” who destroy each other, but a real friend sticks closer than a brother.

Proverbs 27:5-6 (NLT)

An open rebuke is better than hidden love!

Wounds from a sincere friend are better than many kisses from an enemy.

Proverbs 12:26 (NLT)

The godly give good advice to their friends; the wicked lead them astray.

Proverbs 27:17 (NLT)

As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend.

Here are some questions you need to ask yourself as you evaluate your friendships.

- Is this person loyal?
- If so, are they loyal for the right reasons?
- Are they loyal because they are my friend and want the best for me, or are they loyal because of what they think I can do for them?
- Is this person honest?
- Will they tell me the truth even if it hurts?
- Is this person patient and understanding when I'm going through tough situations, or are they demanding?
- Does this person make me feel like I always have to live up to an impossible standard?
- Do they encourage or degrade me?
- Do they bring out the best in me?
- Has this person contributed to any bad habits I might have and poor decisions I might have made, or do they try to help me do the right thing?

After asking these questions, some of you may realize you have only one or two true friends among the many you had considered to be your friends. Some of you may realize that you don't have any true friends at all.

Once you recognize these unhealthy friendships for what they are, how do you break free of them? Our recommendation is that you let each bad relationship phase out on its own. You can be kind to these people when you see them, but do not go out of your way to nurture the relationship. Good friendships take a lot of effort, and if you choose to stop putting the energy toward it, it will become what it needs to be on its own. These people will then either start wanting to be around you for the right reasons, and they will start wanting to do what is right, or they will drift off and find other friendships that are more convenient to them.

Remember: you are the one who has the criminal record. You are the one on parole. Just being in the same room or house or car with those who are doing foolish things can put you right back in prison. Your so-called friends may get off with a warning or a ticket or possibly a little jail time, but you will not be shown the same mercy. You will be sent back to prison and you could be totally innocent of any wrongdoing. So, a little wisdom and discernment about whom you choose to spend time with could save you a lot of grief.

The next big question is how do you start to make the right kind of friends? We strongly believe that if you are truly seeking God's will for your life, God Himself will bring the right friends to you or you to them. It will simply happen. If you are a follower of Christ, the Holy Spirit will make it clear who and when someone is to be your friend as you go about your everyday life.

In the very beginning of these lessons you were asked to consider making the decision to live life God's way and not your own. If you are going to live life God's way it is time for you to grow up and be that man or woman God has called you to be. Your choice to do this will automatically attract to you the friends you need.

LESSON 21: QUESTIONS

Please answer the following questions to Lesson #21. If there is not enough space in the blanks, feel free to use a separate sheet of paper for your answers. Please write or print legibly.

1. Understanding that most of our decisions are influenced by the friends we keep, what percentage would you attribute your present situation being their effect and what percentage would you say doesn't matter and that you made your decisions completely on your own? (Example: 25% your friends influenced you; 75% was you without their influence)

Friends influence _____%

You on your own _____%

2. Everybody has had unhealthy relationships in their lifetime. List or describe some of the negative effects unhealthy relationships have had in your life. (This is not for the purpose of placing blame on others, but to get you to think about how important it is to have the right people influencing your future.)

3. Describe an incident in your life where someone (friend, family member, teacher, etc.) has influenced you to do the right thing, and though it might have been a difficult lesson to learn, you can see now that they were trying to help you.

4. Do you agree or disagree with our perspective that who you keep as your friends is critical to your success for the future? _____

5. Regardless of whether you answered yes or no, explain why you answered the way you did.

6. We often talk about having a plan. If you agree with us about the importance of having true friends and being a true friend to others, how do you plan to implement the changes you see that are necessary to bring this about?

7. Do you see yourself as a leader or a follower when it comes to those who are your friends?

8. Give an example in your life where that supports your answer.



LESSON 22

A LIFE OF THANKFULNESS

To live a life of thankfulness requires both a decision and discipline. It is the mark of a disciple of Jesus Christ. The challenge to be thankful comes in the moments when tragedy, crisis, or disappointments are upon us. Anyone can be thankful when life is going well, yet it is surprising how many people choose to remain unthankful even in the midst of good times.

1 Thessalonians 5:18 (NLT)

Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.

Sometimes the best way to understand a verse is to look at what it is not saying. In this case it is not saying that we should be thankful for bad things happening, but to be thankful regardless of our circumstances. This is not an instruction to be thankful that your leg is broken, but to be thankful despite your leg being broken. There are many things to be thankful for that are outside of our immediate circumstances.

To follow this instruction is to choose to be thankful. All behavior has to do with making a choice. All responses require a decision. The question is now a matter of what you will decide. As we learn to rely on the Holy Spirit to guide our lives, we will actually experience this decision become easier over time. Choosing to be thankful can actually develop into a natural response to difficulties. However, it will require some discipline on your part to cultivate this concept before it becomes second nature. It necessitates training your mind to align with your heart.

Followers of Jesus Christ have thankfulness in their hearts. We are confident that if we asked you how you are supposed to respond to a situation where you have been wronged, you would soon come to the conclusion that being thankful is the correct answer. Once again, we are not saying to be thankful that you have been wronged, but thankful in spite of the offense. The following is an example from Gary Skinner's life and how he applied thankfulness at a difficult time.

"In an earlier lesson I talked about my response after my parole had been cancelled for no apparent reason. I had been in prison for almost a year when I was awarded parole. Three days before I was supposed to go home, the parole board told me they needed to see me again in thirty days, and at that meeting they informed me that they were revoking my parole. When I asked them why, they only said that they had changed their mind. They didn't give me any other explanation.

After processing this situation for a while with the Lord, I finally came to the conclusion that trusting Him was the only way to respond. "Lord, if I lose everything and it's just you and me, it's ok."

This was actually the first part of a two-part response. The second part was that I decided to be thankful. I took a breath and then said, "Thank you Lord, that I can breathe." I took a step and then said, "Thank you Lord, that I can walk." From there I expanded my prayer into thanking God for everything I could think of.

As I think back on that day there are three things that come to my mind. The first is that this response of thankfulness was the perfect response. The second is that I regret to say that I have not

always responded this well in every situation. The third is that it was the Holy Spirit who was at work in me to be thankful in this very challenging moment in my life.”

From a practical standpoint you will soon learn there are many things you cannot do in the midst of being thankful. You can't whine or complain. You can't be angry while thankful. In fact, it is impossible to express any kind of negative attitude and remain thankful. Being thankful clears a path to many positive reactions from yourself and others.

There is no question that living a life of thankfulness is the right way to live. The key is in knowing how to develop it.

The first step is to decide to believe it. Once we choose to be a thankful person according to 1 Thessalonians 5:18, then the second step is disciplining ourselves to follow through with this choice. The third step is to surrender to the Holy Spirit and let Him guide you in making thankfulness a lifestyle.

Galatians 5:16-17 (NLT)

16 So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves. 17 The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions.

We need the help of the Holy Spirit in every area of life where we are faced with doing right or wrong in the eyes of God. Being thankful is opposite of what we want to do. We believe that making the decision to choose thankfulness is up to us, but carrying out the discipline to respond with thankfulness on a regular basis requires help from the Holy Spirit. Recognizing that we need help to carry out God's will in our lives is not weakness. It is wisdom.

It is important to understand that thankfulness is not tied to cause and effect when it comes to our circumstances. In other words, choosing to be thankful does not guarantee a particular outcome. You can't manipulate a situation in your favor by being thankful. Though Gary chose to be thankful when the parole board revoked his parole it did not cause them to reinstate it.

We need to keep our hearts clean about this. We do not want to be telling the Lord that since we are responding with thankfulness, He owes us some benefits. Sometimes people will say, "I was thankful, but nothing got any better. Why should I stay thankful?" Once again, it is not about cause and effect. It is about obedience. The Scripture says, "Be thankful in all circumstances." It does not say, "Be thankful in all circumstances and then you will get what you want."

There is, however, one effect that you will probably notice over time by responding with thankfulness in an unthankful situation. You will get a sense of inner strength well up inside of you. We believe it is the Holy Spirit giving encouragement to press on.

As you grow in this lifestyle of thankfulness and keep your dependency on the Holy Spirit, you will find that your prayers are dominated more with thanksgiving than they are with requests. Instead of spending a lot of time asking God for things (which is not at all a wrong thing to do), you will recognize that your prayer times are more about thankfulness. This is a sign of faith and spiritual maturity. We encourage you to apply this as a lifestyle and as you do you will notice that fewer and fewer things in this life will drag you down. Thankfulness is a great remedy for depression.

LESSON 22: QUESTIONS

Please answer the following questions to Lesson #22. If there is not enough space in the blanks, feel free to use a separate sheet of paper for your answers. Please write or print legibly.

1. Why is both decision and discipline important in living a life of thankfulness?

2. Why do you think Scripture tells us to be thankful in all circumstances? Why is it important as a follower of Jesus Christ?

3. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives when it comes to being thankful?

4. Give an example of one time in your life where you decided to be thankful in spite of the fact that it would have been easier to complain.

5. Do you think others notice when we respond with thankfulness at a difficult time?

6. Is it important for them to notice? _____

7. Do you agree with the statement "thankfulness is a great remedy for depression?" _____
If yes, why? If no, why?



LESSON 23 CHRIST IN YOU

The following is something Gary Skinner experienced while teaching on this subject of Christ in You in a prison.

“Several years ago I was speaking to a small group of men in prison. There were about twenty of us present. We were seated in a circle, and as I read from the following verse, I sensed the Holy Spirit speak to me with some direction.”

Colossians 1:25-27 (NKJV)

... I (Paul) became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God, 26 the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. 27 To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

“As soon as I finished reading “Christ in you,” I stood up and walked around to each of the men, looked them in the eye, and said to each one of them, “Did you know it is Christ in you?”

The responses I got were interesting. Some only looked back at me for a moment; others smiled a little; several got tears in their eyes—but all were encouraged—and as I finished with the last man, something came to mind. It was the realization that most people, if not all, have never had someone look them in the eye and tell them the truth about something they hoped was true but did not fully believe in their hearts.

To read something can have a strong impact, but when we hear the truth spoken directly to us it can open our hearts to receive the same information on a deeper level. On that particular night at that particular moment, I knew something needed to be done to clarify this reality in the hearts of these men, and as a part of this course I am going to do the best I can to help you understand how this can be a reality of understanding for you as well.”

In John Chapter 3, Jesus explains to a man named Nicodemus how this works.

John 3:5-8 (NLT)

5 Jesus replied, “I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. **6** Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. **7** So don’t be surprised when I say, ‘You must be born again.’ **8** The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can’t tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can’t explain how people are born of the Spirit.”

There is a consistent theme that you may have noticed throughout the Scriptures. It is, “God’s part and my part.” There are certain things that only God can and will do and then there are instructions that God gives each of us to do and to obey.

John 3:16 (NLT)

16 “For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

Romans 10:9-10

9 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. 10 For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by confessing with your mouth that you are saved.

Here it is simple: God gave us Jesus. Jesus laid down His life for us. And our response is to believe and confess.

To believe Jesus has chosen us and that we are to embrace Him as Savior and Lord is all that is required on our part. We don’t even have to know how it happens. Jesus Himself said in John Chapter 3 that nobody knows how this works. Lots of things in life are unexplainable yet it does not change the reality of their existence. Jesus used the example of the wind. Can you explain it? Of course not. Is the wind real? Of course it is. Can you explain how someone is born again? Of course not. Is it real? Absolutely.

The moment someone is born again of God’s Spirit, Christ begins to spiritually reside in them. You may have heard the phrase “Invite Jesus into your heart.” Although this is not the exact terminology from Scripture, it does give us a mental picture of this unexplainable event.

Here is an overview: God the Father did His part by sending Jesus Christ to Earth to die for our sins. Jesus did His part by choosing to obey and sacrifice His life. God then did His part again by raising Jesus from the dead after three days.

We do our part by believing this to be true and confessing that Jesus Christ is our Lord. We choose to surrender our will to His. Then we begin living as a follower and disciple of Jesus Christ.

This believing and confessing is a matter of the heart and it happens in a split second. At that moment, God does His part one more time by imparting the Spirit of Christ into us. We are then spiritually reborn. We not only have the hope and promise of eternal life, but we have the power to overcome sin and become more like Christ because He now lives in us.

Why is this important? It is about knowing who the real you is. When you look in the mirror who do you see? A former criminal? A current criminal? A bad dad, a lousy friend, an abusive husband? A pretend Christian?

Perhaps we should ask this question in a different way: when was the last time you looked in the mirror and really believed that Christ lives in you? We’re not talking about seeing perfection because we all fall short; we all have flaws. However, there is a very healthy thing that takes place when you look in the mirror and see the potential of becoming like Christ, because you know in the depth of your heart that He is alive in you and is transforming you by the Holy Spirit.

The Apostle Paul says,

Philippians 4:13 (NLT)

For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength.

Paul was very aware of his own weaknesses. He knew that apart from Christ he could not be effective at anything, yet with Christ he could do everything he was called to do. Paul was aware of the power of Christ in Him. It is that same power that lived in Paul that lives in you. It is Christ in you.

At some point you will begin to understand this much better than anyone could explain it, and it will be an understanding that comes from God Himself. When that happens, you will be in awe of how big God is and how small you are. You will also stop seeing yourself as anything less than God's perfect creation. You will live in power over sin and in the power of God's love toward yourself and others.

Did you know that it is Christ in you? Well, it's true!

LESSON 23: QUESTIONS

Please answer the following questions to Lesson #23. If there is not enough space in the blanks, feel free to use a separate sheet of paper for your answers. Please write or print legibly.

1. When you read about what took place that evening in the Bible study where I walked around and told each man “Did you know that it is Christ in you?” what came to your mind?

2. Prior to this lesson, have you thought about or known much about this phrase “Christ in you”? _____

If someone asked you, “What does Christ in you, mean?” How would you answer?

3. Do you think having a clearer understanding of “Christ in you” is helpful in your life as a Christian? _____

4. Why or why not?

5. Describe an incident where you looked to God instead of yourself for help and strength in a situation and in looking back on that incident you know without a doubt that it was His strength that carried you through.

6. If someone asked you how to be born again, how would you answer them?



LESSON 24

THE ETERNAL RELATIONSHIP

Developing our relationship with Jesus Christ is one of the most important ideas in our Christian experience, yet it seems to get overlooked more often than one might realize. Becoming born again of God's Spirit is of course the beginning of that relationship. Prior to this we were literally without God and without hope. For some, very little is done past that initial introduction to Jesus and very little takes place to develop their bond with God. In this lesson we would like to emphasize the importance of developing your relationship with Him and explain how simple it really is. The remainder of this lesson is Gary Skinner's explanation of how he became awakened to this idea of an eternal relationship with God.

"In the fall of 1996, I decided to face up to a secret fear I had been dealing with for many years. It was the fear of being what Jesus describes in the book of Matthew as "a bad tree."

Matthew 7:17-20

17 A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit. 18 A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit. 19 So every tree that does not produce good fruit is chopped down and thrown into the fire. 20 Yes, just as you can identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their actions.

"When I looked over the past years of my life at that time, all I saw was bad fruit. I had been raised in a Christian home, had professed to be a Christian for most of my life, yet much of what I had done for many years was to become an expert at making a mess of things. During all the years from my childhood up to the time I was incarcerated I had been an avid Bible reader. I knew a lot of Scripture and could quote verses and give advice to others that was actually quite good. I attended church and Bible studies faithfully throughout those years. I knew a lot about the history of Jesus and about His teachings, yet, with all this information and instruction, my life was a disaster.

I had been out of prison for about three and a half years and though much of my life appeared to be going better, that secret fear would not go away. Out of desperation to settle this and to do the best I knew to get on track, I decided to get on my face before the Lord and make the best effort I knew to be honest and open with this fear. I had recently heard a sermon where we were told that if we really wanted to get close to God, we needed to get on our face and worship Him. This sounded reasonable to me, so I decided to give it a try.

I remember going home from church that night and getting into a room by myself. I laid face down on the floor and started talking to the Lord.

"Lord... is this what you want? Is this what I need to do to get close to You? Is this true worship?"

I had been praying for years. I knew how to ask God for things. I knew how to beg for His mercy. I knew how to cry out for forgiveness. I knew how to ask Him to get me out of my

messes. This, however, was something new. I didn't really have an agenda other than a desire to know Him better and by not bringing a list of things I wanted, I experienced an awkward silence. There was a part of me that was laughing inside. This is ridiculous, I thought. You don't have to get on your face to talk to God. He is everywhere, and He hears you whenever you speak. You are being silly.

Yet, there was another part of me that sensed I was on to something... something important for me to learn. I remember laying there and saying, "Lord, I know a lot of Bible verses and I know a lot about you, Jesus... but I don't think I know You. Will you teach me about You?"

As I continued to lie there, I sensed that I had uttered perhaps one of the most important requests I could ever make. As I look back seventeen years later, I can sincerely say that it was definitely true. I continued there on my face for over an hour. What came to me was that I didn't need to figure anything out. I was being honest and humble before the Lord and whatever He wanted to do with me was going to be a good thing. Nothing significant took place that first time other than a sense that I needed to do this again, often.

Over the next eight months or so I continued this exercise. Three to four nights a week I would come home from work, get on my face, and say nothing other than, "Here I am Lord. I'm here to worship You. Have your way in me." I would do this for an hour to sometimes three hours at a time. Again, most of the time, nothing happened. To be honest, there were a lot of times where I would end up falling asleep. Yet, I did not feel badly about it because I knew I was doing what God wanted me to do. It was me, on my face, waiting on the Lord and experiencing nothing at all as far as I could tell.

On a few occasions, though, I felt as if the presence of the Lord was so strong I was glued to the floor and couldn't move. On two occasions I remember feeling as though the Lord was breathing on me. Often I would lie there and tears would stream down my face. I didn't feel particularly sad or happy... it was as if there was some kind of cleansing going on.

The most noticeable thing that I experienced was a transformation in my actions and responses to situations in life that in the past I had not handled well. God was changing me from the inside out. I was living out freedom from personal bondages that I had come to believe would never go away.

There is a verse in Romans that I have come to appreciate, particularly the New Living Translation."

Romans 12:2 (NLT)

2 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.

"I was cooperating with God's plan. I was letting Him have His way in me. I was no longer resisting the Holy Spirit. I was also getting to know the Father, Jesus Christ, and The Holy Spirit in a new way—a personal way. In John Chapter 15, Jesus tells His disciples that they are now His friends. We too are Jesus' disciples, and we too are His friends. I was learning what this friendship really means."

John 15:15 (NLT)

15 I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn't confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me.

"Since that season of "time on my face" many years ago I have found several ways to connect with the Lord by simply spending time alone with Him. Sometimes I still get on my face. Other times I will go for a walk or just sit somewhere by myself and wait on Him. I realize it is more difficult to find a place to be alone with the Lord while you are incarcerated, but if you think about it for a while, you will come up with some method to shut out the craziness around you and get peaceful in your heart before the Lord if you want to badly enough. Ultimately it is not a matter of position of our body, (kneeling, getting on our face, the folding of hands, etc.) but the posture of our hearts. God knows us better than we know ourselves and He will meet us anywhere out of our sheer honesty to be with Him and our desire to let Him transform us.

I encourage you to take this lesson of time alone with God very seriously. If you do, you will discover a greater relationship with God than you ever knew was possible."

LESSON 24: QUESTIONS

Please answer the following questions to Lesson #24. If there is not enough space in the blanks, feel free to use a separate sheet of paper for your answers. Please write or print legibly.

1. Do you believe that time alone with God is important for everyone to grow in their relationship with God, or is this something that is not really necessary? Please explain your answer whether you agree or disagree. (There is no wrong answer to this, we want your opinion)

2. Give an example of someone from the Bible who spent a lot of time alone with God and how you believe it affected their relationship?

3. Describe what you believe the difference is between knowing about God and knowing Him on a personal level.

4. If you agree with Gary's perspective on time alone with God, what plan do you have to do more of this in your own life?

5. If someone were to ask you what transformation means, how would you explain what it is and how it happens?
