

A vintage brass compass with a hinged lid is shown resting on an old, weathered map. The compass face is detailed with concentric circles and markings, and the needle points towards the bottom-left. A red string is tied around the top handle of the compass. The map in the background features various geographical labels and lines, adding to the theme of navigation.

Navigating Difficult Relationships In Christ

Bill Loveless
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Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE

What Makes Relationships Difficult?. 4

CHAPTER TWO

What Makes Relationships Difficult? - Part 2.11

CHAPTER THREE

Dealing With Difficult People Apart From Christ. . 20

CHAPTER FOUR

Becoming Part Of The Solution. 32

CHAPTER FIVE

The Ultimate Result Of Spiritual Growth. 44

CHAPTER SIX

Walking In Freedom. 54

CHAPTER ONE

What Makes Relationships Difficult?

“Navigate”

The word “navigate” means “to move on, move over, or move through.” This definition is very applicable to the Christian life because we are continuing to learn how to navigate life in Christ. One of the harder struggles can be how to navigate difficult relationships. We all have had, are having, or will have them. Whether it be our spouse, kids, extended family, co-workers, church friends, close friends, etc., we all have relationships where we struggle with loving them, liking them, or even being around them. An even bigger problem is that we live in fallen bodies, in a fallen world, surrounded by fallen people.

Therefore, let me lay the groundwork for this study by defining “difficult relationships.”

Difficult relationships cause you to REACT or RESPOND in your FLESH. On some level they ROB you of your LIFE in Christ or they create relational OBSTACLES that you don’t believe you can overcome.

That is the motivation for writing this booklet. Needless to say, volumes have been written on this topic, so my objective is to share some of the obstacles we face in difficult relationships and how to navigate these relationships in Christ. Let’s begin by looking at what is behind difficult relationships.

We All Bring BAGGAGE Into Relationships

Relationships, as we well know, can be complex. Because of this complexity, it is easy to understand why we have difficult relationships. What makes them difficult? First and foremost,

we all bring baggage into our relationships. Let's look at some examples of our baggage.

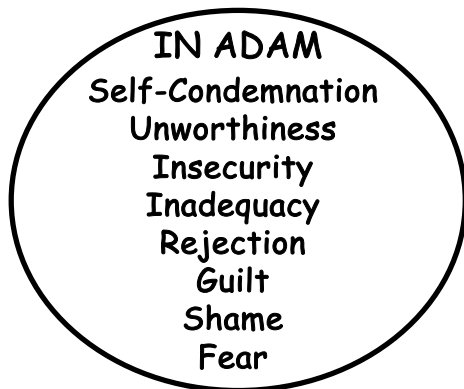
Adam's DNA

It all started at birth because the day we were born, we inherited Adam's DNA. We see this in Romans 5.12.

*"Therefore, just as through **one man sin (Adam's DNA) entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death (through Adam's DNA) spread to all men, because all sinned.**"*

The following diagram illustrates some characteristics of Adam's DNA.

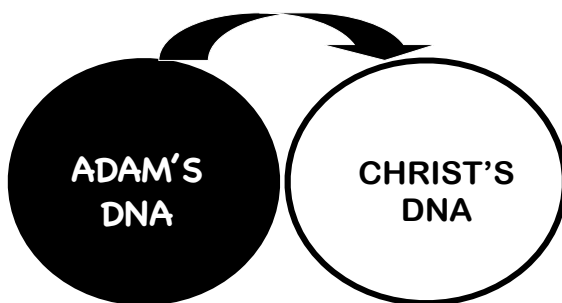
Our DNA IN Adam



This Adamic DNA was passed down from generation to generation. Another way of saying this is that we inherited generational fleshly behaviors and sins from Adam passed down through our family tree. At the moment we uttered our first cry at birth, we were in trouble spiritually because of our Adamic inheritance.

If you are a Christian, the good news is that at salvation, God took you out of being IN Adam and put you IN Christ as the following diagram illustrates.

God Took You Out Of Being IN Adam and
Put You IN Christ



You now have Christ's DNA. So does any Christian you are struggling with. However, if your difficult person is a non-Christian, remember he/she has no choice but to live out of his/her Adamic DNA (i.e., the flesh) which leaves him/her self-focused and self-centered.

No Perfect Parents

In addition, we can bring parental baggage into relationships based on whether or not we had good or bad role models for parents. Since there are no perfect parents, were any of the following true of your experience being brought up in your home?

- Abuse (sexual, emotional, verbal, physical)
- Physical or emotional abandonment
- Conditional rather than unconditional love
- To be loved, you felt you had to win the approval of your parents
- Loving home but _____

Did your upbringing result in any of the following negative feelings or beliefs?

Unloved	Frustrated	Angry	Rejected
Lonely	Unworthy	Wounded	Fearful
Neglected	Inadequate	Entitled	Bitter
Being spoiled	Self-protective	Judgmental	Critical

If you know the people you struggle with well, how would you characterize their home life? What feelings or beliefs might they be experiencing as a result?

We Are Born TAKERS (Trying To Get Our Needs Met)

As a result of being born self-focused and self-absorbed, we became “takers.” Part of being a “taker” means that we look to others or things to get our needs met. For example, we were all born with such God-given needs as unconditional love and acceptance, value/worth, security, and respect. Since we have to get these needs met, as non-Christians we were “takers” because we were trying to get them met in other people, our job, our capabilities, etc.

This is especially true in marriage. We all have the need to be unconditionally loved but our spouses can’t provide that. When the spouse is not meeting that need, it can create conflict.

What might be some negative results if you have two “takers” in a relationship?

Unmet DESIRES Or EXPECTATIONS

I believe one of the key reasons we struggle in relationships is due to unmet desires or expectations. Let’s start with my definition of “desire.”

DESIRE: Something you LONG FOR or something you HOPE will happen.

DESIRES

Let’s look at some examples of realistic desires in different areas of our lives.

Examples of Desires Concerning MARRIAGE

Let's assume both spouses are Christians:

- We will seek Christ as our Source for living life.
- We will go to church together.
- We will pray together.
- We will share our deepest struggles with one another.

In your marriage, what is your response when your desires are not met?

Examples of Desires For Our CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

As close friends:

- We will not betray one another's trust.
- We will be sensitive to one another's needs and desires.
- We will always be available to hear and pray for one another's burdens.

Concerning your close friends, what is your response when your desires are not met?

EXPECTATIONS

However, desires can become expectations. What do I mean?

Desires become EXPECTATIONS when we go from HOPING for something to happen to EXPECTING something to happen.

Let's look at some examples of expectations concerning our various relationships. Notice the key word "WILL."

Expectations Concerning Our SPOUSES

My spouse WILL:

- Make me fulfilled and happy
- Love me and accept me unconditionally
- Meet my standards for taking care of the finances
- Conform to my beliefs about raising the children

If any of these or other expectations you have are not being met, what is your response?

Expectations Concerning Our CLOSE FRIENDS

My close friends WILL:

- Never betray my trust
- Always love me in spite of my fleshly behaviors
- Never reject me

If any of these or other expectations you have are not being met, what is your response?

Expectations Concerning Our DIFFICULT RELATIONSHIPS

The person I struggle with WILL change if:

- I love them enough.
- I become a people-pleaser.
- I speak the truth in love.

If any of these or other expectations you have are not being met, what is your response?

Where Can UNMET Desires and Expectations Take You?

Unmet desires or expectations lead us to either respond in the SPIRIT or react in the FLESH. By the very definition of a desire, we should respond in the Spirit when that desire is not met. With expectations, it is easy to see if we set “bars” of

expectations for others to jump over and they don't, our tendency is to go to the flesh with the result that we could judge, reject, condemn, or even write them off. The problem is that even with unmet desires, we can choose to go to the flesh as opposed to going to the Spirit. Below are examples of fleshly behaviors that can result from unmet desires or expectations.

Frustrated	Angry	Controlling	Rejecting
Unloving	Critical	Guiltting	Shaming
Manipulative	Unforgiving	Condescending	Judging
Uncaring	Insensitive	People-pleaser	Jealous
Vindictive	Self-righteous	Selfish	Abusive
Envious	Deceitful	Bitter	Blaming
Condemning	Resisting	Demanding	Affairs
Retaliating	Self-protective	Uncompassionate	Offended

Do any of these fleshly behaviors apply to you concerning the person(s) you struggle with?

When it comes to desires or expectations, some may be subconscious. We are not even aware we have them until we react in the flesh when they are not met. That is why we must seek the Holy Spirit to expose any desires or expectations that are causing us to go to the flesh. What is true of you is also true of those you struggle with.

They may have desires and expectations of you that are not being met which cause them to go to the flesh. I am not saying this gives them an excuse, but if both of you end up going to the flesh, it can create ongoing conflict in the relationship.

CHAPTER TWO

What Makes Relationships Difficult? - Part 2

Let's explore some of the other factors that make relationships difficult.

Our STANDARDS Can Lead To Expectations

There are three other areas we need to look at to better understand the struggles we have in relationships.

1. BIBLICAL Standards

Based on what we have learned from scripture, one Christian can set up standards which can lead to having expectations for another Christian. Here are some examples:

"James 4:17 says, 'Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.' Since you know the right thing to do, I expect you to love me regardless of what I have done to you."

"John 8:32 says, 'You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.' I know you know this verse. Since you do, why are you still living out of anger and bitterness towards me?"

"Since you call yourself a Christian, how can you keep treating me like this?"

When we are not meeting other people's biblical expectations or they are not meeting ours, what might be some of the fleshly behaviors that result? (Anger, self-righteousness, arrogance, shaming, judging – just to name a few.)

Are there any biblical standards you have for others, or they have for you, that result in them or you going to the flesh?

2. MORAL Standards

Moral standards that line up with the Bible are standards we seek to live from. However, other moral standards may just be the result of how we were raised. Either way, moral standards themselves can result in expectations for others. For example: "I believe we need to put all our problems on the table so we can deal with them. Why can't you do that?"

If people don't measure up to our or their moral standards, this can result in fleshly behaviors such as maligning, condemning, or rejecting.

3. Standards of BEHAVIOR

Like moral standards, we were all raised with certain standards of behavior that we can superimpose on others or vice versa. For example: "Why are you treating me this way? I would never say (or do) that to you."

As a result of expecting people to behave like we do, or vice versa, such fleshly behaviors as guilt, shaming, or judging can occur.

Seek the Holy Spirit to expose any standards of behavior you have for others that may be causing you to go to the flesh.

EMOTIONAL Baggage As A Result Of Our Woundedness

Unfortunately, no one escapes being wounded. Whether from our parents, spouses, friends, co-workers, or adult children, we have all been wounded. It could be the result of abuse from our parents, a divorce, or the loss of a child. Because we do live in fallen bodies surrounded by fallen people, woundedness is inescapable. The problem with our relationships as a result of our unhealed woundedness is this: Wounded people wound others.

Woundedness is like any infectious disease. It will not only be toxic to you, but to others around you as well. This is true of those you struggle with. The problem is that if the wounding event happened long ago, we tend to suppress it or deny that it even took place. We may believe since it was in the past that we are no longer impacted or controlled by it today. Whether we are conscious of our woundedness, or it is hidden, it can negatively impact relationships. The depth of a person's woundedness will determine how deeply it will negatively impact his or her relationships.

As painful as our wounding events may have been, the real problem is the false beliefs about ourselves and our wounded feelings and the fleshly behaviors that flow from these beliefs and feelings. Let's take a further look at this truth.

1. False Beliefs About Ourselves – Out of our woundedness come false beliefs about ourselves. Here are some examples of false beliefs.

As a result of my woundedness, I believe I am:

Unworthy	Rejected	Unlovable
Rejected	A failure	Anxious
Inadequate	Defeated	Insecure

Out of people's false beliefs about themselves come **fleshly behaviors**. Here are some examples using the false beliefs above.

1. **Unworthy** – overly introspective, self-condemning, being critical of others to build yourself up

2. **Inadequate** – critical and judgmental of others, denial, people-pleaser

3. **Rejected** – angry, become defensive, reject others

Out of my woundedness, I believed I was unworthy, rejected, and inadequate. As a result, I did whatever I could to get people

to like me, accept me, or approve of me. When they didn't, I got angry, defensive, and judgmental.

What false beliefs and the resultant fleshly behaviors are you or the person you are in conflict with experiencing?

2. Wounded Feelings – Another result of our wounding events is wounded feelings that result from unhealed woundedness – feelings such as discouragement, rejection, judgment, or being misunderstood.

What are some wounded feelings you or the person you are at odds with experiencing?

Out of my woundedness, for years I carried wounded feelings of being unworthy, unloved, and rejected.

SPIRITUAL Baggage

Let me start by defining the term “spiritual baggage.”

***Spiritual baggage is the result of primarily four things:
not KNOWING God's truth, not BELIEVING God's truth,
not WALKING in God's truth, or being FALSELY
TAUGHT God's truth.***

Let's take a closer look at these four areas.

1. Not KNOWING The Truth

What do you think might be some of the results of a Christian not knowing the truth? Here are two foundational truths I believe are essential in living the Christian life.

a. Knowing the difference between LIVING “A” Christian life versus LIVING “THE” Christian Life

There are many key biblical truths that people don't know which adversely impact their relationships. But I feel that if we don't know the difference between "A" Christian life and "THE" Christian Life, this can create serious, ongoing relational problems.

*Jesus said to Him, "I am THE way, THE truth, and
THE LIFE" John 14:6*

"A" Christian life is a Christian life where you are the source, using your intellect, self-discipline, and will power with God's help to keep God's commands, do what the word of God says, and fulfill God's promises.

Consequences of Living "A" life: You will live in constant defeat by your flesh and Satan; you will never be free from the bondage to your fleshly behaviors; there will be no healing of your woundedness and no spiritual transformation. Since nothing really changes, over time you will harden your heart towards God and may eventually walk away from God. Nothing ever changes and things will get worse.

"THE" Christian Life is living in total dependence on God as your Source for Him to fulfill His promises and transform your life.

*"He (God) is the source of your life in Christ Jesus...",
1 Corinthians 1:30 (NRSV)*

Consequences of Living "THE" Life: You will experience sustained victory (1 Corinthians 15:57), freedom from the flesh of the person(s) you struggle with (Galatians 5:1), healing of your woundedness (Psalm 147:3), and transformation into Christ-likeness (2 Corinthians 3:18; Ephesians 4:15).

What if the person you struggle with is living "A" Christian life versus "THE" Christian Life? Aren't they stuck in bondage to their fleshly behaviors?

For me, living “A” Christian life resulted in being locked into the bondage of my anger, controlling, manipulation, and judgment of others. Can you imagine how detrimental these fleshly behaviors were to my relationships? It was not pretty!

(**Note:** If you want to know more about this topic, please look for the booklet titled “A” Life? Or “THE” Life? under Discipleship Booklets on our website.)

b. Knowing Your NEW IDENTITY In Christ

The second foundational truth for living “THE” Christian Life is knowing our true identity in Christ.

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation (new identity); the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come.” 2 Corinthians 5:17

This verse means that if you have trusted Christ for salvation, you have a new identity. How did that take place?

1. At Salvation, God first removed (CRUCIFIED) your OLD Identity

For God to give us a new identity, He had to crucify your old identity. Before we go on, let’s define what is meant by your “old identity.” Your old identity is made up of any belief you had about yourself that does not line up with God’s truth. Now that you understand the meaning of your old identity, we see from Romans 6:6 that God crucified your old identity.

“... knowing this, that our old self (old identity) was crucified with Him, that our body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin.” Romans 6:6

2. Secondly, God EXCHANGED your Old Identity for a NEW One

The good news is that God didn’t just crucify the old identity. Rather, God removed your old identity and exchanged it for a

new identity. Therefore, you no longer have an old identity with your false beliefs. Now you are a new creation with a new identity. Let's look at a few of the characteristics of your new identity. In your new identity:

Romans 8:35, 38, 39	You are unconditionally loved.
Ephesians 4:24	You are righteous and holy.
Romans 15:7	You are accepted and acceptable.
Colossians 3:13	You are a forgiving person.
Psalms 139:14	You are worthy.
2 Corinthians 3:5	You are adequate.
Galatians 5:1	You are free.
Psalms 139:5	You are secure.
1 Corinthians 15:57	You are victorious.
Romans 8:37	You are a conqueror.
John 15:13	You are sacrificial.
Psalms 71:5	You are selfless.

What if the person(s) you are at odds with doesn't know their true identity? In what ways might that change how you think or feel about them?

(**Note:** If you want to know more about this topic, look for the booklet titled *IDENTITY* under Discipleship Booklets on our website.)

2. Not BELIEVING The Truth

We can know the truth but believing and knowing are two different things. I define "knowing" as a cognitive understanding of God's truth but "believing" is a result of the Holy Spirit giving you revelation of God's truth so that you believe it is true. This truth is found in John 14:26.

*"But the Helper, the **Holy Spirit**, whom the Father will send in My name, **He will teach you all things (give you revelation)**, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you."*

Unbelief about God, His word, and how we are to live THE Christian Life will result in unchanged fleshly behaviors. There

will be no freedom, victory, healing of woundedness, or spiritual transformation which can lead to ongoing conflict in our relationships.

In what ways might that change how you think or feel about your difficult relationships knowing those persons don't believe key biblical truths?

3. Not WALKING In The Truth

“Are you so foolish? Having **begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by (walking in) the flesh?” Galatians 3:3**

We can know, believe, and even have revelation of God's truth, but if we don't choose to walk in it, what good does it do us? This is what Paul meant in Galatians 3:3. He was chastising the Galatians because they knew the truth but were not walking in it.

How would it change how you think or feel about your difficult relationships knowing the persons involved aren't walking in God's truth?

4. Being Falsely Taught God's Truth

The only thing worse than not knowing, not believing, or not walking in the truth is being falsely taught God's truth. False truth can lead to false expectations which result in fleshly behaviors. Let's look at an example.

What if the person you have difficulties with was falsely taught the Christian life is about keeping certain rules and is about spiritual checklists to accomplish in order to grow spiritually? If they have expectations that you should keep the same legalistic rules and checklists and you don't, then they might be tempted to judge or condemn you. If you took ownership of their flesh, how might you respond in the flesh?

Conclusion

The main point of these first two chapters is that we all struggle in relationships because of the baggage we and others bring into those relationships. If we don't recognize our own baggage, it is easy to point fingers at our difficult person and conclude he/she is the problem and therefore must change to reconcile the relationship. Would you agree that if we bring our "baggage" into the relationship, we can be just as much a part of the problem as the others with their "baggage"?

CHAPTER THREE

Dealing With Difficult People Apart From Christ

Introduction

In this chapter we will see how we try to deal with difficult relationships apart from Christ. I encourage you to engage the Holy Spirit concerning what you read for Him to reveal or expose what you may be dealing with that may be hidden or suppressed.

How Do We Deal With Difficult Relationships Apart From Christ?

We have two choices when it comes to relationships. We can either engage God to transform us or we can simply cope with our disagreeable relationships. In this chapter, we will look at the various ways we cope. Let me start by defining “coping.”

***Coping: METHODS or TECHNIQUES we use to
NAVIGATE difficult people APART from God.***

I divide coping into two different categories: defensive and offensive. Let’s start by looking at ways we cope defensively.

DEFENSIVE Coping

1. AVOIDANCE

I believe the number one defensive coping mechanism is just to avoid those who have and are creating pain and heartache in our lives. The thought is: Out of sight, out of mind. However, does “out of sight” truly result in those people being “out of mind”?

2. COMPARTMENTALIZE

Another way we cope with difficult relationships is to compartmentalize. We try to put difficult relationships in a locked box and put them away just like putting a box away in a closet. We then throw away the key so we don't have to think about them or deal with them anymore.

Engaging God: Ask the Holy Spirit if you have anyone in your life you have compartmentalized.

3. Put On MASKS

When we are forced to be around the unsavory people in our lives, we can put on masks in order to appear as if we don't have a problem with them. One mask we may tend to put on to keep our difficult people from being difficult is the "people pleasing" mask. We will do everything we can to prevent them from reacting in the flesh. We might even put on that mask thinking that if we please them enough, they will actually like us or, at the very least, will not reject, condemn, or get mad at us.

For me, I would be controlling and manipulative toward my employees and get very angry when they didn't meet my standards, but on Sunday when I went to church, I would put on my "I am a godly, spiritual man" mask. Masks are like the fig leaves used by Adam and Eve to cover their shame. We use our masks to cover our true fleshly feelings that we have towards others.

Engaging God: Ask the Holy Spirit if you may be wearing masks you are not aware of.

4. DENIAL

One of the ways we try to cope with our difficult relationships is by denying that we may be part of the problem. Here are some examples.

I can't be part of the problem because:

- My behavior isn't anywhere near as bad as his/hers.
- He/She is the one who keeps offending me.
- He/She is the only one who keeps bringing up the past.
- He/She never wants to hear my side of the problem.

Engaging God: Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal any justifications your flesh might have to live in denial.

5. STUFF Emotions

Another defensive coping mechanism we try is to stuff our emotions. They may be emotions associated with how people have wounded us or the fleshly feelings people bring out in us when we are around them. We stuff our emotions thinking we are locking them away in a bank vault only to realize that we are trying to stuff them in a colander where they eventually flow or "ooze" out, especially when we are around those whom we struggle with.

Engaging God: Ask the Lord to reveal if you are trying to stuff your fleshly feelings toward anyone.

6. ESCAPE Or ANESTHETIZE The Pain

If we can't compartmentalize people or the pain they cause us, we look for ways to escape or anesthetize the pain associated with the people who caused the pain, especially those who are closest to us. Here are some examples of ways we try to escape or anesthetize the pain:

Workaholism	Shopaholic	Television
Pornography	Medication	Hobbies
Sex Addiction	Overeating	Movies
Computer	Anorexia/Bulimia	Cell Phone
Drug Abuse	Alcoholism	Fantasizing
Social Media	Video Games	Exercise

The key truth we need to understand concerning these escape options is they will only bring temporary relief from the pain but will never produce healing or freedom.

Engaging God: Seek the Holy Spirit to reveal any ways you may be using to escape or anesthetize your relational pain.

7. Continuing To See Yourself As The VICTIM

Another way of dealing with the pain that someone has caused you is to conclude that you are and will always be the victim. I hear these comments often: “Can’t you see what this person did to me?” “Don’t you understand how deeply they have wounded me?” I am not minimizing the fact you may have been victimized. However, the question is, “Do you have to continue living as a victim?”

You or they can play the “victim” card by trying to get attention, sympathy, and validation from others. It becomes a manipulation tool we use to try to get our validation needs met by others while we remain unhealthy. Question: If I am free in Christ, do I need to keep seeing myself as the victim?

Engaging God: Ask the Lord to reveal if you still are, in any way, seeing yourself as the victim.

8. SELF-PROTECTION

Let me begin by defining “self-protection.”

SELF-PROTECTION means constructing walls in our hearts to try to PREVENT others from HURTING or REJECTING us (again).

Unfortunately, no one escapes being a “self-protector” because it is one of the results of the Fall of Adam. Since we were all born in Adam, we were all born as self-protectors. It was part of Adam’s DNA that we inherited. Much like Adam and Eve put on fig leaves after the Fall to try to hide their shame, we build

walls of self-protection to keep others (or sometimes God) from getting too close. Why do we protect ourselves?

I believe the key driver in self-protection is **fear**. Fear and self-protection are like two sides of the same coin. There are two primary fears that drive us to self-protect:

- Fear of rejection
- Fear of being hurt (again)

If you have been rejected or hurt deeply, would you agree that you tend to protect yourself so that you won't be rejected or hurt again by that person who created the pain in the first place? As a strategy to avoid being hurt, we think we must build walls of protection. The very walls we think will protect us, in fact, imprison us. Why?

These walls IMPRISON us because they HINDER the Holy Spirit from TRANSFORMING our hearts and setting us FREE.

Engaging God: Ask the Lord if you are self-protecting and if so, seek Him to begin tearing down your self-protective walls.

OFFENSIVE COPING

What do I mean by “offensive” coping?

OFFENSIVE coping is a result of believing you have FLESHLY RIGHTS towards those WHO HAVE and CONTINUE to hurt or offend you.

What are “fleshly” rights? They are self-centered, sinful demands towards others that are designed to justify our fleshly

behaviors towards people who continue to hurt us. Here are some examples of offensive coping.

1. Being ANGRY

When I look back over 48 years at how my father abused me, I believed I had the fleshly right to be angry for the woundedness he created. The problem is that over time my anger grew into bitterness and a hardening heart towards him, others, and God.

If you struggle with being angry (frustrated) with someone who creates conflict in your life, what might it be creating in your heart?

Engaging God: Seek the Lord to expose what your anger is creating in your own heart and how it is negatively impacting your relationships with others and with God.

2. CONTROLLING

Another offensive coping mechanism is the fleshly right to control others. In other words, we go on the offensive by trying to control them to try and prevent them from controlling us.

Engaging God: Ask the Holy Spirit to expose how you may be trying to control those who you have ongoing struggles with.

3. MANIPULATIVE

One of the key ways we try to control others is through manipulation. Manipulation is any attempt to sway a person's emotions to get him/her to act or feel a specific way. Manipulation comes in many forms such as guilt, shaming, silence, flattery, or people-pleasing.

Engaging God: Seek the Lord to reveal how you may be trying to manipulate those who you are in ongoing conflict with.

4. Being CRITICAL and JUDGMENTAL

You have heard the expression that the best defense is a good offense. One of my favorite offensive coping strategies (and it was literally “offensive”) was to be critical and judgmental of others, especially those who wounded me. I would find ways in my mind to be critical of them to build myself up or to assure myself that I was okay. If I could convince myself that the person who wounded me was “less than” I was, then I could deceive myself into believing that person was no longer a threat.

My being critical of others was also a way I used to drive that person away before they could hurt or reject me. It was a form of “doing it unto others before they could do it unto me.”

Engaging God: Ask God to expose how you may be critical or judgmental of others.

5. Trying To FIX Someone

This is especially true in marriage. When I disciple hurting married couples, they come to me believing that if I can fix their spouse, they will be okay. I believe this is true of all of us married or not. There is something within us that says, “This person makes me feel_____ (frustrated, guilty, angry, etc.). If I could just get him or her fixed, then I would no longer have to feel those things.”

What’s the problem? You guessed it. We can’t fix ourselves much less anyone else. It is a fruitless effort, but I never cease to be amazed at how long we can be deceived into believing we can fix someone else. The bigger problem remains – even if you had the power to fix someone, it would not fix you.

Engaging God: Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal if and how you may be trying to fix your challenging person.

6. CANCELLING Or WRITING OFF

When none of the above work, we just try to cancel or erase those from our lives who hurt us. As I write this, part of our culture wars in this country centers around “cancelling” or “writing off” people we don’t like or that don’t agree with us. We can do the same to those we are in conflict with. Aren’t you glad God has not written you off?

Engaging God: If you are tempted to write someone off, think about the truth that God will never write you off in spite of the ways you offend Him and sin against Him.

What Can We Expect From Our Coping Strategies?

1. Stay SELF-ABSORBED and SELF-FOCUSED

As long as we are coping with those people who create pain in our lives, we will stay focused on our pain, our struggle, or our heartache. We become self-absorbed and cannot focus on anyone but ourselves. In other words, “It is all about me and my hurt.”

2. Opens us to FURTHER PAIN and WOUNDEDNESS

If we stay self-absorbed with our pain, the result is that we are opening ourselves up for more hurt and pain. Even with all the coping strategies we may try to employ, they never truly protect us from further pain.

3. Stay or become REJECTABLE and OFFENDABLE

As long as we continue to cope with others, we will either stay or become rejectable and offendable. This means we open ourselves to taking ownership of more rejection and offense.

4. Reinforces FLESHLY BEHAVIORS

The longer we focus on coping strategies, the more we reinforce our fleshly behaviors towards those who offend and reject us. Like layers of an onion, we continue to add layers of

our fleshly behaviors which keep us in bondage and continue to justify our fleshly rights.

5. Never grow up SPIRITUALLY

One of the keys as we will see in the next chapter to experience freedom and transformation is to grow up spiritually. However, without seeking and drawing on the power of the Holy Spirit, we will remain self-focused and self-absorbed spiritual children.

6. Locked in EMOTIONAL IMMATURITY

There is a direct correlation between spiritual maturity and emotional maturity. You can't have one without the other. Continuing to live from your hurt or pain not only retards your spiritual growth but it restricts your emotional maturity as well. If we don't experience healing, we never grow up, and will continue to revert to childish things (i.e., fleshly behaviors such as anger, controlling, manipulation, selfishness, etc.).

Let me give you an example to illustrate. I know of a man who was emotionally and verbally abused by his dad as a boy. This abuse left him feeling unloved and rejected. His unmet needs for love and acceptance blocked him from growing emotionally. Even though he is now an adult, he has the emotional maturity of a teenager. Unhealed woundedness leaves us stuck emotionally and will prevent the "growing up" process.

7. HARDENING of our hearts towards people and God

All the things listed above will eventually lead us to what I call the "hardening" of our hearts. I define the "hardening of the heart" as the DEATH that occurs in our hearts from continuing to live from our woundedness and from RESISTING God's work in our lives.

Hardening of the heart is like compounding interest on a certificate of deposit (when they actually made real interest). We know interest on a CD compounds the longer we keep the

CD. It is the same way with our woundedness. Over time this “compounding” or hardening of the heart causes you to move further and further away from seeking God as the solution. Eventually you can turn away from God completely and will no longer seek Him as the Source to heal you and set you free. Let me share a story to illustrate.

I was discipling a man who shared with me that his fiancé was run over by a drunk driver the day of their rehearsal dinner. This event happened 15 years prior to our meeting. Nonetheless, he told (and felt) the story as if it had just happened. He said with deep anger: “God killed the only person in the world who ever really loved me.” It was obvious that over the past 15 years he was resisting God and His healing power which resulted in this man’s heart being hardened against God.

Engaging God: Ask the Holy Spirit if you are hardening your heart towards God because of your fleshly behavior or attitudes towards those who have and are hurting you.

Conclusion

There are many other consequences that result from not realizing that we may be part of the problem in strained relationships. However, I hope the Holy Spirit has opened your eyes in new ways concerning how we may be contributing to our struggling relationships. Now let’s turn the corner and see how to become part of the solution.

SATAN's Strategies To Keep Us In Bondage To Our Flesh

Before we move on from this topic, let's take a quick look at some of the strategies of Satan to keep us in bondage to our fleshly behaviors. As we know, Satan does most of his work through our thoughts.

The greatest DECEPTION of Satan is to PERSUADE us that WE, NOT he, are the ORIGIN of his thoughts.

If he can accomplish that, he will be feeding us thoughts non-stop. What are some of the categories of thoughts Satan will insert into our minds?

Lying Thoughts – “I have the right to not forgive him/her for what was done to me.”

Condemning Thoughts – “I feel like a failure because I can't stop judging and being critical of that person.”

Self-Focused Thoughts – “I must focus on protecting myself. Otherwise, he/she will hurt me again.”

Past Thoughts – “I remember when my dad would beat me and it just makes me hate him more every time I think about those times.”

Retaliatory Thoughts – “Just wait until I see him/her again. He/She will get what he/she deserves.”

Thoughts that reinforce False Beliefs – “Because of all the pain that person caused in my life, I will never be set free from the effects of it. I will forever be locked into my rejection, unworthiness, and inadequacy.”

Thoughts to keep us in Bondage – “I will never be able to forgive him/her for what he/she did to me.”

These are just some examples of why we must be vigilant and filter our thoughts through God's truth because if we continue taking ownership of Satan-inserted thoughts, we will never be set free from them, never be healed from them, or never be able to love others because of them.

In the next chapter, we will begin looking at how to become part of the solution in navigating our difficult relationships in Christ.

CHAPTER FOUR

Becoming Part Of The Solution

Introduction

*“When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child.
But when I **grew up [spiritually]**, I put away childish things.”
1 Corinthians 13:11*

Up until this chapter what I have talked about can apply to you or the person you are struggling with. However, the next two chapters will only apply to you because you have no control over what the difficult people in your life will do or not do. The question for you: “What will you do with the truths you are about to read?”

Growing UP

Paul exhorts us to grow up and become spiritually mature according to Hebrews 6:1.

*“Therefore, leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, **let us press on to maturity.**”*

What does it mean to “press on to maturity”?

*“Instead, we will speak the truth in love, **growing in every way more and more like Christ**, who is the head of his body, the church.” Ephesians 4:15*

What does “growing in every way more like Christ” mean?

Growing more like Christ means living from CHRIST-LIKENESS and living from our NEW IDENTITY in Christ.

With this truth in mind, let's look at the results of growing into Christ-likeness and growing into our new true identity and how this will positively impact our relationships.

CHRIST-LIKENESS

*“And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, **are being transformed into His (Christ) likeness**”*

2 Corinthians 3:18

What will be the result of being transformed into Christ-likeness when it comes to relationships? The more we are transformed to become like Christ, the more we will be able to respond in the Spirit to struggling relationships.

Defining CHRIST-LIKENESS

I define “Christ-likeness” like this:

Christ-likeness is living FROM and EXPERIENCING the SUPERNATURAL characteristics of Christ.

Let's look at some examples of Christ-like characteristics.

Characteristics Of Christ-Likeness

Below is a list of some of the characteristics of Christ.

Unconditional Love	Victory	Worth	Acceptance
Freedom	Patience	Strength	Peace
Forgiveness	Security	Kindness	Wisdom
Understanding	Discernment	Compassion	Rest
Christ-confidence	Adequacy	Humility	Boldness
Righteousness	Selflessness	Courage	Hope
Gentleness	Christ-control	Unrejectable	Power
Sacrificial	Unoffendable	Others' Focused	

The fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22, 23 is a great example of Christ-likeness.

“But the fruit of the Spirit is [Christ’s] love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control....”
Galatians 5:22, 23a

The LINE Illustration

Galatians 5:16 says:

*“But I say, **walk by the Spirit (Christ-likeness), and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh (fleshly behaviors).**”*

Based on this verse, I want to introduce the “line” illustration. The key to this diagram is that if we are living from Christ-likeness, we are living above the line and walking in the Spirit. If we are living out of our flesh, we are living below the line in our flesh.

Unconditional Love	Victory	Worth	Acceptance
Freedom	Patience	Strength	Forgiveness
Understanding	Peace	Security	Kindness
Discernment	Wisdom	Humility	Compassion
Christ-confidence	Adequacy	Boldness	Gentleness
Righteousness	Rest	Courage	Selflessness
Christ-control	Hope	Power	Goodness
Other’s Focused	Unrejectable	Sacrificial	Unoffendable

Christ-Likeness = Walking In The Spirit

Fleshly Behaviors = Walking In The Flesh

Anxious, angry, unworthy, self-righteous, impatient, demanding, unforgiving, unloving, defensive, inadequate, critical, judgmental, ashamed, controlling, arrogant, manipulative, guilty, rejecting, insecure,

When it comes to your difficult relationships, where does God want you to live? ABOVE or BELOW The Line?

God knows that unless you seek Him to transform you into Christ-likeness, you will be stuck below the line in your fleshly behaviors and nothing will change with the challenging people in your life. In fact, things will probably get worse.

Key Christ-Like Characteristics Concerning Relationships

When you look at the list of Christ-like characteristics, which ones, if you were living from them, would change how you relate to others? Here are some I believe are crucial.

Unconditional Love	Acceptance	Freedom
Unoffendable	Forgiveness	Wisdom
Discernment	Unrejectable	Humility
Selflessness	Perseverance	Patience

Let's put these Christ-like characteristics above the line versus the fleshly behaviors of your difficult people towards you below the line.

Unconditional love	Patience	Acceptance
Selflessness	Humility	Wisdom
Discernment	Forgiveness	Unrejectable
Unoffendable	Freedom	Wisdom

Christ-Likeness

Fleshly Behaviors

Frustrated	Angry	Self-righteous	Impatient
Unforgiving	Unloving	Defensive	Critical
Judgmental	Controlling	Manipulative	Rejecting

How would living from the Christ-like characteristics change your attitude towards those with whom you struggle? Before we go on, let's tie Christ-likeness to spiritual growth.

SPIRITUAL growth is being TRANSFORMED to live MORE from Christ-likeness and living LESS out of our FLESHLY behaviors and being IMPACTED LESS by someone else's fleshly behaviors.

How Does Living From Christ-Likeness Transform Your Relationships?

Using the twelve characteristics listed above the line, let's look at some outcomes from living from Christ-likeness.

Acceptance and Unrejectable – If you are being transformed to live from Christ's acceptance, then does it not follow that you would become more unrejectable?

Patience and Perseverance – If you are living from Christ's patience and perseverance, then no matter what fleshly behaviors your difficult person expresses towards you, he/she will not deter you from being patient and persevering in the relationship.

Forgiveness and Unoffendable – If you could live from Christ's forgiveness, not only would you be willing to more readily forgive, but living from Christ's forgiveness moves you to the place where you don't take ownership of someone's offenses towards you. That moves you to a place of becoming unoffendable.

Wisdom and Discernment – Two of the key characteristics of Christ-likeness that are evident if you are growing spiritually are wisdom and discernment. Wouldn't you agree that living from Christ's wisdom and discernment would be very helpful in navigating difficult people?

Humility and Selflessness – As you grow into greater humility, you will become more selfless. One follows the other. As you do, you become more spiritually attractive because even people you

struggle with will eventually experience Christ's humility and selfless attitude through you. This doesn't necessarily mean they will respond to it, but regardless, it will be evident.

Freedom and Unconditional Love – As you grow into Christ-likeness, the more you will be free from your fleshly behaviors which will free you to love the unlovable people in your life. We will talk more about this at the end of this chapter.

(Note: If you would like to know more about growing to become more like Christ, look for the curriculum on our website titled *Growing To Become Like Christ.*)

NEW IDENTITY

In Chapter Two, we discussed the truth of our new identity in Christ and some of the characteristics of our true identity (pages 16 and 17). As we grow spiritually, our minds will be renewed to the truth of our true identity with the result that we will be living from it similar to living from Christ-likeness. Let's look at some results of living from our new identity.

In Your New Identity:

You are RIGHTEOUS – Living from Christ's righteousness means you no longer have to react in frustration or anger when you are provoked by someone.

You are FREE – Living from Christ's freedom means you no longer have to try and control, manipulate, or fix someone.

You are an UNCONDITIONAL LOVER – This means that you will love the people you struggle with rather than being critical or judgmental. And you won't be cancelling them or writing them off. It also means that you will not harden your heart towards God or people.

You are SELFLESS – This means you no longer have to be self-absorbed and self-focused.

You are ACCEPTED – This will free you from being rejectable and offendable.

Three Results of Living From Christ-Likeness and Our New Identity

There are three key results of living from Christ-likeness and our true identity that will transform how we deal with our challenging relationships.

1. Your SPIRITUAL Armor Will THICKEN

When I refer to spiritual armor, I will not be referring to the spiritual armor in Ephesians 5. Rather, I define “spiritual armor” as made up of our Christ-likeness and our new identity in Christ.

Here is my analogy based on my definition of spiritual armor. When I learned that I contain all of the Christ-like characteristics and all the characteristics of my true identity, my main struggle was believing it was true. The problem was that due to my unbelief, my armor was as thick as cellophane. Imagine my false beliefs being darts. Because my armor was so thin, the messages (darts) of my false beliefs could easily penetrate my armor resulting in my going to the flesh.

However, as the Holy Spirit began renewing my mind to the truth, my armor thickened to a point where I became more impenetrable, more unoffendable, and more unrejectable.

a. IMPENETRABLE

Let me share a personal example. In my true identity, I am adequate, but my false belief was that I am inadequate. Early on, I would seek the Holy Spirit to renew my mind to the truth but because my false belief was so strong, the messages (darts) that reinforced my false belief easily penetrated my spiritual armor so that I would react with my default fleshly behaviors such as people-pleasing, self-pity, and manipulation.

However, as I continued my walk of faith, the Spirit was transforming me to move from my unbelief to the truth. With each step of faith my belief deepened and my armor thickened. Over time, I started believing I am adequate in Christ – darts were not penetrating as deeply or for as long. The result? I went to my fleshly behaviors less and less. As the Holy Spirit moved me from unbelief to belief, I was being set free from my fleshly behaviors.

b. UNOFFENDABLE

Webster's dictionary defines the word "offended" as "anything or anyone who causes (a person or group) to feel hurt, anger, or upset by something said or done." This definition described me because I was so hypersensitive that I was continually taking ownership of other people's offenses towards me. I was in a constant state of "offendedness."

As I began to grow in my understanding of Christ-likeness and my true identity, I found myself taking less and less ownership of other's offenses – I was becoming more unoffendable. Using our spiritual armor analogy as the truth that I don't have to take ownership of someone else's offense, my armor became thicker, and it became harder and harder to offend me. It was true freedom for me because the more I became free from my "offendedness," the less offensive I was to others.

c. UNREJECTABLE

It has been said that there are two kinds of people: Those who have been rejected and those who have been rejected more. Rejection hits the very core of our humanness because no one likes to be rejected. The good news is that as we grow in our belief that we are accepted and acceptable in Christ, we do not have to take ownership of someone else's rejection because our spiritual armor thickens and we progressively become more unrejectable.

In regard to the people that you struggle with, in what ways do they offend you or reject you? How would it make you feel if your spiritual armor was thickening with the result that you were taking less and less ownership of their offenses and rejection? What might that free you to do regarding their sinful behavior towards you?

2. You Will See The Hearts of Others Through The EYES of CHRIST

As we grow spiritually, another important result will be that we will be able to see people through the eyes of Christ. Even though “seeing” has a human connotation, the kind of “seeing” we are talking about is a supernatural, spiritual seeing. Let’s look at an example of this in 2 Kings 6:17. The prelude to Elisha’s prayer is that his servant could not see the chariots of fire around the mountains.

*“Then Elisha prayed and said, ‘O LORD, I pray, **open his eyes that he may see.**’ And the **LORD opened the servant’s eyes and he saw**; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and **chariots of fire** all around Elisha.”*

Only until the Lord opened Elisha’s servant’s eyes could he see the chariots of fire on the mountains. In like manner, as we grow spiritually, the Holy Spirit gives us supernatural eyes to see past the externals of a person and see people through the eyes of Jesus. If we are able to see with the eyes of Jesus, what would we see? We find the answer in 1 Samuel 16:7.

*“...The Lord doesn’t see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but **the Lord looks at the heart.**”*

Jesus never focused on the outward appearance but always looked past that to see a person’s heart. Before we go on, I define the “heart” as our soul made up of our mind, emotions, and will. What are some examples of seeing a person’s heart?

a. You will see their BAGGAGE

As you are being set free, you will be able to look beyond your own baggage, and spiritually see those you struggle with have baggage as well. The more you see others through the eyes of Christ, you will be able to see more clearly their:

- False beliefs
- Woundedness/pain
- Fears
- Motivation for how they behave

Why do you think it is important as a Christ-centered believer to see these things in those you struggle with?

b. You will see their SPIRITUAL AGE

As you grow spiritually and become free from your baggage, your discernment will grow and you will be able to discern a person's spiritual growth. This is crucial, especially in people you struggle with. If they are saved and are living "A" life instead of "THE" Life, why would you expect them to act as spiritual grownups? If they are not growing into Christ-likeness or their new identity, then why would you treat them as spiritual adults?

c. You will see their SPIRITUAL POTENTIAL

By spiritual potential, I mean where others could be spiritually if they became saved and understood, believed, and walked in Christ as "THE" Life.

Unlike me with my limited vision, God not only sees the here and now, but He also sees the spiritual potential in every person regardless of their pursuit of Him or their resistance to Him. God, because of His omniscience, can see where a person's life could be if he/she chose to live from Him as his/her Source. He has provided us with many stories about people in His word as examples.

We see this in God's interactions with the stuttering Moses who felt totally inadequate to lead His people out of Egypt. God saw Abraham's spiritual potential in the midst of his unbelief when he chose to sleep with Hagar. God even saw it with Gideon in spite of his putting out the fleece and being paralyzed with fear when he faced the Midianites.

I even look back on my life when I was in total despair and having suicidal thoughts. I saw no hope and no future and yet, what did God see? Potential. He didn't flinch at my doubts because He knew that I was at the end of my rope and was about to turn an eternal corner that would change my life forever. Can you look back for a moment and think about a time when you saw little potential for yourself and yet, here you are experiencing Life in Christ?

The Lord reminded me of my story as a way of telling me that He wants me (and you) to see the spiritual potential in every person, believer and unbeliever alike. They may not be saved, or they may be saved and are resisting God. They may even be rejecting or turning their backs on you. It makes no difference where a person is spiritually because as long as he or she is alive, there is potential and hope.

3. You Will See People As God's MASTERPIECES

Ephesians 2:10 says:

*"For **we are His workmanship**, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them."*

The word "workmanship" in the original Greek means "masterpiece." Therefore, when God sees you, He sees you as His masterpiece. Why? We see the answer in Psalm 139:14.

*"I will give thanks to You, for **I am fearfully and wonderfully made**. Wonderful are Your works, and my soul knows it very well."*

The word “fearfully” in this verse means “to be astonished or in awe.” Could this mean that God sees you and all those He has created as being awesome masterpieces. The answer is, “Yes.”

How would it be different if we could look past the curtain of someone’s fleshly behaviors and see him or her as a fearfully and wonderfully made masterpiece? If someone is a Christian, doesn’t God want to transform us to see beyond that person’s fleshly behaviors, and realize he or she is just as much a masterpiece to Him as we are?

What Is The Overflow of Seeing Others Through The Eyes of Jesus?

What might be some characteristics of the overflow of seeing others you struggle with through the eyes and heart of Jesus?

- Christ’s wisdom and discernment will create a greater sensitivity to them and their baggage.
- You will see and have compassion for their woundedness.
- You will understand their bondage to the flesh because they don’t know the truth, they are not walking in the truth, or they have been falsely taught the truth.
- You will seek to repent or forgive for your offenses or theirs.
- You will seek to rebuild the trust that has been broken.
- You will do whatever it takes on your part to reconcile with that person.
- If they don’t respond to Christ’s heart through you, continue to pray for their freedom.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Ultimate Result Of Spiritual Growth

Introduction

*“Let **all** you do be done in **love**.”*

1 Corinthians 16:14

I looked up the word “all” in the original languages and it means “all.” This one word removes every excuse for not loving everyone, including the “stinkers” in your life. The good news is that as you grow into Christ’s love and grow into the truth that you are an unconditional lover in your new identity, you will discover that loving others comes more naturally. Why?

***SPIRITUAL GROWTH = FREEDOM FROM your
FLESHLY behaviors, your EMOTIONAL and
SPIRITUAL baggage, and your COPING strategies
with the result you are FREE TO AGAPE LOVE.***

I underlined the words “from” and “to” because I believe we must be “free FROM” something in order to be “free TO” something. In this case, in order to love even the most toxic people in our lives, we must grow up because spiritual growth = freedom from our fleshly behaviors, from our spiritual and emotional baggage, and from our coping strategies which frees us to love everyone. However, this is not a man-produced love. What kind of love is it?

AGAPE Love

What is “agape” love?

Agape love is the DIVINE love that ONLY comes from God. Agape love is PERFECT, UNCONDITIONAL, SACRIFICIAL, and SELFLESS.

When we are loving others with natural human love, we can't help but love conditionally. However, with agape love there are no conditions or expectations. In addition, there is one more key truth to loving others with agape love. Loving others with agape love means you love everyone equally, including the people that irritate you the most. What are some of the characteristics of agape love?

Agape love has:

- No conditions
- No expectations
- No fleshly rights
- No limitations
- No selfish motives

In addition, agape love doesn't judge, criticize, compare, take offense, hold grudges, or hold onto the right to not forgive.

Agape Love Has NO Excuses

We can have many excuses not to forgive. Here are some examples. See if any of them apply to your relationships.

- **Unforgiveness** – “They must ask for forgiveness before I can love them. Or I can't possibly forgive them, much less love them, for what they did.”
- **Unmet needs** – “This person is not meeting my needs for love, acceptance, worth, etc., so why should I love them?”
- **Woundedness** – “I can't love them because of how badly they wounded me.”

Are you using any of these excuses or ones similar to not love others? What is the truth? There is no excuse not to agape love even those toxic people in our lives because agape love is unconditional meaning we are without excuse.

Engaging God: If you discover you have excuses for not loving others, seek the Holy Spirit to set you free from those excuses.

Agape Love = POWER

Have you ever thought about love working through the Spirit's power? Here are some examples of what that looks like.

- It can disarm others and make them open and transparent.
- It can bring a person to brokenness.
- It can draw an unbeliever to salvation.
- It can move people to love you.

In addition, God's agape love through you can:

- **Penetrate** someone's heart
- **Soften** someone's heart
- **Heal** someone's heart
- **Transform** someone's heart

In what ways might it change your willingness to love if you believed God's power could accomplish these things?

Engaging God: Seek the Lord to give you deeper revelation of His power in you.

Agape Love Is An UNSTOPPABLE Force

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,

*nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, **will be able to separate us from the love of God**, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 8:38, 39*

Romans 8:38, 39 promises that nothing will separate us from God’s love. In addition, Paul tells us that nothing and no one is going to stop God from loving you. Likewise, no one can stop you from loving other people. The person you are loving may say, “No” to your overtures of love, but that will not stop Christ’s love from pouring through you into that person because His love is truly an unstoppable force.

I see agape love like a wrecking ball tearing down the walls of our anger, bitterness, unforgiveness, etc., and opening a pathway to love the most unlovable people in our lives.

When I think of this truth, it reminds me of one of my board members who calls me periodically and says, “I love you, Bill, and there is nothing you can do about it.”

Engaging God: How would it change your willingness to love those who are difficult to love, or who you fear will reject your love, when you realize there is nothing they can do to stop Christ’s love through you? If you are still unwilling to love them, ask the Holy Spirit to give you the willingness to love them no matter what.

There is so much more that can be said about agape love, but I hope this section has given you eyes to see that since we contain all of Christ’s love and we are unconditional lovers in Christ, we have no excuse for not loving everyone.

Does Agape Love Mean I Have To Like, Trust, OR Approve of That Person?

Agape Love and LIKING

Does loving someone with agape love mean I have to “like” them? The answer: Not necessarily. According to scripture, we are to agape love everyone including people like Vladimir Putin,

the president of Russia, but we don't have to like his sinful, fleshly attitudes and behavior.

Agape Love and TRUSTING

Human love and trust go hand in hand. You can't have one without the other. However, when it comes to agape love, you must have one even if you don't have the other.

To explain, let's use an example of a married couple. Trust in marriage can be compromised in different ways. From affairs to finances, trust can be broken. The worst form of broken trust is having an affair. Even in this extreme case, it does not give the offended spouse the right not to agape love his/her spouse who committed the affair. If both parties are willing to rebuild the trust, the key to the rebuilding process is for the offended spouse to agape love his/her spouse rather than reject the spouse. Building on the foundation of agape love will greatly facilitate the trust being rebuilt. It won't be an easy or short process but through it, trust can be rebuilt.

What if the other party does not want to work at rebuilding the trust? All you can do then is just continue to love and pray for that person. Therefore, let's sum up this section this way: We must love everyone with agape love, but trust will have to be earned and/or rebuilt.

Engaging God: Is there someone in your life who has broken your trust? If you are unwilling, seek the Lord to give you the willingness to begin to rebuild that trust.

Agape Love and APPROVAL

Similar to loving and not necessarily liking someone, we are to love everyone even though we may not approve of their behavior. I think a good example of this is the LGBTQ movement. We are to agape love all those who call themselves lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, etc., even though we, as Christians, don't approve of their sinful behavior because it is contrary to what

God's truth says. However, disapproval does not let us off the hook from loving others.

Here is a powerful true story to explain concerning a homosexual and a Christian couple. The homosexual was very anti-Christian. He participated in gay parades and while there, he would see Christians standing with signs that read "Turn or Burn." As a result, he was deeply angry and offended because of their unloving attitudes. The result was a deep bitterness and hatred for Christians.

At one point, he became sick with a long-term illness (not HIV) that kept him bedridden for the most part. There was a Christian couple in his apartment complex who found out about his condition and started bringing him meals, running his errands, and taking care of his needs. They did not tell him they were Christians. They just kept performing these loving acts until one day he couldn't help but ask, "Why are you so kind and loving?" They told him it was because of the love of Christ that compelled them. He knew that because of their beliefs, they did not approve of his behavior but were loving him anyway. The good news to this story is that he trusted Christ as a result of their unconditional love towards him.

Engaging God: If you struggle with not loving someone you don't approve of, seek the Holy Spirit to transform you to agape love that person.

What About Setting Boundaries?

We won't go into any great depth about this issue, but suffice it to say, there are certain abusive and toxic people that you need to draw healthy boundaries with in order to protect yourself against their flesh, especially those who have physically harmed you or have threatened to do so. While you can learn to love them with agape love, you must separate from them physically because of their potential to physically hurt you.

With other toxic people, such as those who constantly ridicule, demean, or criticize you, you also need to set up

boundaries to protect yourself from verbal abuse. For them, it may take physical separation, or it may mean being honest with them and telling them they must stop the offensive behavior if they want to continue having a relationship with you.

However, just like with love and liking, trusting, and approving, your setting up healthy boundaries is not an excuse for not loving those unhealthy and toxic people. Another key point is this: As you spiritually grow up, your spiritual armor may **thicken to a point** where you may **no longer** need to set boundaries.

We have talked earlier about how, early on, our spiritual armor is the thickness of cellophane. As a result, the darts of rejection, abusive behavior by others, etc., can easily penetrate the cellophane. However, as we grow in Christ, our spiritual armor grows thick enough to repel these sinful and fleshly darts coming at us from others. The result: We may be able to remove some or all boundaries set for a particular person or persons.

My Unlovable Person

These truths I have shared so far are very applicable to one of the more unlovable people in my life. I hope it will be encouraging.

My brother, Jim (not his real name), was a very toxic person in my life. Jim held on to every past sin I had ever committed against him (50+ years' worth). For many years I was able to ignore Jim until we ended up having to work together to sell a piece of land that we inherited. For two years, as we were attempting to sell the land, Jim made it a point of trying to make me feel worthless at every turn. Every one of his phone calls, texts, and emails was intended to minimize and reject me.

I wanted to retaliate against him but I restrained myself. Nonetheless, I was very angry in my flesh. My real motive for wanting to sell our jointly-owned land was so I would never again have to see Jim until his funeral. At this point I did not love,

like, trust, or approve of Jim so I set boundaries to prevent him from further hurt towards me.

I was living in self-protection with Jim. I didn't want to be around him, hear from him, or even think about him. However, in the midst of my agony towards Jim, the Lord came along one day and said, "What about Jim?" And I responded somewhat sarcastically, "What about Jim?" The Lord said, "I can't let you continue not loving him. You write and teach about love but you are not applying that to Jim." (At times like these I realize why it is so much easier to teach the truth than live it.)

My first response was a fleshly one because I wanted to keep on protecting myself from Jim rather than loving him. However, I knew in my spirit that the Lord was right and it was time to stop self-protecting and start loving. The problem was that I was not willing to love Jim.

So, what do we do with our unwillingness to love?

***Our only option is to SEEK God to transform
our hearts to BECOME willing.***

This is one of the key reasons I had to depend on God because I knew that I was not willing to love Jim. How about you? Before I could ask God to love Jim through me, I had to pursue Him to move me to a place of being willing. This is why I prayed the following prayer concerning Jim.

"Lord, give me the willingness to pursue loving Jim."

Initially this was a very difficult prayer to pray but after I continually prayed it, over time the Holy Spirit changed my unwilling heart to one willing to pursue loving Jim. It took six months but over that time what I did not see was the power of love penetrating Jim's heart as well as mine.

For six months I prayed the simple prayer asking the Lord to love Jim through me. For those six months I didn't feel or experience any love towards Jim. I was very intentional about that prayer whenever I called or emailed him. During that time, I also didn't sense any change in Jim's rejection, criticism, or anger towards me.

Then one day, I got a call from Jim and he said these words which he had never spoken to me before: "Can you help me?" (He was asking help concerning our business deal.) I knew the Lord had done a work in my heart because I didn't respond with a negative or sarcastic remark. Instead, I said, "How can I help you?" I realized in that moment that God had transformed my heart and set me free from my anger towards my brother.

When we finished the conversation, Jim uttered two other words I had never heard from him: "Thank you." Little did I know that this would be the beginning of a new relationship with him because from that time forward, we have continued to draw closer to one another. The Lord has transformed me to a place where I not only love him, I like and trust him. It has been a long and hard journey but it was well worth it.

Footnote: Early on I set boundaries to protect myself from being hurt by Jim, but over time, as our relationship has grown, the boundaries have been removed because of the mutual love we now have for each other.

Agape Love and Your Spiritual Artery

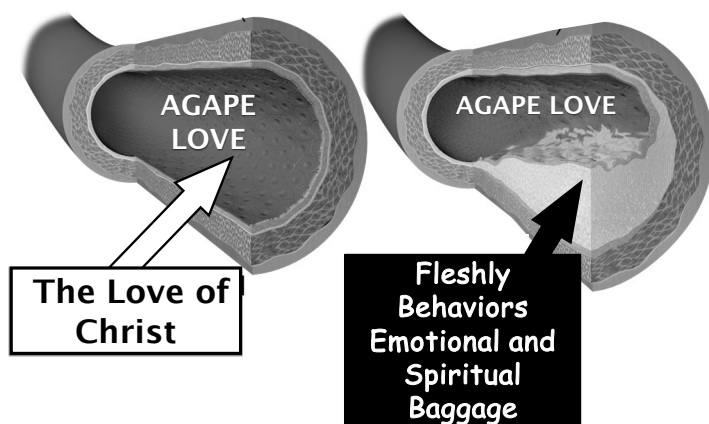
As you know, a physical artery contains all the blood you need to sustain life. What if we applied this analogy to a spiritual artery? In your spiritual artery, you contain all of the agape love of Christ according to Colossians 2:9, 10 that you read earlier. However, similar to a physical artery, we can have plaque in our spiritual artery as well. I call this "fleshly" plaque.

What makes up our “fleshly” plaque?

- **Fleshly Behaviors**
- **Emotional Baggage**
- **Spiritual Baggage**

If the physical plaque builds up in a physical artery, it will restrict blood flow. If not treated, over time it could eventually kill us by a stroke or heart attack.

“Fleshly” Plaque



In the same way, if we are not engaging God to remove our “fleshly” plaque, it could prevent us from ever loving the toxic people in our lives. However, it gets worse because the consequences of not seeking the Holy Spirit to remove your fleshly plaque slowly creates a hardening of your heart towards others and towards God.

Therefore, let’s summarize this chapter with this truth.

***SPIRITUAL GROWTH = FREEDOM
To AGAPE LOVE EVERYONE.***

CHAPTER SIX

Walking In Freedom

Introduction

*“It was for **FREEDOM** that Christ set us **FREE**; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.”
Galatians 5:1*

God’s objective concerning difficult relationships is to not only set us free from the fleshly behaviors we may react with, but to eventually move us to that spiritual place where we can love our unlovable people with the love of Christ regardless of whether or not they love us in return. With that in mind, let’s look at some key truths to experience Christ’s freedom.

Key Truths To Experiencing Freedom

1. Freedom = SPIRITUAL WILLINGNESS

*“For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am **not practicing what I would like to do (spiritual will)**, but I am doing the very thing I hate (fleshly will).” Romans 7:15*

This verse reveals that Paul, like you and me, has two different wills: spiritual and fleshly.

The **Spiritual Will** is willingness to walk by faith and depend on God to heal you, to set you free, to transform your life, etc.

The **Fleshly Will** is unwillingness to walk by faith and to live totally from the flesh.

When Paul says, “I am not practicing what I would like to do but I am doing the very thing I hate,” he is essentially saying his **fleshly** will is stronger than his **spiritual** will. Why?

Let me use this analogy to illustrate. If you have a guy with weak muscles arm wrestling a body builder, who is going to

win? The body builder of course. Early on in your Christian walk, your spiritual will is more like the weak-muscled guy while your fleshly will is like the body builder. Why? Because up until you start walking by faith, all you have exercised were your fleshly muscles. Your spiritual muscle was small and weak.

However, as you increasingly walk by (exercise your) faith, your spiritual muscle (spiritual will) strengthens and you more consistently, through Christ's power, overcome your fleshly will.

Early on in difficult relationships, our fleshly will overwhelms our spiritual will because of the strength of our flesh due to the depth of our hurt or woundedness. I understand because I was so deeply hurt and abused by my brother that I was totally unwilling to let go of my bitterness and anger. However, I realized that the only way for me to ever start the road to freedom was to seek the Holy Spirit to move me from unwillingness to willingness – which, over time, He did. This is why I have asked you numerous times throughout this study, to engage the Holy Spirit to move you from your fleshly unwillingness to spiritual willingness. Why? **Without spiritual willingness, there will be no freedom.**

Engaging God: If you struggle with your spiritual willingness to be set free from your fleshly behaviors towards your stressful relationships, seek God by faith to grow your spiritual will.

2. Freedom = SPIRITUAL DETERMINATION

In addition to spiritual willingness, the transformation process to freedom includes spiritual determination and perseverance.

“For I determined (Spirit-produced) to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.” 1 Corinthians 2:2

Paul was determined that nothing was going to get in the way of his knowing Christ. I am convinced that we have to be just as determined to engage God to grow us up, transform us, and set us free. I added the words “Spirit-produced” because this was

not a man-made, self-produced determination manufactured by Paul. This determination was produced in him by the Holy Spirit as a result of transforming Paul's life. This is the same determination we need to be set free to agape love our difficult people.

Engaging God: Seek Jesus to BE your determination and to grow it.

3. Freedom = HEALING

“He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.”

Psalm 147:3

Since hurtful relationships tend to cause woundedness to some degree, healing will be a necessary part of your freedom. If you have not been deeply wounded, it is simply a matter of seeking the Holy Spirit on your own for healing. However, you may be experiencing deep-seated woundedness and even trauma that may require professional counseling to guide you through the process of healing.

Do not hesitate to seek counseling as long as it is Christ-centered. By Christ-centered, I mean a counselor who is not giving you tips and techniques on how to heal yourself. Rather one, who is using biblical truth and is constantly directing you to the Holy Spirit who is the only One who can truly heal you.

(Note: I have written a study on healing called *Healing The Wounded Heart* that you can download for free from our website. It goes into greater depth about the process of being healed.)

Engaging God: Remember that only the Holy Spirit, not man, can and will heal you. Seek Him to heal those wounded parts of your soul and set you free from them.

4. Freedom = FORGIVENESS

“Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”

Colossians 3:13

Unforgiveness occurs when we take ownership of someone else's offense towards us which triggers our fleshly right which says, “I don't have to, or I won't forgive that person.” When offended our flesh reacts through such things as frustration, anger, retaliation, or revenge. In our flesh, we can justify not forgiving someone. Here are some reasons used to justify our unforgiveness.

1. This person hurt me so deeply; I will never be healed.
2. This person who wounded me has scarred me for life.
3. This person has ruined my life.
4. They need to be punished for what they did (said) to me.

The problem with unforgiveness is this:

***UNFORGIVENESS creates a prison for YOU,
NOT your offender.***

I lived in unforgiveness towards my father for 48 years not realizing that I, not he, was in prison. In addition, unforgiveness was like a progressive cancer that was slowly killing me and negatively impacting all my other relationships to one degree or another.

This is why God uses “forgive or forgiveness” over 100 times in the Bible. He knows that unforgiveness will not only be a cancer to our soul but will create, over time, a hardened heart towards people and towards Him.

Therefore, seek the Holy Spirit to give you the spiritual willingness to forgive your offender. If you are unwilling, I understand because I was unwilling to forgive my father. In light of my unwillingness, the Lord gave me this prayer to pray:

“Heavenly Father, forgive my father through me.” I prayed this prayer for the last 18 months of my father’s life with the result that the Holy Spirit softened my hardened heart to a place where I became willing to forgive my father. I can’t begin to put into words the freedom forgiving my father gave me. It not only freed me **from** my internal prison of unforgiveness, but it eventually freed me **to** love my dad with the love of Jesus. That, my friends, was a supernatural miracle that radically changed my life. Before we leave this topic, remember this key truth.

Forgiveness is a PROCESS. It may take several ACTS of forgiveness before you FULLY forgive your offender.

(Note: I have written a booklet called *Forgive* that you can download for free from our website. It goes into greater depth about forgiveness.)

Engaging God: If you struggle with forgiving someone like I did with my dad, ask the Holy Spirit to move you from unwillingness to willingness in order to be set free.

5. Freedom = FILTERING Your Thoughts

What we think about and what thoughts we take ownership of will determine how free we will become. This is why 2 Corinthians 10:5 is so important.

*“We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and **we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.**”*

We have over 50,000 thoughts going through our mind every day. I wonder how many of those thoughts have to do with those who have hurt or wounded you? You may say, “out of sight, out of mind,” but as we said before, Satan will keep inserting lying, condemning, and fleshly thoughts concerning your difficult relationships to keep stirring up your flesh, especially if the

relationships are close personally or geographically (spouse, kids, or co-workers).

The foundation for taking every thought captive is this:

Do you THINK about what you THINK about?

Why is this important? Our thoughts concerning our difficult relationships will either reinforce our fleshly thoughts and behaviors towards those involved or will set us free. The recurring problem becomes the thoughts that come to mind when you think about how that person has hurt or is hurting you. If you don't filter your thoughts through the truth of God's word or the Holy Spirit, then your fleshly thoughts towards that person will only serve to reinforce your fleshly behaviors. This is why we learn the word of God and walk in the Spirit. We need both to not only filter our fleshly thoughts, but to be set free by thinking truthful thoughts.

Engaging God: Begin thinking about what you think about and seek the Holy Spirit to start filtering your thoughts by speaking truth into any fleshly thought you have about someone else.

(Note: I have written a booklet called *The Battle of The Mind* that you can download for free from our website. It goes into greater depth about filtering your thoughts.)

6. Freedom = Seeing Your Offender With Jesus' Eyes

This will definitely be a process, but over time, as you feel God is setting you free, He will give you His eyes to see past the fleshly behaviors of your offenders and see them as He sees them. It is like drawing the curtain (of your or their fleshly behaviors) back and seeing them in the same way God does. By the way, God chose them, like you, to be born out of 500 million possibilities at conception out of His eternal love for them.

Another key truth concerning spiritual sight is that you can see their emotional and spiritual baggage that caused you to

struggle with them in the first place. This was true of my dad because once I pulled back the curtain of my unforgiveness, I could see his abuse flowed out of his own woundedness. This is not to excuse his sin but it produced a sympathy for my dad that could have come no other way than the Spirit giving me eyes to see. That was wonderful freedom for me.

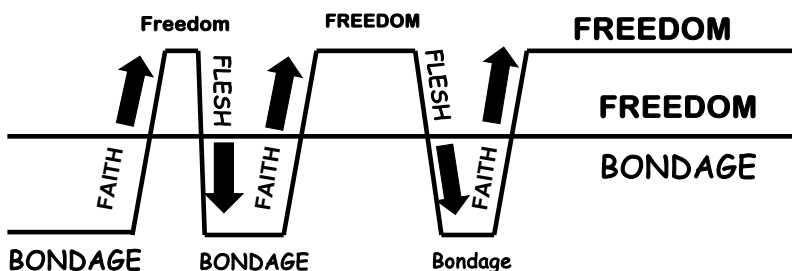
Engaging God: It may be very hard to pull the curtain back of your or others fleshly behaviors and see them with the eyes of Jesus. However, seek and keep seeking the Holy Spirit to do so.

Final Truths Concerning Experiencing Freedom

1. You Will FAIL Along The Journey BUT...

Referring to the line diagram in Chapter Four, we see in the diagram below if you live below the line you are living in bondage to your flesh and the flesh of your difficult person, or you can be set free from your fleshly behaviors and emotional and spiritual baggage by living above the line.

As you seek the Holy Spirit to set you free, you take steps of faith that take you above the line but because of the **strength** of your fleshly will, you give into the flesh and **fall below** the line. Look at the following diagram to illustrate.



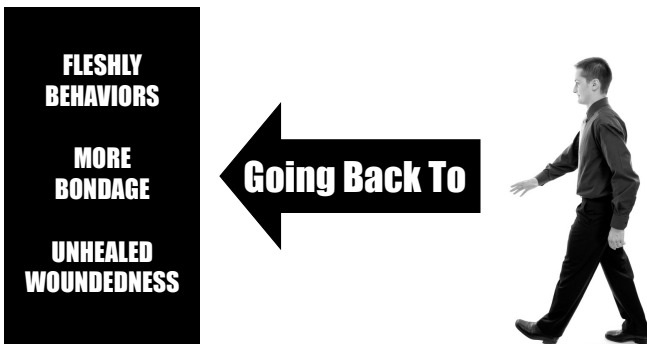
However, with each step of faith comes more freedom and the strengthening of your spiritual will to stay above the line longer. The truth is that you will fail and fall below the line many times. When you do, repent of your flesh and take another step of faith because walking by faith will lead you to eventual freedom.

2. You Will Want To GIVE UP...

*"Now may the **God who gives perseverance and encouragement** grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus." Romans 15:5*

Depending on the depth of pain or woundedness this person has or is creating in your life, you will be tempted several times to give up on ever being set free. I understand because to experience freedom takes work. This is not self-initiated work. Rather, the work is to seek Jesus, in this case, to BE your perseverance and your encouragement to keep seeking freedom.

Remember, that you have the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit in you **constantly** encouraging you to keep taking steps of faith to be set free. If you do give up and stop engaging God to set you free, what will be the consequences? Look at the following diagram for the answer.



If we give up our walk of faith to experience freedom, we will go back to experiencing our fleshly behaviors. This will result in more bondage and no healing of the woundedness inflicted on us. This is why giving up is not an option.

3. You Have The Power of The Holy Spirit To CHOOSE

If we continue to see ourselves as the victim or that we are powerless to change, remember Ephesians 1:19, 20.

*“I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God’s power for us who believe him. **This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead** and seated him in the place of honor at God’s right hand in the heavenly realms.”*

When you feel powerless to change, remember that you have God’s power in you that raised Jesus from the dead. As you walk in the Spirit, you are walking in His power which gives you the power to choose not to sin. Therefore, seek out the power of the Holy Spirit to give you the willingness to choose to not sin and to not react in your flesh, in order to choose to be set free to love.

4. Continue To Seek RECONCILIATION

God hates division among members of the body of Christ. Why? Because if we were all living in Christ then we would come to the place where Paul says,

*“Beyond all these things **put on LOVE, which is the perfect bond of unity.**” Colossians 3:14*

Reconciliation involves two people. All God is calling you to do is to seek to reconcile. You can’t force anyone to reconcile with you. God loves the heart of a believer who wants to repent or forgive and seek reconciliation.

5. These “Thorny” People In Your Life Are NECESSARY

*“... **I was given a thorn** in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud. **Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away.**” Colossians 12:7, 8*

Have you ever been like Paul when it comes to some relationships in that you want the Lord to remove them? However, have you ever thought about those “thorny” people

being necessary in your life? Before you recoil at that remark, think about this.

What if God is using that person to draw you into a deeper dependence on Him or is using that person as a divine scalpel to remove the very fleshly behaviors that are making you part of the problem in your difficult relationships? I look back and see my “thorny” brother was essential in being used of the Lord to soften my heart, to free me, and to transform my heart to love him.

6. What IF They NEVER Change?

Going back to my story about Jim. “What if Jim never responded to my love and never changed?” The answer: God changed my heart towards Jim regardless if his heart did or did not change. I was free to love him with agape love whether he changed or not. The key is this. Whether or not difficult people change, God is transforming you and setting you free with the result that you will be free to love even the most toxic person in your life with the unconditional love of Christ.

Just remember that as long as your difficult people are breathing, there is still hope. Persevere in love and prayer because you never know what the Lord might do. I know because I experienced it with my brother.

CONCLUSION

I hope this short study has been helpful in at least getting you on the right track to freedom and is giving you hope that the Spirit can transform even if your difficult person never changes. The only two commandments from the Lord focus on one word: LOVE. Therefore, God's greatest desire for us all is to be free FROM our baggage, fleshly behaviors, and the ways we cope and come to the place where we are free TO love others with the love of Christ. I pray when that happens with your struggling relationships, you can say with Paul:

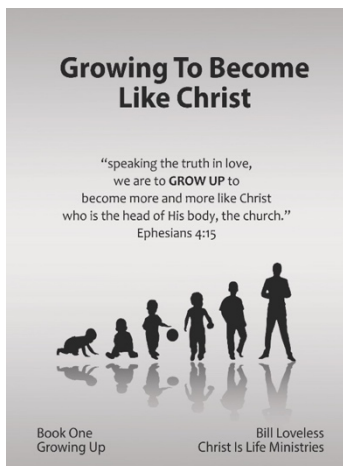
*"Now all glory to **God, who is able**, through **his mighty power** at work within us, to accomplish **infinitely more** than we might ask or think." Ephesians 3:20*

Why? Because there is nothing the power of God cannot do. Amen?

Where Do I Go From Here?

At our website listed below, we encourage you to check out our four-part discipleship series called ***Growing Up – Growing Out – Growing Deep*** designed to teach Christians how to fulfill their purpose and calling. The first book in the series is called ***Growing to Become Like Christ***.

Book One covers the following topics:



- What it means to grow up spiritually to become like Christ.
- The difference between living “A” Christian life versus living “THE” Christian life.
- What it looks like practically to grow to become like Christ.
- What are some of the hindrances to spiritual growth and how we overcome them.
- How becoming like Christ transforms every area of our lives.

CILM DISCIPLESHIP MATERIALS

CILM has this series and many other studies, booklets and videos at our website listed below. To purchase ready-to-use copies from **Amazon or download for free** and do your own printing, copying and binding, please go to the **Discipleship** tab of our website. We hope you will take advantage of these materials.

Christ Is Life Ministries (CILM)

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(2025-08-08)

Navigating Difficult Relationships In Christ

We all struggle with difficult relationships because we live in fallen bodies, in a fallen world, surrounded by fallen people. The question is, “As a Christian, do you want to be part of the problem or part of the solution when it comes to your difficult relationships?”

This booklet is designed to reveal to you how you can navigate difficult relationships through Christ by answering the following questions.

- What is behind difficult relationships?
- What emotional baggage is brought into relationships?
- How does that emotional baggage negatively impact our relationships?
- How are we set free from our fleshly behaviors in order to love the unlovable people in our lives?
- How do we spiritually navigate difficult people?



Bill Loveless is the founder of Christ is Life Ministries (CILM), a non-profit, non-denominational discipleship ministry. CILM's focus is teaching Christians that Christ is their only source for living the Christian life, what it looks like to be transformed into Christ-likeness, and how to be drawn into a deep relationship with Him. Bill finished his earthly journey in 2024 and is now with the Lord he loves.

For further information and to see other discipleship materials being offered, please go to our website: www.christislifeministries.com

