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### EXECUTIVE CREDIBILITY: A MEASURE OF OUR SINCERITY AND SKILL WITH PEOPLE

Through the years of the Soviet regime, Russians learned how to compartmentalize their lives. They knew what the party expected of them, and it wasn't always what they wanted to do, so they developed a double life. Their public behaviors conformed to what their superiors wanted to see and hear, while their true feelings (when they differed) were kept hidden away. They learned how to be cool and detached, or to act friendly and cooperative, waiting for the strategic moment that would serve their purposes. Their finely-tuned survival skills, coupled with the amoral thinking that guided them, created an ethical nightmare for people doing business in Russia.

The relationships I shared with my staff were not so complicated. I worked, lived, ate, and slept within their eyesight in our tiny little apartment/office. Sergei, Natalya, Lydia, Michael, and Tonya knew who I really was and that there was no secret compartment in my life which might cause them harm. They had shown their integrity and consistency in so many situations, that I had also grown to trust their character. We worked together professionally within the serious framework of our agenda, but always with the sensitivity of trusted brothers and sisters. Beyond the fact that we now shared a common faith in Christ, we really had become like family.

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One of our favorite things to do together was to have a celebration dinner. After we had finished a major delivery of medicine or completed a project, we always shared a meal. The staff would go shopping for goodies, which they would cook up into something festive and delicious. We took advantage of these times to relax and be ourselves among friends. On rare occasions, we allowed special guests to join us. They usually expressed their envy of our relationships as they could see how open, yet respectful and considerate we were with one another. There were no secrets between us because there was nothing to hide. It was a completely safe environment that we protected with reverence.

We decided to invite Alexander, a pediatrician who served as a health care advisor to the Mayor, to join us for one of our feasts. He had worked many long hours volunteering on our distribution team and helped us report our results to the Mayor. We had developed an effective system for verifying the needs of various recipients and documenting their consumption, and Alexander was allowed to work with Natalya in the most sensitive areas of our accounting processes. He had always been extremely helpful, and had even assisted us in finding venues for seminars and other events.

The evening of our dinner, Sergei and I were talking about a business proposition I had turned down that day. The man who made the offer had been dumfounded by our response. We recounted to the rest of the staff how we had explained to him our policy of refusing every commercial offer. Of course, they had heard these stories before. We had all agreed that the perception of our mission for Christ was too important to risk it on any business venture, no matter how profitable. That day's offer was sincere, and the man had argued that the profits could be used to support our ministry. He was right, but I had already turned down several deals such as marketing emeralds from Siberia, diamonds, fine art from the Volga region, and even patentable medical advances. This mission absolutely required that we be perceived as non-commercial. I knew that Russians were inherently suspicious of westerners, so it was hard for them to believe we were not profiting personally in some way from our humanitarian work as so many others had done. I did not want to give them any reason to question our motives for being in Russia.

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As we talked, I noticed that Alexander suddenly turned sullen and tearful. I asked him what was wrong. “I know it’s true, I know it’s true,” he said. He was very troubled and asked if he and I could talk privately. When we entered my room, the first words he uttered were, “Please forgive me. I can’t do this any more.” He went on to confess that he was a Russian counter-intelligence officer. He had been sent to investigate our activities and had been doing so the entire eighteen months he had been a volunteer. His job was to uncover any activities which were illegal or otherwise contrary to our mission. In fact, he and his colleagues had been behind some of the deals I had been offered; they had been deliberately sent to test me. He now knew virtually everything about me and the staff, and his conscience would not let him go on.

I had suspected that my telephone line was tapped and had wondered who it was. I kept hearing the familiar clicks and tone changes I had learned to recognize when I was in the telephone business. I asked Alexander, “Was my phone tapped?” He lowered his head with embarrassment and said, “Yes.” Then I asked, “Was my office and bedroom bugged too?” “Yes,” he said. To his surprise, I said, “Great! That means you have been hearing my prayers when I am here alone and you know how many times I have asked God to help me bear up under the burden of dishonesty around us.”

I assured him that he was forgiven. Actually, I saw the whole incident as a great benefit to us. He could be our very best witness in helping move our programs forward. Alexander became a one man army for the Lord. Whenever we needed help inside the government, he would show up with a thick file that would answer anyone’s questions.

*Executive credibility is a measure of our sincerity and skill with people.* When people know from personal experience that we are who we say we are and that we will be just in the conduct of our business, they are more likely to cooperate with us. But if a man’s integrity or wisdom is in doubt, people will express their feelings about him in ways that are detrimental to his mission. To grow in influence, we must demonstrate emotional maturity as well as competence because when a man is perceived to be “kind, honest and fair, his kingdom stands secure” (Proverbs 20:28 TLB).

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In Isaiah 42: 1-4 the writer speaks prophetically of Jesus:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on Him and He will bring justice to the nations, He will not shout or cry out, or raise His voice in the streets. A bruised reed He will not break, and a smoldering wick He will not snuff out. In faithfulness He will bring forth justice; He will not falter or be discouraged until He establishes justice on the earth.

A person who is growing in these attributes will invoke the greatest confidence in the constituency that forms around him. He will function under the grace of the Spirit of God, not shouting, crying out, or raising his voice. He will not be eager to break off or snuff out the value of another person's contribution. And he will not falter or become discouraged until he establishes justice where he leads. The implications here go far beyond the administration of work or the judgments required to establish equity. This scripture describes a man who understands how to be an example of justice.

The Hebrew word for justice is *mispat* (#5477). This is a very interesting word because of the number of ways it is translated from Hebrew to English. It is most commonly translated as just or justice, such as in 1 Chronicles 18:14, "David reigned over all of Israel, doing what was just and right for all his people." But it is also translated as: dimensions, specifications, standards, regulations, ordinances, practices, precepts, requirements, the prescribed way, and the proper time and procedure. So to faithfully bring forth justice, we must demonstrate the right way to do things in both word and deed.

In 1978, I was invited to South Africa to minister in various churches and small groups. The itinerary was arranged by South Africans who had established an evangelistic association near Pretoria and were known throughout the country. I knew this would be a turning point in my life and ministry. From the beginning, every obstacle dissolved in front of me. I saw the Lord's favor resolve problems with my visa and even provide a free upgrade to fly first-

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class. I had a sense of destiny about my schedule and felt the closeness of the Lord in an unusual way. As I flew across the ocean enjoying the amenities, I took time to thank the Lord for making the trip possible. While I sat in my seat praying, He spoke very clearly to my heart that I was about to experience His grace and anointing in a measure I had not yet known.

During my three weeks in South Africa we traveled thousands of miles by car. We often ministered several times in a day, stopping at home groups, churches, farms, and villages along the way. God was allowing me to speak with clarity and wisdom that were beyond my years, and He confirmed His word with signs and miracles (Mark 16:20). We kept adding meetings to our schedule and I was thrilled with the opportunities I had to speak. I even ministered at the Anglican Cathedral of South Africa in Capetown. It was as though everything I said and did carried God's grace and anointing upon it. I was, at the same time, both gratified and puzzled, because I had never encountered such success in my ministry.

Only a day or two before I returned to the U.S., we were driving along a lonely stretch of desert road. I was so exhausted that I was sitting straight up in my seat with my chin on my chest, sound asleep. Suddenly, I was aware of the presence of the Lord. With my chin still resting on my chest and my eyes closed, I began to utter silent praise to Him. I was overwhelmed by the wonderful things I had seen Him do and was sincerely thankful to have been used so effectively.

As I continued to enjoy the Lord's presence, my prayers turned to my family. I had been traveling a lot and knew I was needed at home to help Dorothy raise our son, Scott, who was then nine years old. So I asked the Lord if He could arrange for me to minister in a local congregation and not have to travel so much. His answer came immediately and His words were extremely loving, fatherly, and devastating. I will never forget those words because they sliced through my soul like a hot knife through butter. "I would like to let you do that, but I can't let you minister in one place for more than two or three weeks, because if people get to know you they will not believe a thing you say." In an instant He let me understand exactly what He meant. It wasn't that I was dishonest in my life or

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ministry, I just didn't have the maturity to live up to the message I preached. In other words, my practiced values were not the same as my stated values.

He continued to speak to me, "I am giving you a choice today. You can continue on like you are and I will give you success in your ministry. But what I want you to do is go home and resign your ministry, get a job, and wait on Me." Before I realized what I was doing I said, "This is no choice! Now that I know what You really want me to do, how could I not obey You?" Although I knew the Lord had shown me the truth about myself, I began to think of men I knew in ministry, and questioned Him about why I could not be like them. He responded crisply, "You can be like them. I am giving you a choice today. You can go on like you are or you can choose to take another path. Thirty years from now only you and I will know the difference."

Suddenly my head snapped upright and I was wide awake. I must have looked startled because both of my colleagues asked me if something was wrong. I said, "No," and spent the rest of the afternoon quietly meditating about my remarkable encounter with the Lord. The next day, I called Dorothy and told her about my experience, and that I had decided to resign my ministry. She said the Lord had shared a similar message with her at about the same time the day before, preparing her for my call. We were overwhelmed with His mercy and in complete agreement to obey Him.

Colossians 4:1 (NAS) says, "Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven." People usually associate justice with accountability, but at its best, the concept of justice emphasizes the necessity for men to live credible lives at home and at work.

### **Hold People Reasonably Accountable**

"With good men in authority the people rejoice, but with the wicked in power, they groan" (Proverbs 29:2 TLB). Anyone who has been abused or humiliated by an authority figure knows the truth of this scripture. Our bad experiences can create fears and leave emotional scars that last a lifetime, and when people feel insecure or

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afraid it leads to serious problems in the work place. This is why the proponents of quality management emphasize the need to establish a “blameless” working environment, where the emphasis is on finding and eliminating problems, not finding and punishing wrongdoers.

This doesn't mean there is no accountability. People are encouraged to discover and take responsibility for the causes of problems, essentially holding themselves accountable. Other systems of accountability become secondary and are only needed to separate chronic problems from normal human errors. When people know they will be praised and rewarded for finding errors, they will eagerly search them out. This is especially true when a discovered error is treated as an opportunity to share in the recovery of lost profits. But when people fear they might be unfairly punished or embarrassed for their mistakes, they find ways to avoid being caught. This often leads to various forms of dishonest or irrational behaviors.

The concept of man being held accountable started in the Garden of Eden. After Adam and Eve disobeyed God, they heard Him walking in the Garden and were afraid, so they hid from Him. But the Lord, knowing what had taken place and where they were, called to Adam, “Where are you?” He was generously giving Adam an opportunity to give an account for his actions. Adam answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked” (Genesis 3:10). When Adam realized he had sinned he became “afraid” and hid himself. This has been the natural first response to accountability by every man since Adam. The fear of accountability creates all kinds of human instability and it is compounded by people's bad experiences with unfair authority.

One way to build trust and security at home or at work is to make our stated values become our practiced values. But simple consistency in leadership is not enough. There must also be “due process,” with established procedures for gathering and evaluating the facts of an issue and making reasonable judgments. When repeated errors point to a person's attitude instead of the frailties of a process, the procedures for correction should include counseling and progressive discipline. We must take into consideration each person's human rights and our need to be perceived as reasonable.

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To show partiality in judging is not good. Whoever says to the guilty, “you are innocent” – peoples will curse him and nations will denounce him. But it will go well with those who convict the guilty, and rich blessing will come upon them.

Proverbs 24:23-25

There is a time and place to exercise the power that goes with authority, and to discipline the unruly. The man who does this properly can expect to be blessed.

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments (Exodus 19-20), he was bringing the standards by which the people would be held accountable. This event was accompanied by thunder and lightning, fire, a thick cloud of smoke, a vibrating mountain, and the sound of a trumpet. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him. When the Lord had everyone’s undivided attention, Moses delivered the Ten Commandments to them. The people were terrified, but Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning” (Genesis 20:18-20). This is the classic model for accountability. Make sure everyone understands the rules, then explain the benefits, consequences, and the ways you will help.

But, no man should try to create the same sense of authority for himself as the Lord did for Moses. When a man breathes smoke and fire and bellows the threat of judgment, it is called tyranny. When he violates procedures and misuses power according to his own whim, it is called tyranny. When he unfairly holds back approval, promotion, benefits, or subverts due process for his own purposes, it is called tyranny. Tyrants try to make people fear and obey them by emphasizing the harm they might cause. They are tolerated because people fear losing their jobs, financial status, or ranking in a community.

Eventually, though, all tyrants have one thing in common—even when they are able to hold whole nations in bondage, “the unjust tyrant will reap disaster and his reign of terror shall end” (Proverbs 22:8 TLB). I have seen this time and time again as apparently unmovable, tyrannical authority is suddenly deposed.



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While it's clear that no one should indulge himself in tyranny, it's also true that each of us will experience its oppression at some time in our life. Because Proverbs 25:26 tells us that a man who yields to tyranny is like a "muddied spring or a polluted well," it's very important to know what to do, especially at work, while we wait upon the deliverance of the Lord. Here are some suggestions:

1) Don't be afraid. "The fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in the Lord will be exalted" (Proverbs 29:25 NAS). Jesus said,

I tell you friends, do not be afraid of those who can kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear. Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you fear him. Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

Luke 12:5-7

2) Unless the Lord clearly gives you direction to leave, or you are asked to do something illegal or immoral, keep doing your job.

Obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

Colossians 3:22-24

3) Be prepared to hold your superiors accountable without trying to develop political or social power on your own behalf. Do not try to exercise authority or influence you do not have. Hold the tyrant accountable by making the correct standard clearly evident in your own life. All that is required is that you speak the truth humbly.

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Remember, “God has not given us the spirit of timidity, but of power, love and discipline [or sound judgment]” (2 Timothy 1:7 NAS).

4) Be prepared to make an investment of suffering. Tyrants and the people around them do not like being told they are wrong. Proverbs 29:16 (TLB) says, “When rulers are wicked, their people are too; but good men will live to see the tyrant’s downfall.” Just remember,

Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. Do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your heart, always being able to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence. Keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.

1 Peter 3: 13-17 (NAS)

### **Avoid the Risks of Becoming Proud**

When we think about how a tyrant acts or speaks, we recognize boasting, arrogance, and heavy-handedness as being the fruit of pride. But beyond that, most men do not understand its potential for leading them into further sin. The Bible does not specifically define pride. It does, however, provide many descriptions of what it causes a man to do, which I have reduced to two simple definitions:

1) Attributing our position or success in life to our own skills, strengths, or righteousness, instead of the grace of God.

2) Using our physical, emotional, or mental strength for our own purposes, instead of trusting and yielding to God.

God’s opposition to man’s pride and the obstacles He creates to expose it, are an expression of His mercy. We should be thankful that He does not allow us to continue to be proud. The way pride grows and spreads, it could end up costing a man his soul. Fortunately,

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“those who walk in pride, He is able to humble” (Daniel 4:37). Unfortunately, the processes required to bring humility can seriously damage a man’s credibility and prevent him from reaching his goals. “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (1 Peter 5:5; James 4:6).

I can think of several times when I felt opposition that could not be explained in natural ways. I know the devil is real and that his objective is to “steal, kill, and destroy” (John 10:10). He would prefer to destroy everything I do. But sometimes I have felt myself or my project suspended in protective custody, held short of success, and yet maintained intact for its future potential. This was clearly a demonstration of Father’s love rather than an enemy’s scheming, and could not be explained any other way but as the opposition of the Lord. Eventually, I would hear the Lord whispering to me through the confusion of the moment, explaining the reasons for His opposition. And more than once He has said, “You have not followed my decrees or kept my laws but have conformed to the standards of the nations around you” (Ezekiel 11:12).

God can use every situation to help us learn the lesson that will improve us as men. He is able to hold the most complicated processes in suspension, and extend deadlines to incredible lengths, so He can deliver a message that both heals and frees us to serve Him more purely. God wants us to be successful in life and He often uses our work to teach us what He thinks we need most at that moment. The topic may be directly related to our mission, or it may be very personal, but we can be sure that when the lesson is learned, it improves our character. For we know that “the end of a matter is better than its beginning, and patience is better than pride” (Ecclesiastes 7:8).

Pride causes us to take things for granted and forget that the good things we receive are from the Lord. Deuteronomy 8:10-14 warns us that we can lose our sense of thanksgiving and dependence upon Him.

When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the  
Lord your God for the good land he has given you.  
Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God,  
failing to observe his commands, his laws and his

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decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

King Hezekiah is a good example of someone who started out vigorously serving the Lord and being blessed by Him, only to allow pride to enter his heart (2 Chronicles 29-32). As a young twenty-five year old king, Hezekiah repented of the evil that had marked his father's kingdom. He tore down the altars and the high places where other gods were worshiped and restored the Levites into the service of the Lord. He was faithful to God and to the people and "in everything that he undertook in the service of God's temple and in obedience to the law and the commands, he sought his God and worked wholeheartedly. And so he prospered" (2 Chronicles 31:21). King Hezekiah was known to have had a well-equipped standing army and even when they were greatly outnumbered, "the Lord saved Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem.... He took care of them on every side" (2 Chronicles 32:22). Hezekiah understood what it meant to faithfully follow the Lord and to experience His blessings, prosperity, and protection.

But like many men, he had both faith in God and pride working in his heart at the same time. We know this because of the account of his illness. When he became ill, "he prayed to the Lord, who answered him and gave him a miraculous sign. But Hezekiah's heart was proud and he did not respond to the kindness shown him; therefore, the Lord's wrath was on him and on Judah and Jerusalem" (2 Chronicles 32:24-26). We don't know how Hezekiah expressed his pride or what God did to get his attention and bring him to repentance, but we do know that the "wrath" Hezekiah experienced was an expression of God's mercy. It was a demonstration of God's ability to deliver us from the clutches of pride (or any other sin) and back into His favor. After Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem repented, the Lord returned him to "very great riches and honor"

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(2 Chronicles 32:27). All Hezekiah had to do was embrace the reality of his circumstances and look for God's purposes. I think this is what the Apostle Paul was talking about in Romans 5: 2-4 when he said,

We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom he has given us.

Most men think that if they are not boastful, then they are not proud. But what about the times we fail to trust God? Or when we fulfill selfish desires? The spiritual power that urges us to disobey His will or methods is pride. When we yield to the power of pride and take control of a situation, we are often reacting to some kind of fear. Pride helps men cover over their fears and drive back their adversaries with demonstrations of power. In Jeremiah 49:16, the Lord said to Edom, "The terror you inspire and the pride of your heart have deceived you."

Pride also manifests itself in passive behaviors. It can cause us to withdraw within ourselves when fear, stress, or oppression comes. When a man suddenly goes cold and silent he is probably "cocooning" in the power of pride to avoid expressing his true feelings. When this happens he can become emotionally or behaviorally "locked," unable to express the full range of thoughts or emotions that are within him. A man who has practiced this method of coping with pressures can offer incredible resistance to oppression. But he may also become stubborn and unresponsive to God and others who love him. "In his pride, the wicked does not seek Him; in all his thoughts there is no room for God" (Psalm 10:4).

Pride can incite us to be angry with other people's limitations and reject the people or things we cannot change. It produces an inordinate need to control outcomes and causes us to rely more on our own strength and intellect than the Scriptures, disguising itself

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as our friend and protector. The prophet Obadiah said, “The pride of your heart has deceived you” (Obadiah 1:3). Just as Satan deceived Eve, pride influences our thinking and prompts us to believe and say things that are not true. After a few repetitions, it becomes the truth as we know it and we no longer have a clear perception of reality.

Pride enters through the gates of our human experience and builds upon the biased perceptions it creates. It has its greatest opportunity when:

- 1) We are insecure or unsure of ourselves and want to be perceived as secure, important, or superior.
- 2) We have been emotionally wounded or tormented, and have turned into ourselves to find strength.
- 3) We do not appreciate the blessing of our strengths and talents, and disparage others who are not as gifted.
- 4) We have been influenced by theological or cultural extremes, and do not respect other people’s values.

The apostle Paul had a simple solution for the problem of pride. He said, “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you” (Romans 12:3). If we fail to do so, we can always depend upon the faithfulness of God.

For God does speak – now one way, now another –  
though man may not perceive it. In a dream, in a  
vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on men as  
they slumber in their beds, he may speak in their  
ears and terrify them with warnings to turn man  
from wrongdoing and keep him from pride.

Job 20:14-17

### **Remain Honorable Under Pressure**

Most of the bad conduct we commonly attribute to stress can more accurately be traced to the spiritual condition of unbelief. Unbelief is the opposite of faith and is best described as cynicism or doubt which attacks our faith in God and confuses our perceptions about His plans for us. This nagging, disruptive force grows when we see God and the world through a prism of materialism,

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superstition, or human philosophy. It fuels fear and pride and is often accompanied by outbursts of anger and other unsettling attitudes and behaviors. A man who “doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; He is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does” (James 1:6-7).

When unbelief is left unchallenged by the truth of Scripture, it creates a disintegrated view of life. In its more common form, it fosters unshakeable feelings of fear, dread, or insecurity. As it grows, it causes a person to have inordinate reactions to even minor problems and feel tortured by what he sees as a struggle against life’s unfair pressures. The most common symptoms of unbelief are: 1) impatience, 2) harsh judgments, and 3) depression.

1) Impatience is stimulated by the perception that a relationship or process is not going to work out as desired. The result is angry, impulsive behaviors and other expressions of the lack of restraint. A man will often defend impatience as the fruit of rational thought. He may see his actions as necessary to move things forward, tie up loose ends, reorganize, or otherwise make things more certain. Impatient people experience intense anxiety when important or strategic processes appear to be standing still. They fear that inaction will lead to potential problems or failure. Popular culture encourages impatience. It tells us that we must constantly be moving forward, creating initiatives, and doing what we can to eliminate snags.

Psalms 46:10 (NAS) says, “Cease striving [“be still”, NIV] and know that I am God. This is a call to follow the Lord’s ways, not our own, and give up the constant struggle for new ground. It is an invitation to stop, listen, and wait. In my walk with Christ, many great things have happened when I was standing still. “Those who wait for the Lord will gain new strength” (Isaiah 40:31 NAS). Personal revelation, deep inner healing, strategic wisdom, and the intervention of God in my career and finances, have often taken place when it looked like I was not making any progress. There are times that faithfulness to God requires us to take action, while other times He wants us to stand still and peacefully wait for Him to complete His plan. Moses took action by leading Israel out of Egypt, but as Pharaoh’s chariots and horsemen overtook them, Moses calmly

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spoke to the people of Israel, “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today... The Lord will fight for you. You need only to be still” (Exodus 14:13-14).

2) Harsh judgments about people’s actions or motives are often the result of accumulated anger from past events. The pain of past injustices or breaches of trust can feed unbelief and cause a person to justify his inner feelings of suspicion and doubt. Unchecked, this leads to inaccurate observations, unfair generalizations, and angry judgments. Harsh judgments can surface when a person feels socially uncomfortable, limited in his opportunities, interfered with in his plans, or unjustly treated. It is stimulated by the perception that more pain and frustration are imminent.

Unbelief causes a person to judge without the requisite information. He incorrectly sees life as stacked against him or that people are being dishonest or uncaring. This general feeling of mistrust coupled with an exaggerated need to experience justice, creates a pattern of conflicts in a man’s life. It’s dangerous to “keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance, for the Lord is a God who knows, and by Him deeds are weighed” (1 Samuel 2:3). Being judged harshly is terrible for the victim, but a more serious problem is faced by the perpetrator, who must at sometime answer the question, “If I have denied justice...what will I do when the Lord confronts me?” (Job 31:13).

3) Depression is stimulated by our perception of a potential loss or setback; or the frustration, stress, and fatigue caused by real events. It lowers our physical or mental state into despondency, brooding, or moodiness. Feeling the continuous weight of a problem, living with a gloomy outlook, or the nagging feelings of despair, can all be indicators of depression. A person suffering from depression goes through long periods of despondency followed by sudden and furious attempts at problem-solving. Men rarely recognize depression and even more rarely treat it as a spiritual problem; we usually attribute it to fatigue. But it may really be caused by unbelief and the wearying fears associated with potential outcomes at home or at work.

The Prophet Jonah must have been exhausted after surviving a storm at sea, three days in the belly of a whale, and the walk to



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Ninevah. Then he went through the city declaring God's message that in "forty days Ninevah would be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4). But what could have been an extended assignment ended quickly, because the king called his people to fasting and repentance. "When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, He had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction He had threatened" (Jonah 3:10). We would expect Jonah to be joyful and relieved to finally get some rest. Instead, his reactions were typical of the behaviors associated with unbelief.

Jonah was angry with God because He had shown compassion on Ninevah. The Lord asked Jonah, "Do you have any right to be angry?" (Jonah 4:4). Jonah did not answer, but he "went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city" (vs. 5). Things were not going to turn out the way Jonah wanted them to; and even though his desires and what he apparently believed should happen were in direct conflict with the will of the Lord, he refused to recognize the error of his ways.

Then the Lord God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live."

Jonah 4:6-8

Jonah's swing of emotions is similar to those produced by unbelief-induced depression: first angry, then depressed, then very happy and encouraged, then angry and depressed again. But what was Jonah angry about? Was it an angry, unbelieving reaction that caused Jonah to run away from the Lord in the first place and head for Tarshish instead of Ninevah (vs. 1:3)? Why was he angry that the people of Ninevah repented? Was it a proud reaction? Did he feel

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embarrassed after running around announcing God's impending doom? When the vine died, was he angry about the loss of shade, or did the loss of comfort remind him of the frustration of the previous day's experience? We don't know, but we do know that God asked Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?" "I do," he said, "I am angry enough to die" (Jonah 4:9).

When people become entangled in unbelieving behaviors, they begin to think they have a "right" to be angry, impatient, judgmental, and depressed. In fact, we can become so controlled by our anger that we unwittingly struggle against God's purposes. God has a plan for every man's life, and it is "for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope" (Jeremiah 29:11 TLB). This simple truth can relieve the pressures of unbelief and deliver you from its power. "If you want favor with both God and man, and a reputation for good judgment and common sense, then trust the Lord completely; don't ever trust yourself. In everything you do, put God first, and He will direct you and crown your efforts with success" (Proverbs 3: 4-6 TLB).

### **Discern and Pursue the Just Cause**

In the course of following God's plan for our life, many decisions have to be made that require wisdom and discernment, but decision making is most challenging when our conclusions might affect others. People do not always cooperate, often complicating the simplest issues with their personal biases. However, when we apply faith and scriptural principles to complex problems and ask the Holy Spirit to give us wisdom, even the most heart-rending decisions become discernable. In 1 Kings 3:9, Solomon, recognizing the difficulties he would face as king, prayed this way: "Give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong."

Discerning the just cause could be as personal as knowing which house to buy, or as public as deciding what is equitable and fair in a dispute. It could also be a decision about whether or not to involve yourself in a process or event. Discerning is a learned skill that takes dedication and practice. Just like any other skill, the more disciplined you are, the more accurate you will become. As Hebrews 5:14 (NAS)

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says, “Solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.” Here the word “discern” (#1252) means to separate the facts thoroughly or to make a judicial estimation.

As a man’s ability to discern increases, the matters that come before him become more complicated and carry greater consequences. Friends, colleagues, and clients begin to recognize the reliability of his opinion and come to him for help. “The heart of the discerning acquires knowledge; the ears of the wise seek it out” (Proverbs 18:15). These challenges prepare a man for greater responsibilities, like the one King Solomon faced in I Kings 3:16-28:

Now two prostitutes came to the king and stood before him. One of them said, “My lord, this woman and I live in the same house. I had a baby while she was there with me. The third day after my child was born, this woman also had a baby. We were alone; there was no one in the house but the two of us. During the night this woman’s son died because she lay on him. So she got up in the middle of the night and took my son from my side while I your servant was asleep. She put him by her breast and put her dead son by my breast. The next morning, I got up to nurse my son – and he was dead! But when I looked at him closely in the morning light, I saw that it wasn’t the son I had borne.” The other woman said, “No! The living one is my son; the dead one is yours.” But the first one insisted, “No! The dead one is yours; the living one is mine.” And so they argued before the king. The king said, “This one says, ‘My son is alive and your son is dead,’ while that one says, ‘No! Your son is dead and mine is alive.’” Then the king said, “Bring me a sword.” So they brought a sword for the king. He then gave an order: “Cut the living child in two and give half to one and half to the other.” The woman whose son was alive was filled with compassion for her son

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and said to the king, “Please, my lord, give her the living baby! Don’t kill him!” But the other said, “Neither I nor you shall have him. Cut him in two!” Then the king gave his ruling: “Give the living baby to the first woman. Do not kill him; she is his mother.” When all Israel heard the verdict the king had given, they held the king in awe, because they saw that he had wisdom from God to administer justice.

This situation required a wise and discerning man. The first woman’s story describes such cruel behavior as to be unbelievable. Solomon had to wonder, “Could the second woman have been so selfish and cold-hearted that she might do such a thing? Yet, her accuser sounds believable.” This would be quite a dilemma for anyone to unravel. But Solomon, having surely heard the cases of hardened liars before, knew what to do. He had to take the initiative to cause the truth to surface. And it worked. The second woman exposed her lack of love for the baby, making Solomon’s decision obvious.

As extreme as it sounds, this story does have a direct application for today. Anyone who has visited a prison, watched divorce court, or worked at a return desk in a retail store, knows how convincingly people can lie. A discerning man who takes on the task of judging an issue will want to be sure of the facts. But more importantly, he will need to be certain that his cause is just—that he should be involved. He should not take a position in an argument where he has no established authority to make a judgment. “Like one who seizes a dog by the ears is a passer by who meddles in a quarrel not his own” (Proverbs 26:17). But when a man has yielded his will to the Lord and has correctly discerned His plan, “He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun” (Psalm 37:6).

The inability of some men to make good decisions can be maddening to themselves and their families. While a man might want to be a good leader, it may be that his poor choices undermine both his confidence and reputation. Even though he believes that

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God lives within him by His Holy Spirit and he is expecting “streams of living water” (John 7:38) to flow out of him with wisdom and revelation, the results of his decisions may often be no better than a wild shot in the dark. A history of bad decisions can leave him and the people around him confused and making excuses for their circumstances. At its worst, the difference between the standards a man professes to uphold and the decisions he is known for can become a humiliating lifestyle of failure and rejection. James asks some questions that are relevant to this dilemma:

Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water. Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil.

James 3:11-15

These questions about springs, fig trees, and grapevines are a metaphor for the mixtures we sometimes find in men’s lives. Obviously, a spring can only flow with one kind of water. If it tastes salty, it is either totally salty or somewhere there is a source of salt commingling with the fresh water and making it dangerous to consume. If a tree bears olives, it’s because it is an olive tree, no matter how convincingly someone declares otherwise. And if a man’s life produces a confusing mixture of unreliable wisdom, it is because there is a source of demonic wisdom “harbored” somewhere in his heart. This is one explanation for why men profess to do good things and are either unable to make wise decisions, or can’t follow through on them once they are made.

But from where do these sources of demonic wisdom originate? They can come from things we have learned and experienced at any point in our life. They are the perverted ways of thinking and analyzing,

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false doctrines and philosophy, errors of fact, and other scriptural conflicts that are harbored in the un-repentant recesses of our heart. An amazing factor in how demonic wisdom holds men in bondage is the deceiving nature of religious activities. A person can be very involved in church activities, serving on boards, volunteering time, contributing lots of money, even preaching and teaching, and not be serving the Lord with all his heart. The zeal with which we practice our beliefs is no indicator at all about the validity of our beliefs, nor of how open our heart is to correcting those things that are wrong.

I have counseled with many men who have struggled with the confusion of spiritual mixture in their lives. In most cases, the consequences of their poor decisions have had to fully take their course before they were willing to accept their need for change. As Proverbs 10:13 says, “Wisdom is found on the lips of the discerning, but a rod is for the back of him who lacks judgment.” But to some, like my friend Darrell, an honest look at the facts of their life was enough to shake them free from deception.

Darrell was a tough-minded and successful businessman who had enjoyed all the fame and fortune offered by his profession. Upon becoming a follower of Christ, he zealously rejected the immoral side of his past life and became a steady, dependable family man. He was generous, sensitive to people in need, and found great joy in following the mandates of Christ. But as time passed, his family became unsure of his spiritual convictions because of the instability they brought into his business affairs. Darrell had often received what he described as “guidance” from his daily Bible reading. It usually had something to do with how to live his life, and he took great pride in responding to “the Lord’s leading” in a literal fashion. Although this sounded good, it resulted in many conflicting actions on his part.

For instance, one morning he would read something like Isaiah 1:17, which says, “Learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.” Instead of meditating over the Scriptures and coming to a full understanding of what the Lord might be saying to him, he would pick out one part of it such as “defend the cause of the fatherless” and immediately turn away from stewarding his business, to build a

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children's home. Of course, he received wide acclaim for his good motives. However, the next week he might read something like Jeremiah 21:12, which says, "Administer justice every morning; rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed, or my wrath will break out and burn like fire because of the evil you have done." This would make him feel like he wasn't doing enough, and off he would go to work in a victim's restitution program. It wasn't long before many people realized that he was not walking in the wisdom of the Lord. In fact, he had been a more stable businessman before he knew Christ.

Finally, his family was able to convince him that his zeal was misdirected and that his relationship with Christ was supposed to improve his stewardship of his business, as well as facilitate generous acts of benevolence. While his motives were not in conflict with Scripture, his knee-jerk expressions of obedience to God's Word lacked credibility. He decided to seek the Lord to find out why he was so vulnerable. After a short time of prayer about his past, he remembered how almost nothing he ever did pleased his father. He was regularly told by his father that he was not very smart or strong, and that he would have to do special things to stand out from those around him. Actually, Darrell was smart and strong, but he believed his father, and his insecurity had caused him to take extraordinary risks to succeed and prove his value as a person. In doing so, he had accomplished some spectacular achievements and failures. Unfortunately, when he came to Christ, he continued to believe his father's demonically inspired motivational speeches. Now Darrell was trying to please God the same way he had tried to please his misguided earthly father.

Darrell had been held captive by the things his father had told him as well as some tangled perceptions he had accepted about life in Christ. It was not until the Lord helped him look back into his past and see the truth of several important events and the effect they had upon his behaviors, that he was able to heal his fractured judgment. After forgiving the people the devil had used to ensnare him, he repented for believing and living in accordance with the things that caused him to sin. As he forgave and repented, clarity returned to his thinking, and he began to sharply discern his responsibilities.

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He had learned a valuable lesson. “Like a muddied spring or a polluted well is a righteous man who gives way to the wicked” (Proverbs 25:26). Even in Darrell’s youthful innocence, the devil had sullied his ability to discern the just cause.

### **Keep Yourself in God’s Love**

The essential elements of influence and leadership are described in Micah 6:8, “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” Becoming this simple, yet profound, mixture of a man who knows what is good, models justice and mercy at home and at work, and humbly follows the Lord into His plan, could take a lifetime. But everything a man needs to grow into leadership will come to him naturally as he seeks the Lord. If he needs revelation or understanding, it will be given to him. If he needs strength and courage, it will rise from within him. As he needs wisdom to discern the just cause, it will open before him.

In the story of Jesus’ temptation by the devil, Jesus emphasized our most important need: To “worship the Lord your God, and serve him only” (Matthew 4:10). All that we do should ultimately serve His agenda. But when an agenda becomes the object of our worship, it undermines the grace of God in us. We are not to worship the Bible, church, our family, or our work. What we accomplish in these areas is important, and in some respects holy; but it can only be “just” as it conforms to the Lord’s will and does not preempt our worship of Him.

“Agenda worship” is so common that it is often not recognized. It is manifested in three ways: 1) Idolatrous idealism, 2) Extreme applications of truth, and 3) Organizational solutions to relational problems.

1) Idolatrous idealism occurs when a value or activity is emphasized to the point that it becomes a religion unto itself. Good things such as quality management, humanitarian relief, environmental justice, healthy living, or even evangelism can destabilize our walk with Christ when we allow them to dominate our life and draw us away from simple devotion to Him.



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2) Extreme applications of truth are an outgrowth of idolatrous idealism. They occur when “a” truth becomes “the” truth, or when we begin to see a particular value or strategy as offering a singular solution to the world’s problems. A person who has fallen prey to this kind of delusion will force his perception of life to conform to “the truth” he serves. Because his initial “truth” may have substance, he doesn’t easily yield to correction.

3) Organizational solutions to relational problems assert the absolute value of the mission over the relative value of people. When a person does not conform to the values of the mission, those who idolize it believe he must be isolated or rejected. His failure to “fully agree” may be judged as a threat to the “rightness” of the agenda, and provide the project’s leaders with a rationalization for ending the relationship.

So how can we avoid the entrapments of agenda worship? By testing the way we implement our values and strategies to be sure they reflect the love of God. Jude 1:21 says, “Keep yourselves in God’s love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.” A more literal translation would be, “Keep yourselves open so that the love of God can flow through you.” When the love of God flows through you, people can expect to see, hear, and experience the very nature of your Heavenly Father. Exodus 34:6-7 describes the attributes of God’s loving nature in His own words. He is:

The Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love [literally – mercy and truth] and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished.

God’s personality is big enough to hold each of us accountable for our sins. This is not in contrast to His loving nature, but an extension of His faithfulness to us. These verses also describe the balance of sensitivity and strength that are desirable in our own character. Colossians 2:9-10 says that, “in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form and you have been given fullness in

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Christ.” Being shaped into a person who has Christ-like character is an agenda with all of the intensity a man could want. It is hard work that requires us to continually die to what may have become normal but ungodly ways of living and leading. Hebrews 5:8 says, “Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from what He suffered.” This means that even Jesus was subject to the principle of vocational suffering in order to fully identify with those He came to redeem. In the same way, we must suffer pressures at home and at work, to grow in the nature of God.

The Apostle Paul said it this way, “Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead” (2 Corinthians 1:9). The death that Christ wants us to experience is the one that takes place when we choose a godly response over a sinful attitude or behavior. As we allow the old way to die, we can then say, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).

God’s love is released in and through us, and we are kept in His love, when we take deliberate steps to obey Him.

1) The foundation for God’s plan is found in Romans 10:9-10, which says, “That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.” This allows us to have a personal relationship with God through Christ, and become a channel of His love.

2) Then, as Jesus said in Mark 12:30, the first commandment is “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” We cannot allow any agenda, object, or person to steal our love away from Him. This kind of focused commitment to Him, first and above all else as our loving Father, allows us to begin receiving installments of His character into our lives.

3) In Mark 12:31, Jesus said that the second commandment is “Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.” This scripture challenges us to love people without reward or condition. When we absorb the consequences of someone’s human

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failures, we are loving them the way we would want to be loved. As Proverbs 19:22 says, “What a man desires is unfailing love.”

For someone to be able to depend upon our encouragement and support, no matter what trial or difficulty he encounters, is one of the most practical ways we can express God’s love. When we allow the Holy Spirit to replace the judgmental or agenda-driven thoughts we have harbored, and instead express God’s love, we are becoming more like Him. When we continue to devote precious time and resources to a man whom we believe will overcome his human frailties, we are making the same kind of investment God makes in us. When we offer hope and a future to those who would otherwise fail, we restore life the way our heavenly Father does.

A man who has learned obedience to Christ has received the key to a successful life. Every act of obedience completes God’s love and character in us and causes us to become a more reliable man. We are more reliable because we are more real. We know the torment of sin and the pain of unhealed wounds in our soul. We know the trauma of loss and failure. We know the loneliness of rejection and the heartbreak of broken relationships. We know about pressures, deadlines, and the frustrations of waiting. And we know that there is a corresponding grace in Christ for each challenge that life presents to us. There is an immeasurable potential for men who know God as “the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).





