WHO CAN FIND A VIRTUOUS WOMAN? FOR HER PRICE IS FAR ABOVE RUBIES.
- PROVERBS 31:10

THE VIRTUOUS WOMAN

High School

The Missionary Baptist
Vacation Bible School Literature Committee presents

THE VIRTUOUS WOMAN

Vacation Bible School Lessons for HIGH SCHOOL
Written by Brother Danny Hayes

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Chairman:
Brother Rick Williams

Chairman Elect:
Brother Rick Williams

Contributing Editors:
Elder Mitch Glasscock
Elder Jerry Miller
Elder David Swindle
Elder Stephen Skinner

Proofreaders:
Sister Laura Beavers
Brother Danny Hayes
Brother Randall Henson
Sister Casey Rouse
Sister Deborah Williams
Brother Rick Williams

Booklet Design and Layout:
Brother Cory Glass

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Treasurer
Brother Randall Henson
10022 Woodburn-Allen Springs Rd.
Alvaton, KY 42122
270-842-4526

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In Memory of Clifford Hayes

When I was young, I remember my Dad serving as clerk for ordinations and church organizations and later for the Siloam Association. Even at that time, as young as I was, I remember being amazed at how he could manage to take so many notes and then give back an account of the proceedings with such clarity and detail. But the fact is that Dad loved the written word and loved putting words down on paper. I believe that the abilities that I and many others observed flowed from those loves. As Mom has gone through his things since his passing, she has found numerous papers where he had written. The subjects are many as were his interests, but the clear pattern shown is that he loved to write.

As he lay in the hospital, he told us of the reasons that he had for wanting to live. Of course, he wanted to be with us. He wanted to enjoy the life and family with which God had blessed him, but he also still had things that he wanted to do, to finish. Now Dad wasn't strong anymore and his hands had developed a tremor from his medicine, so he wasn't able to do much physical work, but he could still write. Among the things that he wanted to live for was to finish his memoirs and to put his old Sunday School lessons – handwritten – onto his computer.

Above writing, Dad loved the Lord and His Church and was well studied in The Word, from the Law to Grace and Church Doctrine and this expressed itself in the bulk of his writing. He wrote Sunday School lessons for several years and during that time he became involved with writing Bible School lessons, writing one of five lessons. As time went on, he wrote the entire set of Adult lessons and has been doing so for several years now. This year's lessons are the last set that he wrote. He did them all, finishing them before he became ill.

We who participate in the Literature Committee will be hamstrung by losing him, his wisdom, knowledge, and love for God's cause. His ability to work with other people to produce something of value was a treasure that will now leave a void. Among the multitude of things that I will miss are trading rides to committee meetings, getting his insight on our committee proceedings, and the competition between us to see who could produce the most verbiage in a set of lessons (he holds the record, though I believe that I beat him this year).

I can't overestimate Dad's influence on me. I owe a great deal of who I am to him. He helped teach me how to love the Lord and is my first inspiration to write. Every boy with a good father wants to emulate him and to have his approval. Even now, I can still feel the pleasure that I would get when Dad admired something that I had done or when he simply stated that he was proud of me. It encouraged me to continue, to improve and truly that drive continues even now.

I hope that these lessons are profitable to you and that you enjoy them. I hope you agree that they are among the best that my Dad has produced.

Danny Hayes

LESSON ONE

FAITH

LESSON TEXT
Hebrews 11:1

WRITTEN BY
BROTHER DANNY HAYES

How many times have you heard people say that they wished that they as a young person had known what they know now? What did they mean by that? Maybe because they wanted to have been practicing their profession from the time that they were a child? Probably not. Usually, when an adult says something like that, it's because they wish they had done things differently. It could be that they wish that they had behaved better. Maybe they would like to have avoided mistakes that they made. Maybe they would have taken steps to make them a better, more complete person than they think they now are.

It's a strange thing, but if you ask these people if anyone had ever tried to tell them about these things that they wish they had or hadn't done, many would answer that yes, they were warned or advised. So why do they think that they didn't know then what they know now? Think back to a time when you did something with bad results that you'd been warned about. Why did you do it? You'd been warned. You didn't think the bad results would really happen, did you? What about now? You'd think twice now, or maybe avoid it all together, wouldn't you? Why now and not before?

The thing is that there's a lot of experience and knowledge out there for us to draw from. There have been hundreds of generations who have lived before us. They have experienced things that are very much like what awaits us in this life. Not every single one of those experiences have been passed down, but there is still a wealth of life-knowledge. So given this, there's really no excuse for doing dumb things, is there?

The point here is that we humans are very adept at figuring out ways to get into trouble, but not very good at staying out of it. Even when we're told how to stay out of trouble, it doesn't register very

well. We tend to think that we're smart enough or lucky enough to avoid it, that it won't happen to us. It seems that pain is our best teacher. We're also not very good at choosing the correct path. Though we may be advised as to the best way, we often make our own way, learning not from the experience of those who have been there, but from our own mistakes. Why is this?

Could it be that it's because the experiences of others are not our own? It's not our knowledge. For any given situation, we could be given dozens of different suggestions on what we should do. Some may be good, some maybe not so good. If we don't have the knowledge ourselves, they all may just sound like opinions to us. We need real knowledge, real feedback, so we have to learn on our own. But wait...we learn to build buildings, bridges, airplanes, computers, and many other things without having to start with stone and sticks and working our way up in knowledge. We build on knowledge from thousands of years ago to now without having to go back and do all the trial and error. So this explanation really doesn't hold does it.

Think back to those times you got yourself into trouble and be honest with yourself. You really knew that you were doing the wrong thing, didn't you? If you were in a situation where you had to decide a course of action, you may have been exposed to opinions and you may even have been confused about the right path, especially if you already knew what you wanted to do. It can be hard to tell the difference between good advice and bad advice in such a case,because what we want talks really loudly. There may be a tiny voice in our heads saying we should listen to the good advice, but what we want usually screams at us. In retrospect, you know what that means. It's never a good thing to be conflicted. If it was okay, why did you feel conflicted? Very often it's good to at least stop and listen to the tiny voice. Usually, we know what the right thing is...the problem is wanting to do it, to follow that little voice.

So maybe what people who say "I wish I knew then what I know now" are really saying is that now they know how to listen to the tiny voice – our conscience. Most of us who have gotten ourselves in trouble absolutely knew that what we were doing was wrong. There are people in this world who never had their conscience trained at all, but not many of them. And even of those people, they still have a sense of right and wrong to the point that they will try to either deny or justify any wrongdoing that is brought to light.

If this is the case, then we should all train ourselves to listen to the tiny voice, and maybe even try to give it some exercise to make it a stronger voice. Doesn't it make sense that we should want to avoid hurts and troubles if we can, especially the ones that are self-inflicted? You see the need for the good sense to avoid walking off the edge of a cliff, don't you? Then wouldn't you also want the good sense to avoid ruining your life? Of course you would. But really it goes further than that.

Wouldn't it also make sense to not just develop the good sense to avoid trouble, but also the good sense to be able to blossom? You don't just want your life to be safe from destruction, but you want it to prosper. Be aware that we're not talking about making money. It's about a well-lived life rather than a riotous or chaotic one. It's about having the lasting riches of happiness, love, and peace rather than the poverty of striving after material goods and fleeting pleasures. It's about being a blessing and inspiration to those around you rather than dragging others down.

Proverbs 4:23 says "*Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.*" The writer is saying here that from the heart springs everything that affects our lives. Note that he's not talking about the blood pump in our chest. The heart is the inward part of a human being. It is where our innermost thoughts and desires reside. Given this, it should come as no surprise that the heart affects our entire life. It also makes sense that we should keep it with a great deal of care. Of course, keeping, or taking care of it would include filling it with the right kind of stuff, because if the issues of

our lives come out of it, we should want what's in it to be good so that what comes out will be good. Here's the whole point of everything that we've talked about so far: if you make sure you know the right stuff now, you won't ever have to say "I wish I'd known then what I know now."

Having said all this in a generic sense, let's get more specific. This year's lessons are aimed toward the young women. We'll talk about what it means to be a woman and, more to the point – what kind of woman each of you was meant to be. Don't laugh...we're not going to try to cover it all, but there are some important things about who you should be that we will attempt to look into. Think of these lessons as the things that women's magazines don't cover. We'll try to talk about the heart and the things that you should try to fill it with in order to be the person that God intended for you to be.

To the guys: don't drift away. You should pay attention as we go through these lessons. If there's discussion, you may want to ask questions, but it may benefit you to just listen. A somewhat strange and under-reported fact about the really important things in life is that they don't carry gender. They're really issues related to being human. They may manifest themselves differently between female and male because of the different ways that we're all put together, but the important issues are common to us all. To listen to the young women discuss what these issues mean to them may give you insight as to what these traits are really all about. Besides, since these traits that we'll talk about are important for young women to aspire to, they are also the marks of a good person – the kind you may be interested in finding at some point in your life.

FAITH

In our first lesson, we're going to take up the subject of faith. "Faith" is a word that we hear used a great deal in today's world. We can have faith or practice faith. We can exhibit good faith or abuse someone's faith in us. We can be faithful to our word or to our closest friends or relations. We can take a leap of faith, perform an act of faith or fall back on our faith. While we may use the word a lot, do we really know what it means? Of course, we're talking here about faith as it relates to God. Let's look at some definitions.

What is Faith, Really?

The current Merriam-Webster online edition defines faith in the following ways: *belief and trust in and loyalty to God; firm belief in something for which there is no proof; without question.* These definitions are pretty standard fare in the dictionary world of today.

Now let's look at the same word from the Webster's Dictionary of 1913: *Belief; the assent of the mind to the truth of what is declared by another, resting solely and implicitly on his authority and veracity; reliance on testimony; The belief in the facts and truth of the Scriptures, with a practical love of them; especially, that confiding and affectionate belief in the person and work of Christ, which affects the character and life, and makes a man a true Christian, -- called a practical, evangelical, or saving faith*.

Lastly, let's look at what Webster's had to say on the word in 1828: *Evangelical, justifying, or saving faith, is the assent of the mind to the truth of divine revelation, on the authority of God"s testimony, accompanied with a cordial assent of the will or approbation of the heart; an entire confidence or trust in God's character and declarations, and in the character and doctrines of Christ, with an unreserved surrender of the will to his guidance, and dependence on his merits for salvation. In other words, that firm belief of God's testimony, and of the truth of the gospel, which influences the will, and leads to an entire reliance on Christ for salvation.*

Notice the big change from 1828 to today? Why? Has the meaning of the word changed? Have we learned more? Are we smarter now than we were in 1828? Contrary to what you may have thought in fourth grade, dictionaries get their definitions from society, not the other way around. Dictionary publishers don't dictate definitions nearly so much as they chronicle them.

If definitions always stayed the same, the dictionary publishers would have been out business a long time ago.

The good thing about having a dynamic language is that it can change to allow us to adequately describe the world we now live in, which in many, many cases is far different from the one of 1828. The bad thing is that we sometimes lose the original meaning of words, thereby losing the concept that they stood for. There are many things – often the most important things - that are no different now than they were 2000 years ago. People are still being born the same way. We still die the same way. We still love, still get angry, still sleep. The definitions of some of these change to address new things that we've learned about them. For instance, 2000 years ago, people probably didn't know about clinical death verses biological death, but the reality of death is still no different than it was then.

But in the definitions above we see some key points as to the meaning of faith changing over time. From 1828 to today, we see "*assent of the mind to the truth of divine revelation*" change to "*belief in something for which there is no proof*". How can this be? Perhaps we should look to a source that hasn't changed over time.

In our lesson text, the Apostle Paul defines faith this way: "*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*" (Heb. 11:1) Most of us who have been around church or sunday school for very long have heard this verse read or quoted. But do we really know what Paul was saying in this verse? Let's parse it out.

He says faith is substance. What is substance? It's something concrete, real. Something that you can see and touch. So it's the concrete manifestation of things hoped for? That would mean that faith is being able to see and touch the things we hope for? But if you've got this kind of faith, you can't take it out and show it to others like you could show them your cellphone or your shoes. So how is it concrete? How is it real?

Let's say there's something

that happened last week that really pleased you, maybe your school won a big game. You know that happened, don't you? Can you take that out of yourself and show it to someone else? You might tell them about it, but you can't show it. So is it real? Did it really happen? Of course it did. You know it happened. It's real. It's concrete to you even if nobody else saw it.

Now if faith is the concrete manifestation of things hoped for, it's the same thing. If you've got this, you don't have what we, in today's world, call hope. You have knowledge. You're not wishing for something. You have the satisfaction of having it by knowing that it's coming to you, even before you actually do have it. So we see that faith is really just knowledge. We can't take it out and show it to other people. We can only tell them what we know. Whether they believe us or not, it changes nothing - we still know.

The second half of Paul's statement says that faith is the "evidence of things not seen." The original greek word here is "elegchos". It means proof. What is proof? Dictionary.com says that it is "*evidence sufficient to establish a thing as true*". With this meaning, we see that faith proves things that we cannot see, to be true. With faith, we are given irrefutable proof. This is what Jesus was talking about when He told Thomas, who had doubted Jesus' resurrection, "because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed." (John 20:29). He wasn't talking about blind acceptance. He was talking about faith, which is direct proof from God Himself.

From all of this we get that faith is the reality of things earnestly desired, the proof of things otherwise unprovable. Not either/or. It's both at the same time. So we see that faith, rather than today's popular concept of belief without proof, is really knowledge given to us directly by God. This knowledge is the one thing that cannot be taken from us because it is through the eternal part of us – our spirit.

Having Faith

The naysayers who want to steer the world to a disbelief of

God use the fact that we can't show anyone this knowledge. They demand objective (universally measurable or observable) proof, saying "show me God." They either don't realize or don't acknowledge the fact that this proof of God is subjective, meaning that it's discerned only by the individual who has sought and found God. They say that the evidence of God must be objective or it cannot be used. Of course, they could get the proof that they shout for if they would only look for it, because that's how God intends to reveal Himself to mankind. 2 Chr 15:2 says "*The LORD is with you, while ye be with him; and if ye seek him, he will be found of you; but if ye forsake him, he will forsake you*."

This doesn't imply a half-hearted or skeptical search for God, but an earnest one. Many of us were convinced of His existence long before we actually found Him. There was a time that we had been told would come, when He would reveal Himself to us. It would, we were told, be a painful occurrence when God would reveal to us that we are sinful and not fit to be accepted by Him. Even for those of us who had been taught of God from our earliest memories, this was the first time that we *knew* that God was real because at that time, we actually experienced His presence as He communicated with us.

Even though we know this however, it's not enough to just know that God exists. We must seek Him until we find Him. We must be saved from our sunful condition, be changed to a condition that God will accept. But how do we find Him? Where is He? We aren't equipped to know how to find Him. But look at 2 Chr 15:2 again - "*...if ye seek him, he will be found of you...*". It doesn't say 'you will find him." It says '*he will be found of you.*' If we seek Him, He will come to us. If we have faith in Him, that is, if we have the knowledge that He will be found, He will come to us. Sounds hard, doesn't it? But here's the thing – that faith is something that God gives us. Look at Eph 2:8: "*by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God*". What we must get to is an understanding that we cannot find God of ourselves, that we are helpless. Once we understand that, we must throw ourselves upon His mercy, and after this surrender on our part, He gives us this faith as a gracious gift – He is found of us. He becomes our God and we become His people.

It should be pointed out that this is not the end, but should be considered the starting point for any well-lived life. Salvation is the foundation upon which we should all build our lives. This is where we first acquire the faith that we need to live as we should. With this faith, we have the knowledge that can bring us peace. With our own lives at peace, we are free to use the knowledge that we have to take God's word to those around us. We should strive to build upon the foundation of our faith by exercising it with study, self-control, and communing with God. This is true growth and maturity as a Christian, but no building is possible without the foundation of salvation through faith.

Hannah

In the Book of 1 Samuel, we see a young woman named Hannah who could not have a child. She was very distraught about it. While in Shiloh with her husband to offer sacrifices to God, she was in great distress, to the point of refusing to eat. Knowing that help could only come from God, she went to the temple and poured her heart out to Him. She promised that if God would only give her a son, that she would give him and his life back to God. So earnest was her seeking that God answered her through the priest Eli who told her that her petition would be granted.

From this point on, Hannah was no longer sad. What could cause such a dramatic change in a person? The only reason would be that the cause of her sadness had been removed. But wait... the cause of her sadness was that she couldn't bear children. Hannah did not yet have a child. She was not yet bearing a child. There was no objective evidence that this condition had been removed, so why would she now be happy? It was because of her faith. Remember our definition? Hannah experienced the reality of the things she hoped for, the proof of what she could not see. To Hannah, it was

a done deal...money in the bank...a certainty.

Hannah would have a son and we can see the depth and truth of her faith in her following through and leaving him at the temple so that he could be dedicated to the service of God. You can still see her joy and happiness in her prayer as she gave her child to the Lord's service (1 Sam. 2:1-10). Likewise, people can't see the faith of a person. They can't experience the concrete reality that that person's faith gives them. But everyone can see the results. It may not always be as big a thing as giving up a child to God's service. But it can certainly be visible and when God is lifted up, you can be certain that people will notice. They may not even like it, but they will notice. Hannah wasn't giving up her child to show her faith. God doesn't want a show put on for the rest of the world to see and that's the last thing that should be on our mind. What He wants is to be loved, served, and reverenced and when we do that through faith, He will accomplish His purposes using that.

Looking Down the Road

When you're driving a car down the road, which of your five senses is the main one that you use to do it safely? If you said vision, you're correct. Let's apply that as an analogy for life. When traveling down life's highway, can you see what's in front of you? None of us can see into the future. Kind of scary isn't it? Picture all the cars on a highway with no windows. Nobody can see where they're going. Chaos would ensue. So how is it that we're often content to forge ahead in life with no idea of what's just around the next bend in the road?

In 2 Corinthians 5:7, Paul made a startling statement that addresses just this situation. Speaking of those who know and follow Jesus, he said, "*...we walk by faith, not by sight*". Paul wasn't saying that we close our eyes when we travel because he wasn't speaking in terms of physical transportation, but of traveling through life. That's how we can address the problem of our blindness to the future. With faith alone can we navigate life's road because through our faith, we know. That is not to say that suddenly, we can divine the future like a so-called fortune teller. By our faith, we have a communication with God, who *can* see the future. God can make us to know the things that we should do and the things that we should avoid. It's true that our own common sense can help us in our journey in many cases, but that's more like knowing not to steer into oncoming traffic, basic rules. God knows every bump in the road. Allowing God to guide us is like being given a map telling us which way to go, when to turn the wheel, when to stop, and when to go. "*...the just shall live by faith*" Heb. 10:38

So finding God and the faith that He gives is worth all the toiling and seeking that it may take us. That faith gives us a basis for building our lives. It is the rock that we build our relationship with God upon. It is the knowledge and the vision of not only our tomorrows, but also our forevers. If you have not experienced it for yourself, we who write these lessons recommend it to you. "Seek God" is sound advice for all people, whether they already know Him or not, but especially to those who do not.

In our next lesson, we look at one of those life-tools that faith helps us fashion and wield – Wisdom.

LESSON TWO
WISDOM

LESSON TEXT
Proverbs 14:1

WRITTEN BY
BROTHER DANNY HAYES

What is Wisdom?

First thing, let's look at a definition. "Knowledge of what is true or right coupled with just judgment as to action" (dictionary.com).

It's human nature to want to build, to improve our lot. Very few people want to just sit in the dirt in the middle of nowhere and slowly starve to death while doing nothing about it. What's the first thing a rational person would do upon finding themselves in such a situation? Probably the first thing they'd think about is finding water when they became thirsty. Next might be finding food. Close on the heels of those two things would be building some type of shelter. What we see in these things is an attempt to make things better, to improve our conditions, and perhaps also that of others who might be in the same situation.

It's not an instant transition. Improving our conditions can take some time, but we would deem it to be worth the effort. But what if we didn't know how to find water or food? What if we had no idea where to start on building a shelter? If we had no idea how to improve our situation at all, we'd probably just sit and wait to die. What else could we do? In Hosea 4:6, God through His prophet says "*My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge*". Lack of knowledge doesn't just stop improvement. It brings death. In our example, what is required to stay alive? The knowledge of how to do what needs to be done.

But what if we have the knowledge of how to do these things and we decide that our time would be better spent by finding neat looking rocks? We'd still die of thirst, hunger, or exposure, wouldn't we? So we can see that knowledge alone cannot save us. We need to be able to tell when we need to put that knowledge to work. This is an example of wisdom.

Keeping House

Look at our lesson text. How many people do you know that tear down their own house? Wouldn't that be kind of dumb? You'd have no place left to live. But what if you did things that inadvertently caused your house to fall down by trying to do something else? In a house there are some walls that are integral to the structure of the house itself. They are called load-bearing walls and actually help the house to stay standing. What if you wanted to make one big room of your living room and den by knocking out one of these supporting walls? Doing so would make your house fall down. It doesn't matter that you weren't trying to tear down your house. The result is the same.

Our actions have repercussions. Everything that we do affects something else. It may not be a big effect, but it's there all the same. And to that you can add the effect of the effect - the things that are affected by the things that are affected by the things that we do. Look at the old proverb (not biblical) that illustrates this point. It's called "For Want of a Nail":

For want of a nail the shoe was lost.
For want of a shoe the horse was lost.
For want of a horse the rider was lost.
For want of a rider the message was lost.
For want of a message the battle was lost.
For want of a battle the kingdom was lost.
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.

When we look at our actions, or lack of them in this light, we can see the effects spreading out like ripples on a pond until a matter that started with the smallest of pebbles, becomes an all encompassing thing, the repercussions felt a great distance away. With such a view, we should see the great responsibility for all that we do. It should make us tremble with fear that even a waggle of our finger at the wrong moment could be the cause of eventual calamity.

How do we avoid catastrophe? What's the difference between the woman who builds her house and the one who tears it down? It comes down

to being wise rather than foolish. The wise woman knows the right things, but more to our point, she is able to judge when and how to use the knowledge that she possesses.

Let's contrast the two women using our example of the house renovations. The wise woman judges that it would be dumb to knock down the wall between the living room and den because she knows that the wall helps support the house. The foolish woman may not even possess the basic knowledge of the house's structure, but even if she does, she may not connect that with what she wants to do. She may think that the worst couldn't possibly happen to her. Whether it's the lack of knowledge, the lack of wisdom to use the knowledge properly, or both, the foolish woman plucks down her own house.

Of course, this verse is metaphor. It's not really talking about the places that these two women dwell, but something much more precious. It's talking about their lives. How many people have you known or heard about who seemed to bring on their own ruin? Many of us wonder how they let it go so far, but they get caught up in doing what they want to do at the moment until it seems that they've spent all their moments and have nothing to show for it. How many stories have we heard of movie, music, and sports stars who having unimaginable riches, went fast and hard until at some point, they were spent, homeless, and hopeless? In many cases, when you hear them talk about how they got to where they are, you can listen to them and tell that they still just don't get it. That if they were given the chance to go back and start over that they'd do everything the same way that brought their "house" down.

These stories are painful to listen to, but their lives can teach us something if we'll listen. If we're honest, we can see similarities between them and us that could take us down the same road. We may not be exactly like them, but we're human like they are. We might not be lured by the same things that they are, but we all can be lured by something. The point is that people – US – are very

prone to doing things that are self-destructive. We don't see them as self-destructive or we wouldn't do them, but that's the problem. We don't have good foresight. Remember the verse from our last lesson? "*...we walk by faith, not by sight*" (2 Cor 5:7). This is why we need that sight, but even beyond that, we must use it. How many people have been blessed with that sight and closed their eyes to consequences when they were lured toward doing something destructive? In Numbers chapter 22, we see Balaam, a prophet of sorts, who tried repeatedly to curse Israel in return for great gain from the Moabite king even after God had also repeatedly forbidden him from doing so.

We don't hear much about the wise people, so we must hunt for stories about them. Wisdom doesn't usually call attention to itself. Wise people don't usually stand out because their lives, while not perfect (they are people after all), are normally quiet, peaceful. The lack of riot and calamity in their lives can certainly fly under the radar. That is not to say that the people themselves are not noticeable. While their acts are not done for publicity, they are noticed by those who are touched by them. Remember the ripples on the pond? Yes, ripples flow from the acts of a wise person as well. Those ripples, however, don't become tsunamis. Now would be a good time to read Proverbs 31:10-31. This is a description of the virtuous woman, which is what these lessons were designed around. Look at how her wise acts affect her children and her husband. Think of how the poor whom she has helped are affected. See how her life is ordered and how she anticipates needs and opportunities.

Do You Want To Build Up or Tear Down?

How do you want your life to be?

Do you want love – whether of friends or of a spouse and family? How do you intend to find it? By chance? Sadly, many of us resort to this method, and some of us are blessed with good results. But others are not and their lives suffer injuries because of it. Do you want

to trust your life to chance? The choices that we make in this regard affect the rest of our lives, so it's important to acquire and use wisdom. If you are looking for a mate, don't go about it like you're shopping for candy. Candy is fun, sweet and usually pretty to look at, but beyond that, there's not much substance. A steady diet of it is certainly not healthy and will surely leave us stunted and weak. In shopping for candy, we don't give our purchase much thought and allow a sudden urge to drive us in it. Looking for a mate should be more like shopping for a house. You're certainly thinking about what looks good to you, but you're thinking more about how you're going to like it many years from now. You're looking at how the house will shelter you, comfort you, and how compatible it will be with your life over the years. You want to know how stable its structure is, from foundation to chimney. You want a solid, secure, warm, sunny place that will always be your refuge in this life.

Do you want happiness? No matter what it is that we are engaged in, we all want to be happy. Do you see how regret at having taken wrong actions could cloud your future happiness? How do you intend to take the proper steps? Prudence is a word that has gotten a bad rap in our society, but all it is, is using wisdom to avoid making the wrong choices. Remember the ripples? Wisdom is being able to use our knowledge, whether from faith or good teaching or life experiences, to see the possible consequences of our actions. Wisdom then, is the ability to understand what the bad choices are - even on things that we really want to do – and avoid them. But happiness isn't just about avoiding wrong things. It's also about doing right things. Sometimes the worst thing we can do is nothing. What if we see someone in need? What if we see, with wisdom, a bad ending for someone else? Would it be right to sit back and do nothing? The real key to happiness in this life is helping make others happy. To reach a happy outcome, we need to use wisdom.

Do you want a family? How does anybody know how to raise another human being? Think of the responsibility that comes with taking a brand new baby completely unformed in mind and personality and trying to help them be shaped into a stable, rationale, happy, faithful, wise adult. It boggles the mind and frightens the wits. How can we do this? How can anyone consider such an undertaking and not desire true wisdom to aid us in doing it? How can we know what to do when they ask us questions? When they look up at us and ask us things that we cannot answer? How can we know what to do? We can't. A truly proper job of parenting cannot be done without God's help. There are times that our own wisdom, no matter how great, cannot be sufficient and we must depend upon God Himself to help us to know what to say and do. But wisdom is required to know when those times are upon us. True human wisdom is completely compatible with God's wisdom. We may not possess His wisdom ourselves, but if we know Him, we have access to His wisdom when we need it.

Do you just want to have fun? There's nothing inherently wrong with fun. There's nothing wrong with enjoying ourselves. But if fun and enjoyment become our main goal in life, we may find ourselves going the wrong way in life in order to achieve it. Solomon said "*To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven*" (Eccl 3:1). There are certainly times when enjoyment is okay. But just as certainly there are many other times when fun and laughter isn't appropriate. If your number one goal is fun, then there are going to be times when you're bound to be going against the grain. You may have a hard time getting others to go along with you if you're trying to party during final exams, for example. While others are working on building, what you're doing is making cracks in your walls. A complete person doesn't seek fun every single moment of their life. What they seek is to do the right things at the right times.

Proverbs 4:7 says, "*Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding.*" Wisdom is not just having knowledge, but applying that knowledge properly. In verse 6 of the same chapter, the

writer talks about wisdom as a female saying, "*Forsake her not, and she shall preserve thee: love her, and she shall keep thee.*" These are strong promises for our lives, but wisdom, given by God, is up to the task.

So you can see that in a way, wisdom is one of the muscles you use to help you build your life. In the same way that you must exercise to build the muscles in your legs, core, back and arms before beginning any task that requires strength, you need to apply yourself to wisdom and get it before beginning to build your life. You wouldn't think of trying to lift something heavy without a strong body because you could hurt yourself. Try to think the same way about making big life decisions without wisdom. "*If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.*" (Jas 1:5)

LESSON THREE

COMPASSION

LESSON TEXT
Proverbs 31:20

WRITTEN BY
BROTHER DANNY HAYES

Have you ever had trouble? It may or may not have been your fault. It doesn't matter. How did it feel? Do you remember how alone you felt? Do you remember the anxiety and worry? The stress? The feeling that nothing was going to be alright ever again?

When in such a situation, did anybody ever reach out their hand to help you? Do you remember how it felt, even if all they did was listen to you? Even if your problem wasn't helped, didn't it keep you from feeling so horribly alone? And if they did help, didn't it make you feel like you would do anything for that person?

In this lesson we're going to talk about compassion. Dictionary.com says that compassion is "a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering." But let's go beyond just a definition. Compassion is a trait that we who plan these lessons see as an important part of the character of a woman – indeed of a Christian person. So as we can see by the definition that compassion has components, let's look at them individually.

Sympathy from Empathy

Sympathy, feeling bad for another person's trouble, is certainly necessary for compassion. It's normal for us to feel sympathy for someone who has a problem or is just going through a rough time. We should dislike seeing other people suffer. But true, deep sympathy comes from empathy. Empathy is putting yourself in another person's place, to understand their pain by knowing how you'd feel if you were in their situation.

So if you've ever had trouble, congratulations. Your experience gives you the valuable tool of empathy. You may have never experienced the exact trouble that another faces, but the fact that you've

had trouble qualifies you to feel empathy. Of course, the fact that you're qualified doesn't mean that you just automatically empathize with folks who have trouble. The key here is that you work on empathy all the time. You can't just stay completely focused on yourself until a friend has problems and then flip on your empathy switch. When people around you are happy, share in their happiness by being happy for them. Understand their happiness. If you can achieve this, you don't have to "work" yourself up into a state of empathy for them when they have problems.

While there are those people who seem to be naturally empathetic, others of us seem to have to work at it. It very well may be that the natural empathizers are just those folks who've been practicing it for so long that it only seems to come naturally to them. This should be our goal. Practicing empathy doesn't take our time or drain our wallet. It doesn't sap our energy or require grand gestures. It only requires us to try to understand, to want to understand.

There was in our past someone who wanted to understand, who wanted to know what it was like to be us, to know how it felt to be sad, happy, alone, peaceful, frightened, bereaved…all of it. Jesus came. Jesus, "*Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men*" (Phil 2:6-7). God had created us, but He wasn't one of us. So His Son, who is God also, lowered Himself to become a human being. He came to sacrifice Himself for our sins, it's true, but He also came to share our experience.

During His time on Earth, Jesus practiced empathy and could legitimately do so because as Paul states in Hebrews 4:15, he "*was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.*" Jesus had troubles. He went hungry and thirsty. He was tempted directly by Satan face to face. He was threatened with death by those who would not hear Him. He was pursued through His life by those looking for a reason to accuse Him. Then He

was wrongly accused. He was forsaken by His friends and by God His father. Jesus knew troubles, the likes of which we have not had to deal with. Yet His empathy as well as His compassion is a model for us.

In a notable example in John chapter 11, Jesus' friends Mary and Martha sent for Him because their brother Lazarus, also Jesus' friend, was very sick. By the time that Jesus reached their home, Lazarus had died and been buried. When Jesus came among His friends, in verse 33, and "*saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled*". It's clear that although Jesus felt pain at the loss of Lazarus, His reaction in this verse was to the pain of His friends. He felt their pain and it wasn't just because of the emotionally charged situation that He was in. Jesus had been with these people many times. He had empathized many times with their happiness, their sadness, their troubles, and their high-points. He knew them, not just as God, but as a fellow human being. When the time of their bereavement came, He was no stranger to their emotions.

Help

Empathy is a wonderful ability and we should all cultivate it. But empathy does no good to anyone unless it spurs us to action. In fact, empathy that does not at least desire to help in times of trouble is incomplete. What good does it do anybody? You might think, "but at least I understand what they're feeling." But what good is that? It doesn't even do you any good because if you're truly hurting for another, without help, there is no prospect for even your hurt to be diminished, much less theirs. That's why empathy without the desire to help just doesn't make sense. It goes back to what we said in our lesson on wisdom. The desire to improve things, whether we know how to do that or not, is a natural part of being human.

Helping other folks in times of trouble is something that the empathetic person naturally wants to do, but it isn't always that simple. People's problems are often unique, not so much that we can't empathize, but unique enough that we can't just take a cookie cutter approach to helping. Human problems are actually more varied than people because

each person can have multiple troubles. Often, just being there for emotional support can help immensely, but there are problems that require wisdom to at least know where to begin. For example, a friend of yours who has been without a job for a long time is now having their house foreclosed. You can go to them. You can share their pain. But how do you actually help them with their problem? So you see why our lesson on wisdom is placed before this one? If all you can do is be there, that's good. But if you have wisdom to know what to do and where to seek further help, it's better.

Compassion

In Mathew 9:36-38, Jesus saw the multitudes that were following Him to hear Him preach and see Him heal people and "*was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd.*". He saw that they were truly seeking God and His kingdom, but He could see also that there was no one to help them in that quest. Now it's true that people have found God with no apparent help from anyone. God can save regardless of anything and that's a fact. But how much advantage is it to have others with us, each helping the other to be strong and continue in God's service? Jesus saw this. He saw that they were in need of guidance and indeed, He was already helping by declaring the gospel to them. But He mourned the fact that there were so many, yet so few to help them. So He went to the heart of the problem and asked His disciples to pray to God to send more people to help. He gave them the honor of helping Him help all the multitudes of people.

In John chapter 5, Jesus went to the Pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem. The Pool of Bethesda was a reservoir in a small valley in the northeastern corner of Jerusalem made from a dam built on a small stream there. The pool was surrounded by columned porches and was a place of healing because there were times when an angel would disturb the waters of the pool. When the waters were disturbed, the first person to step into the waters would be healed of whatever malady they might have. As a result, many infirm people waited by the pool to watch the waters, seeking to be the next one who was healed. When Jesus was there, He saw a man who was obviously crippled and who had been for 38 years. When Jesus asked him if he wanted to be healed, the man answered that he had no friend to help him into the water and because of that, somebody else always got there first. Jesus could see what it must be like for the man who had been trying for so long to be healed. The man believed in God's healing or else he would have long before given up and just stayed home. Seeing his belief and having sympathy for the man, He said only "*Rise, take up thy bed, and walk*" (v. 8). Jesus had compassion and it moved Him to help the man.

As Jesus showed us, part of being a complete person is to have compassion on others. Compassion is a natural outgrowth of a living, breathing faith which is given to us by God. If you regularly practice empathy and compassion, you should keep it up. If you don't, you should try it. If you see someone struggling, think how you would feel in their shoes and ask if you can help them. They may refuse your help, but at least they get the choice. So if you run across an elderly lady with a flat tire, think how you'd feel and stop to help her. If you can't change a tire, you may just be able to stay with them until help comes. If you know of a family who's been burnt out of their home, think how you'd feel and put together a care package or money to help them. If you know someone who has lost a loved one, think how you'd feel and show them that they're not alone, that you care. You might be surprised how that the more compassion you show, the more compassion you will want to show.

LESSON FOUR

COURAGE

LESSON TEXT
Esther 4:16

WRITTEN BY
BROTHER DANNY HAYES

In this lesson, we take up the subject of courage, which is a most necessary trait for leading a well-lived life. Do you see yourself as being courageous? If you said no, take heart. There have been many people who were obsessed with having courage for no particular reason other than to show that they had courage. There have been many who were more afraid of showing cowardice than facing death. It didn't matter what the challenge was. You could get them to do anything by threatening to call them "chicken".

The thing is that, as with the other traits that we've studied, courage is not an end unto itself. It's true that courage is "the ability and willingness to confront fear, pain, danger, uncertainty, or intimidation" (wikepedia.com). But as John F. Kennedy said, "Efforts and courage are not enough without purpose and direction." If there's no real purpose to whatever acts of "courage" might be displayed, they are just wasted effort. It's here that we must go back and talk once more of wisdom.

Since courage misdirected is only misspent effort, we have to be able to discern where and when such acts are needed. Sometimes this is very difficult because of our natural tendencies. If a person is naturally inclined to perform brave acts, they may be tempted to rush in where they shouldn't. If a person is perhaps more timid, they may tend to hold back when something really should be done. It's easy to let our natures tell us what to do, simply because it's natural. But we're not supposed to be driven by our natures. Romans 8:13 tells us, "*if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.*" If, as we learned in lesson 2, we have acquired wisdom and allow God's Spirit to guide us, we will truly know when something should and should not be done.

Still, knowing that a hard thing must be done is not the same as doing it. If it were that easy, courage would be a common thing and nothing special to be spoken of, much less having a lesson on it. Doing the right thing is often hard. Refraining from the wrong thing is difficult as well. This is where courage must come in. Let's look into the life of an extraordinary young lady who lived a long time ago to get a good example.

Esther

In the book of the Bible that bears her name, Esther was a young Jewish woman who lived in the Persian Empire around the 5th century B.C. She was probably there with many other Jews as a result of the captivity of the Jewish people into exile by King Nebuchadnezzar and there is reason to believe that there was a sizable Jewish population across the Persian Empire at that time. She apparently was an orphan and had been raised by her older cousin, a man named Mordecai. We should point out that the Jews, as they have done throughout history, obviously kept themselves separate as a distinct people, even as they were also members of the Persian Empire. They didn't mix with the local populations and were apparently identifiable as Jews, probably cloistering in their own ethnic communities in the cities where they lived.

At the beginning of the book of Esther, we are introduced to King Ahasuerus, thought to be the Persian ruler Xerxes. Ruling an empire that stretched from India to Ethiopia, Ahasuerus was absolute in his power as a monarch. Direct disobedience to him was not just rare. It was unknown. His word and authority was unquestioned within his kingdom and much of the world. This is why it was notable when as we are told in the first chapter, he was refused by his queen. He was having a feast for all the nobles of his domain in order to show how great his kingdom and his power were. After this feast had been going on for many days, he ordered his queen to be brought before these people so that he could show them her great beauty. But his queen, Vashti, refused to be put on display.

Of course this made Ahasuerus quite angry as his own power

and glory, as well as that of his kingdom, were made to look silly and unimportant. In his anger, he consulted his wise men, who insisted that the queen must be put away so that the women of the kingdom would not start disrespecting and disobeying their husbands. Now all this sounds foreign to most of us today, but the Persian Empire of that time was a very different culture than the one in which we are now. So decrees were made that Vashti would be deposed and a new queen would replace her.

As a result of the decree of Ahasuerus, a search was made for the finest and fairest of all the young maidens from the entire kingdom. Out of all the young women who were brought before the king, Esther pleased him most and he chose her for his queen. Now all through the time of this search with all of the vetting and examinations, there had been nothing found about Esther's ethnic background. In fact, Mordecai, her adopted father, had advised her to not reveal that she was a Jew. Apparently the Jewish people's situation in that country was as tenuous as it has been in many places and continues to be even today and Mordecai didn't want her position put in jeopardy because of her ethnicity.

During the entire search process, Mordecai would come around to check on Esther, and after she was installed as queen, he kept in contact with her. Now Mordecai had been made an officer of the court of the king, and as he was going about his duties as such, he found out about two of the king's bodyguards, obviously disgruntled, who plotted to kill Ahasuerus. Mordecai relayed this knowledge to Esther, who made it known to the king and the bodyguards were hanged for their conspiracy.

After all this, King Ahsureus moved Haman - a scheming, self-important, power-hungry man who was also arrogant, vain, and vindictive - into a position of great honor above all his other courtesans. As a result of this, all the king's servants were expected to bow to him and for all practical purposes worship him, but Mordecai refused to do so, apparently because he was a Jew and bound to worship only God. Of course, to such a man as Haman, this was infuriating, even though it was a matter of

religious integrity. He sought not just to destroy Mordecai, as such men will often do, but all the Jews were the target of his wrath.

Calling them only "a certain people", Haman convinced the king that the Jews – in reality good citizens and industrious contributors to society – were breakers of the king's laws and did not conform to the society that they lived in. He offered to pay the expenses of the soldiers needed to kill them all and promised to make sure that all the property of the Jews would be brought into the king's treasuries. Ahasuerus agreed and not only gave the lives of these "certain people" to Haman, but paid the expense himself. A decree went out from the king across the whole empire that on a certain day, the 13th day of the month of Adar, the Jews would be destroyed. The decree actually seems to have required every Persian citizen to make it their duty to see that all Jews were killed.

When Mordecai heard of the king's decree, he went into mourning, dressing in sackcloth and ashes (an outward act of mourning), as did the Jews across the empire. You might be thinking, "why didn't they just leave?" Remember that the Persian Empire was the greatest power of that time. The empire was vast and powerful. There were not many places that you could go to be beyond its reach. Within the sphere of Persia's influence, the power of Ahasuerus was absolute. A decree from the king was irrevocable, even by the king himself. Think about how it would be if the full power and capability of the United States was suddenly turned upon you. Do you think it would be easy to get away? Now think how hard it would be for an entire group of scattered people to sneak away from that. It would be hopeless. You would feel hopeless. That's why the Jews all across the empire mourned and fasted. Prayer is not mentioned in this book, but the Jews had to know that their only hope was for God to intervene and the fasting implies that prayers to God were also being made.

Esther, who had been told of Mordecai's mourning by her servants, sent him fresh clothes, hoping to cause him to stop mourning as he was, but Mordecai would have none

of it. He sent a message back to Esther with a copy of the king's decree. He instructed her that she should go to the king, to use her influence with him to ask for her people to be spared.

Esther was scared. She sent back to Mordecai, telling him of the law concerning what he was asking her to do. The law was that anyone - even the queen - who came before the king without being called to do so, was to be put to death. The only exception to this law and the only hope for the person who approached Ahasuerus, was that the king could hold his scepter out to such person as pleased him, to be spared. Esther pointed out that she had not been called to the king in thirty days, implying that she feared that she may have fallen out of favor with him, which would make for a deadly situation should she approach him unbidden.

As scared as Esther was, Mordecai was unmoved. It's obvious from preceding passages that Mordecai loved Esther. But he was pushing her toward what very well could be a death sentence. He sent a message back to her, reminding her that she herself was a Jew and even though she was the queen, the king's law applied to her as well. He told her that the Jews would be saved by some other means even if she did nothing, but that she and therefore her father's lineage would be destroyed because of her refusal. He showed in Esther 4:14 that he was convinced that things happen for a reason by saying, "*who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?*"

Although it may appear that Mordecai had finally revealed that he didn't truly care for Esther, he was showing wisdom. Mordecai knew that the situation was dire and that it was no time for any individual of the group to put their own personal safety above the group as a whole because they were all in danger from the least to the greatest. He was asking Esther to risk her life because 1) he saw that the only hope was to appeal to the king directly, 2) he knew that Esther was in the best position of anyone to make the appeal, and 3) he knew that her life was in danger anyway and that this was the best way of ensuring her survival.

Mordecai's wise approach

appealed to Esther's wisdom which he had helped to foster. She saw that what he was saying was right. She sent back to him to gather all the local Jews that they both knew in order to fast for three days and nights on her behalf. She said that she and her ladies would fast as well. As previously stated, the book of Esther doesn't specifically mention prayer, but the fasting cannot be interpreted any other way. There is no other reason that they would fast in connection with her undertaking of a perilous task. She was asking for their help by doing this. How else would other people fasting help Esther if it were not fasting with the intention of making supplication to God on her behalf?

The tone of what Esther has said speaks of her resolve to do specifically that thing that she had stated could very well mean her own death. In 4:16, she said that after the fasting and prayer, "*will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish.*" You might interpret this statement as fatalistic, but Esther had not resigned herself to whatever the fates might have had in store for her. An attitude of fatalism does not reconcile to her earlier attempt to preserve her life by trying to avoid going before the king. She had determined to do what she now saw must be done and to put her life into the hands of God. This is much different from fatalism, which views fate as unchangeable and inescapable. Trusting God places confidence in the One who can direct the future any way that He determines it should be.

At the end of the three days of fasting, Esther dressed in her royal clothing and finery in order to be pleasing to the king and stood in his inner court, waiting for him to take whatever action he chose. You can imagine the way that she might have felt, waiting to see if the king would be pleased and spare her life or if he would show displeasure with her by having her cast out and killed. He had not summoned for her in over 30 days, so she had no way of knowing if he was pleased with her as queen or not. She truly did not know what awaited her. But she knew the rightness of what she was doing and that she had given her life to God, who was truly who held her life.

Then Ahasuerus held his

scepter out to Esther to show that he favored her. She moved to him and touched the scepter in acknowledgment of the great kindness he had just shown her by bending his own law to allow her to live. Esther had been spared. But her task was not finished. She was still to try to plead the case of her people to the king. Being moved by wisdom, she took a less direct approach. She asked that the king and Haman come to a banquet that she would prepare, to which he agreed. When both the king and Haman were at the banquet, the king asked her to make a request and that it would be granted, even if it was for half his kingdom. Esther only requested that the king and Haman come to another banquet the next day.

Haman, who was even more full of himself since being invited to the queen's banquets, was angry because, once again, Mordecai had not shown reverence to him. At his wife's suggestion, he had a very high gallows to be built upon which he intended to have Mordecai hanged. In the meantime, the king found out that the earlier plot against his life had been foiled by Mordecai and caused him to be greatly honored. The king asked Haman to design the mode of honor to be bestowed upon Mordecai, but he did not name who the honor was for. Haman, who again being self-centered, assumed that the honor would be for himself. After designing a great honor to be given before all the people of the city, which he had thought would be for himself, Haman had to personally proclaim Mordecai – the very man he sought to kill - before everyone. Because of this, Haman was rather rattled as he was escorted to Esther's second banquet.

At the banquet, the king once again asked Esther to request whatever she wanted. It was here that Esther took another great risk. She asked Ahasuerus to spare her life and the lives of her people, explaining that she and her people had been sentenced to death by the treachery of an enemy and that the destruction of her good people would damage Ahasuerus's kingdom by their loss. When the king asked who would do such a thing, Esther exposed herself as a Jew in saying that Haman was the enemy. Rather than focusing on Esther's ethnicity, the king was angry with Haman and his duplicity in tricking him

to make the decree to destroy the Jews. Seeing the anger of the king toward him and seeing his high position in danger, Haman was horrified.

When the king left the room to take a walk to deal with his anger, Haman threw himself on Esther's mercy and in doing so, literally threw himself on the couch where she sat. When the king came back, he saw where Haman was and thought that he was attempting to molest Esther, whereupon he had Haman hanged on the same gallows that he had built for Mordecai. The estate of Haman was given to Esther, who put Mordecai in charge of it. Further, the king, who could not countermand his own law, made another that gave the Jews the right to defend themselves and to destroy those who first sought to destroy them. From this time, the Jews established the Feast of Purim, which the Jewish people observe even today.

Courage

Let's look at our somewhat lengthy summary of Esther's story to see what we can glean about courage. Courage is not necessarily dauntless and bold. Esther did not challenge Haman to a duel or try to lead a revolt against the king. She was at first scared and reluctant to do anything. When she did, it was a very quiet approach. She did not use confrontation and did not get in anyone's face. She only did that which she saw needed to be done.

We see that courage can consist only of a few words properly spoken at the proper time. The important thing was not the courage itself, but Esther's actions. Her courage was the strength that she employed to do them. Courage is like a handsaw. A handsaw is very useful when you need to cut a board, but the job can also be done with a power saw. The important thing is that the board gets cut. How it is done is secondary. A wise craftsman can tell the difference between when the handsaw should be used and when the power saw should be used. Sometimes things that need to be done can be done in a manner that is without risk, but when they can only be done by taking a risk, we must have courage in order to get the thing done.

Courage is not necessarily doing great things worthy

of having a story such as Esther's recorded for posterity. Courage is not necessarily epic. Sometimes courage is as small a thing as saying "we shouldn't do that" or more to the point "I'm not going to do that." Courage is needed for building the kind of life that was spoken of in our lesson on wisdom. As wisdom was likened to our muscles, courage can be thought of as one of the tools that those muscles wield to extend wisdom's reach and capability.

In our next lesson, we'll be discussing Purity.

LESSON FIVE

PURITY

LESSON TEXT
Matthew 5:8

WRITTEN BY
BROTHER DANNY HAYES

Purity - freedom from anything that debases, contaminates, pollutes, etc. (dictionary.com).

In this lesson, we're going to discuss frankly a subject that is not very popular. You won't find much in the way of support for what's going to be presented here in TV, movies, or music. You won't find much in the current thought of today's thinkers that will agree with our lesson. You yourself may not like what is said. All that we ask is that you keep an open mind and consider the things that we present as we try to delve into the subject of purity.

Perhaps no single issue has affected the overall condition of our world as we find it today more than the declining level of purity in our society and in each of our lives. It has affected our churches to such a degree that they no longer have the effect of being a driving force for good and the gospel in our world as they once were. This issue has affected our leaders, our institutions, and each of us in such a way as to cause a general decline in the quality of our society, much as neglected silver will tarnish over time.

By now, you may already be rolling your eyes, but please don't shut this out. Give this lesson a few minutes of honest consideration before turning away from it.

Purity in Body

Of course, this is the context in which you're probably accustomed to hearing about purity. It's important, though only really a part of the entire subject of purity. However, let's get into it, because it's not only important, but a really good illustration of the bigger subject of overall purity.

In the second chapter of the Bible, God created Adam and then created Eve to be his mate (Gen 2:18-25). Notice that in the 24th verse, the word "wife" is specifically mentioned. Eve wasn't created just for Adam's

physical pleasure. She was his wife and Adam was her husband and this was the pattern that God was establishing as again is stated in verse 24. In Gen 1:28, among the things that God told them, was, "*Be fruitful, and multiply*". God sanctioned a sexual relationship. There is however, no indication that this type of relationship was sanctioned for anything other than marriage.

When we look at the law that God gave to Israel through Moses, we see that He has many rules regarding sex. When you read through them, you can see that God intended for sex to be confined to a marriage. Indeed, the penalty for pre-marital sex was for the couple to be married, and adulterous (anything outside of marriage) affairs were also prohibited by the law. For those who incorrectly believe that Jesus abolished the Mosaic law, you can find these prohibitions reiterated throughout the New Testament (Mat 5:27-28; Luk 18:18-20; Acts 15:29; Rom 1:28-32; 1 Cor 6:9, 13, 18; Gal 5:19; Col 3:5-6; 1 Th 4:3).

There is however, more than these prohibitions to cause us to believe that any sex other than in a committed, marital relationship brings about impurity. Look again at Gen 2:24. In describing the marital relationship, it says that a man "*shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.*" Furthermore, we see in the Old Testament, that what made a marriage official was this: "*Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her*" (Gen 24:67). Implied is commitment, but also implied is the consummation of the marriage. There was no ceremony that we're told of, no legal documents. Only the joining of the two to become one flesh.

So in the eyes of God and to the world, a married couple is to function as one person. Logically, how can a woman join herself to a man to become one person when she has already joined herself to another? How can she even be available for such a relationship? Yet people do this all the time. Sometimes this causes guilt over past indiscretions, which can have a disastrous effect on a marriage. How? What is the essence of two being one? Wouldn't it be that everything is common between the two? How can

everything be common when guilt is only carried by one of the pair? This guilt can create a wall that destroys togetherness, oneness, and thereby injures the essence of what marriage is supposed to be. In other cases, having been joined to others causes casualness in a relationship, a lack of commitment, which is one of the foundations that marriage is built upon.

Given this, can you see the importance of maintaining your purity, even if you're completely honest about your past? Imagine that a man that you loved proposed to you and gave you an engagement ring and said "I've only given this to two other women before you." How would that make you feel? Would you think that he didn't think enough of you to give you a new, never-been-worn engagement ring? How much better is it for you and your betrothed to give to each other a spouse that is spotless? How much easier is it to establish the intimacy between two hearts in a marriage if neither person has given themselves to anyone else?

Obviously, being able to come to a marriage from a position of purity is not something that just happens by chance. It is the result of a determination to do it. It is the result of a love for the person that you will someday marry, even if you don't know who that person will be. To be content to let things happen as they will is like sitting back and letting a car drive itself. In such a case, you're sure to miss any destination that you may have in mind. To reach a desired destination requires resolve and control. You must determine within yourself that you will avoid situations that might cause you to lose your purity.

That being said, is maintaining purity easy? You shouldn't fool yourself. Our bodies have many urges. In the Bible, they are referred to as "lusts of the flesh." They are difficult to ignore. Some are our body's way of saying that it's hungry or thirsty. Some are the body's way of saying that it wants the types of carnal pleasures that would take away your purity. So yes, it causes difficulty and conflict when your body wants to do something that you have already determined that you don't want to do.

Many people, perhaps even a significant other, will tell you that the fact that your body

wants to do these things is a sure sign that it's natural and therefore there's nothing wrong with it. They say that God created you to feel this, so how could it be wrong? But how do we reconcile that with the fact that God has clearly said that it is wrong to engage in these fleshly relations before marriage? The fact is that God did NOT create us the way that we are. Many people forget that God created man and woman not only as perfect beings, but as already married as well. They also forget that our natural responses are not always right. Our natural reaction to someone else angering us is to lash out at them. By this logic, assault or even murder under these circumstances should be excusable, but we all know that it's not. Criminal law makes no allowances for getting angry. Just because something is natural and we feel like doing it doesn't mean that it's okay.

So if it's not easy to avoid, yet something that we're supposed to avoid, how do you do it? The determination is important, but don't depend upon it to get you out of a touchy situation that you've let yourself get into. That may not work. Remember in the first lesson's introduction where it said that what we want usually screams at us? If you allow your desires to have control, then you have given up control of yourself, just like letting the car go down the road without driving it. You keep control by never giving it up.

In a time not so long ago, this control was maintained by society at large with the practice of never allowing a dating couple to be away from everyone. Very often, the first time a couple was completely secluded from everyone else was on their wedding night. As long as they submitted to this practice, they were never given an opportunity to let things get out of control. Of course, it's not like that today. Changes in times and attitudes have been such that there are many times that a dating couple can be completely isolated. If you have determined that you will maintain your purity, even if the one you are now dating will soon be your spouse, these are the danger zones.

Now it's important that a couple be able to be alone so they can begin to establish a connection of mind and heart, but it's not necessary that they be isolated. There have been

many loving and meaningful conversations and even innocent caresses carried on in a living room with an entire family in the very next room. Your determination to maintain purity is a determination to keep yourself away from situations where you might lose resolve and give up control.

Please don't think this is naive. It's not an uncommon attitude in our world today to think that it's unreasonable to expect an unmarried person to refrain from sexual activity. Most health professionals, teachers, and even parents not only don't expect you to refrain, but they actually expect you to actively pursue sexual activity. Why do they do this? They've forgotten or have never known, that anything worthwhile is difficult, but rewarding in the end. They've perhaps bought into the lie that we are nothing but animals and therefore shouldn't be expected to take control of ourselves as true human beings should do. They may have been affected by the left-over free love attitude of the 1960's & 70's that says "if it feels good, do it."

But all that is just input. You can control your life. You have control over what input influences you. You have the power to determine whether you have an eventual marriage that is free of guilt, closeted skeletons, and secrets or a spouse that is just your latest lover.

Purity of Heart

In much the same way as our bodies, we should strive to keep our hearts pure. A pure heart is one that is unfettered by sin, guilt, and just general nastiness. In the introduction to the first lesson, Proverbs 4:23 was referenced. It says, "*Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.*"

In explanation to His disciples of His answer to the hypocritical pharisees in Mark 7:5-16, Jesus said "*...That which cometh out of the man, that defileth the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, Thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man.*" (Mar 7:20-23) Jesus was saying that what comes from a person's heart can actually defile them. Add

to this the verse from Proverbs and we see that what comes out of our hearts are the things that make our lives and that those things have the power to defile, or corrupt, us.

Scary isn't it? But keep in mind that nothing can come out of the heart – the most inward part of us - that we have not put into it. Each of us is the guardian of our own heart. We have the power to fill our own hearts, else we would not be told in Proverbs to keep it with all possible care and persistence. Each of us is the gatekeeper of our heart. We decide what to let in and what to keep out. Why should we be so careful? Because what goes in will also come out.

If we fill our hearts with lies, what will come out? Lies. If we fill our hearts with violence, what will come out? Violence. If we fill our hearts with fantasies, what will come out? You get the picture. So if what's in our hearts determines what will come out and be our lives, what's the best things to fill our hearts with? Good stuff, right?

But where do we get the stuff to fill our hearts with? There's no heart store where you can just walk down the aisle and pick out what you want. There's no app for that. In Matt 6:21, as He told us that we should lay up treasures in heaven, Jesus said this: "*where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*" Jesus gave us the secret of filling our hearts. We must choose these good things that we want in our heart, and make them our treasures. And how do we do that?

How does a rich man treat his treasure? Like a precious thing. Matthew 13:45-46 tells of a merchant who was looking for good pearls, and found one that cost an incredible amount. This single, perfect pearl was so important to him that he sold everything he had in order to buy it. In the end, the merchant had nothing but the pearl, but that was okay with him because that pearl was his treasure. If you want love in your heart, treat love like a precious thing. Make love your treasure. If you want truth in your heart, make truth your treasure. Take these things and don't trade them away for anything. You'll soon see the fruits of these things begin to issue forth from your heart into your life.

Being pure of heart includes

filling your heart with good things, but it's also necessary to keep out the bad stuff. The sad thing about us is that we are the descendants of the fallen Adam. Having inherited his sinful nature, our bodies have a positive bias toward sin. Because of this, we are attracted to things that are not good for our hearts. Think about some of the bad things that you've been attracted to in the past and you can see what this means. As a result, much like avoiding the lusts of the flesh that we talked about in the last section, it is difficult to keep these things out of our hearts. The desire of our sinful bodies is to let them in. It may not be the same things for everyone. For you it may be vanity. For another it may be materialistic gain. But for all of us, it's hard to keep out. As with your body, a determination to have a pure heart is essential. You have to be determined that you will keep away from the things that you know are bad for you. You must avoid the things that you yourself have a weakness for and there is yet another tool at your disposal in this task.

The temptations that we've talked about so far may be something that you don't feel that you're capable of dealing with successfully. But we have help available to us. God will help us in times of temptation. In Hebrews 4:15-16, Paul tells us "*we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.* "

Having purity in body and in heart is a condition that will serve you well throughout your life. If you don't know God, it is a good position from which to seek Him. If you already know Him, it is a good position from which to get closer to Him.

If you've thought very much about these lessons and the subjects presented, you can see that they are not separate virtues, but are closely linked and very much intertwined. Wisdom is required to seek faith, but faith is required to increase wisdom. Compassion very much flows from a pure heart and often requires courage in order to perform the actions that it demands. Courage requires wisdom and faith and needs the strength that comes from a pure heart.

We pray that you will consider the things that have been said in these lessons and that you will continue to study these subjects beyond what has been presented here.

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