

## Sermon Outline

### ***God's Power to Change Your Life*** **Chapters 1–2**

Most people long to see lasting change in their lives because they know there is room for improvement.

#### **Introduction**

The power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead 2000 years ago is available to change our lives now. We don't have to live with regret over past failures, pain from old hurts, and guilt for sins. Paul says in Colossians 2:13–14 that God forgives all our sins and cancels every debt we owe to him. Jeremiah 31:34 says that God *chooses* to forget our sins. This means God will never treat us as our sins deserve. On the cross Jesus cried out *tetelestai*, "It is finished!" Our debt to God has been "paid in full."

As we trust God's promises for life-changing resurrection power, we have resources to face our problems and to see real, lasting change in our personalities. In partnership with God, we can cultivate a transformed life. As we study the Bible, as we depend on the Spirit, and as we learn from difficult circumstances, God unleashes power to become more like his son, Jesus. The character traits of Jesus are revealed in the "fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22–23). Over time as we partner with God, the resurrection power of Jesus transforms us into the kind of people we long to be, into the very people God designed us to be.

Let's begin right now to experience each "fruit of the Spirit" as indicators of becoming more like Jesus—a truly changed life.

## ***God's Power to Change Your Life***

### **Chapter 3: Becoming a More Loving Person**

"Love is probably the most misunderstood word in the world" (p. 47). The word describes many things—I love good pizza, I love my dog, I love my car, I love my spouse. Overuse and misuse of the word *love* has gutted its deep, rich meaning. In the Bible, love is a choice, and that choice is about *conduct*, not about feelings.

The Greek language has four words for love—*storge* means natural affection; *eros* means sexual attraction; *philia* means emotional affection; and *agape* means unconditional, sacrificial action. God calls us to express *agape* to everyone, even though we may not feel an emotional affection toward them. We are called to speak and act for the well-being of everyone.

1 Corinthians 13:13 "... the greatest of these is love."

Let us consider five steps to growing in Christlike love.

#### **Step 1: Experience God's Love**

Before we love others, we must feel and understand God's deep love for us.

"And I pray that Christ will be more and more at home in your hearts as you trust in him. May your roots go down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love really is" (Ephesians 3:17–18, New Living Translation).

"Why is it important to feel loved by God? Because unloved people become unloving people."

John 15:12 Jesus said, "Love each other as I have loved you."

#### **Step 2: Forgive Your Enemies**

In learning to love others, we must forgive those who have hurt us.

"Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:13, New International Version).

To begin loving people today, we must close the door on the past with its hurts, grievances, and resentments.

#### **Step 3: Think Loving Thoughts**

"The people we would rather ignore are the very ones who desperately need massive doses of love" (p. 54).

We need to think loving thoughts to help shape loving actions. "For as he **thinks** within himself, so he is" (Proverbs 23:7a, New American Standard Bible). Look beyond the faults of others and see their needs.

#### **Step 4: Act in Love**

To act in love toward others when we don't feel like it is not hypocrisy; it is loving by faith.

"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you" (Luke 6:27–28, New International Version).

How can we do this?

- Love your enemies.  
Ephesians 4:2
- Do good.  
Look for ways to give, serve, and help those we don't like.
- Bless those who curse us.  
"A blessing is a positive word spoken to or about others" (p. 57).
- Pray for those who mistreat you.  
Through prayer God changes us even as he changes others.

#### **Step 5: Expect the Best**

"If you love someone ... you will always believe in him, always expect the best of him" (1 Corinthians 13:7, Living Bible).

Love expects the best of others, even those we don't like. People rise to the expectations of them. Treat others in the way you would like them to become.

Specific application: Marriage Relationship

To resurrect love for your mate, remember his or her good qualities and repent of your own negative thoughts or fantasizing about being married to someone else. Take action. Do things you did when you first fell in love. Commit yourself to your spouse regardless of his or her faults and failures.

***God's Power to Change Your Life***  
**Chapter 4: The Choice to Rejoice**

"If you ask people what their number one ambition in life is, most people will say, 'I just want to be happy'" (p. 65).

Trying to appear happy when we're not creates tremendous stress. Being happy is easy when things are going our way. How can we be happy in a world that is falling apart? How can we be positive in a negative world?

Galatians 5:22, "The fruit of the Spirit is ... joy."

Philippians 4:4, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"

"Happiness depends on happenings" (p. 66). Joy is different and much deeper. Joy is inside us, a choice we can make. "Joy is what makes life—well—enjoyable."

We can learn to choose joy and be the most positive people in the world. Let's consider three reasons why.

**Reason 1: We Have Hope**

"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" (Romans 5:1–2, New International Version).

"For a Christian, no situation is completely hopeless. Christians have hope.... And joy is impossible without hope" (p. 68).

Romans 12:12 (New International Version) "Be joyful in hope."

Many people place their hope in artificial, temporary things: the stock market, good looks, big salary, nice job, good family.

**Reason 2: God Has a Purpose for Our Lives**

"Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance ..." (Romans 5:3, New International Version).

The Greek word for "sufferings" refers to things that put us under pressure.

"Joy is learning to enjoy life in spite of problems" because God is with us (pp. 69–70).

Christians don't deny problems or act like nothing is wrong or hypocritically fake joy. Christians find joy in the truth that God uses our problems to achieve his purpose in our lives and to adjust our perspective onto what suffering produces in us.

Suffering produces ...

- Perseverance (the ability to handle problems)
- Character (proven reliability over time)
- Hope (confidence in God's power and purposes)

“When we learn to rejoice in problems—not *for*, but *in* the problems—God uses it for good in our lives” (p. 73).

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance” (James 1:2–3).

Book of Philippians—a book about **joy** while Paul was suffering.

### **Reason 3: God Is with Us**

“But that is not all; we rejoice because of what God has done through our Lord Jesus Christ, who has now made us God’s friends” (Romans 5:11, Good News Translation).

“When you pass through deep waters, I will be with you; your troubles will not overwhelm you. When you pass through fire, you will not be burned; the hard trials that come will not hurt you” (Isaiah 43:2, Good News Translation).

“No matter what you go through in life, you will never go through it alone.... Joy is like a muscle. The more you exercise it, the stronger it becomes” (p. 72).

Here are four activities to exercise your joy muscle:

- Develop an attitude of gratitude  
1 Thessalonians 5:18 (New American Standard Version)  
*In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*
- Cultivate inner joy through giving  
Acts 20:25  
*Jesus himself said: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."*  
2 Corinthians 9:7  
*... for God loves a cheerful giver.*
- Develop inner joy through service  
In Mark 8:35 Jesus tells us that to find our lives we must lose them.  
Ephesians 6:7–8 (New International Version)  
*Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.*
- Share Christ with others  
Luke 15:10 (New International Version)  
*In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.*  
Romans 10:1 (Good News Translation)  
*My friends, how I wish with all my heart that my own people might be saved! How I pray to God for them!*  
Ask God for a passion for the lost like Paul had.

***God's Power to Change Your Life***  
**Chapter 5: Peaceful Living in an Uptight World**

"Everyone wants peace of mind.... But most of us have to admit that we experience more stress than peace" (p. 81).

Stress is epidemic in the modern world, creating unhealthy people. Three thousand years ago Solomon wrote, "A heart of peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones."

What is peace of mind? We need three kinds of peace: *spiritual* peace—peace with God (Romans 5:1); *emotional* peace—inner tranquility of heart (Colossians 3:15); and *relational* peace—peace with others (Romans 12:18).

Jesus offers a peace not found in this world, and he offers this peace as a gift. Jesus said, "I leave behind with you—peace; I give you my own peace and my gift is nothing like the peace of this world. You must not be distressed and you must not be daunted" (John 14:27 Phillips).

There are five keys to acquiring God's perfect peace.

**Key 1: Obey God's Principles**

Psalm 119:165, 167

*Great peace have they who love your law,  
and nothing can make them stumble.*

*I obey your statutes,  
for I love them greatly.*

"... [Y]our life will run more smoothly if you live according to God's design as presented in his Word. It is that simple. If you want to be at peace, obey God's principles" (p. 86).

**Key 2: Accept God's Pardon**

"Guilt is the number one destroyer of peace for most people" (p. 87).

Micah 7:18

*Who is a God like you,  
who pardons sin and forgives the transgression  
of the remnant of his inheritance?  
You do not stay angry forever  
but delight to show mercy.*

1 John 1:9

*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

God's peace and our sin cannot coexist.

**Key 3: Focus on God's Presence**

Isaiah 26:3

*You will keep in perfect peace  
him whose mind is steadfast,  
because he trusts in you.*

"If you look at the world, you will be distressed; if you look within, you will be depressed; but if you look at Christ, you will be at rest.... Focus on God's presence" (p. 88).

Tension and stress are warning lights on the dashboard of our lives.

Two things to do to get God's help in times of trouble (Psalm 46:1, 10):

- Be still.
- Know that God is God, and God is with you.

#### **Key 4: Trust God's Purpose**

Proverbs 3:5–6

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart,  
and lean not on your own understanding;  
In all your ways acknowledge Him,  
and He shall direct your paths.*

"All God expects from you is to trust him without trying to figure everything out. Acknowledge that God is in control.... Indecision produces stress. But when we trust in the Lord, he directs our paths, and makes them straight, not stressful" (pp. 93–94).

- Paul learned this truth—Philippians 4:2.
- Jesus lived this truth—Luke 8:22–25.
- Peter experienced this truth in prison—Acts 12:1–19.

#### **Key 5: Ask for God's Peace**

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6–7, emphasis added).

"Prayer is the cause; peace is the effect" (p. 96).

Jesus warned about the troubling effects of worry (Luke 8:14).

Peter gives us good counsel, "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7).

"Peace is not a trouble-free life; it is a sense of calm in the midst of life's storms" (p. 97).

#### **The Serenity Prayer**

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the  
difference.*

***God's Power to Change Your Life***  
**Chapter 6: Developing Your Patience**

"The famous psychologist-educator John Dewey said that the most useful virtue in the world is patience" (p. 99).

"It is better to be patient than powerful. It is better to win control over yourself than over whole cities" (Proverbs 16:32, Good News Translation).

It is by testing our patience that God gives us true patience. Let's note four ways to test your patience. How do you react to ...

- Interruptions?
- Inconveniences?
- Irritations?
- Inactivity?

The oyster takes an irritation—a grain of sand—and turns it into a pearl.

The fruit of the Spirit—peace—is linked to the fruit of the Spirit—patience. When we experience God's peace, we have a strong resource for expressing patience.

Let's consider four ways to become a patient person.

**Way 1: Develop a New Perspective**

"Patience begins by changing the way you view something. When I am impatient, I have a limited perspective" (p. 107).

"A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense" (Proverbs 19:11).

Wisdom is gaining God's perspective on anything in life.

Wisdom's perspective offers 3 insights:

- I am only human, not God. I am not in control.
- No one else is perfect either.
- God is in control. He is with me and I can trust him.

"A patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man displays folly" (Proverbs 14:29).

"Maturity involves the ability to wait, to live with delayed gratification" (p. 109).

**Way 2: Acquire a Sense of Humor**

Learn to laugh at life and at yourself.

"A relaxed attitude lengthens a man's life" (Proverbs 14:30, Living Bible).

Laughter is the shock absorber of life. If you can laugh at it, you can live with it.

God has a sense of humor, and Jesus used humor (see, for example, Matthew 7:3–5).

“Being cheerful keeps you healthy” (Proverbs 17:22, Good News Translation).

### **Way 3: Deepen Your Love**

1 Corinthians 13:7 is simple and direct: “Love is patient.”

“When you are filled with love, almost nothing can provoke you to anger or cause you to be impatient” (p. 111).

“Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other’s faults because you love” (Ephesians 4:2, Living Bible).

“What happens when you praise God for the people who irritate you? You may become so much more like Jesus that they won’t bother you anymore” (p. 113).

### **Way 4: Depend on the Lord**

“Patience is not merely a matter of human willpower; it is the fruit of the Spirit.... Patience is a form of faith” (pp. 113–114).

- Noah waited on the Lord for 120 years for rain.
- Abraham and Sarah waited on the Lord for 100 years for a son.
- Moses waited on the Lord for 40 years to be the leader of God’s people.

“The Bible is a book about waiting. Why? Because waiting demonstrates faith, and faith pleases God” (p. 115).

In John 11 we learn that Jesus’ friend Lazarus became fatally ill. Jesus heard, yet waited until after Lazarus died before he visited the family. God was working a glorious purpose even in the midst of Mary and Martha’s grief. God is never late!

“Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him” (Psalm 37:7).

We should cultivate patience because our God is patient (see 2 Peter 3:5). Patience is a character trait of Jesus. To be patient is to be like Jesus.

## ***God's Power to Change Your Life***

### **Chapter 7: Putting on a Little Kindness**

Paul offers a spiritual wardrobe to God's people. "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" (Colossians 3:12). Notice the word "clothe"—it means "to put on" like you would put on a coat or jacket. Kindness is a choice. Kindness is love in action.

There are risks in being kind. Some people may take advantage of us. Yet we are to be kind because ...

- God is kind to us.

"Because of his kindness you have been saved through trusting Christ" (Ephesians 2:8, Living Bible).

- We want people to be kind to us.

"Do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12).

"Be kind and honest to others and you will live a long life; others will respect you and treat you fairly" (Proverbs 21:21, Good News Translation).

"Your own soul is nourished when you are kind; it is destroyed when you are cruel" (Proverbs 11:17, Living Bible).

Let's explore the five characteristics of a kind person.

#### **Characteristic 1: Be Sensitive**

"Kindness always starts with sensitivity ... [and] with noticing the needs and hurts of others" (p. 121).

"Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:4).

David is a biblical example of kindness and sensitivity. David became a very close friend with Jonathan, the son of Saul. Saul hated and hunted down David to kill him. After Saul's and Jonathan's deaths, David sought to show kindness to Mephibosheth, Saul's grandson. Why? David said to Mephibosheth, "Don't be afraid,... for I will surely show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan. I will restore to you all the land that belonged to your grandfather Saul, and you will always eat at my table" (2 Samuel 9:7).

Be sensitive to the needs and hurts of others.

#### **Characteristic 2: Be Supportive**

Be supportive in speech. "Kind words bring life, but cruel words crush your spirit" (Proverbs 15:4, Good News Translation).

The power of life and death are in the tongue. "You can destroy others with what you say to them" (p. 123).

"Righteous people know the kind thing to say, but the wicked are always saying things that hurt" (Proverbs 10:32, Good News Translation).

Joseph is a biblical example of being kind and supportive. Joseph was treated meanly by his brothers who sold him into slavery, which brought Joseph to Egypt. After thirty years of both turbulent and triumphant experiences, Joseph rose to power in Egypt. Because of a famine, Joseph's brothers came to Egypt for food. Joseph could have easily taken revenge on his brothers, but instead he spoke kindly to them and was supportive of their needs (see Genesis 50:19–21).

### **Characteristic 3: Be Sympathetic**

Be present to people in crisis. "When others are happy, be happy with them. If they are sad, share their sorrow" (Romans 12:15, Living Bible).

"Strong leaders are not afraid to show emotion" (p. 126). According to 2 Timothy 2:24, kindness is a mark of a spiritual leader. Enter into the experiences of your wife (or husband), your children, and your friends.

Jesus is the supreme biblical example of being a sympathetic leader. Jesus is called "the kindness and love of God" (see Titus 3:4). "If you want to know what kindness looks like, look at Jesus" (p. 128).

### **Characteristic 4: Be Straightforward**

"Sometimes [kindness] means laying it on the line, telling the truth, leveling with people" (p. 128).

"Wounds from a friend are better than kisses from an enemy" (Proverbs 27:6, Living Bible).

"We don't realize that sometimes kindness means telling the painful truth" (p. 129).

Paul the apostle is a biblical example of kindness that tells a hard truth. In Galatians 2 Paul had to tell the apostle Peter a very painful truth. Peter was violating the grace of God by his refusal to eat with his Gentile brothers because of fear of the Jewish leaders. Peter became a hypocrite and was in danger of destroying the unity of the "body of Christ." Paul was kind to Peter by telling Peter the truth.

When you confront others ask ...

- Am I really committed to this person's best interest?
- Will I help my friend to make the needed change?

### **Characteristic 5: Be Spontaneous**

Galatians 6:10 says, "As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially those who belong to the family of believers."

Take the opportunity to be kind. When it comes to kindness, good intentions don't count.

In Luke 10 Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. A man had been beaten and robbed by bandits. He was left for dead on the road to Jericho. The Samaritan risked his own well-being by spontaneously showing kindness to the victim. He was unlike the priest and the religious leader who, out of self-interest, left the victim. "Here is the point: Jesus told this story to remind us of all the people around us who are hurting" (p. 133).

"The number one enemy of kindness is busyness" (p. 134).

Be kind to someone this week—in your home, at your work, at your church. Make a list of seven people and write practical ways you can be kind to each of them.

## ***God's Power to Change Your Life*** **Chapter 8: Living the Good Life**

In Webster's Dictionary there are seventeen different categories of "good" with three or four different uses or illustrations of each category. In the Bible "good" and "goodness" are mentioned 619 times.

What is the good life? Good means ...

- For some, looking good—a serious business in America
- For some, feeling good—the hot pursuit of pleasure
- For some, having goods—the quest for money and things

In the Bible, God says "the good life" is *being* and *doing* good. Yet, what exactly is "goodness"? "Goodness" means fulfilling a purpose. God made you for a purpose. "For we are God's workmanship, *created* in Christ Jesus *to do good works*, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10, emphasis added). The Christian is made for a lifestyle of goodness.

The benefit of being and doing good is lasting self-esteem.

We are not naturally good.

The problem in all people is that *it is not our nature to be good*.

The Bible says that the inherent goodness of mankind is a fallacy. Isaiah 53:6 tells us we all want to do our own thing and go our own way.

- Humans cannot be inherently good. History shows a record of human violence, wars, crimes, and prejudice by even highly educated people.
- Parents know that we are not inherently good. Children are by nature selfish; they lie and do wrong.
- We acknowledge our own heart. We are not good. We are wayward, unloving, impatient, and lazy, prone to do wrong. "Can an Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil" (Jeremiah 13:23).

Paul's experience recorded in Romans 7 shows the profound struggle we have to do good.

Our goodness is a gift from God.

Justification is God's work through Jesus Christ to make us new. We are given the ability to do good. "It is God who works in you both *to will* and *to do* for His good pleasure" (New King James Version, emphasis added).

"Does it mean a Christian never sins? Of course not. All of us make mistakes. All of us sin. What it means is that now that I am a Christian, I have a new power and a new desire to do what is right" (p. 145).

Learning to do good.

We must cooperate with God's efforts and work at letting his goodness fill us. Titus 3:14 exhorts us to *learn* to do good.

Let's consider five simple suggestions for learning to do good.

### **Suggestion 1: Master Your Bible**

"The whole Bible was given to us by inspiration from God and it useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives; it straightens us out and helps us do what is right" (2 Timothy 3:16, Living Bible).

"It is not enough to own a Bible; you must use it" (p. 146).

Modern versions help us to understand the Bible, such as the New International Version, the Living Bible, the Good News Translation, and the New Living Translation. Also, Eugene H. Peterson's paraphrase, *The Message*, is helpful.

### **Suggestion 2: Guard Your Mind**

"Sin always starts in the mind, so guard your mind" (p. 148). We must not be careless about what we allow to enter our minds.

Jesus said, "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body is full of light. But if your eye is clouded with evil thoughts and desires, you are in deep spiritual darkness" (Matthew 6:22–23, Living Bible).

If you want to do good, think about good, positive, and uplifting things—things that are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, and of good report (see Philippians 4:8).

### **Suggestion 3: Develop Convictions**

"It has been said that if you don't stand for something, you will fall for anything.... Do you know the difference between an opinion and a conviction? An opinion is something that you hold; a conviction is something that holds you. An opinion is something you will argue about. A conviction is something you will suffer for and, if necessary, die for" (p. 149).

Romans 12:9 "Hate what is evil; cling to what is good."

Philosopher Edmund Burke once said, "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."

The apostle Peter reminds us that it is better to suffer for doing good than for doing evil, just as Jesus suffered (see 1 Peter 2:19–20). We live in a world with people who hate good (see 2 Timothy 3:3).

### **Suggestion 4: Master the Courage to Be Different**

"Sometimes goodness means being willing to stand alone" (p. 151).

3 John 11, "Do not imitate what is evil but what is good."

The three young boys of Israel were young men of integrity and conviction, and God delivered them from the fiery furnace (see Daniel 3).

1 Peter 3:11 (Moffatt) says we should develop “a passion for goodness.”

We should promote what is positive and good. Even though the Roman Christians lived in an evil society, they were known for being “full of goodness” (see Romans 15:14). We are called to be people of integrity in a fallen, evil world.

### **Suggestion 5: Meet with Other Believers**

Hebrews 10:24–25, “Let us not give up meeting together ... but let us encourage one another.”

“Our fellowship with other believers is designed to encourage us to live good lives in an evil world” (p. 153).

Jesus prayed in John 17 regarding our relationship to the world. Jesus did not pray for *imitation* of the world. He did not pray for *isolation* from the world. Jesus prayed for *insulation* against the world's ways. Just as the Roman army was ranked in companies, platoons, and battalions, so Christians are not to be soldiers in the spiritual war all alone. We need one another if we are to battle evil with goodness.

### **Conclusion**

“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up” (Galatians 6:9).

“Use your influence for God and for good in your world this week” (p. 155).

***God's Power to Change Your Life***  
**Chapter 9: The One Who Can Be Counted On**

All nine of "the fruit of the Spirit" are interrelated qualities and they grow together. Let's now consider the fruit of "faithfulness"—a word sadly disappearing from our vocabulary.

"To be faithful means to be reliable, trustworthy, dependable, consistent. Faithfulness is a rare quality. The Bible asks, 'Who can find a faithful man?' (Proverbs 20:6, New King James Version). It is not easy to find someone who can really be counted on" (p. 158).

There are two reasons to be faithful:

- We should be faithful because God is faithful.  
"[The LORD] is faithful in all he does" (Psalm 33:4).
- God rewards faithfulness.  
In Matthew 25 Jesus tells a story (a parable) that teaches that God will judge and reward us according to our faithfulness.

Let's consider eight exercises to develop faithfulness in our lives.

**Exercise 1: Keep Your Promises**

Proverbs 25:14 says, "Like clouds and wind without rain is a man who boasts of gifts he does not give." This is a person who makes promises and doesn't keep them.

"It is a trap for a man to dedicate something rashly and only later to consider his vows" (Proverbs 20:25). Broken promises cause resentment.

Ecclesiastes 5:5 says, "It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it."

When we make promises we must keep them. Be dependable, be faithful to your word with your spouse, with your children, in your work, and with your friends.

**Exercise 2: Honor Your Marriage**

Hebrews 13:4 says, "Marriage should be honored by all." Marriage is to be held in high regard, and marriage vows are to be taken seriously. A bride and groom make vows of lifelong faithfulness. We must live out the qualities of love described in 1 Corinthians 13.

Faithfulness is choice.

**Exercise 3: Use Your Talents**

1 Peter 4:10 exhorts us, "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms."

"If you do not use the talents you have been given, other people will be cheated because you are not contributing what God has uniquely equipped you to provide" (p. 163).

We cannot all be brilliant, but we can all be faithful.

#### **Exercise 4: Make the Most of Your Time**

“Live life, then, with a due sense of responsibility, not as men who do not know the meaning of life but as those who do. Make the best use of your time” (Ephesians 5: 15, Phillips).

“You can do three things with your time—spend it, waste it, or invest it.... There are two primary time wasters: regret and worry. When we regret the past, we waste huge amounts of time looking backward to change something we can’t change. When we worry about the future, we waste time fretting over events that may never happen” (pp. 164–65).

Make your time count because it is a mark of being faithful.

#### **Exercise 5: Stand by Your Friends**

Proverbs 17:17, “A true friend is always loyal, and a brother is born to help in time of need.”

Cultivate personal loyalty. Don’t be like Peter, who abandoned Jesus by denying his relationship to him.

Who would write to you saying, “I know I can count on you if things got tough”?

#### **Exercise 6: Manage Your Money**

Jesus asks a very penetrating question, “If you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?” (Luke 16:11).

“God says that if you are not faithful with your material possessions, he will not trust you with spiritual resources” (p. 167).

One way to be faithful with money is to be faithful in giving to God’s work. “On every Lord’s Day each of you should put aside something from what you have earned during the week, and use it for this offering. The amount depends on how much the Lord has helped you earn” (1 Corinthians 16:2, Living Bible).

- Giving should be regular (systematic).
- Giving should be planned (decide an amount and keep records).
- Giving should be proportional (a percentage of your income).

#### **Exercise 7: Do Your Best at Work**

“Employers, colleges, and mission agencies all want to know about a person’s faithfulness in work habits” (p. 169).

Jesus said, “Whoever can be trust with very little can also be trusted with much” (Luke 16:10). Then Jesus asked, “If you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own?” (Luke 16:12).

“Christians ought to have a reputation for being the most dependable people at work. They are always aware of who their true boss is” (p. 171).

“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men” (Colossians 3:23).

### **Exercise 8: Commit Yourself to a Church**

“In Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Romans 12:5). This verse underscores the importance of belonging to a local church.

- Christians are in a spiritual battle (Ephesians 6:10–18).
- Christians are called soldiers (2 Timothy 3:3).
- Christians have military armor (Ephesians 6:11).

“*Koinonia*, the Greek word translated ‘fellowship’ in the Bible, means being as committed to each other as we are to Jesus Christ” (p. 173).

### **Conclusion**

When Jesus Christ returns, will he find us faithful (see Matthew 25:14–20)?

***God's Power to Change Your Life***  
**Chapter 10: A Gentle Approach**

"It is a medical fact that people who have friends live longer.... We all want friends. Proverbs 18:24 says, 'A man who has friends must himself be friendly' (NKJV). In other words, if you want to be liked by others, it helps if you are likable" (p. 175).

Gentleness means "strength under control" according to the Greek word in the New Testament. Gentleness is a fruit of the Spirit. Philippians 4:5 tells us to "show a gentle attitude toward everyone" (Good News Translation).

Let's consider how to practice gentleness with six types of people.

**Practice 1: Be Understanding, not Demanding—with those who *serve* you**

"Don't just think about your own affairs, but be interested in others, too, and in what they are doing" (Philippians 2:4, Living Bible).

How do you treat restaurant workers, clerks, secretaries, bank tellers, etc.?

Be gentle with those in your home. Peter exhorts wives to exhibit "a gentle and quiet spirit" while he exhorts husbands, "You husbands should try to understand the wives you live with" (1 Peter 3:4, 7, Phillips).

**Practice 2: Be Gracious, not Judgmental—with those who *disappoint* you**

Galatians 6:1 says, "If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch out yourself, or you also may be tempted."

Romans 14:1, "Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters."

"We set ourselves up for Satan's attack in our own areas of weakness the moment we begin to judge others" (p. 179).

Romans 15:7, "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God."

"The more you recognize God's grace to you, the more gracious you will be to others" (p. 180).

**Practice 3: Be Tender without Surrender—to those who *disagree* with you**

"One of the tests of spiritual maturity is how you handle people who disagree with you.... You have three alternatives: you can retreat in fear, you can react in anger, or you can respond in gentleness" (p. 180).

Proverbs 15:1, "A gentle answer quiets anger, but a harsh one stirs it up" (Good News Translation).

James 3:16–17, "Where there is jealousy and selfishness, there is disorder and every kind of evil. But the wisdom from above is pure first of all; it is also *peaceful, gentle, and friendly*" (Good News Translation, emphasis added).

"Gentleness is the ability to *disagree agreeably*" (p. 183).

"And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 2:24–25).

#### **Practice 4: Be Teachable, not Unreachable—with those who *correct* you**

"Let every man be quick to listen but slow to use his tongue, and slow to lose his temper" (James 1:9, Phillips).

Meekness is not weakness. Being teachable is a wise trait.

"Whoever heeds correction is honored" (Proverbs 13:18).

"The wisest people I know are the people who have a 'teach me' attitude and are willing to learn from others" (p. 185).

James 1:21 encourages us to approach God's Word with a teachable, humble attitude.

#### **Practice 5: Be an Actor, not a Reactor—with those who *hurt* you**

"Actor" means "one who initiates action," not one who is a hypocrite or pretender.

Jesus is our example. "When they hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23).

Strength is found in gentleness, not in retaliation. Gentleness is not our natural inclination or impulse. When we are hurt, we want revenge. Gentleness is a fruit of the Spirit. It is supernatural, not natural, to be a gentle person.

"Do not repay anyone evil for evil.... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:17, 21).

Don't let others determine how you are going to react or respond. Trust God. "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city" (Proverbs 16:32, New King James Version).

#### **Practice 6: Be Respectful—with *unbelievers***

Respect those who have trusted in Christ; don't reject them.

"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have. But do this with *gentleness* and *respect*" (1 Peter 3:15, emphasis added).

"The manner in which you share the gospel can determine how willing a person is to listen to you. In fact, your attitude speaks more powerfully than the words of your message" (p. 191).

"Jesus was gentle, and he wants us to be gentle in telling others about him" (p. 192).

### **Conclusion**

Of the six types of people, with which type do you find it most difficult to be gentle? List them, pray for them, and ask the Spirit to develop gentleness in your life.

***God's Power to Change Your Life***  
**Chapter 11: Developing Self-Control**

Many of our problems are caused by a lack of self-control. "Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control" (Proverbs 25:28). Self-control contributes to a sense of competency, security, and true freedom.

"Every athlete in training submits to strict discipline, in order to be crowned with a wreath that will not last; but we do it for one that will last forever" (1 Corinthians 9:25, Good News Translation).

The Greek philosopher Epictetus wrote, "No man is truly free until he masters himself."

"People will try almost anything to gain self-control, or to make up for the lack of it" (p. 197).

Self-control is a "fruit of the Spirit."

Let's consider seven steps to self-control.

**Step 1: Admit Your Problem**

"A man's temptation is due to the pull of *his own inward desires*, which can be enormously attractive" (James 1:14, Phillips, emphasis added).

We often will not admit our problems. We rationalize, ignore, or blame others for our problems, but God says we are responsible for our behavior. So, admit it.

**Step 2: Put Your Past behind You**

Paul says in Philippians 3:13–14, "But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

This statement is a great lie: Once a failure, always a failure.

"Failure in the past does not mean you will never be able to change" (p. 200).

Learning self-control is like learning to walk. A child falls down many times; but the child gets up and tries again. We learn self-control in the same way. Don't give up.

**Step 3: Talk Back to Your Feelings**

Challenge your emotions; don't give your feelings authority and allow them to manipulate you.

Titus 2:11–12, "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age ..."

God's grace gives you the power to do what is right. God gives you the ability to say no to that feeling, to that desire, to that impulse which leads you from doing God's will.

#### **Step 4: Believe You Can Change**

"Your beliefs do control your behaviors" (p. 203).

Three times in 1 Peter we are told to be clear-headed and self-controlled. Romans 12:2 teaches us that we are changed by the renewing of our minds.

God tells us in 1 Corinthians 10:13 that he will never put more *on* you than he has put *in* you so that you can bear it. The verse says, "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."

We have a promise written by Paul, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13, New King James Version).

"Stop setting yourself up for failure by constantly criticizing yourself. Stop nagging, condemning, and putting yourself down" (p. 204).

Jesus said, "Everything is possible for him who believes" (Mark 9:23).

#### **Step 5: Make Yourself Accountable**

"We may not like this step, but we desperately need it. Find someone who will check up on you, will pray for you, and will encourage you in the areas where you want to develop more self-control" (p. 205).

Ecclesiastes 4:12, "Two people can resist an attack that would defeat one person alone" (Good News Translation).

Galatians 6:2, "Share each other's troubles and problems, and so obey our Lord's command" (Living Bible).

Create a "buddy system." What should you look for in a "buddy"? A buddy should be ...

- Someone of the same gender as you
- Someone who is faithful and dependable
- Someone who will keep your problem confidential
- Someone you give permission to check on you

#### **Step 6: Avoid Temptations**

"Stay away from situations that weaken your self-control. If you don't want to be stung, stay away from bees.... Plan in advance to stay away from situations that you know are going to cause temptation in your life" (p. 207).

Ephesians 4:27, "Don't give the Devil a chance" (Good News Translation).

1 Corinthians 15:33, "Bad company corrupts good character."

"Avoid both people and situations that tempt you to forfeit self-control" (p. 208).

### **Step 7: Depend on Christ's Power**

"Let the Spirit direct your lives, and you will not satisfy the desires of the human nature" (Galatians 5:16, Good News Translation).

"Spirit-filled people are still going to *have* the desires of the flesh. It's just that you won't satisfy them" (p. 211).

God, in effect, says, "Let me into your life. Let my Holy Spirit control you *while* you are still struggling with that problem. I will help you change" (p. 212).

The pleasures and rewards of sin are only very temporary (see Hebrews 11:25).

Philippians 2:13, "For God is at work within you, helping you want to obey him, and then helping you do what he wants" (Living Bible).

God gives us both the desire and the ability to do what is right.

### **Conclusion**

"The secret of self-control is Christ-control.... Remember, Christ provides the power to change your life" (p. 214).

## ***God's Power to Change Your Life***

### **Chapter 12: A Productive Life**

"In America we are very conscious of productivity at all levels. Once a month the government releases a report on our gross national product.... Suppose each of us were issued an 'individual productivity report' each month. How would yours look?" (p. 215).

God wants us to live fruitful lives—that means productive lives. What is God's definition of "productive"? The word "fruit" is used sixty-six times in the New Testament. There are three kinds of fruit:

- Edible fruit (grapes, figs, etc.)
- Biological fruit (babies)
- Spiritual fruit (Christlike character)

We have considered the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Jesus said, "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples" (John 15:8, New International Version). And a little later he said, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last" (John 15:16, New International Version).

Let's consider four conditions for fruitfulness (for productive lives).

#### **Condition 1: Cultivate Roots**

The prophet Jeremiah wrote, "But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit" (Jeremiah 17:7–8, New International Version).

We need roots not only to bear fruit, but to endure hard times. "The righteous cannot be uprooted" (Proverbs 12:3).

How do you cultivate roots?

Memorize Psalm 1:2–3. These verses describe a stable life.  
Memorize Colossians 2:6–7 God's Word is our great help.

#### **Condition 2: Eliminate Weeds**

"The seed is the word of God.... The seeds that fall among [weeds] stand for those who hear; but the worries and riches and pleasures of this life crowd in and choke them, and their fruit never ripens" (Luke 4:11, 18, Good News Translation).

The U.S. government reports that there are 205 varieties of weeds in America.

What are the weeds in your life that may be choking back the fruit of the Spirit?

There are three kinds of weeds:

- Worry—preoccupation with daily concerns and cares
- Riches—fixation on making money to buy more things
- Pleasure—endlessly chasing after “the good life”

“Weeds are a sign of neglect” (p. 222).

### **Condition 3: Cooperate with God**

Jesus says, “I am the true Vine, and my Father is the Gardener. He lops off every branch that doesn’t produce. And he prunes those branches that bear fruit for even larger crops” (John 15: 1–2, Living Bible).

“Pruning involves *cutting off* the dead branches and *cutting back* the living branches, both to shape the tree or vine and to stimulate growth” (pp. 222–23).

“One of the biggest mistakes Christians make is confusing pruning with punishment. Pruning is not punishment, so don’t equate the two. God is not angry with you. He just sees that you are someone who can bear more fruit, someone who has potential for greatness, someone he wants to use in a significant way” (p. 225).

“Can God’s pruning fail to produce? Sure it can, if we don’t cooperate” (p. 228). God does not want us to resist or rebel, to become resentful and complaining. He uses pruning to develop deeper Christlikeness in us.

### **Condition 4: Wait for the Harvest**

“Growth takes time; it is not instantaneous. God takes two days to make mushrooms, but he takes sixty years to make an oak tree. Do you want to be a mushroom or an oak tree? Growth takes time” (p. 229).

In John 12:24 Jesus says, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die, it abides by itself alone; but if it die, it bears much fruit” (American Standard Version).

“The point Jesus stresses here is that death precedes life. Just as a grain of wheat must die to produce fruit, so we must die to ourselves to produce spiritual growth. And dying to our own selfishness takes time” (p. 230).

A great assignment: memorize the fruit of the Spirit, Galatians 5:22–23:

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

Always remember: growth takes time. Don’t despair. Be patient with yourself.

### **Conclusion**

“In 1968 a scientist discovered a six-hundred-year-old seed necklace in an Indian grave. He planted one of the seeds, and it sprouted and grew. Although the seed had been dormant for six hundred years, it still had the potential for life” (p. 232).

You, too, have the enduring potential to bear much fruit for God. You, too, can experience a deeply meaningful changed life.