



PART 1

THE FOUR FOUNDATIONAL VALUES
OF PERSONAL RELIABILITY

BECOMING A RELIABLE MAN



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PERSONAL AUTHENTICITY: A MEASURE OF OUR RESOLVE TO LIVE A CONSISTENT LIFE

I met Uncle Yuri at a luncheon that we held to inform local dignitaries about the gerontological hospital and other humanitarian medical services our foundation had helped establish. It was a happy public relations event with a simple meal and a few special introductions and speeches like most luncheons with a purpose. We wanted to inform as many influential people as possible about the kinds of clinics we were sponsoring for the elderly. Besides getting acquainted and allowing them to tour our facilities, we also provided everyone with free medical exams and a small pack of over-the-counter medicines to take home with them. We wanted them to experience first-hand the kind of loving care our patients could expect to receive.

When I sat down next to Yuri, I had no idea what he did for a living. He was a big imposing man about my father's age with a deep authoritative voice and a strong handshake. We quickly entered into a conversation about how a Floridian like me was coping with the cold and sunless days of Russian winter. It was a brisk exchange that was, at times, very funny, with good-natured bantering back and forth. Yuri had a surprisingly quick wit and he loved to tell Russian proverbs and riddles. It was as though we had been friends from the beginning and I felt free to kibitz and joke around with him just like anyone would with their uncle. I don't remember when

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I started calling him Uncle Yuri, but it felt completely natural to both of us.

When I asked him about his wife, his eyes misted. She was frail and weak from a long-time illness and was not expected to get better. I wanted to help if I could, so we arranged to meet her for tea and to pick up her medical file. An American missionary doctor volunteered to help me obtain the specialized medicine she required and coordinate her treatment in Russia. Yuri could not have been more appreciative and those simple efforts deeply cemented our relationship. He soon invited me to his office, a common ritual among Russians, to visit and get to know his colleagues. It was like any family-man's office, with pictures of his grandchildren on his desk and mementos scattered about. And like any proud grandpa, he had stories to tell about each of his "babies." Yuri was a perfect example of how you can be misled about a person's personality or character if you are exposed to only one dimension of his life. This articulate and playful older man with a "Papa's" demeanor was a KGB General.

Russians often referred to KGB headquarters as the "Big House." It was a place they feared because of its history of terrifying interrogations, torture, and murder during the Soviet years. None of my Russian friends would go with me to visit Uncle Yuri; even finding an interpreter was a problem. When we pulled up in front of the building, they would become visibly shaken and refuse to go in with me. It was a demonic stronghold that represented the most evil part of communism, but the Lord wanted me to go there whether it gave me the creeps or not. His grace allowed me to remain natural and friendly, even though I was always closely scrutinized by everyone from the guards downstairs to the people I passed in the hallways. Apparently, I didn't look like I belonged there, which was strange, because some of them didn't either.

Yuri and his colleagues had been taught to rationalize the things they did at work as necessary for the state. This allowed them to close off their consciences so that they could live what was an otherwise normal life. I wasn't too surprised by this because I understood from my consulting experiences how businessmen can rationalize the dishonest things they might be doing either personally

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or professionally in order to keep functioning. Just like some of the men I knew who were trapped behind a religious facade, I was sure that Yuri would like to find a way out. When we talked about the Kingdom of God, I could see the desire in his eyes, but there was always something holding him back. One night after we had shared dinner at his apartment, the Lord opened my heart to understand. His reluctance wasn't related to the personal and financial risks involved. He had done such terrible things, he didn't think that he could be forgiven.

I suddenly realized that the Lord wanted to give Yuri a miracle, and in a moment of calm boldness I began to speak to him on behalf of the Lord. "Uncle Yuri, you believe God speaks to men don't you?" "I suppose," he said, "but He has never spoken to me." It was a startling response because there was absolutely no reluctance on his part to speak about God as a person. I could see that His heart was wide open and ready to believe, so I continued. "Well, He just spoke to me about you," I said, "and He wants me to convey a message. Would you like to hear it?" His eyes widened, and in the quiet voice of a frightened little boy he said, "Yes, please." "I think He said that at this very moment He is bringing things to your memory, bad things that you have done that you have not believed that even He could forgive. Is that true?" He nodded yes, as though he was unable to speak. "Well, the Lord wants to forgive you for these and all your sins. All you have to do is accept His forgiveness and you can be free."

Tears started streaming down his face and mine. For a long time he sat silently in the presence of the Lord, crying and being cleansed from the sin-guilt of the horrors in which he had participated. His prayer was a simple and repeated, "Thank you," as he expressed his deep appreciation to the Lord. I don't know what else the Lord said to him that night, but it was obviously a lengthy conversation. Not long afterwards, without any prompting from me, he was baptized. He eventually left the KGB for a job in industrial security, leaving behind the glaring inconsistencies of his double life.

Personal authenticity is a measure of our resolve to live a consistent life. It is an indicator of the sensitivity of our conscience and how obediently we respond to the conviction of the Holy Spirit. True

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accountability begins in the recesses of the heart, where our hidden will and desires are tested by our knowledge of the will of God. The choices we make to discipline our souls, bring consistency to our words and deeds, and obey the Lord, are the ultimate proof of our credibility. As followers of Christ, “the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1:5 NAS). These inner attributes are essential for becoming a reliable man.

Like Uncle Yuri, too many men have believed that they are in a special category of sinners that will prevent them from fully obeying Christ. They either believe they are too entangled in their sinful desires and indulgences to be able to follow the Lord, or that they can't fit into the unlivable models that religion has offered. A man who has tried to turn away from his sin and naively reached out to the church for help can find himself trapped between his desires for something real and lasting in Christ, and his refusal to continue in a religious system that has failed him. But ultimately, each of us owns our sins and can blame them on no one. Our choices are simple: We can ignore the important issues of life, or we can turn our hearts to obeying Christ first and above all else “forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead . . . press[ing] on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:13-14 NAS).

And what a goal, prize, and upward calling it is! When God spoke through the prophet Isaiah about the coming of Jesus, He described His fantastic plans and purposes for men. About Christ's ministry to those who would believe in Him, He said:

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news *to the poor*. He has sent me to bind up *the brokenhearted*, to proclaim freedom *for the captives* and release from darkness *for the prisoners*, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort *all who mourn*, and provide for *those who grieve* in Zion to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead

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of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

Isaiah 61:1-3

And about His vision for men and the effect His restoring power would have on those who obey Him, He continued:

They (those who *were* poor, brokenhearted, captives, prisoners, or who mourned or grieved) will be called oaks (#352, or strong men) of righteousness (#6664, justice, and the right thing to do ethically, morally, and legally), a planting of the Lord for the display of His splendor.

Isaiah 61:3

This is what Christ died for and the kind of vision that makes life vital and satisfying for those who follow Him. What could be more relevant than to be God's men of "righteousness and justice" at home and at work.

Embrace the Obligations of Manhood

The subject of manhood has been written and argued about for centuries with various theories on how to identify and measure masculinity and know when manhood actually occurs. But I remember very well when I first stepped across the line of demarcation between adolescence and adulthood. I was standing in a hot, muggy telephone booth next to the post office in Cocoa Beach, Florida. It wasn't exactly what I had in mind; not a grand entrance, but it was more than conspicuous. The street noise was so loud that I could barely hear the voice on the other end of the line say, "I'm pregnant." The crush of that moment was indescribable. As the weight of responsibility settled across my shoulders, I understood for the first time that life had the potential of being more than I could handle. I was gripped with the fear of failure, thinking I might not be capable of caring for myself and a new family. But down deep inside I heard a voice speak to me, "be a man." I don't know if it was a memory of the things I had heard

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my Dad say, or the voice of God pushing me to embrace my obligations, but it strengthened my resolve and in just two weeks I was married and on my way to figuring out life.

Just a few days before I heard I was going to be a Dad, I had made a deposit on a bright red Corvette Stingray. So when I stopped by to tell my parents that I was getting married, my Mother craftily tested my will by saying, “You can’t afford to buy a new car *and* get married.” I sat at the kitchen table and thought for a moment. I wasn’t wise or godly, but I could add and subtract in my head. And there were going to be more important expenses to consider. So I picked up the phone, called the dealer and canceled the order. Looking back, that was a clear indicator that our marriage would survive life’s pressures. Actually, Dorothy and I had both done much better selecting a mate than we could have imagined at the time. Each of us was part of God’s plan for the other. But although we worked very hard and shouldered our responsibilities well, the love that had brought us together in the beginning was clearly not going to sustain us without some adjustments. Within a short time I seriously damaged our marriage with my misguided and selfish attempts to “be a man” without God.

Whether we are aware of it or not, almost every man has argued against the Lordship of Christ at one time or another. It’s not something we do consciously. In fact, our arguments sometimes sound very noble, especially when we say (as I once did), “I’m not going to try following Christ until I am really ready, because I don’t want to be a hypocrite.” But there is nothing wise or noble about saying “No” to the Lord. In my own case it would have been more honest to say, “I have good feelings about the Lord when I think of Him, but I like doing things my own way and I’m enjoying my sins far too much to consider obeying Him right now.” Like most men, I was too proud to say anything quite so honest. And it would be many years before I realized how ridiculous my reasons for not following Christ had become. Eventually though, every one of us must settle his differences with his Maker and obey Him if we want to reach our full potential as a man.

When God made man, He gave him the freedom to reject having a relationship with Him. He also gave him the freedom to not trust

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in or rely upon Him. But there is an undeniable capacity within man to know that God exists and it is out of that conflict—the truth of God’s sovereign existence against the hardness of man’s will—from which all arguments against His Lordship arise. The extreme is atheism, although I’ve discussed the impossibility of it with many avowed atheists (especially in Russia) and each of them quickly retreated to agnosticism. The agnostic, unlike the so-called atheist, does not deny the existence of God. He backs slightly away from that hard line and says it is impossible to prove the existence of God. Each step away from atheism modifies slightly what a man is willing to admit without submitting to Jesus as Lord. “Oh yes, there is a God, but his name is _____, not Jehovah.” “Oh yes, I believe in God, but Jesus was not the Son of God.” “Oh yes, I believe that Jehovah is God, and that Jesus is His Son, but I don’t believe the entire Bible,” and so on.

One night I was sharing my faith with an industrialist who had built textile plants around the world. He was very firm in his position of “unbelief” and when I had finished sharing about Christ’s work in my life he said very succinctly, “That’s a very nice fairy tale, but I’m sorry, I don’t believe it.” He was not offended or offensive, just unbelieving, so I thought we should change the subject. I asked him to tell me more about his work. For the next couple of hours he told me about the various factories he had built, the difficulties of international finance, and even details about the textile machines he manufactured. It was a fascinating discussion that would hold the interest of almost anyone. I learned a lot and was sincerely interested in knowing more about him. At the end of our discussion I turned to him and said, “That’s a very nice fairy tale, but I’m sorry, I don’t believe it.” He was dumfounded and sat quietly for a moment. Then he said, “I get your point.” We went back to our discussion of faith and he became a follower of Christ.

Every obstacle to the Lordship of Christ rests upon a foundation of unbelief. Whether it represents a logical, illogical, rational, or irrational perspective, unbelief is very often rooted in the pain or disappointment of real-life events that didn’t turn out the way we wanted. Some unbelieving arguments are based upon misstated or confused facts or even false doctrine. But if they are repeated often

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enough, they can begin to sound reasonable and provide a man with the excuse he needs for hardening his will against God. No matter how carefully a man may have been nurtured and trained by his parents, how much life experience he has, or how well-intentioned he may be, if he does not know the Lord, understand what He requires of him, and learn how to obey Him, he can expect only limited success in dealing with life's problems.

Ironically, one of the most common sources of unbelief is the church's many denominations. When you analyze the theologies of most "Christian" religions, you discover that most have congregated around their common unbelief of one or more parts of the Bible. As a result, their ministries are able to produce no better than partially committed men—partially committed to God through Christ, and partially committed to the limiting doctrines of a religious institution calling itself "the church." The man whose faith has been divided by his commitment to both God and an institutional agenda is like the man described in James 1:8 whose faith is divided by doubts. He is "double-minded" and plagued by recurring episodes of his failed personal reliability. The Apostle Paul clearly warned us about dividing our hearts between the Lord and even our most respected brothers in Christ. In 1 Corinthians 1:11-13 he said:

My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?

Having been a Pharisee and the son of a Pharisee (Acts 23:6), Paul understood the kind of institutional pride and idolatry that can grow from sincere and misguided acts of loyalty. It can become divisive to the body of Christ in general, and to a man's personal devotion to the Lord. Instead of finding his identity in the Lordship of Christ, a man's need to belong, to participate in something bigger than himself, or to be associated with power, can draw him into the

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captivating agendas of organized religion. Whether you're just becoming a follower of Christ or you're a weary veteran looking for a fresh start, the Lord's message has always been the same. He consistently calls us to turn away from the temptations of the world or the disappointments of institutional religion and to turn to Him. So when He speaks to men, there is no confusion about His purpose.

To Thomas, who needed help in overcoming his doubts, He said, "Be not unbelieving, but believing" (John 20:27 NAS).

To Peter, who had denied Him and failed miserably in his time of testing, He asked, "Do you love Me more than these?" (John 21:15 NAS).

To the proud and rebellious Pharisees He said, "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad. . ." (Matthew 12:33 NAS).

In Isaiah 46 the Lord exhorts the men of Israel to turn away from their numerous sins and return to Him alone as their protector and provider. He makes this simple, clear, and direct appeal:

Remember this, and show yourselves men (#377, be a man, act in a masculine, manly way); Recall to mind, O you transgressors. Remember the former things of old, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me.

Isaiah 46:8-9 NKJ

Be Diligent in the Use of Your Faith

The first twenty-four hours after I became a follower of Christ is a blur in my memory. All I can remember is the sweet, mellow, peace of the Lord's presence. It was clear to me what I had done: I had committed to a complete surrender of my will to His. In return, He had mercifully forgiven me of my sins and was going to teach me how to follow Him. And, because He loved me, He would stick closer to me than any mentor I'd had, convicting me of my sins and giving me wisdom so that I could become a better man. To remain in the peaceful presence of the Lord, all I had to do was apologize to Him and ask for His forgiveness (or repent) when I made a mistake.

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On the evening of the second day, I faced the first major challenge to my faith. As I stood in the bathroom brushing my teeth, I suddenly remembered the magazines that were tucked away in the cabinet just below the counter where I was standing. And I immediately felt ashamed that they were still there. The Holy Spirit was doing His job of convicting, now it was my turn to obey. But instead, I closed the door and reached under the counter fully intending to indulge in one more act of lust. Evil was still trying to control my life and something within me wanted to take just one more look. It was an impulse that went completely against the desire to obey that I had felt only a few seconds before. Then, just as though a friendly counselor was speaking to my soul, the Lord simply said, "Don't do it." His voice reminded me that what I now had was far too valuable to risk taking even one more look. I asked God to forgive me for having considered it. Then I yelled at the top of my voice to my invisible, unknown foe, "No, never again. In the name of Jesus, leave me alone!" As suddenly as the episode had begun, I was free.

A strategic fragment of Satan's grip on my soul was broken that night. And the Lord wasted no time in consolidating His gains. Almost immediately, other sins associated with lust began to come to my memory as the Lord led me in a thorough renunciation of each facet of this evil scheme in my life. I had sneaked around, lied, and done many other things that were in violation of my marriage covenant in order to support my habit. Not only that, I had feelings of insecurity and rejection that gave lust validating powers it should never have had. That night the Lord began a dialogue about a number of things that needed correcting before they produced further sin and torment in my life. I had already been forgiven of my past sins, but God wanted to eliminate the *sources* of sin in my life. Instead of spending my entire life repenting of the same old sins, He wanted me to work at identifying and removing the root causes.

In John 6:29 Jesus said, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one He has sent." The easiest and most obvious step we can take to help ourselves believe is reading God's Word. But the toughest work in believing is obeying the conviction of the Holy

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Spirit to rid ourselves of “unbelief” that causes us to resist God’s Word or to argue against His way of doing things. The simplest definition of “faith” (#4102) is “being morally persuaded of the truth.” And the simplest way to express faith is through repentance and obedience. So when we become morally persuaded that we are routinely thinking or acting in a way that is contrary to the will of God, we can ask Him to help us see the reason why. We can then express our faith by repenting and taking actions consistent with obedience.

This kind of introspection might require layers of repentance. For instance, cursing could be rooted in anger, and anger could be rooted in an injustice that needs to be forgiven. By forgiving the injustice and then repenting of the anger associated with it, we might lose the powerful urge to curse. If we don’t we might become so frustrated at our inability to stop cursing that we become even more unbelieving. Ridding ourselves of unbelief is the most important work that God requires of us as followers of Christ. And it is the most effective way to seek personal improvement because it relies upon an active relationship with the Lord. The success we experience will depend upon how persuaded we are that:

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.
The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making
wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right,
giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord
are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the
Lord is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of
the Lord are sure and altogether righteous. They
are more precious than gold, than much pure gold;
they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the
comb. By them is your servant warned; in keeping
them there is great reward.

Psalms19: 7-11

All of the men I’ve known who said they were followers of Christ, yet argued against this practical approach to faith, had focused their believing on external goals. Instead of working to bring their soul

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into submission to God's will, they were striving to gain God's blessing on what they wanted to do; and that didn't include a lot of time digging into their past. In virtually every case the results were tragic, as root causes that had been ignored or rationalized eventually overtook their lives. Whether it was a businessman using his faith in God to believe for greater success, a family man leaving his job to minister and do great exploits for God, a man-child allowing his wife to carry the emotional and spiritual burdens of their family, or a religious loyalist who believed he had fulfilled his obligations to God by supporting the local church, they were each blinded by unbelief. Eventually though, a man will reap the consequences of failing to do the "work of God."

Karl was a residential real estate broker who had started out as a salesman for a tiny firm. He was a handsome, bright, articulate man who had worked hard at his profession and had already become reasonably successful. Not long after he became a follower of Christ he attended a men's meeting where he was encouraged to demonstrate his faith in God by "calling those things which be not as though they were" (Romans 4:17 KJV). This was a reference to Abraham's faith to believe that he would become the father of nations. Each man was encouraged to think of the thing he wanted most in his business (and that would bring glory to God) and to begin speaking about it in such a way as to believe it had already happened. Karl quickly saw himself as "the largest broker in his city" and began to say it to nearly every person he encountered.

Since his "confession" was consistent with almost every motivational speaker's idea of a visionary, and the goal-oriented methodology of most leadership seminars, it was easy to see how Karl had overlooked one very strategically flawed nuance of the principle his seminar leader had failed to convey: Abraham was being encouraged to believe *what God had told him*, not what he imagined himself to be. Nonetheless, for several years Karl repeated his goal as though it had already come to pass. As his business steadily expanded he became increasingly convinced of his ability to "believe God for great things" and he could not be persuaded that he was the willing captive of unbelief, and that what he did believe was inconsistent with the truth of Scripture. In fact, the success of his

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business had become the defining virtue of his walk with Christ. He gave his testimony at churches, traveled on volunteer mission trips to speak about faith, and demonstrated his prosperity as a generous contributor to many programs as the evidence of God's approval of his use of his faith.

But Karl had brought unfinished business into his walk with Christ. He had a serious problem with "the ladies," as he called it. He was constantly flirting with women and was involved in more than one adulterous relationship prior to coming to Christ. He had made a new commitment to his wife, resolving to never again be unfaithful. However, on my occasional visits to his office, I noticed that Karl continued to be flirtatious (or at least overly familiar) with women. When I asked him about it, he would deny any wrongdoing and defend it as part of his "sales" personality. But I knew it went deeper than that and kept encouraging him to pray about it. Each time we talked he would lament that he hadn't taken time to be with the Lord and talk to Him about his problem. Eventually, I heard rumors that Karl's marriage was breaking up. It wasn't long before he called me for an appointment to seek counsel.

He had gotten involved with a young girl about half his age who was, of all things, a stripper in a nightclub. I had only one question for him, "How does a follower of Christ find himself in a night club, watching strippers in the first place?" He hung his head and said, "I know, but she really is a great gal, and I love her. She wants to be a Christian and get married, and I believe it's God's will." There were so many things wrong with his thinking that I barely knew where to start. He wasn't even considering repentance. He had long since rejected what I had told him about root causes and their consequences. In fact, he had mildly mocked my faith as being "hung up on the past." Although he knew he had a sin from which he could not shake loose, he had depended upon "calling those things which be not as though they were" instead of working to find the cause of his unbelief. Now, all he wanted was someone to approve his mistaken plan. The ridiculous part of this story is that he probably would have been a very successful realtor anyway. But his choice to follow an easy path of unbelief cost him his family, his business, and the relationship he could have had with the Lord.

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Not long after our last meeting, he filed for bankruptcy and was nearly destitute from the drinking, drugs, and immoral lifestyle he and his new “Christian” wife had built for themselves.

Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

2 Peter 1:5-8 NAS

Work to Keep a Clear Conscience

The kind of cold, heartless arguments against truth that at one time were the private venue of hardened criminals are now routinely heard in our homes, schools, businesses, and yes, churches. While young and old alike argue for their right to exhibit selfish, vulgar, unethical, and insensitive behaviors, “don’t judge me,” has become the standard defense for a worldwide culture that rejects defining right and wrong. We are living in an era where people have little concern for their neighbor’s rights or about matters of personal conscience. It is a time when large numbers of our citizens, from every walk of life, have learned to ignore the facts and switch the rules when it suits them and to rehearse their lies until they show no conscience.

One of the most pathetic and terrifying things to see is a man who has lost or is losing his conscience. In both my business and pastoral counseling, I have encountered several men who were so stunningly without conscience that they defied understanding. A businessman once came to my office to discuss what he called “personal problems.” I occasionally had interviews with men whose friends had referred them to me for spiritual counsel, so I expected it to be a routine first visit. But not long into our discussion, he very

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casually mentioned that he was facing legal charges for “touching” a little girl in his neighborhood. He said it in such a matter-of-fact manner that he might as well have been talking about a business loan. There was no sense of urgency or remorse about the man whatsoever and when I made a comment about the seriousness of the charges he looked me straight in the eye and said with a light chuckle, “I don’t get it. I mean, what’s all of the fuss about. She’s only six years old. She doesn’t even know what I did. There’s really been no harm.”

The pedophile who sat across from me in my office that day was dressed in a conservative business suit and looked like any middle-aged family man. He had a wife and children of his own and lived in a nice neighborhood where families thought they could trust one another. He went to work every day and even attended church, so there was no reason for his neighbors to have suspected what he was capable of doing, unless they had known about the video tapes he had stashed around his home, or his choice of websites. If they had followed him to work and witnessed the cool manipulation of his customers, they might have been alarmed. Or if they had called one of the business contacts he bragged about, they might have discovered, as his mortgage banker had done, that his work history was not as impressive as he had often stated. But whenever he was caught in a misdeed, he would calmly lie and discredit his accuser. He was a special kind of predator called the “white-collar psychopath,” (Hare 1993) whose smooth, articulate demeanor allowed him to blend into almost any community undetected.

My first encounter with someone who demonstrated such an extreme lack of conscience had come years before when a friend asked me to help counsel a man from a prominent Christian family who had left the church and actually become a Satanist. He had become violently angry when his parents confronted him with his sins, but had agreed to attend a counseling session to appease his mother. For our entire session he boldly and defiantly described his participation in unspeakable rites and sacrifices, including murder. I was so shocked that I had trouble breathing. As I sat there praying about this hollow shell of a man, I asked the Lord, “How could he

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possibly have declined from reciting Scripture in Bible class to where he is now?" His answer came with clear and unequivocal precision, "One step at a time." Just like a young man learning to smoke or to drink scotch, he had to have ignored and overcome the nauseating natural repulsions of his body and soul, and willed himself to continue. Although his story was heartbreaking and gruesome, it was a good lesson how each of us is capable of sinking deep into sin and depravation.

Speaking to someone who has slipped over the edge of humane behavior into what might be an irreversible spiritual condition has always had a very sobering effect on my own attitudes. It makes me more thankful for God's grace in my life, and a lot more sensitive to what I might be doing to grieve the Holy Spirit. I've also realized how easy it is to continue doing little things that dull our spiritual senses and eventually lose our sense of shame about sin. When that happens, a little piece of our conscience is gasping for breath and has already weakened a part of our will to be further tempted. What we're doing wrong might appear almost indiscernible or harmless by itself. But when it becomes part of a pattern of disobedience, it can accumulate into the spiritual leverage the devil needs to draw us into more serious sins, ones that we might not have considered had we obeyed our first convictions about the little things.

One afternoon I received an urgent call from a family asking me to visit their son who had just been arrested. I didn't ask why but assumed it was on another drug charge. When I arrived at the jail, the chaplain, who escorted me to the young man's cell, spoke to me in a fatherly tone and said, "Remember where you are and what you're doing. Keep alert. If you need help, just wave to the guard." It was a rather ominous instruction for a visit with a young drug addict. But as soon as I sat down, I realized why. The young man began sobbing and cried out, "I did it! I did it! I'm so sorry; I don't know what came over me." He then described in excruciating detail how, only hours before, he had murdered an innocent storekeeper who had refused to give him money so that he could buy drugs. It was a despicable and bloody crime and an act of senseless rage. But as unbelievable as it sounded, almost any addict could relate to the reservoir of anger that had accumulated within

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him, if not the crime. The habit that had started out years before with marijuana had become a consuming heroin addiction, creating the potential for any act that would satisfy his craving.

My next visit was even more startling. I found quite a different young man this time. If I had not already heard his horrific confession, he would have sounded completely believable when he said, "I'm innocent you know. My parents have hired a good lawyer and he says we can beat the charge." After spending time with his lawyer, he was intent on speaking the legal language of the courtroom. Apparently, he had rejected the Lord's conviction and decided to rely upon his proven ability to manipulate his parents with lies. Before he was finished with them, they had spent all of their savings, re-mortgaged their home, and even asked me to be a character witness at his trial. I was so saddened by their plight that I only said this, "Tell your son I will be very happy to tell the truth and the whole truth, but he might prefer that I invoke my right to pastoral confidentiality and remain silent. Let it be his choice." Instead of clearing his conscience, pleading guilty, and probably getting a lighter sentence, he ended up on death row.

Ecclesiastes 1:9 says, "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun." There are no especially "modern" sins, only new ways to commit old ones. But one thing is abundantly clear; the frequency, intensity, and widespread acceptance of the no-conscience attitude has had an alarming influence on the world, and even on believers. Some men I've known have even started comparing their behaviors to the rest of the world instead of the Scriptures, as a way of arguing against their need for change. No one but God really knows what combination of pain, rejection, unbelief, and rebellion it takes to gradually turn a person's heart to defiant disobedience, or just how far we can go before the Lord calls us to accountability. But why take the risks of ignoring the conviction of the Holy Spirit upon our heart? It's too easy to slide, one step at a time, toward a personal disaster. Instead, we should work to keep a clear conscience and pray as King David did in Psalms 51:10-12:

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Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

Subject Yourself to Reality Checks

When our focus is first of all on the Lord and His will, He helps us overcome the challenges of each day, sometimes by causing us to avoid troubles and sometimes by strengthening us to go through them. In 2 Corinthians 12:9, the Lord said to the Apostle Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you.” There is no truer test of our faith than when we trust the Lord to establish our agenda, including who and what comes into it each day. King David said to the Lord, “Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage” (Psalms 84:2-5).

The Hebrew word here translated as pilgrimage (#4546) also means “a highway, course, path, staircase, or terrace,” indicating a way or means to a destination. One of the greatest mistakes made by new followers of Christ is to think of our salvation experience and forgiveness for all our past sins as the culmination of our journey instead of the beginning. The restoration of our soul can be a life-long process. And it is founded upon a very involved personal relationship with the Lord. There is much more to a walk with Christ than stumbling along in life and occasionally repenting and getting back on track in our pilgrimage. He wants us to dig deep into our souls to seek improvement and grow into strong, reliable men who can be trusted. Becoming a follower of Christ is not like joining a political party or a service club. It is a learning experience that allows us to enjoy wonderful fellowship with our Maker.

I had two failed attempts to find a sustaining faith (at ages twelve and twenty) probably because I had only decided to “be a Christian,” instead of beginning a pilgrimage. Each time, I sincerely repented of my sins and felt God’s forgiveness. But without setting my heart to learn His ways and do what I read in the Bible, I was destined to have sins pile up day after day until I gave up. Then, after a few years under the pressures of family life, I realized how poorly I had

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managed things. The third time I came to Christ as a learner and I was able to share the same testimony as the Prophet Jeremiah, who said, “Your words were found and I ate them, and Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart” (Jeremiah 15:16 NAS). From that day forward, I was committed to practicing the ways of the Lord. And nothing or no one would ever again be allowed to take the place of His presence in my life. It is that intensity of love and appreciation for who He is and what He has done for us that releases His grace to help us each day.

You may have heard the story of the chicken and the pig that were wandering around the barnyard, watching the farmer complete his chores. The chicken said to the pig, “You know, he’s a really nice guy and he’s been good to us. Why don’t we give him a ham and eggs breakfast to show our appreciation?” The pig looked at the chicken with a frown and said, “That’s easy for you to say. For you it’s just a contribution, but for me it would mean total commitment.” Over the years, I’ve heard countless discussions like that between men who were trying to decide whether or not they wanted to take an easy doable path that required little or no sacrifice, or to lay down their lives as they knew them to obey Christ. Jesus said, “Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:35-36). The Scriptures provide many penetrating reality checks like this one to which a man must subject himself if he is going to continue to follow Christ. No one can press these things upon us. Our embrace of them must be an authentic expression of our love for Him.

Spiritual confrontation can be one of the purest expressions of real love. This is especially the case when it takes place between a husband and wife who are both dedicated followers of Christ. Second only to the Lord Himself, no one knows or loves a man like his wife. Although it took me too long to appreciate her perspective on my life, I have come to trust Dorothy first among all others, not just to love me, but to know something about me that no one else could tell me, and to tell me for my own good, not just to even the score from a previous hurt. And she feels the same way about me.

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But with all that said, we both realize that nothing or no one can take the place of our personal pursuit of the Lord's perspective on our life. Everyone else—friends, family, and members of small groups—are just helpers for those times when we're having trouble receiving the truth about ourselves.

Recognizing their limitations, small groups can be very helpful in sorting through issues and providing a needed perspective. But unless the people from whom we seek advice have reliable knowledge and experience, they might hinder rather than help. I've counseled with several men who say they have attended small groups seeking help to overcome lust or another equally tormenting sin, only to have their hearts turned away from the power of God to the unbelieving view that "we can never really be free." It's like telling someone that they can never be free from the compulsion to open the hood of their car, pop open the battery, and drink the acid from it. No matter how many enticing ways someone might try to tempt a man to take those fatal steps, he could never be convinced to do it if he knew what the results would be. When a man thoroughly understands the realities of his sin, and the full effect it has had on him, his relationship with the Lord, his family, job, etc., it will become relatively easy for him to hate his sin and repent deeply enough to get free. Then, with a little common sense and discipline, he can resist the temptation of sin just like it was acid, in a sealed battery, in a locked car, in a distant parking lot.

A man can also attend a small group but not have the humility to honestly participate and take it to heart when he receives godly counsel. I attended a men's prayer group that occasionally spent a whole day together just to talk about our walk with the Lord and pray for one another. Our "prayer day" was a priority that each person considered an almost sacred appointment. We were a group of only six men with very diverse backgrounds and careers. And even though we felt like brothers from the beginning, one of the men never got connected to what we were doing. He was just too proud to be real, and when he came to our meetings he was always in the middle of a business crisis that sounded very similar to the ones we had heard before. It soon became clear to us that he was

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using our prayer time to show off a little and brag about his business exploits. Like a lot of men, he was more interested in money and toys than in taking serious steps to pursue the Lord. Unfortunately, his religious experiences had only taught him how to “act spiritual” instead of being led by the Spirit. He had not yet learned the importance of Jeremiah 9:23-24, which says:

“Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,” declares the Lord.

I’ve been a part of several small groups for fellowship, prayer, and Bible study—some with just men, others with just couples, and still others with a mix of single and married male and female participants. Although each of these groups had its own sweet moments and fulfilled a portion of God’s plan for my life and marriage, the “men-only” format had a far more powerful effect on its participants because it created situations where we had to humble ourselves and tell the truth or be exposed as phony. The corporate wisdom that God releases when men get real and join together to help one another do the right thing can be astonishing. In a mixed group, people are often reluctant to do the kind of confronting that can be done in a men-only setting, probably because men have a tendency to be more easily embarrassed and become defensive when they are in a mixed setting. They may also harbor hurt feelings or frustration in a mixed group that in a men-only meeting might be taken head-on, just like flesh and blood brothers would do. Done with love and care, it’s usually better to get our issues out in the open and talk about them. Each man must decide between the Lord and himself what kind of group, if any, suits the Lord’s purposes for his life and which relationships can be depended upon to provide wise counsel. As King David said:

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O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord. You hem me in—behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.

Psalms 139:1-6

Let Your Life Be Your Message

In over twenty-five years of ministry I've found that one of the most imposing obstacles to men becoming more reliable is the inconsistent behavior of those who teach and lead in the church. The religious denominations within the church have done such a good job of convincing people that they are God's representatives on the earth that men who turn away from their unbelieving inconsistencies often give up on the pilgrimage they have begun with Christ. They don't stop believing in Christ, but their faith and motivation are often so dramatically shaken that they cynically withdraw from their daily pursuit of His will. Since men often believe that there are no other options but the secular world or institutional religion, they are likely to wander through life frustrated and confused about God's purposes.

Barry was a guy I had met at a men's prayer breakfast. He was a country boy who had grown up in rural Arkansas and become entangled in guns and violence as a teenager. After spending several years in prison he had worked cutting lawns and doing hard labor until he eventually established a very profitable landscape business. Since he had come to Christ, he had settled down and become a gentle and devoted family man. He was also a practical person who was very sensitive to people's needs and often bought groceries or paid the rent for folks who were struggling. His entire church life centered on his personal ministry to the poor and the relationships he had built with a small group of fellow-believers. He had also influenced other men to follow the Lord. Barry was an

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uncomplicated believer who had continued to grow spiritually until someone urged him to become more involved in his local church.

Like so many men, he soon found that the church was absorbing his time and energy, limiting his fellowship with friends and family. As he became immersed in the church's programs and organizational issues, he realized that he could not conform to its man-made rules nor defend its leaders whose messages were often grossly inconsistent with the way they conducted their lives. Not only that, he had begun to invite people to listen to an "inspiring message" rather than serving and loving them until they asked him about his faith. He knew that his own life wasn't working as well as before and the people whom he had invited to church were regularly falling out of sync with the church's agenda and leaving. Finally, he erupted in anger, "backslid," and left for Las Vegas where "everyone was doing exactly what they looked like they were doing." However, he soon realized that the people in Las Vegas were no more real than some of the "hypocrites" who had caused him to leave the church. They were both just acting in ways they thought were expected of them. Barry had discovered how dysfunctional a life dominated by either worldliness or religion could become and thought that he was trapped between two losing choices. But when he remembered his roots were in Christ and the relationships God had given him, he found real joy again.

Barry's testimony is typical of a lot of men I have known who start out serving the Lord with all their heart only to become side-tracked into institutional life. Far too often, men either give up their faith and return to their worldly ways, or yield control of their lives to organized religion, missing the very best that God has to offer—a life of freedom in Christ. There is no more powerful force against the Lordship of Christ than religion, which slowly enslaves and emasculates men by pressing institutional authority between them and God. As men relinquish their leadership responsibilities to an institution, they begin to believe that a professional minister can exert more influence for Christ than men who are just being themselves at home, at work, or meeting with a few close friends. In Matthew 5:13-16, Jesus said:

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You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

When we choose to let our light shine through the filter of a religious institution and its programs instead of allowing the Lord to direct our energy where it's needed, the light of Christ does not shine as clearly as it should. One of the most compelling examples I have known was that of George and Frances Lanier. I met for several days with Pastor Lanier, his wife, and their Board of Directors, discussing what had become an embarrassing list of personal inconsistencies in their life and ministry. Having begun as an evangelist, Pastor Lanier had become a Christian celebrity, with invitations to speak coming from literally around the world. The church had applauded almost everything that George and Frances had done and they were perceived by most people to be two servants perfectly harnessed into God's work. But the marital and ministry harmony they projected in public was not at all the real story. They had almost constant battles about the differences between Pastor Lanier's sermon's and his private practices at home and in the office.

While Pastor Lanier appeared transparent and vulnerable in his public life, he could turn cold and demanding in private, and he had regularly ended relationships with people who had pointed out his frailties. Frances had often come to tears during board meetings, alternately lashing out in rage at her husband's lifestyle or neurotically defending him from inquiries that might threaten either his mission or their financial stability. Somewhat intimidated by the Laniers' public stature and the practical eloquence of Pastor Laniers' work, several groups of board members, over many years, had struggled to help them find healing. There had been angry separations and

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reconciliations, lots of board turnover, and a fragmented family that followed dutifully along, thinking that the chaos they endured was part of their burden in Christian ministry. Every family and board member I spoke with said they felt obligated to protect what they called “the message” Pastor Lanier “carried” by keeping the knowledge of his personal life as secretive as possible. They knew that if his constituents became aware of how often they had caught him lying, manipulating, and breaking his word that the validity of what he had to say would suffer.

But after extended prayer and discussions, the Board agreed on the necessity of confronting the Laniers once again. One entire morning had been spent laying out specifics as lovingly as possible, so that the Board’s position on each fact was clear and unmistakable. After giving the Laniers some time alone, we had reconvened to discuss any questions they may have had. As we got started, Frances said, “I have an important question. Is the Board saying that we have to be, or that they are requiring us to be, authentic Christians? In other words are you saying that we are not authentic?” Realizing the pain of that moment, I answered in as subdued manner as possible, “Yes, that’s what the Board is saying.” She motioned to her husband and spoke with disgust in her voice saying, “Then why have I had to endure ‘this’ all these years?” She raised her hands and arms, as if to worship the Lord, leaned back in her chair, gazed upward and prayed hopeless words of unbelief that almost stopped our hearts, “Lord help me. I’m drowning in ‘Lanier.’ Just give me cancer and let me die. I can’t stand it anymore.”

It was one of the most chilling moments in my spiritual life and an exclamation point to the list of failures Frances had complained about for many years. But each time their friends had attempted to reconcile Frances’ accusations about George’s lies, financial mismanagement, and general unreliability with his complaints about an unloving, vindictive wife with signs of mental instability, they had failed. The problem with their counter-accusations was simple. Each of them was telling the truth about the other. But neither of them was willing to take responsibility for his or her own sins. When each of a series of counselors discovered the unyielding nature of their conflicts and the fraudulence of their public image, the Laniers

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quickly joined forces to escape exposure and keep the cloak of authenticity draped over their ministry. One disappointed constituent who had first-hand knowledge of their deceptions had frustratingly labeled their life together as “the Lanier conspiracy.”

The Laniers are a good example of how people can become caught up in the “profession” of ministry and/or the development of their “message” instead of doing what’s necessary to let the Lord’s light shine through their lives. Even though counselors and board members with whom they had supposedly maintained close relationships for many years surrounded them, they chose to live a double life that was completely inconsistent with the mandates of Christ. Rather than develop an authentic inner life with Christ and an honest relationship with one another (as they had often preached) they had been acting happy and unified in the presence of their Board and constituents and quite another way at home. Theirs is one of many sad stories in the long history of the church, and the negative effect its leaders’ inconsistent behaviors have had on the lives of people like Barry.

All that most of us can do to help people like the Laniers, or someone they may have harmed or discouraged, is to pray for them and occasionally provide opportunities for correction or healing they may have missed in the quietness of a prayer closet. Even so, the final responsibility for authenticity rests squarely on the shoulders of each believer who must bear the consequences of his or her failure to obey the Lord. In Psalm 86:11, King David prayed, “Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name.”