

Vice & Virtue

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Class Schedule

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Preface

At it's heart, this material is a study of the character of a godly individual. This should come as no surprise, since nearly *all* Bible study, at least in some respect, is a character study of the godly individual.

One of the more fascinating qualities about the study of godliness, though, is its adaptability to a variety of study approaches. Only the base subjects of this life can be exhausted through a simple study that stems from one perspective. The more robust a subject is, the more times it can be studied and the more perspectives it can be looked at from...all without exhausting the subject.

Take, for example, the kingdom of Heaven. In Matthew 13 alone, Jesus tells 6 parables, all of which start with, "The kingdom of Heaven is like...". The kingdom of Heaven is not a topic that can be described adequately with one analogy, one approach. In fact, were Jesus to have told a *thousand* parables about the kingdom of Heaven, He would not have said all there was to say about the topic, because its very essence surpasses our human comprehension.

Godliness is similar in that it can withstand scrutiny from multiple perspectives. One can spend a lifetime--and indeed many have--studying what a Godly character looks like and still not learn every detail.

Thus, the value of approaching the topic from various perspectives.

In this material, we'll focus our study on seven pairs of character traits. Seven are traits that must *never* be found in the character of a Christian, and seven are traits that must *always* be found in the character of a Christian.

Our group of seven ungodly traits, or "vices," characterizes what the Catholic church has termed the "seven deadly sins." This group has also been called the seven "capital vices" and the seven "cardinal sins." Though Catholics recognize that this is not an all-encompassing list of "deadly" character traits, they argue that these seven lie at the root of most, if not all, other sins.

To which I suggest there is considerable merit.

The seven counterbalancing traits, or "virtues," are traits that we should strive to integrate into our character if we are to be godly individuals.

I pray that this study is fruitful for you. It has caused me to look deeper inside myself, and I suspect it will do the same for you.

Week 1: Worldliness vs. Godliness

“You and I have need of the strongest spell that can be found to wake us from the evil enchantment of worldliness.” (C.S. Lewis)

Few distinctions are more clearly delineated in Scripture than the one between worldliness and godliness. In no uncertain terms, Scripture indicates that the character promoted by the world is diametrically opposed to the character promoted by God.

This does not stop us from blurring the lines, though.

As Christians, we often swallow, with ravenous enthusiasm, the poisonous lie promulgated by Satan himself that we can have our cake and eat it, too. We delude ourselves into thinking that piety and frivolity are symbiotic.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Godliness and worldliness are not parallel paths; they are wholly divergent.

And so we stand at a crossroads. Every time we make a decision.

Either we will take the path that leads to life and godliness. Or we'll take the path that leads to death and worldliness. (cf. Deut. 30: 15-20; Joshua 24: 15)

There is no middle ground. Only life or death. Only hot or cold.

God will vomit out of His mouth those who are lukewarm. (Revelation 3:16)

At The Heart of the Distinction

When you boil it all down, there is one defining feature that distinguishes the worldly character from the godly one:

Motive.

Worldliness, at its core, is *selfish*. Godliness, on the other hand, at its core, is *selfless*.

One looks inward. The other looks outward.

One says, “*my* will be done.” The other says, “*Your* will be done.”

3 Biblical Analogies

Scripture uses multiple analogies to describe the drastic nature of the distinction between godliness and worldliness. Consider three of them:

Light vs. Darkness

Possibly the most vivid analogy Scripture uses to describe the distinction between godliness and worldliness is that of light and darkness.

John describes Christ as the “true Light” (John 1:9), and Jesus later confirms this epithet as valid when He simply states, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12).

It’s important to note that Christ did not say that He *has* the light of the world; He says that He *is* the light of the world. Thus, light is a defining feature of Christ Himself, not just His message. (And as Christ is one with God, it’s not surprising that John later writes of God the Father, “God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5, NKJV).)

As a result, it only makes sense then that those who call themselves by Christ’s name should also be described as the “light of the world” (Matthew 5:14) and as “having the light of life” (John 8:12).

Because God defines Himself as light, and bestows this light upon all who faithfully follow Him, everything that stands in opposition to Him must necessarily be described as darkness:

- 1 John 1:6 draws a distinction between fellowship with God and “walking in darkness.”
- Christ indicates that those who follow Him “shall not walk in darkness” (John 8:12, NKJV).
- Paul indicates that we should, “Walk as children of light...and have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness” (Ephesians 5:8-13, NKJV).
- Paul also writes that the godly have been “...delivered...from the power of darkness...” (Colossians 1:13, NKJV).
- To the Christians in Thessalonica, Paul writes, “You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness” (1 Thessalonians 5:5, NKJV).
- Peter writes that the godly “...were called...out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

In the end, godliness and worldliness are as different as day and night.

Truth vs. The Lie

A second analogy that Scripture uses to illustrate the distinction between godliness and worldliness is that of truth and a lie.

Just like Christ defines Himself by light, He also defines Himself by truth: “I am the way, the *truth*, and the life...” (John 14:6, NKJV) Similarly, Jesus prays to the Father that He would, “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth” (John 17:17, NKJV). Again, it isn’t that God’s word *has* truth, it’s that God’s word *is* truth.

Accordingly, those who align themselves with the Creator are described as “walking in truth” (2 John 4; 3 John 3-4) and as “obeying the truth” (Galatians 5:7).

Because God is truth, everything that stands against Him is described as the opposite of truth. Whereas Scripture indicates that it is impossible for God to lie (Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18), it describes Satan as the “father of lies” (John 8:44).

Thus, those who choose an ungodly character are described as being “...of [their] father the devil...” (John 8:44) and as “wandering from the truth” (James 5:19, NKJV). When man opts for worldliness over godliness, he “...exchanges the truth of God for the lie...” (Romans 1:25).

So, just as godliness and worldliness are as different as night and day, they are also as different as truth and a lie.

Purity vs. Defilement

A third analogy that Scripture uses to highlight the distinction between godliness and worldliness is that of purity and defilement.

Purity is yet another defining feature of God Himself (1 John 3:3). As a result, everything that emanates from Him is also pure, including His words (Psalm 12:6; Psalm 119:140), His commandments (Psalm 19:8), and His wisdom (James 3:17).

Who then is qualified to associate with God? Those who have adopted a godly character and have purified their hearts (Psalm 24:4; cf. James 4:8 and 1 Peter 1:22). Jesus reiterates this when He says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for *they* shall see God” (Matthew 5:8).

If the godly character is described as pure, then the worldly character is described as defiled:

- Jude describes certain apostates as having “...defiled the flesh...” (Jude 8).

- The Hebrew writer equates “falling short of the grace of God” with bitterness, trouble, and “becoming defiled” (Hebrews 12:15, NKJV).
- Paul, in his letter to Titus, makes a marked distinction between the “pure” and the “defiled” (Titus 1:15).
- Jesus speaks of “...evil coming from within and defiling a man” (Mark 7:23, NKJV).

Thus, just as godliness and worldliness are as different as night and day and truth and a lie, they are also as different as purity and defilement.

The Bottom Line

If we are to be people of godly character, we cannot even so much as dabble in worldliness.

Godliness and worldliness are not opposite sides of the same coin...they are in fact two entirely distinct monetary systems. What works in the kingdom of this world is not even recognized by God as valid currency in His kingdom.

“No man can serve two masters,” Jesus said (Matthew 6:24, NKJV). It’s not that doing so is a bad idea, it’s that doing so is *impossible*.

Because we cannot be both godly and worldly, we must make a choice. No single human decision has any more gravity than this, as what we select will do no less than determine our eternal destiny.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” Cursed are the defiled in heart, for they shall *not* see God.

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. Can you think of any other analogies/descriptions that Scripture uses to distinguish between godliness and worldliness?
2. Christ describes His followers as “the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13). List some qualities of salt that might be applicable to Christians. If the godly are the salt, what are the worldly?
3. Is it possible to be an undercover/camouflaged Christian? In other words, is it possible to have a godly character and go unnoticed in a worldly environment? What does Christ teach regarding the world’s response to a godly character? What does He teach about our willingness/hesitancy to demonstrate a godly character in a worldly environment?

Week 2: Pride

“A proud man is always looking down on things and people; and, of course, as long as you’re looking down, you can’t see something that’s above you.” (C.S. Lewis)

Pride is the foundation upon which all other sins rest, the substrate on which all other sins feed.

It is the surest path directly away from God, as it is the antithesis of God Himself.

When pride strikes, its lethal venom courses through a person’s life, simultaneously commandeering his consciousness and anesthetizing him to its pernicious effects. If left unchecked, it becomes a gangrenous cancer that consumes a person down to the core of his soul.

Pride is idolatry in its most toxic state: a replacement of the Creator with oneself. It bluntly screams in the face of God, “Not *Your* will, but *mine* be done.”

Because of this, God reserves some of His most potent language for expressing His thoughts about pride:

“These six things the Lord *hates*, yes, seven are an *abomination* to Him: a proud look...” (Proverbs 6:16-17, NKJV)

“Everyone proud in heart is an *abomination* to the Lord...” (Proverbs 16: 5, NKJV)

“And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness...they are...proud, boasters, inventors of evil things...who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are *deserving of death*...” (Romans 1:28-32, NKJV)

“Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.” (Proverbs 26:12, NKJV)

Pride is a sin that has close to a 100% infection rate. Nearly every human being that’s ever lived has struggled with it on some level.

Not even Moses, the man described by God Himself as more humble “than all men who were on the face of the earth” (Numbers 12:3, NKJV) was immune to its effects. Reaching his breaking point with the children of Israel at Kadesh, Moses defied the Lord

and shouted to the people, “Hear now, you rebels! Must *we* bring water for you out of this rock?” (Numbers 20:10, NKJV)

The words had hardly left Moses’ mouth when the Lord thundered against him in judgment: “Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.” (Numbers 20:12, NKJV)

“Devastating” would hardly describe how this judgment must have sounded to Moses. The man had spent 80 years preparing for his leadership role and would spend 40 years discharging the duty.

All to die before he reached the goal.

All because he momentarily opted to arrogantly direct Israel’s attention away from the glory of God.

God hates pride, and He will not tolerate it.

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. Where does pride come from? What drives its development inside a person?
2. How does pride manifest itself? How does a proud person behave (differently than a humble person)?
3. What are the effects of pride? How does one's pride affect the people around him?
4. What are the practical consequences of pride? How does/will God deal with the proud?
5. Pride is notoriously difficult to detect in oneself. Given that reality, are there things we can do to make that discovery easier? What can we do to monitor our levels of pride?

Week 3: Humility

“Humility is the foundation of all the other virtues...” (Saint Augustine)

To say that Jesus defied the expectations of the Jews would be an understatement...roughly equivalent to saying that the sun is hot.

Jesus was *not at all* who the Jews were looking for.

What they wanted was a well-heeled blue blood. What they got was the “illegitimate” son a poor carpenter.

What they wanted was a king who would triumphantly march into Jerusalem on his royal steed and reclaim the holy city from the barbaric Romans. What they got was a king who made His royal ascent into Jerusalem on a donkey and was subsequently nailed to a cross.

What they wanted was a Messiah who would trumpet their piety and condemn the filthiness of everyone around them. What they got was a Messiah who verbally flogged *them* for their self-righteous hypocrisy and praised the faith of the “sinners.”

Jesus was not who the Jews were looking for simply because they were not who Jesus was looking for.

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And the same might be said of us.

If the “foolishness” of the gospel (1 Corinthians 1:18-25) still seems a bit backward to us, it’s likely because we’re still operating from human wisdom.

If what we’re looking for is a Christianity that extols what we so often hold dear...self-confidence, self-assurance, and self-reliance...we’re destined for eternal disappointment.

Because it simply doesn’t exist.

While humanity praises the self-confident, Jesus praises the meek (Matthew 5:5).

While humanity glorifies the self-assured, Jesus glorifies the poor in spirit (Matthew 5:3).

While humanity commends the self-reliant, Jesus commends the God-dependent (Matthew 6:25-34).

## **Humility**

There is hardly a more central concept to Christianity than humility. It is at the very heart and soul of everything that Jesus taught.

To speak of a “proud Christian” is to speak of an impossibility. A person can be one or the other, but not both. Pride and Christianity are mutually exclusive.

To speak of a “humble Christian” is to speak redundantly. A person cannot be a Christian *without* being humble. Humility is inherent in Christianity.

Not surprisingly then, Scripture speaks often and favorably of humility and those who possess it:

- Psalm 18:27: “For you will save the humble people, but will bring down the haughty looks.” (NKJV)
- Psalm 25:9: “The humble He guides in justice, and the humble He teaches His way.” (NKJV)
- Psalm 147:6: “The Lord lifts up the humble; He casts the wicked down to the ground.” (NKJV)
- Psalm 149:4: “For the Lord takes pleasure in His people; He will beautify the humble with salvation.” (NKJV)
- Proverbs 3:34: “Surely He scorns the scornful but gives grace to the humble.” (NKJV)
- Proverbs 15:33: “The fear of the Lord is the instruction of wisdom, and before honor is humility.” (NKJV)
- Proverbs 22:4: “By humility and the fear of the Lord are riches and honor and life.” (NKJV)
- James 4:6: “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” (NKJV)
- James 4:10: “Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord and He will lift you up.” (NKJV)

## **Jesus and Humility**

If Christ proclaimed the virtue of humility and commanded His followers to be characterized by it, we should find conclusive evidence that Christ exemplified this trait in His own life.

And that is exactly what we find:

*“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.” (Philippians 2:5-8, NKJV)*

Christ humbled Himself to the point of literal humiliation. Giving up the glories of Heaven, Jesus not only took on the form of mankind but suffered the most heinous of all executions at the hands of mankind.

Accordingly, God lifted up the One who humbled Himself:

*“Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:9-11, NKJV)*

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If we wish to be glorified by God, we must humble ourselves.

If, on the other hand, we wish to glorify ourselves, we must accept the fact that the Creator of the universe will be working against us to bring down our haughtiness.

And that is a scary proposition.

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. “Servanthood” and “slavery” are frequently used in the New Testament to flesh out the concept of Christian humility. Give some passages that speak to this concept of being a servant.
2. Jesus was a king, but He spoke of Himself as a servant. Give some passages that demonstrate this. Why would the King of Kings come as a servant?
3. Servanthood is a repulsive concept to the world. List the traits of a servant/slave that make it a degrading position in the eyes of the world. Then, list the traits of a servant/slave that make it an honorable position in the eyes of God. Are there any traits that appear on both of your lists?
4. Humility does not come naturally to human beings, so it must be learned/developed. That being the case, how do you develop it? What are some practical steps that one could take to plant and grow this character trait?

Week 4: Wrath

“In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage.” (John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath)

Wrath is one of the most overtly destructive forces a human being is capable of harnessing.

By its very definition (“strong, stern, or fierce anger; vengeance or punishment as the consequence of anger”), wrath is bent on unleashing devastating force against another person. Drawing from a vivid analogy once used by Dan Rather, wrath is the spiritual equivalent of a tornado in a trailer park. It has the distinct ability to transform wholeness into utter carnage in a matter of moments.

Accordingly, God does not mince words when it comes to wrath:

- Ephesians 4:31: *“Let all...wrath, anger...be put away from you, with all malice.”* (NKJV)
- Colossians 3:8: *“But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath...”* (NKJV)
- James 1:19-20: *“So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be...slow to wrath, for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”* (NKJV)
- Galatians 5:19-21: *“Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are...outbursts of wrath...and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”* (NKJV)

Why Wrath Must Be Put Away

Let me suggest 5 reasons that wrath is to be purged from the life of a Christian:

1. Wrath assumes the right to avenge oneself. Romans 12:19 plainly states the following: “Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord.” (NKJV)

When we become wrathful, we bluntly retort, “Vengeance is actually *mine*, I will repay.”

Nowhere in Scripture are we granted free reign to avenge ourselves at will. Though we may desire to do so, we are not given that right. God has reserved that right for Himself, and we do nothing but blatantly defy His authority when opt to dish out our vengeance.

2. Wrath is destructive. This point has already been stated, but it is one of the most prominent features of wrath. By its very nature, wrath is given to harming its target. It is the ultimate flexing of one's destructive muscles, with no other intention than to see its enemy reduced to rubble.

3. Wrath is impulsive. Wrath lives by the mantra, "Ready, fire, aim." It explodes now and asks questions later.

Proverbs 12:16 confirms this: "A fool's wrath is known at once, but a prudent man covers shame" (NKJV). There is wisdom in working through one's emotions "behind closed doors." Wrath, though, throws the doors wide open and announces itself in all its naked shame.

Impulsivity goes hand-in-hand with foolishness and wrath bows down to both: "He who is slow to wrath has great understanding, but he who is impulsive exalts folly" (Proverbs 14:29, NKJV).

4. Wrath is addictive. One can gain a reputation for being a hothead rather quickly. This is due to the fact that wrath is habit-forming. The explosive release of emotion is captivating and quickly takes hostage anyone foolish enough to embrace it.

As Proverbs 19:19 says, "A man of great wrath will suffer punishment; for if you rescue him, you will have to do it again." (NKJV)

5. Nothing good comes from wrath. If one's goal is to bear the fruit of the righteousness of God, wrath is the precise way *not* to do so. Period.

"...for the wrath of man *does not produce the righteousness of God*" (James 1:20, NKJV).

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In the end, Christians are commanded to be people of unmistakable self-control (Galatians 5:22-23; 2 Peter 1:5-6). There are few characteristics that more flagrantly defy this directive than wrath.

We would do well to flee from it.

## Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. Distinguish between anger, wrath, and malice.
2. Anger is at the root of wrath. Therefore, is anger sometimes, always, or never a sin? Give Scriptures to support your answer.
3. Wrath is strongly condemned by God in Scripture but is demonstrated by Him repeatedly (especially in the Old Testament). Is God being hypocritical? Or worse, sinful? If not, how can God's wrath be justified when He condemns us for being wrathful?
4. Where does wrath come from? What causes anger to turn into wrath?
5. This lesson gives 5 sinful attributes of wrath. Can you think of any others that Scripture indicates?
6. How does malice factor into this whole discussion?

# Week 5: Patience

*“All men commend patience, although few are willing to practice it.” (Thomas à Kempis)*

Few are the number of virtues that are both more needed and more difficult to obtain than patience. While our own fallibility convinces us of a deep need to develop patience with others, it is that very fallibility in those around us that tends to ignite all *but* patience inside of us.

Even so, Scripture confirms our conclusion that patience is virtuous:

- “A patient man is better than a warrior, and he who rules his temper, than he who takes a city.” (Proverbs 16:32, New American Bible)
- “A wrathful man stirs up strife, but he who is slow to anger allays contention.” (Proverbs 15:18, NKVJ)
  - “A hot-tempered man stirs up dissension, but a patient man calms a quarrel.” (Proverbs 15:18, NIV)
- “A man’s wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense.” (Proverbs 19:11, NIV)

## The Patience of God

If God’s demonstrations of wrath and righteous indignation compel us to take notice, His demonstrations of patience certainly warrant our attention.

Once we wrap our minds around the heinous nature of sin, we have no difficulty understanding how God’s wrath is justified. Sin not only deserves severe punishment, it deserves *swift* punishment.

And it is that very fact that makes the patience of God mind-boggling.

Though we don’t relish the thought of righteous judgment being rained down on us, we can understand it. Justice is logical: If I commit sin “A”, God will justly respond with punishment “B.” B naturally follows A. Justice is common sense, and because God’s wrath is intertwined with His justice, we can also understand His wrath.

God’s patience is nearly impossible for us to comprehend, though, because it makes no logical sense. It is inextricably tied to God’s grace and therefore offers us something that we don’t deserve. When I commit a sin (and truly repent of it), God chooses to respond not with wrathful punishment, but with patience and grace.

Instead of striking me dead on the spot for rebelling against Him, He says, “I love you. I want you to come back to Me, and I’m willing to wait for that to happen.”

Wow!

How poignant are the Psalmist’s words: *“But you, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.”* (Psalm 86:15, NIV)

Those who are inclined to disagree with the Psalmist need only read the accounts of God’s endurance with the children of Israel or the accounts of Jesus’ longsuffering with His impetuous apostles.

God’s patience is inconceivably great.

And because that virtue is so deeply woven into the character of God Himself, those who espouse His Son as Lord and Savior must weave it into their characters as well.

## Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. Why is patience so difficult for us as human beings? Why doesn't it come naturally to us?

2. "Twenty-first century America is not a culture given to patience." Give some evidence to defend or refute this statement.

3. How can we, as Christians, develop patience when we live in a society given to impulsivity?

4. This lesson contrasts wrath and patience. How exactly is patience the opposite of wrath? Or is it?

5. Cite one Biblical event, story, or parable that you think teaches the virtue of patience. Then list the practical lessons about patience taught by that story.

6. The word “longsuffering” is often used in the same context as “patience.” What might “longsuffering” teach us about the concept of patience? Did Jesus have anything to say about the concept of longsuffering?

7. Patience and hope are mentioned together in the New Testament on more than one occasion (See Romans 12:12, Romans 15:4, 1 Thessalonians 1:3). What is the connection between these two concepts?

8. Is there an easy way to develop patience? In other words, is there a shortcut? (Consider James 1:2-4)

# Week 6: Lust & Chastity

*“Lust is the craving for salt of a man who is dying of thirst.” (Frederick Buechner)*

Plato once said that all human behavior flows from only three main sources: desire, emotion, and knowledge. Whether or not this is true, there is no doubt that *much* of our behavior flows from just one of those three sources: desire.

We want, so we pursue. We pursue until we obtain the object of our want, we tire of the pursuit, or we are prohibited from obtaining the object of our want.

Desire is surely one of the most potent propellants of human activity.

And unfortunately, the well of desire is also one of the deepest reservoirs from which sin is drawn.

There are three main issues that have significant bearing on a discussion of desire and its fruits. When sin is a byproduct of desire, it is in large part due to these three factors:

## 1. Discontent

Discontent often manifests itself through the act of complaining.

While complaining is a voicing of one’s negative view on his current circumstance, it carries the implicit expression of a wish for something perceived to be better. Thus, the concept of desire is intrinsic to the concept of complaining.

Historically, God has punished few things more harshly than the attitude of discontent.

The children of Israel were expert complainers. Scripture records incident after incident in which the people murmured against God.

And God responded severely:

In Numbers 21, God sent fiery serpents among the people to destroy the complainers. In Numbers 16, God delivered a plague that wiped out nearly 15,000 people.

God detests discontent.



And when desire wells up from the fountain of discontent, it is sin.

## **2. The Grass Is Greener On The Other Side**

Closely related to discontent is the notion that the grass is greener on the other side.

Desire is often an outgrowth of the perception that someone else has it better. It really makes no difference whether or not the grass is actually greener on the other side, it matters only that we *think* it is.

When the perception is that things are better on the other side of the fence, one's mind begins to cry, "Woe is me! If *he* deserves something that good, then *I* do, too!"

We try to keep up with the Joneses.

Which is bad enough.

But we often go further than that.

Many times, we want to do more than just be *like* the Joneses...we want to *be* the Joneses. We don't want simply want something similar to what they have, we actually want what they have.

And God calls that covetousness...and He bluntly condemns it:

- "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or *anything* that belongs to your neighbor." (Exodus 20:17, NASB)
- "...Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses." (Luke 12:15, NKJV)
- "Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth...covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things, the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience..." (Colossians 3:5-6, NKJV)
- "Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have..." (Hebrews 13:5, NKJV)

When desire gives birth to covetousness, it is sin.

### 3. Excess

One of the most pernicious traits of desire is its ability to lead to excess.

The New Testament repeatedly condemns excess by commending moderation:

- “And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content.” (1 Timothy 6:8, NKJV)
- “Give us this day our *daily* bread...” (Matthew 6:11)
- “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...” (Matthew 6:19, NASB)

At its core, excess carries with it the concept of waste and waste is a misappropriation of the resources over which we’ve been made stewards.

Excess also carries with it a sense of entitlement to more than what is actually deserved. When one chooses to live in excess, he chooses to hoard for himself what he might otherwise use to help those in need.

And as one becomes accustomed to living in excess, he is likely to begin overestimating his own worth as an individual.

When desire leads to the pursuit of excess, it is sin.

### The Hard Reality of Desire

In the end, pursuing our desires with reckless abandon can have catastrophic consequences...yet we often choose to do so.

Consider the man who, desperately longing to slake his thirst, runs to the ocean. He pauses for a moment, scanning the horizon, and realizes that the water he's longed for now stretches out in front of him as far as he can see.

Without any more delay, he dives headfirst into the ocean, mouth wide open. As soon as he hits the water, he begins to gulp it down as fast as he can.

After a few moments, he pauses.

He’s discovered something very strange: though he’s consumed a considerable amount of water, he’s *more* thirsty than he was before.

Looking around, the man reassures himself that there is certainly enough water in the ocean to eventually quench his thirst.

So he begins to drink again.

Much to his dismay, the more he drinks, the thirstier he becomes. Determined to quell his thirst, he continues drinking...and drinking...and drinking.

A few days later, some passersby gasp as they notice the man's body washed ashore...dead.

The man had failed to consider the salt in the water. In his quest to quench his growing thirst, he had literally indulged himself to death.

## **Lust**

Of all desires, those of a sexual nature are some of the strongest.

If this were not so, TV, movies, music, and advertising would not be jam-packed with sexual content. Nor would the strip club industry be a \$2-3 billion per year venture. Nor would the pornography industry be an \$8-10 billion per year venture. Nor would AshleyMadison.com (whose slogan is "Life is short. Have an affair.") be the 2,412th most-trafficked website on earth (out of approximately 644,000,000 websites).

God has deeply ingrained sexuality into us and the desires that stem from it can be incredibly powerful.

Which means that we must give both diligent and constant attention to steering clear of illicit sexual desire, or lust.

If there is any doubt as to how strongly God detests illicit sexual cravings, it is cleared up when he equates lust to committing adultery with a person in one's heart (Matthew 5:28).

## **The Problem**

At the very least, lust is an expression of sexual discontent.

Often, though, it is far more...sexual covetousness.

Though one may crave sexual satisfaction from an individual not bound to another person, many occasions of lust involve the desire for one whom God has already bound to another individual.

Either way, lust is sin.

It desires something sexual that one has no right to.

It is indulging “...the flesh in its corrupt desires...” (2 Peter 2:10, NASB).

And for this reason, Paul admonishes that “...this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, *not in passion of lust*, like the Gentiles who do not know God...” (1 Thessalonians 4:3-5, NKJV).

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes: “Let us walk properly, as in the day, not...in lewdness and lust...” (Romans 13:13, NKJV).

Why?

Because, in the end, our sin will surely ensnare us:

“The righteousness of the upright will deliver them, but the unfaithful will be caught by their lust.” (Proverbs 11:6, NKJV)

## **Chastity**

Aldous Huxley, one of history’s most flagrant proponents of unfettered sexual liberation, once wrote in a novel that chastity is “...the most unnatural of the sexual perversions.”

He could not have been more wrong.

If God has categorically condemned sexual promiscuity and anything leading to it, then chastity is anything but a perversion. It is in fact one of the purest of all virtues.

## **The Only Outlet**

God has ordained a domain for sexual expression, but only one: within the bounds of a heterosexual, non-adulterous marriage.

Expression of sexuality outside of that relationship is sin.

## **A Difficult Battle**

Just because God authorized only one domain for sexual expression does not mean that He is unaware of the struggle it is to maintain that purity.

Writing by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul indicates that for the unmarried and the widows, "...it is good for them if they remain even as I. But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion" (1 Corinthians 7:8-9).

It is no small achievement to maintain sexual purity.

But it is a requisite achievement to enter the gates of Heaven. There is only one end that awaits those who choose to let their sexual cravings go uncontrolled:

"But the...sexually immoral...shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (Revelation 21:8, NKJV).

## **The Bottom Line**

Chastity is far more than just outward control, control of behavior. It is more than simply refraining from illicit sexual activity.

It is also inner control, control of mind and heart. It is refraining from illicit sexual desire.

In the end, why does any of this matter? Why should we be so concerned about our sexuality that we strive to control even our inner desires?

Because controlled sexuality is purity and holiness. And God is both.

If we are to call ourselves Christians, we are to be both as well.

*"Be holy for I am holy."* (1 Peter 1:16, NKJV)

## **Questions for Thought and Discussion**

1. Define lust.
2. What causes a person to lust?
3. What does lust lead to?
4. How do we eradicate and/or prevent lust?
5. What do Proverbs 5 and 6:20-35 teach us about lust/sexual sin?
6. What are some practical ways to ensure that we are chaste?

# Week 7: Sloth

*“If Joan of Arc could turn the tide of an entire war before her 18th birthday, you can get out of bed.” (E. Jean Carroll)*

If your life was a garden and God called in the harvest today, how much produce would you have to offer Him?

Scripture indicates that we will be judged by our fruit (Matthew 7:15-23). This is certainly a sobering reality if we must admit that our produce is rotten. But it's devastating if we must admit that our tree is barren and has produced no fruit at all.

God reserves a special kind of disdain for laziness, apathy, and general inaction:

“So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.” (Revelation 3:16, NKJV)

In a sense, negative action is better than no action at all.

“Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is the lazy one to those who send him.” (Proverbs 10:26, NASB)

When we embrace a life of laziness, we become an irritant to the very God who created us “in Christ Jesus for good *works*.” (Ephesians 2:10)

## Work Is Not Evil

Work and labor are not the results of sin.

Humanity has not been subjected to the rigors of productive activity as a backlash against and punishment for its sinful rebellion against God.

Though the laziness in us would object to this sentiment, work is inherently good.

Consider the fact that one of the main reasons God placed Adam in the garden of Eden was to work: “Then the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to *cultivate it and keep it*.” (Genesis 2:15, NASB)

Yes, the work became much more difficult after Adam and Eve sinned (Genesis 3:17-20), but work existed long before sin entered the world.

So, as Christians, we would do well to dispense with the delusion that work is the enemy.

Our primary purpose in this life is not to eat, drink, and be merry. It is to be productive.

“God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was *very good*.” (Genesis 1:31, NASB)

That includes having put man in the garden to cultivate it and keep it.

## **Rest Is Only Rest If...**

...it is preceded by work.

Otherwise, it's laziness.

“By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done.” (Genesis 2:2, NASB)

God rested, there is no doubt about that. But, He rested *after* He had worked. (Not just after He had worked, but after He had *created the universe*. Maybe that raises the bar a bit for what counts as work deserving of rest...)

Scripture says that God rested one day out of seven. The majority of His time that first week was spent working.

Not sitting around twiddling His thumbs. Not being busy just to be busy.

The majority of the first week was spent being *productive*.

Not only did God not spend His time the first week being lazy, He did not slog His way through the six days of work, simply living for the weekend when He could take a break and relax.

God took joy in His work, even while He was doing it. Seven times in Genesis 1 it is mentioned that God saw what He had done throughout the first six days and determined that it was good.

The moral to the story?

Work is good. Laziness is not.



## **Good Intentions**

As human beings, we have an epic ability not only to engage in irrational behavior but to justify it in our own minds.

This is eminently true with laziness.

We often assuage our consciences with the lie that laziness is not actually laziness. Instead, what it is is waiting for the right moment to capitalize on our grand plans. We have high aspirations for our lives, but we must wait for the opportune moment to realize those plans. We're biding our time until our moment arrives.

Meanwhile, life passes us by.

Harvest arrives and we have no produce to offer.

Indeed, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

## Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. Depending on which translation you use, you will find various terms used in Scripture to describe the same basic concept: *sloth*, *sluggard*, *indolence*, *laziness*. Define these four terms and then describe what nuance each brings to the general concept. If you find any other terms used in Scripture, define and describe them as well.

2. Study what the book of Proverbs says about laziness. Then, describe the reasons it gives as to why laziness is sinful.

# Week 8: Diligence

*“He that would have the fruit must climb the tree.” (Thomas Fuller)*

A farmer who doesn't work doesn't eat.

Crops don't raise themselves.

The farmer who wants produce at harvest must work the whole season.

He may try to buck the system. He may try to cheat the system. He may try to beat the system. Ultimately, though, he cannot. He cannot break the natural laws that God established; he can only break himself against those laws.

*“Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” (2 Corinthians 9:6, NASB)*

## Diligence

Diligence is a defining character trait of the godly individual.

Scripture bears this out in multiple passages:

- “You will seek Me and find Me when you search for me *with all your heart*.” (Jeremiah 29:13, NASB)
- “...He is a rewarder of those who *diligently* seek Him.” (Hebrews 11:6, NKJV)
- “The one who had received the five talents came up and brought five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you entrusted five talents to me. See, I have gained five more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’” (Matthew 25:20-21, NASB)
- “All hard work brings a profit...” (Proverbs 14:23, NIV)

Given God's preference for diligence, He shows little sympathy for the person who chooses laziness:

*“...if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either.” (2 Thessalonians 3:10, NASB)*

## Characteristics of True Diligence

True diligence can be recognized by several characteristics:

**It results from internal motivation.** The diligent person needs no goading or prodding to start what needs to be started. Neither does he need constant supervision nor chaperoning to ensure that he finishes what needs to be finished.

“Go to the ant, O sluggard, observe her ways and be wise, which, *having no chief, officer or ruler*, prepares her food in the summer and gathers her provision in the harvest.” (Proverbs 6:6-8, NASB)

**It begins with the end in mind.** The diligent person does not expend effort haphazardly. Instead, he organizes, plans, and maps out his work in such a way that he will achieve his desired results. He realizes that particular results require particular efforts.

“Go to the ant, O sluggard, observe her ways and be wise, which, having no chief, officer or ruler, *prepares her food in the summer and gathers her provision in the harvest.*” (Proverbs 6:6-8, NASB)

The winter stockpile only materializes if the ant plans ahead and starts collecting in the summer and fall. No forethought, no food in the winter.

**It is productive, not simply busy.** The diligent person recognizes that not all busyness is business. He thus chooses only to engage in productive effort.

“For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, *doing no work at all*, but acting like *busybodies*.” (2 Thessalonians 3:11, NASB)

It’s possible to be busy without accomplishing anything productive. Not all effort is created equal. Wheels can spin both in the sand and on the road, but only one of those results in forward progress.

**It is ultimately focused on more than self-satisfaction.** Diligence brings great reward to the one exerting the effort:

- “...the hand of the diligent makes rich.” (Proverbs 10:4, NASB)
- “...the soul of the diligent shall be made rich.” (Proverbs 13:4, NKJV)
- “He who tills his land will have plenty of food...” (Proverbs 28:19, NASB)
- “In all labor there is profit...” (Proverbs 14:23, NASB)

In the end, though, diligence sees a higher purpose:

“He who steals must steal no longer; but rather *he must labor*, performing with his own hands what is good, *so that he will have something to share with one who has need.*” (Ephesians 4:28, NASB)

## **The Underlying Motivation**

Underneath it all, the motivation that ought to drive us to be people of diligence is that we work for our Creator.

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

## Questions For Thought and Discussion

1. If diligence is a learned trait, what practical steps can we take to ingrain it into our character? How do we develop a strong, solid work ethic?

2. Scripture obviously commends diligence in spiritual/eternal matters (Heb. 11:6), but does it promote diligence in temporal matters? In other words, as long as we are diligent in our seeking of God, does it really matter how diligent we are in the affairs of this life?

3. This lesson lists 4 defining features of true diligence. What other characteristics could you add to that list?

4. When is rest/relaxation appropriate? How much is appropriate? How do you make these decisions? What factors should you consider as you make these decisions?

5. Is it possible to be too diligent? Is there ever a time when working/being diligent is not appropriate?

# Week 9: Greed

*“For greed all nature is too little.” (Seneca)*

“Money, money, money. Always sunny in the rich man's world...All the things I could do if I had a little money.”

More than almost any other, this mindset dominates the collective American consciousness in the twenty-first century.

Cleverly cloaked by political correctness as “consumerism,” greed has become a driving force in our culture. The very thing that draws so many immigrants to our country--the “American Dream”--is often described primarily in material terms. For many years now, the symbol of achievement for Americans has not been freedom, education, or good health...it's been homeownership.

And because money dominates much of our personal conversation, it should be no surprise that it dominates our political conversation as well. Presidents are often elected based on their ability to enhance the national economy. If they succeed in that endeavor, we send them back for another term. If they fail, we replace them. The rise and fall of men who hold the world's most powerful office is largely based on their ability to pad the wallets of the Americans who elect them.

Oscar Wilde once commented, “When I was young, I thought that money was the most important thing in life. Now that I'm old, I know that it is.” Though most of us wouldn't let these words escape from our lips, we betray our hearts by the avaricious lifestyles we live.

## Nothing New Under The Sun

If there is any consolation in this discussion of greed, it's that greed is not a new problem. Though Americans have perfected the art, we did not invent it.

Scripture is chockfull of individuals overcome by the magnetic pull of greed: From Lot choosing the better land for his livestock (Genesis 13) to Achan pilfering booty from the wreckage of Jericho (Joshua 7). From Gehazi wrongfully profiting from Naaman (2 Kings 5) to Ananias and Sapphira lying about their income (Acts 5). The list is staggering.

And of, course, the story of the very Son of God is inextricably tied to greed. Jesus was not betrayed for glory, honor, fame, good health, or a long life...but for 30 pieces of silver.

The Messiah, the Son of the Creator of the universe, was not delivered over for anything more than a pocketful of money.

Greed is a plague that has infected mankind almost since day one.

## **The Problem(s) With Greed**

Accordingly, Scripture has much to say against greed. Consider the following as a non-exhaustive list of God's comments on the subject:

- **Greed is characterized by a tendency to hoard material possessions to oneself.** (See Luke 12:16-21)
- **Greed can destroy one's sympathy, compassion, and concern for the less fortunate.** (See Proverbs 18:23; Consider also Luke 16:19-31 and 1 Timothy 6:17)
- **Greed focuses one's attention on the wrong kind of treasure.** (See Matthew 6:19-21)
- **Greed can prompt one to take advantage of others in order to gain wealth.** (See James 5:1-5; Consider also Proverbs 13:11)
- **Greed consumes one's time and energy.** (See Proverbs 23:4)
- **Greed is never satiated.** (See Ecclesiastes 5:10)
- **Greed can be complicit with a multitude of other sins.** (See 2 Timothy 3:1-5)
- **Greed is the opposite of contentment, which is commanded by God.** (See 1 Timothy 6:6-8; Consider also Hebrews 13:5)
- **Greed prevents one from being a public servant of the church.** (See 1 Timothy 3:8)
- **Greed prevents one from being a leader in the church.** (1 Timothy 3:3, Titus 1:7)
- **Greed leads to grief, ruin, and destruction.** (See 1 Timothy 6:9-10)
- **Greed prevents one from being able to serve God.** (See Matthew 6:24)

## **Just Avoid It**

In the final analysis, greed compels us to do what Will Smith once described as "spending money we don't have to buy things we don't want to impress people we don't like."

And as Christians, we must simply avoid it altogether.



## Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. Why is our culture consumed by greed and materialism? Where does this come from? What's at the root of this problem?

2. What are some practical ways that we can overcome greed?

3. What lessons about greed and wealth can we learn from the story of the rich young ruler and Jesus' ensuing conversation with His disciples? (See Matthew 19:16-30, Mark 10:17-31, Luke 18:18-30)

4. What about investing? Is it a sign of greediness to place one's money in a 401(k), in real estate, in the stock market, etc. in order to grow the amount of money he currently has?

5. This lesson has addressed the insatiable hunger for wealth. What about actually having wealth, though? Scripture does not condemn wealth in and of itself, but it does point out some inherent dangers that attend it. What are those dangers?

# Week 10: Charity

*“A bone to the dog is not charity. Charity is the bone shared with the dog, when you are just as hungry as the dog.” (Jack London)*

When asked what the first commandment of all was, Jesus promptly responded by saying that one should love the Lord with all his being. He then appended a second command to the first and prefaced it by saying that it is *like* the first (as in, similar in importance): “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (see Matthew 22:35-40)

If there was any doubt as to the weight of the second command in comparison to that of the first, Jesus cleared it up by stating that, “On these *two* commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22:40, NASB)

In a similar situation, recorded in Luke 10, Jesus was asked by an individual how he might obtain eternal life. Jesus responded by citing the same two commands. (see Luke 10:25-28)

The message is clear: Those who are to be called by Christ’s name must not only love their Creator with complete dedication, but they must view their neighbor as worthy of the care and concern usually only reserved for oneself.

Charity (or generosity) is not a peripheral command. It is in fact at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian. One cannot be an uncharitable Christian any more than up can be down or wet can be dry. Charity is inherent in Christianity.

No matter what the culture around us screams, Jesus quietly reminds us that, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Acts 20:35)

*(As a note, this lesson will focus on charity and generosity in the context of money/material possessions, as this is the counterpart lesson to the one on greed. Obviously, though, Christian charity/generosity extends far beyond just our stewardship of financial/material resources.)*

## The Difference Between Greed and Charity

At its root, greed stems from a person’s misinterpretation of himself.

While a charitable person recognizes that he is merely a means to an end (insofar as financial/material resources go), a greedy person considers himself an end.

While a charitable person understands that he is simply a funnel through which financial and material resources can be spread to those in greater need, a greedy person misinterprets himself as a collection tank, where resources are to be pooled indefinitely.

A charitable person is like a body of water that has streams flowing both into and out of it. A greedy person, though, is like the Salt Sea, which water only flows into.

While the greedy person deludes himself into thinking that a constant inflowing stream of resources (with no balancing outflow) produces a much more vibrant existence, the charitable person knows that the opposite is true.

It's no coincidence that the Salt Sea is also known as the Dead Sea.

Life cannot be sustained when resources only flow inward.

## **The Hang-Ups**

Why then do we struggle to be as charitable as we ought to be?

Here are three reasons:

**1. We think what we have belongs to us.** This goes back to the concept of an end versus a means to an end.

We often forget that we are not owners, we are stewards. Owners are the end. Stewards are a means to an end.

God has surely blessed us with much, but He's not blessed us with things that are *ours*. He's entrusted to us things that are *His*.

From the outset, a clearheaded steward understands that what is put in front of him is to be used for the purposes dictated by the owner. The steward is the instrument by which the owner's purposes are carried out. Nothing more, nothing less.

**2. We have a scarcity mentality.** As opposed to an abundance mentality.

One says that there's only enough for some. The other says that there's enough for everyone.

When we view material resources as limited quantities (which is exactly the way advertisers want us to view them), we consider the attempt to obtain them a competition: “I’ve got to get them before someone else does, or there won’t be any left for me.” There is a winner and a loser: He who obtains wins, and he who doesn’t loses.

When we view the reservoir of material resources as able to provide for everyone, we no longer view the obtaining of them as a competition.

God clearly states in Proverbs 28:27, “He who gives to the poor *will never want...*” (NASB).

**3. We equate possession with personal worth.** In other words, he who has the most toys is worth the most as a person.

We attach social status, credibility, and influence to wealth.

Thus, we try to keep up with...or *outdo*...the Joneses.

Jesus warned: “Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.” (Luke 12:15, NASB)

If it did, the Son of God would have had very little personal worth.

## **Biblical Principles Regarding Charity**

So what does Scripture have to say about financial/material charity?

Consider these three principles as a starter list:

**1. True charity is done out of altruism, not selfishness.** There are many ways to pervert charity and turn it into an utterly selfish act:

One is to do it for *notoriety*. Ananias and Sapphira stand as sobering examples of this (Acts 5:1-11). Not coincidentally, God used their actions to make it clear that their motives were unacceptable. (Consider also Matthew 6:1-4)

Another way is to do it for personal *material gain*. We can use charity as a twisted outlet for our greed. We give to get in return. After all, God did say “He who gives to the poor will never want...” (Proverbs 28:27, NASB) and “He who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” (2 Corinthians 9:6; See also Proverbs 11:24-25)

Yet, we must remember the principle that Emanuel Swedenborg eluded to when he said, “True charity is the desire to be useful to others with no thought of recompense.” The

same sentiment was expressed with a bit more candor by Don Bennett: “Real charity doesn’t care if it’s tax-deductible or not.”

Biblical, godly charity is done purely for the benefit of the receiver.

It is altruistic.

**2. True charity involves sacrifice.** If you doubt this, just remember the story of the widow and her two mites, as well as Jesus’ extolling of her action. (Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4)

Noted at the beginning of the lesson, Jack London once said, “A bone to the dog is not charity. Charity is the bone shared with the dog, when you are just as hungry as the dog.”

Khalil Gibran echoed London’s sentiment when he said, “Generosity is not giving me that which I need that you do, but it is giving me that which you need more than I do.”

**3. True charity is equivalent to storing up eternal treasure.** Being willing to trade the wealth of this life for the betterment of those around us has eternal ramifications.

God has promised eternal treasure to those who are willing to sacrifice their own comforts in this life for the good of others:

“Instruct them [those who are rich in this present age] to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, *storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed.*” (1 Timothy 6:18-19, NASB)

## The Moral To The Story

God gives us material blessings for the purpose of sharing with others, not to hoard to ourselves.

“...Let him labor, working with his hands what is good, *that he may have something to give to him who has need.*” (Ephesians 4:28, NKJV)

“...you will be enriched in everything *for all liberality...*” (2 Corinthians 9:11, NASB)

*“Freely you received, freely give.”* (Matthew 10:8, NASB)

## Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. Cite some Biblical examples of charity.
2. This lessons argues that we are stewards of material possessions and not owners outright. Give Scriptures to affirm this claim.
3. Jesus told the rich young ruler that to be complete, he needed to sell all of his possessions and give to the poor. Must we do the same? Would there ever be a circumstance where we would need to do that? If so, what would that circumstance be?
4. In order from highest priority to lowest, list the considerations a Christian must weigh as he/she decides how to spend a sum of money.
5. Read the attached letter from Warren Buffett. What is your reaction to it? Does this constitute Biblical charity? What other thoughts come to your mind as you read this letter?

# Week 11: Envy & Kindness

*“There is but one step from envy to hate.” (Goethe)*

## Envy

Though Scripture addresses many sins, it describes few as bluntly as it does envy. In Proverbs 14:30, Solomon writes that “...envy is rottenness to the bones” (NKJV).

Envy has the ability to consume one’s character in the same way gangrene consumes one’s body, and it can do this with the speed of an unrelenting cancer.

The Bible is rife with examples of envy and its destructiveness:

- Cain and Abel (Genesis 4)
- Sarah and Hagar (Genesis 16)
- Rachel and Leah (Genesis 30:1)
- Joseph’s brothers and Joseph (Genesis 37:11)
- Korah and Moses (Numbers 16)
- The Jewish leaders and Jesus (Mark 15:10)
- The Jewish leaders and Paul (Acts 13:45)

Individuals consumed with envy are often driven to destroy the object of their envy, and these Biblical examples demonstrate that.

Envy is not content to simmer in one’s heart. It does more than *compel* one to act destructively, it *propels* one toward destructive action. The effects of envy are often more than simply disastrous, they are *swiftly* disastrous.

Because of this, God declares in no uncertain terms that those who are envious will not inherit the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:21).

## The Problems With Envy

Here are four reasons why God detests envy:

**Envy is carnal.** On more than one occasion, Scripture describes envy as appealing to temporal and base desires:

“For you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?” (1 Corinthians 3:3, NKJV)

“Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are...envy...” (Galatians 5:19,21, NKJV)

The problem with this?

It’s exactly the opposite of what Christians are commanded to focus on:

“Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, *not on the things that are on earth.*” (Colossians 3:1-2, NASB)

**Envy is contrary to love.** 1 Corinthians 13:4 clearly states that love “does not envy” (NKJV).

We can love, or we can envy, but we cannot do both.

If our aim is to be godly, the choice is obvious:

“God is love and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in Him.” (1 John 4:16, NASB)

**Envy produces confusion and all kinds of evil.** Envy is a gateway sin, leading to a multitude of other evils:

“For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.” (James 3:16, NKJV)

**Envy leads one to destroy the object of his envy.** This was mentioned at the start of the lesson. Envy is not satisfied to merely *feel* ill toward another, it thrives on destructive *action* against another.

To drive this point home, we need only remember the heinous death that our Savior suffered.

Even Pilate could see through the Jews’ murderous motives:

“For he [Pilate] knew that because of envy they [the Jews] had handed Him over.” (Matthew 27: 18, NASB)



## The Heart Of The Matter

At the end of the day, the most important thing in life is relationship.

Every command of God revolves around relationship, either to Him or to others. Every single one.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments *depend the whole Law and the Prophets.*” (Matthew 22:37-40, NASB)

Thus, anything that promotes God-approved relationship is good and right, and anything that destroys God-approved relationship is sin.

Envy is the latter.

## Kindness

If envy rots a person to the core, kindness breathes new life into dead men’s bones.

Mark Twain once said, “Kindness is the language which the deaf can hear and the blind can see.”

It transcends language, background, intelligence level, and religious bent. It has the power to lift up the downtrodden and the power to humble the arrogant.

While envy burns bridges, kindness builds them.

## The Virtues of Kindness

Here are five reasons why true kindness is as virtuous as envy is vicious:

**True kindness is shown to all men.** “But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself *is kind to ungrateful and evil men.*” (Luke 6:35, NASB)

The kindness of God is the standard for our kindness.

God chooses to pour out His kindness on all men, whether they are grateful for it or not.

**True kindness is shown, even when it's not deserved.** An interesting phrase is used in Psalm 119:76. While the NASB simply translates it “lovingkindness,” the NKJV renders the phrase as “merciful kindness.”

This indicates that God not only doles out His kindness when it is justly called for but even when it is not. God does not reserve His kindness only for those who actually deserve it, but He showers it down on those who certainly do *not* deserve it.

God willingly demonstrates kindness even in circumstances where it can only be described as *merciful* kindness.

True kindness shows no partiality.

**True kindness is a characteristic of godly love.** Just as surely as envy is *not* a characteristic of godly love, kindness *is*.

According to 1 Corinthians 13:4, love is kind. The two qualities go hand-in-hand.

**True kindness acts, even when it makes one vulnerable.** “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us...For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His son...” (Romans 5:8,10, NASB)

God showed us the kindness of His Son, not while we were His friends, but while we were His enemies.

This opened God up to the possibility of rejection. By showing us kindness while we were in a hostile stance against Him, God ran the risk of having His kindness thrown back in His face.

And, in fact, most people do throw it back in His face (consider Matthew 7:13-14).

Yet, knowing this would be the case, God still showed us His kindness.

**True kindness is part of the fruit of the Spirit.** “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, *kindness*, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control...” (Galatians 5:22-23, NASB)

True kindness is more than just something God does, it is *who He is*.

## The Command

Kindness is not merely a good idea. It is commanded by God to be found in our character:

“*Be kind to one another*, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” (Ephesians 4:32, NASB)

“Add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness *brotherly kindness*, to brotherly kindness love.” (2 Peter 1:5-7, NKJV)

“What is desired in a man is *kindness*...” (Proverbs 19:22, NKJV)

## Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. Define envy, jealousy, and covetousness. How are these three concepts related? How are they different?

2. Scripture indicates that envy is carnal. Give some examples of carnal desires that are often associated with envy. In other words, when a person is full of envy, what kinds of things are they often envious of?

3. James 3:16 indicates that all kinds of evil flow from and are associated with envy. Generate a list of evils that might keep company with envy.

4. What are some practical steps that we can take to overcome envy?

5. Give some examples of kindness being shown in the Bible.

6. Does kindness necessitate that we like the person we are showing kindness to?

7. Is there ever a time when kindness is inappropriate?

# Week 12: Self-Discipline

*“By constant self-discipline and self-control you can develop greatness of character.” (Grenville Kleiser)*

## Self-Control

Heaven will be filled with only one kind of person: the kind that so desperately wanted to get there that he absolutely would not be denied.

No one will accidentally get to Heaven. No one will just happen upon it one day, having gone out for a leisurely walk down the path of life with no apparent destination in mind. No one will have the wrong address and mistakenly knock on Heaven's gate.

No one will just end up there.

This is because we live in a sin-stricken world. As a result, we are bombarded by temptations that constantly distract us from the path to Heaven. Because of this, few people will get there. (Matthew 7:13-14)

Heaven is reserved only for those who have developed the self-control to get there.

## Living Without Self-Control...

...is like letting all of your defenses down and begging to be overrun by the world. It's like throwing the front door of your life wide open and saying to Satan, "Come on in!"

"Like a city that is broken into and without walls is a man who has no control over his spirit." (Proverbs 25:28, NASB)

Living *with* self-control, on the other hand, makes a man better "than he who captures a city." (Proverbs 16:32, NASB)

## An Expectation

Self-control is a fruit of God's own spirit (Galatians 5:23).

Thus, it should be no surprise that God commands His people to infuse it into their characters as well:

“...Giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge *self-control*...” (2 Peter 1:5-6, NKJV)

As Paul wrote to Titus, God teaches us that “...denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age...” (Titus 2:12, NKJV).

## Two Components Of Self-Control

Because of the importance of self-control in the life of a Christian, we will spend our last two lessons exploring this topic.

In this lesson, we will look at self-discipline, which is one component of self-control, and in the final lesson, we will look at moderation.

## Self-Discipline

Jim Rohn once said that, “Everyone must choose one of two pains: the pain of discipline or the pain of regret.”

He was exactly right.

We cannot escape that choice. Either we will subject ourselves to the rigors of developing a disciplined life or we will suffer the true pain of having *not* developed a disciplined life.

If godliness is our goal, self-discipline is a requirement.

## The Steps Of Self-Discipline

Self-discipline is achieved by doing three things:

**1. Training our intellect.** The first step toward a life of self-discipline is to gain knowledge. One cannot discipline himself unless he knows he needs to.

“...Giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue *knowledge*...” (2 Peter 1:5, NKJV)

As Christians, we recognize that the knowledge we must seek is the knowledge that comes from God...the knowledge of *truth*:

“This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the *knowledge of the truth*.” (1 Timothy 2:3-4, NASB)

In our quest for knowledge, though, we must guard against that which deceptively masquerades as truth:

“And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in *real knowledge* and all discernment...” (Philippians 1:9, NASB)

This is imperative, because the knowledge of the world will fill our minds with nothing of substance. If we pursue this intellectual cotton candy, we’ll be “always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:7, NASB).

We must also avoid deceiving ourselves into believing that mere enthusiasm for seeking knowledge is equal to actually having knowledge:

“For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but *not according to knowledge*...” (Romans 10:2, NKJV)

**2. Conforming our will to our intellect.** The second step in achieving a life of self-discipline is to harmonize one’s will with the knowledge he has acquired.

Assuming that the knowledge one has gained is the knowledge of truth (knowledge from God), this step will orient a person toward the right path.

Gaining the knowledge is finding out which path is right. Conforming one’s will to that knowledge is moving onto that correct path.

If the acquired knowledge is not the knowledge of truth, conforming one’s will to that errant knowledge will only compound the existing problem. As Stephen Covey said, “If your ladder is not leaning against the right wall, every step you take gets you to the wrong place faster.”

Step 1 is about discovering God’s will. Step 2 is about choosing to make His will our will.

**3. Subjugating our thoughts and actions to our will.** The final step in achieving a life of self-discipline is to enslave one’s mental and physical activities to his will. It’s deciding that one’s willpower, and not his passions, will be the master.

If gaining the knowledge of the truth is finding out which path is right, and conforming one's will to that knowledge is moving onto that correct path, then subjugating one's activities to his will is *staying on* that correct path.

If Step 1 is about discovering God's will, and Step 2 is about making His will our will, then Step 3 is about consistently abiding by that will.

Arguably, this is the hardest step.

The apostle Paul once wrote: "For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want." (see Romans 7:14-25)

But, this is where the rubber meets the road. This is often where our self-discipline is either made or broken.

When the pull is strong to let our passions rule us, what do we do?

Paul firmly stated: "For I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I *discipline my body and make it my slave*, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified." (1 Corinthians 9:26-27, NASB)

## **Is It Worth It?**

Remember what Jim Rohn said? "Everyone must choose one of two pains: the pain of discipline or the pain of regret."

Looking back over her training, Olympic swimmer Sarah Bombell said, "The pain of discipline is far less than the pain of regret."

Amen.

Though not easy to develop in a world filled with sin, self-discipline is worth it.

Said Paul near the end of his life: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, *and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing*." (2 Timothy 4:7-8, NKJV)



## **Questions for Thought and Discussion**

1. Give some Bible examples of self-control/self-discipline.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Give some Bible examples of a lack of self-control/self-discipline.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. The words “discipline” and “disciple” are closely related. What does the concept of being a disciple tell us about the concept of self-discipline?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. What are some practical ways that we can train ourselves to be self-disciplined?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. Can a person be self-disciplined in worldly matters without being self-disciplined in spiritual matters? What about the other way around? Are both necessary in the life of a Christian?

# Week 13: Moderation

*“The heart is great which shows moderation in the midst of prosperity.” (Seneca)*

In the previous lesson, we began to explore the subject of self-control, as we took a look at its first major component: self-discipline. This week, we finish our exploration of the topic by considering the second major component of self-control: moderation.

Though the common phrase “moderation in all things” is never found in the Bible, God certainly addresses the topic in such a way that we’re well within the bounds of Scripture to suggest that Christians ought to be people of moderation.

At the very least, we can *rule out* Oscar Wilde’s notion that moderation is a fatal thing. His conclusion that nothing succeeds like excess seems to be the antithesis to God’s proclamations on Christians living.

## The Two Kinds of Moderation

Scripture addresses two distinct kinds of moderation, both of which it commands Christians to engage in:

### Avoidance Of Excess

The first kind of moderation is the most obvious kind: *avoidance of excess*.

Though the Bible never uses the phrase “moderation in all things,” it does key in on a few specific examples. This seems to establish the general principle of a godly life excluding excess:

In Ephesians 5:18, the NKJV reads: “And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation..”

The word translated “dissipation” is the Greek word *asotia*, which carries the literal meaning of profligacy, prodigality, riot, and excess. Given that context, the King James actually renders it: “And be not drunk with wine, wherein is *excess*...”

Similarly, Richard Weymouth translates the verse: “Do not indulge in much wine--a thing in which excess is so easy...”

The point is that we should avoid excess, because in this particular case, it literally impairs one's mind.

Though wine/strong drink are often used in Scriptural condemnation of excess, the general principle is stated in other contexts as well:

Proverbs 25:27 warns that "It is not good to eat much honey..."

One could even make the argument that Paul's admonition to women regarding *modesty* (1 Timothy 2:9-10) carries an implicit directive to avoid aesthetic excess.

The underlying concept driving all of these passages is that a godly person is a person of self-control, and a person of self-control is a person who recognizes the inherent dangers of excess.

Thus, the godly person is content to be moderate in his pursuit and consumption of this world's blessings.

## **Constant Self-Examination**

The second kind of moderation that Scripture commands Christians to demonstrate is one of reflection, examination, and adjustment.

We should not only be moderate in our living, we should be moderators of our living.

The easiest way to grasp this concept is to think of a "moderator" in a debate. He's the individual charged with keeping the event flowing forward and the debaters on topic. To achieve this, he must cut some of the debaters' comments short, redirect them at times, etc. He closely observes what's happening and makes adjustments as needed.

Scripture commands us to do this with our own lives:

"But a man must *examine himself*, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup." (1 Corinthians 11:28, NASB)

"*Examine yourselves* as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves." (2 Corinthians 13:5, NKJV)

"But each one must *examine his own work*..." (Galatians 6:4, NASB)

As the prophet Jeremiah wailed over Jerusalem, he proclaimed, "Let us *examine and probe our ways*, and let us return to the Lord" (Lamentations 3:40, NASB)

Godliness does not happen by accident. One must constantly look in the mirror and adjust as necessary.

## **A Final Word**

In many ways, every subject that we have explored over the last 13 weeks comes down to the issue of self-control. When we firmly root our lives in habits of self-discipline and moderation, we will be well on our way to living virtuously.

The life of a Christian is not a life of perfection. Rather, it is a life of well-intentioned effort aided by the grace of God.

Pursuing a life of virtue can be wearisome and, at times, even discouraging. When the world is floating downstream, we sometimes wonder whether swimming upstream is worth it.

On those days when the pressures of the world seem insurmountable, let us not forget that without pressure and heat, carbon is never turned into diamonds.

Struggling against a world of sin and entering through the narrow gate is indeed worth it:

“For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.” (2 Corinthians 4:17, NKJV)

May God bless you as you continue to pursue a life of virtue.

## **Questions for Thought and Discussion**

1. Why is excess so dangerous in the life of a Christian?
2. Is there any area of life in which excess is acceptable? If so, give some Scriptures to back up your claim.
3. How can we examine ourselves to see if we are in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5)?
4. Where is the line between moderation and excess? How do we determine that line?
5. Is the line between moderation and excess different for each individual or is it the same for everyone?