

STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Priorities

1 Thessalonians 2:1–13



LET'S BEGIN HERE

The church pulpit is much more than a polished podium from which a pastor can pontificate. Since the beginning of our Christian heritage, the pulpit has been the primary place from where God's Word has been dispensed to His people. From the pulpit, pastors proclaim God's truth, sound His warnings, and feed His people.

But what governs the words of spiritual nourishment that come from the pulpit? *Priorities*. It's easy to see a church's priorities when the ministry is just starting out, when the ink of the congregation's ideals is still wet on the paper. But later on, when storms roll in, the priority list can get blown away in a gust of confusion.

To keep this list securely nailed down, we must strengthen our grip on four priorities that must characterize our churches as well as our personal lives.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Four Priorities That Characterize a Meaningful Ministry (1 Thessalonians 2:1–13)

With time, churches can lose their vitality. Instead of allowing God to stretch and shape them into living communities of believers, many congregations petrify in traditionalism. Maintaining programs becomes more important than ministering to people. And the result is an ingrown, stagnant clique. Writing to the church at Thessalonica, Paul gave four priorities that will keep our ministries spiritually vital and meaningful.

- **Biblical:** Meaningful ministry must stay on target by maintaining a faithful commitment to the Word of God.
- **Authentic:** Meaningful ministry must have integrity and credibility and strive to stimulate Christians to growth in Christ. No flattery, no greed, no ego trip, no exploitation.
- **Gentle:** Meaningful ministry must operate with grace and tenderness, like a nursing mother with her child.
- **Relevant:** Meaningful ministry must teach that the Bible is alive with relevance. The amazing thing about the Bible is that it is *never* out-of-date.



Quotable

“You can come to church, sit, leave, and NEVER be impacted by another life. That’s tragic, you know?”

— Charles R. Swindoll



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1 Thessalonians 2:1–13

2. The Result of a Meaningful Ministry

Biblical accuracy. Authenticity. Gentleness. Relevance. When these priorities guide church ministry and our personal lives, Christianity is not something we put on and take off, like a coat from the closet. It is something we assimilate, something that soaks into our lives so deeply and completely that it changes the very chemistry of our being. And only when we strengthen our grip on changing from the inside out will we significantly impact the world around us.



A CLOSER LOOK

The Real Meaning of “Relevant”

Relevance is good. But when does relevance become compromise? We can conform to our culture so much that we distort God’s Word in the process. In the interest of making biblical truth more palatable, more in line with the congregation’s “felt needs,” churches often end up pleasing people instead of God. Perhaps you’ve seen this happen. Maybe you’ve even heard some of these comments from other Christians or even in your own church:

- “People don’t want to hear about sin these days; it’s too negative. We need to uplift people and make them feel good about themselves.”
- “With all the violence in today’s world, the last thing we should talk about is Jesus, the victim of brutal injustice, hanging on a bloody cross.”
- “A virgin birth? Get real! What difference does Jesus’s mother or the nature of His birth make to our lives today?”

Christians today must face the challenge to stay up with the times without looking down on the Word. We must understand our culture, not to reinterpret the gospel of Christ and change its meaning but to explain it in terms our culture will understand. Human sinfulness, God’s love and forgiveness, and Jesus’s miraculous birth apply just as much to the teenager who surfs the Internet as to the turn-of-the-century farmer.

Continued on next page



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1 Thessalonians 2:1–13

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Can you think of any examples from your experience, in your church, or your personal life in which relevance has crossed over the line into compromise? Is the Word of God still revered in those situations? Is purity compromised for the sake of peer pressure? Has pleasing people replaced pleasing God as the primary goal?

Take some time and think about some ways you can have empathy toward the culture but still maintain an unwavering commitment to biblical truth, especially in such areas as:

- Movies, TV, and the entertainment industry
- Art and music
- Political involvement
- Your attitude toward non-Christians



LET'S LIVE IT

When pastors and church leaders follow the meaningful ministry priorities above, they will provide an atmosphere where Christians can live as imitators of Christ. But we shouldn't leave the responsibility to our pastors alone to follow these ministry priorities. Each Christian must put these principles into action each day.

Are you committed to God's Word, living with authenticity, treating others with gentleness, and sharing the gospel of Christ in a relevant way? If so, how can you integrate these priorities into your life this week?



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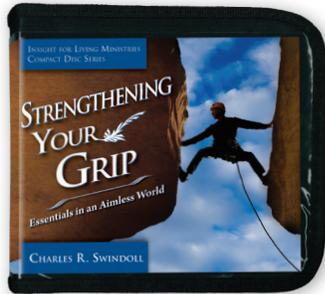
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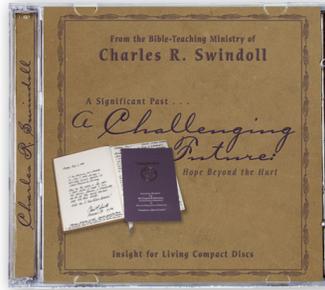
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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Involvement

Acts 2:42–47; Romans 12:9–16; 1 Corinthians 12:20–27



LET'S BEGIN HERE

In an article written a number of years ago, a psychologist attempted to describe the relationship of Christians with one another. He compared us to porcupines on a cold winter night. The cold drives us together in a close, tight huddle to keep warm. But as soon as we get so close that we start touching, we start jabbing one another with our sharp quills, scattering the huddle. But when it gets cold again, we move back toward one another to get warm . . . only to prick each other yet again.

And so we are constantly coming together then moving apart in a sort of religious dance. We *need* each other . . . yet we keep *needling* each other!

It's a bit dismaying to realize that you're going to be spending eternity with people in the family of God you don't even speak with on earth! Quite frankly, when someone has wounded us with his or her sharp quills, it's natural to want to keep our distance. But we do need each other . . . needles and all!



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. A Historical Perspective: Involvement in the Early Church (Acts 2:42–47)

Throughout history, no church has better modeled involvement than the early church in Acts 2. It all started with Peter's sermon at Pentecost when 3,000 Jews were saved. The new church had no pastor, no bylaws, no sanctuary, and an incomplete Bible (the New Testament had not yet been compiled). Yet the members of this new congregation were more deeply involved with one another than almost any other group in history. Even with the hindsight of 2,000 years of church history, the latest technology, and shelves groaning under the weight of ministry books, few modern churches display the involvement of that first congregation.



Quotable

*“Don't just
pretend to love
each other;
really love
people.”*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Involvement

Acts 2:42–47; Romans 12:9–16; 1 Corinthians 12:20–27

2. A Present-Day Question: Why Get Involved? (Romans 12:9–16; 1 Corinthians 12:20–27)

Why get involved with others, anyway? Doesn't the Christian life really come down to us and God? In his letters to believers in Rome and Corinth, Paul provided two insightful answers:

- God *Commands* Involvement
- The Body *Needs* Involvement

3. Three Essentials of Involvement

To encourage involvement in our churches, we need to maintain these three essentials:

- **Spontaneity:** Involvement should be voluntary and spontaneous, never mandatory or contrived. People must have the freedom to get involved as God leads.
- **Vulnerability:** We can't truly be involved with others if we don't open up and let them see our hurts and our weaknesses. And yes, it's worth the risk!
- **Accountability:** Since our actions affect the whole church, we need relationships with people who will ask the tough questions about our growth and purity.



STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Involvement

Acts 2:42–47; Romans 12:9–16; 1 Corinthians 12:20–27



GETTING TO THE ROOT

True Fellowship

The Greek term for “fellowship” is *koinonia*, the root of which means “common.” Drawn together by the thread of their common commitment to Christ, their common possessions, and their common suffering for Christ, the early church became a tightly knit group. We might define *fellowship*, then, as genuine Christianity freely shared among God’s family members.

God created us for involvement, not isolation. God shaped us to fit together in relationship with Him and with each other. The fall, though, bent that perfect union out of shape, leaving us either fighting against closeness to Him and others or straining to connect with Him and the people around us.

Thankfully, Christ came to teach us how to live in the community of the church, flaws and all, and to exercise love, grace, and mutual encouragement.



LET’S LIVE IT

Are you involved? Many of us spend many hours each week serving in our churches in some capacity. But involvement and busyness aren’t necessarily the same thing. Sure, fellowship will often revolve around church programs, but just because our schedules are full doesn’t mean we’re *involved* in the lives of others.

How many people in your life really *know* you—your dreams, your struggles, your fears, the areas of your life that need accountability? How can you begin to truly get involved in one person’s life this month?



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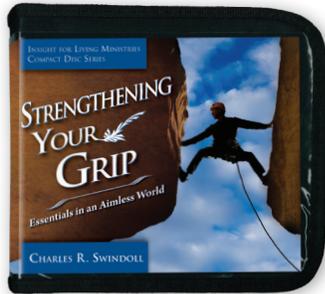
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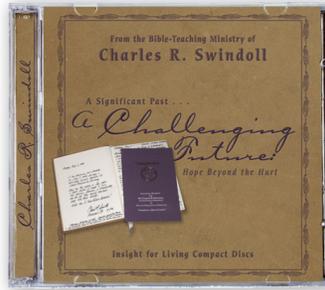
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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Encouragement

Hebrews 10:19–25



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Hebrews 10 commands Christians to “hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful” (Hebrews 10:23). But do you know what command follows it, written before the ink had dried on the first? “And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds” (10:24).

Did you know those commands were in the Bible? God wants us to think about how we can encourage our brothers and sisters in the Lord. And remember, it's impossible to stimulate someone else to love and good deeds if we are not around them. Encouragement is primarily a face-to-face thing.

The family of God is not a place for verbal put-downs, sarcastic jabs, critical comments, and harsh judgments. We get enough of that from the world. This is a place we need to assemble for the purpose of being encouraged . . . and we are free to be ourselves.

In this lesson, we will learn that encouragement is not the responsibility of a gifted few but the responsibility of the *entire* family of God. That means *you*.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Our Source of Encouragement (Hebrews 10:19–21)

For the Christian, encouragement is rooted in our relationship with Jesus Christ. Hebrews 10 reminds us of just a few of the things we have to be encouraged about.

Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God . . . (Hebrews 10:19–21)

How wonderful! Because of Christ, we can have *confidence to approach God*. It may help us to remember that from the time of Moses until Calvary, anyone wanting to approach God had to do so through a priest and had to bring an animal to be slaughtered. But now, because of Jesus's final sacrifice on the cross, the door to the very throne room of God has been swung open. With Jesus as our great high priest, we no longer need to slaughter sheep and bulls on the altar. If we have trusted in Him, we have full access to our heavenly Father.



Quotable

*“That which
will keep a
ministry on target
is a faithful
commitment to
the Word
of God.”*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Encouragement

Hebrews 10:19–25

2. The Ministry of Encouragement (Hebrews 10:22–25)

The writer of Hebrews told us not only what we have received but also what we should do now:

- First, we should *draw near to God* (Hebrews 10:22). We no longer need to tiptoe to the throne room of God or walk on eggshells in His presence. Instead, God has invited us to walk boldly to Him across the crimson carpet Jesus laid down for us.
- Second, we should *hold fast to the confession of our hope* (10:23). We have a sure hope that God will keep His promises and that His Word doesn't change.
- Third, we should *consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds* (10:24). Having encouraged us about all we possess in Christ, the writer further urged us to ponder how we can continue meeting together as a church and encourage others to live Christlike lives (10:25).



GETTING TO THE ROOT

A Lesser-Known Encourager

Barnabas exemplified a servant of God, who not only accepted his supporting role but excelled in it. As the apostle Paul's partner in ministry, Barnabas encouraged and supported him from the beginning—even before others trusted Paul (Acts 9:26–28).

So what made Barnabas such a good friend to Paul? The name Barnabas literally means “son of prophecy,” but Acts 4:36 renders it “son of encouragement.” In both the Old and New Testaments, prophets proclaimed God's Word, served as His spokespeople, and reminded God's people to obey Him. Perhaps Barnabas reminded Paul of Jesus Christ's words on the Damascus road (9:3–6) and encouraged Paul to keep walking in faith when he faced persecution and trials.

When the young, struggling church needed reinforcement, Barnabas, a godly man who yielded to the Holy Spirit, “began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord” (11:23). Barnabas then found Paul and urged him to take a leadership role. Barnabas recognized the gifts and calling God had given Paul, and Barnabas took second place. May we all value the role of encourager as essential to the work of God!



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Strengthening Your Grip on Encouragement

Hebrews 10:19–25



LET'S LIVE IT

So how can we practically encourage others each day? We can express appreciation for a friend's gifts and talents. We can thank our parents for their faithfulness. We can acknowledge our kids when they go out of their way to do a good job on a school project. We can even encourage others by the way we live—by modeling integrity, compassion, and diligence. Remember: you don't have to be an outgoing extrovert in order to encourage others. Just prayerfully open your eyes and look for ways to build others up.

When was the last time you received true encouragement? How did it make you feel? Do you know people who need encouragement this week? How can you affirm their gifts or thank them for their friendship?



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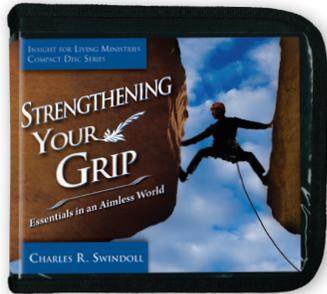
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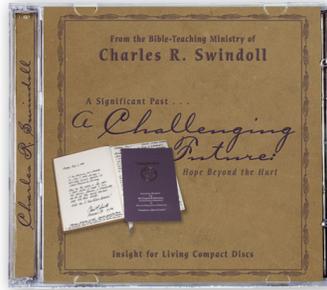
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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Purity
Matthew 18:15–17; 1 Thessalonians 4:1–5



LET'S BEGIN HERE

“Pleasure is supreme.” . . . “Follow your feelings.” . . . “Do whatever makes you happy.” . . . “Purity? That went out with the Puritans!”

These slogans of our pleasure-obsessed society pulse from the media like a strobe light, mesmerizing us into a state of moral apathy. Sitcoms depict abstinence as fit for only the undesirable or the immature. And advertisements blatantly seduce us into acquiring absolutely everything our hearts desire.

But before we burn the media at the stake, we have some confessing of our own to do. Christianity historically has been the advocate and defender of purity, but that may no longer be the case. When we watch the news and read about current events, the church seems silent. Maybe we have drifted from the call to defend biblical purity.

Far too many Christians have bought into the “pursue pleasure at all costs” philosophy. Marriages are breaking up at almost the same rate inside the church as outside. Christian leaders often create just as much scandal as any movie star. And many churches no longer place holy living at the top of their priority list. But purity, as Paul explained in Romans 6, is a powerful alternative to our culture’s formula for living.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Moral Erosion: A Historical Fact

If Paul were to step into the twenty-first century, he might gawk at our technology, but our depravity wouldn’t surprise him a bit. Even though there were no crude talk shows or indecent music videos in Paul’s day, he was familiar with immorality. Divorce and homosexuality were widespread in the Roman Empire. That’s why Paul wrote to the Christians in Thessalonica: to warn them about letting the poison of sexual immorality seep into the church.



Quotable

“You can come to church, sit, leave, and NEVER be impacted by another life. That’s tragic, you know?”

— Charles R. Swindoll



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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Purity *Matthew 18:15–17; 1 Thessalonians 4:1–5*

2. Moral Purity: An Attainable Goal (1 Thessalonians 4:1–5)

After ministering for only a few weeks among the Thessalonians, Paul had been able to impart to them the life-changing truth of the gospel. But Paul didn't just want to increase his list of converts; he wanted to teach them to "walk in a manner worthy of the God who [had called them] into His own kingdom and glory" (1 Thessalonians 2:12). Paul wanted the Thessalonians to excel in godliness, which would result in closer fellowship with God and more satisfying lives.

3. Moral Correction: A Biblical Mandate (Matthew 18:15–17)

Purity is a conscious choice; it doesn't just happen. But what if a Christian decides to follow his or her passions into an impure lifestyle? Well, that's where *church discipline* comes into play. This phrase conjures up all sorts of images and feelings—sullen-faced legalists, strict conformity to every jot and tittle, and loveless judgment. Unfortunately, these impressions come from an inaccurate, unbalanced understanding of Scripture. God never intended church discipline to be used like a black boot of tyranny. It's actually a last resort, meant to keep the body of Christ pure and healthy. And the purpose of church discipline is always *restoration!*



A CLOSER LOOK

Church Discipline

So what are the steps of church discipline? Jesus outlined this process for us in Matthew 18:15–17:

1. *Go yourself:* If you see a brother or sister in Christ living a lifestyle that is destructive to him or her and potentially harmful to the church, you must lovingly confront that brother or sister in person and in private (Matthew 18:15; Galatians 6:1; Ephesians 4:15).
2. *Take someone with you:* If the offender rejects your loving confrontation and continues an impure lifestyle, you must take another Christian with you and try again to talk with the offender. Maybe, when faced with two loving brothers or sisters in Christ, the offender will repent (Matthew 18:16).

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Strengthening Your Grip on Purity *Matthew 18:15–17; 1 Thessalonians 4:1–5*

Continued from previous page

3. *Tell the church:* If the offender refuses to repent at this point, the impurity must become a matter of public knowledge to the church. This doesn't necessarily mean bringing the person in front of the whole congregation for discipline. Depending on the circumstances, a group of elders or other church officers may handle the problem best (Matthew 18:17).
4. *Treat the offender like a non-Christian:* If step three has no effect, the church must begin to treat the unrepentant offender like a non-Christian (Matthew 18:17; 1 Corinthians 5:1–7). This person will no longer be welcome at church and definitely cannot take part in the Lord's Supper. The church must break off fellowship with the offender until loneliness and godly sorrow leads the person to repentance. Though this step seems harsh, it worked in the Corinthian church, and the sinning brother was eventually welcomed back into fellowship (2 Corinthians 2:6–8).

Remember: though church discipline can be unpleasant, its ultimate purpose is to purify the body and bring sinning Christians to repentance and back into the community of faith.



LET'S LIVE IT

Before we begin to think that purification only applies to those involved in obvious, public sin, we need to remember that we *all* need God to do His purifying work in our lives. That's why Jesus died for us. His blood makes us pure in God's sight. The Holy Spirit and God's Word help us to live in purity each day. Sure, we will all fail. But through Christ, we will always receive forgiveness and restoration.

What temptations are you most susceptible to? What lifestyle changes should you make to avoid those lures? Take some time this week to meditate on 1 John 1:9 and to thank God for His grace.



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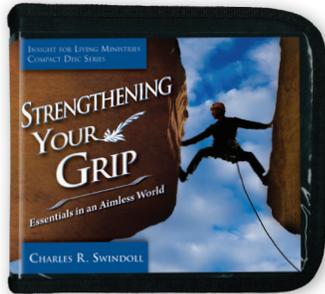
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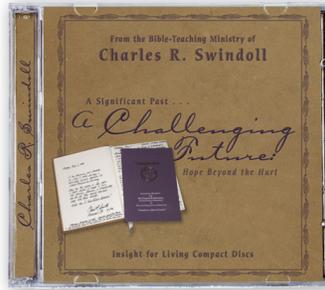
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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Money

1 Timothy 6:3–19



LET'S BEGIN HERE

As we consider strengthening our grip on various things in this life, we certainly cannot overlook the issue of money. It can be difficult to bring up the subject of money. People get tense and clutch their wallets a little tighter. When the words *tithing* and *stewardship* come from the lips of a pastor, many people run. And we have the prosperity gospel preachers to thank for that. These false teachers have broken trust between the people and the pulpit. They teach that God's blessings can be bought for the right price, and that God's highest blessing on His people is monetary.

But in reality, God's blessings are not for sale. He showers His gracious gifts—monetary and otherwise—on whomever He pleases. In fact, Paul wrote about this subject in the last chapter of his first letter to Timothy, explaining that God expects contentment and stewardship from His children. The Lord calls Christians to manage His gifts in order to accomplish His purposes and bring Him glory.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. A Reminder to Those Who Are Not Rich (Philippians 4:11–13; 1 Timothy 6:6–8)

From a biblical point of view, money itself is neither good nor bad. It's our attitude toward money and how we use it that determines the issue of morality or immorality. True wealth begins as a matter of the heart. In 1 Timothy 6:6, Paul defined a rich life as one that results from godliness and contentment. The world sends us quite a different message. But Christians must remember that even if our bank accounts don't reflect the value our culture places on wealth, we must consistently live two principles to find true treasure:

- First, *we should look at life with an eternal perspective*, and remember that we can't take our wealth with us when we die (1 Timothy 6:7).
- Second, *we should enjoy the essentials with simple acceptance*. The essentials include the food and covering that God so generously provides (Philippians 4:11–13; 1 Timothy 6:8).



Quotable

“Don't just pretend to love each other; really love people.”

— Charles R. Swindoll



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MM05

STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Money

1 Timothy 6:3–19

2. A Warning to Those Who Want to Get Rich (1 Timothy 6:9–16)

Paul shifted his attention from the non-rich to those who want to get rich, who want to find the proverbial pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. But according to 1 Timothy 6:9, people who crave and passionately pursue monetary wealth will:

1. Fall into temptation and be ensnared by riches
2. Fall into many foolish and harmful desires
3. Fall into ruin and destruction

3. Instructions for Those Who Are Rich (1 Timothy 6:17–19)

So much for those who want wealth. What about those who have it? Paul instructed Timothy how to shepherd those with more than enough money. In 1 Timothy 6:17, the apostle gave three straightforward commands to the rich.

- 1) *Don't be conceited.* Along with money comes the temptation to look down on those who have less. The rich must remember that everything they have comes from God, and He can increase it or remove it at His discretion.
- 2) *Don't trust in your wealth for security.* As Proverbs 23:4–5 explains, riches come and go as they please. Like a mighty eagle, they will fly away to the heavens. Our only real security comes through Jesus Christ. He will never fail us or leave us.
- 3) *Don't hoard your wealth.* Become a generous person knowing that God blesses some of us with riches, not so we can live in luxury, but so we can share it with others who don't have enough (1 Timothy 6:18–19).



STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Money

1 Timothy 6:3–19



GETTING TO THE ROOT

Contentment

In 1 Timothy 6:6, Paul gave us the formula for true wealth:

Godliness + Contentment = Great Gain

You won't find this formula in *Forbes* magazine! But at the end of our lives when we reflect on all we have accomplished, we won't wish we had more money, or spent more time at work, or had more toys. We will cherish the time we spent in fellowship with the Lord and with the precious people He placed in our lives.

The greatest key to living life with an eternal perspective is contentment. The Greek word *autarkeias*, which means “contentment,” refers not only to one's acceptance of his or her circumstances and lot in life but also to self-sufficiency.¹ While self-sufficiency might seem unbiblical—and it is if we are trusting in ourselves instead of God—the idea behind self-sufficiency can help us understand contentment. In order for Christians to live with self-sufficiency, we must live with contentment and within our means—our income must sufficiently cover our expenses. It's hard to live with contentment if each month introduces a new set of worries as we struggle to stretch our paycheck to cover an ever-increasing set of expenses. And we won't have the wisdom to cut expenses to a reasonable level if we don't live with contentment. So, self-sufficiency paves the way for a satisfied life, and contentment helps us to live within our means.



LET'S LIVE IT

Clearly, Christians shouldn't spend their lives running toward money. So, is the answer to just run away from money? According to 1 Timothy 6:11, it's not enough to flee materialism. We must also pursue godliness. We can't just grit our teeth and mumble, “I will not love money!” We must transfer that love from money to God, because we can't serve both at the same time (Matthew 6:24). Just as it takes time, commitment, and work to become rich, spiritual growth also requires time with God, consistent Bible study, and actively sharing our treasures with others.

Are you running toward wealth or toward the Lord? How much time and effort do you put into getting to know God and allowing His Word to transform your mind?

ENDNOTE

1. Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 152.



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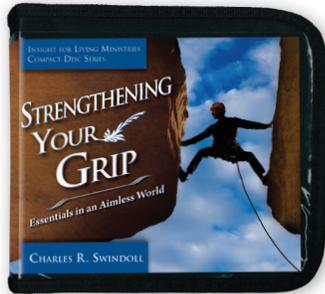
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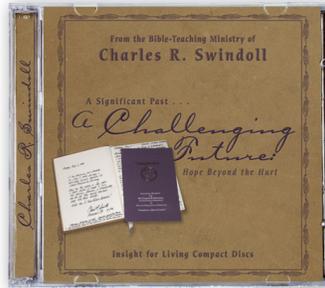
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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Integrity

Psalm 75:5–7; 78:70–72



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Integrity is the opposite of hypocrisy. A person with integrity follows through on commitments and doesn't back down when something better comes up. A person with integrity refuses to use others for personal benefit, doesn't tend toward haughtiness, and has an accurate view of personal strengths and weaknesses. Integrity welcomes accountability, even when it comes through constructive criticism.

Integrity is solid like a rock. It won't crack under the pressure of circumstances, and it won't crumble when others leave. Integrity keeps one strong while under the white light of examination and the exacting demands of close scrutiny.

Though Christians should strive for personal integrity, we must remember that integrity does not equate to sinless perfection. No one can achieve that goal in this life. A person with integrity doesn't hide his or her shortcomings but confesses them to the Lord and to others. Let's learn more about integrity in this lesson.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Integrity Test One: Adversity

Few things reveal the strength or weakness of our integrity as does the strenuous course of adversity. Just as a footrace tests the endurance of a runner, adversity tests the strength of our character. The Christian life, though, isn't a fifty-yard dash. It's a marathon with challenging hills, monotonous straightaways, and crowded turns. And no one endured the marathon of testing like Job, who lost nearly everything in a matter of hours. We read in his tear-stained journal that though God's tests pushed Job to the edge, he held on to his integrity (Job 27:1–6). Now, holding on to our integrity doesn't mean having to withstand adversity's flames with a smile on our face. God knows our frailty. What He looks for is the quality of our faith. And if we submit to God's sovereign wisdom in the midst of adversity, He will be just as pleased with us as He was with Job (Job 42:1–9).



Quotable

*“That which
will keep a
ministry on target
is a faithful
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the Word
of God.”*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Integrity

Psalm 75:5–7; 78:70–72

2. Integrity Test Two: Prosperity (Psalms 75:5–7; 78:70–72)

How often we sigh and think, *If I only had more money*. Believe it or not, prosperity tests our integrity just as much as adversity—and sometimes more so. In the midst of suffering, we have one goal: survival. Adversity forces us to trust in God, and often we feel His presence more than ever. But when prosperity falls on us, Satan wants us to get puffed up with pride and stop trusting God, who warns: *don't get conceited*. In Psalm 75:5, to the wicked He says, “Do not lift up your horn on high, / Do not speak with insolent pride.” In the midst of prosperity, we must *keep the right perspective*. God will humble the proud (Psalm 75:6–7). On the other hand, God does exalt the humble who hold tight to their integrity. The Lord took David, a lowly shepherd, and exalted him to the highest office in Israel (78:70–72). But to have David's kind of integrity in the midst of prosperity, we must continually open our hearts to the Lord, and we must endure His scrutiny and correction.



A CLOSER LOOK

Humility: The Foundation of Integrity

“I said to the boastful, ‘Do not boast,’
And to the wicked, ‘Do not lift up the horn;
Do not lift up your horn on high,
Do not speak with insolent pride.’”

—Psalm 75:4–5

When we work hard and exert time and effort to achieve a goal, what's wrong with taking the credit? What's wrong with tooting our own horn? That's what the godless thought in Asaph's day. They relied on their own strength and pointed to their great power when they achieved success. But they forgot that all of their abilities came from the Lord. They neglected gratitude, and their pride took over their hearts. God hates pride. The Lord has promised that those who boast in their own strength will be humbled—He will break their horns (Psalm 75:10). So when we succeed, to whom should we give credit? There's nothing wrong with acknowledging our own gifts and talents. But when we forget that they originate with God, we will begin to slide down the slippery slope of pride. Let's use the success God has given us to proclaim His strength and not our own strength.



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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Integrity

Psalm 75:5–7; 78:70–72



LET'S LIVE IT

For our integrity to be refined as silver, we must submit ourselves either to the scalpel of adversity or the probing light of prosperity, depending on our circumstances. That's when we'll find out what we're really made of.

This study on integrity has provided two lingering lessons:

1. No amount of adversity should alter personal integrity.
2. No amount of prosperity should weaken moral integrity.

Each day we must examine ourselves, just as the apostle Paul commanded in 1 Corinthians 11:28!

Has your integrity been put to the test lately? Did adversity tempt you to compromise in order to relieve the pain? Or did prosperity tempt you to compromise in order to retain the comfort of your possessions? Think about your most recent trial, and evaluate the quality of your integrity as a result.



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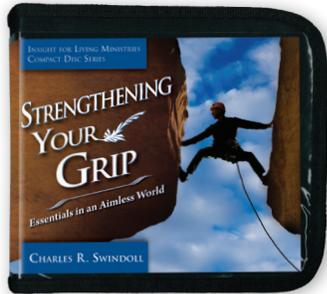
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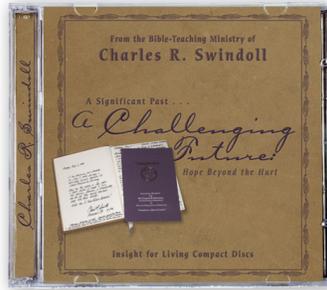
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MM06

STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Discipleship

Matthew 28:16–20; Mark 3:13–14; Luke 14:25–33



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Time for a pop quiz. What is a disciple?

- a. Someone who has completed a ten-week Bible study course
- b. A Christian leader
- c. A knowledgeable Christian
- d. A zealous Christian
- e. A Christian who listens to spiritual CDs

Answer? None of the above. Surprised? Don't be! Never has a word been so overused yet so misunderstood. Although the topic of discipleship has been overworked, it is an under-applied concept. We all have probably heard a lot about discipleship. But if the truth were known, most of us still are not discipling others or being disciplined ourselves. Most of us are still spectators when it comes to ministry. That is not only unwise and unhealthy, it is unbiblical. Let's focus our attention on what the Lord said in His Great Commission in Matthew 28:16–20 and learn what it means to live as a true disciple.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. The Cornerstone of Discipleship (Matthew 28:16–20)

Discipleship is more than just another program in the church. Jesus Christ has established discipleship as the method by which He plans to fulfill His mission to grow His church. And how does He plan to grow His church? Through Christians as they live out Jesus's command in Matthew 28:16–20 to *go*, *baptize*, and *teach* others all that Jesus said while He lived on earth.



Quotable

“You can come to church, sit, leave, and NEVER be impacted by another life. That’s tragic, you know?”

— Charles R. Swindoll



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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Discipleship

Matthew 28:16–20; Mark 3:13–14; Luke 14:25–33

2. The Choosing of the Disciples (Mark 3:13–14)

In order for Jesus's plan to multiply disciples to come to fruition, He chose to invest His life and teaching into twelve men. And they, in turn, were to pass His teachings on to others—to disciple others. So choosing these men could not be left to a random recruiting project. Jesus needed to select each one personally. And He didn't pick the brightest, most well educated, or wealthiest men. He chose common, humble laborers to walk with Him and learn from Him. But before these men could begin ministry, they had to spend time with Jesus. That's where discipleship, and all of ministry, begins. And the disciples—unsophisticated and coarse in the eyes of the religious leaders—could speak with boldness and conviction because they had been in the presence of the Lord (Acts 4:5–12).

3. The Cost of Discipleship (Luke 14:25–33)

How much does following Christ as His disciple cost? Everything! In Luke 14:25–26, Jesus expects disciples to hate their families in comparison to their love for Him. Our relationship with God and our obedience to Him must trump every other relationship and priority in our lives. We must love Him more than anyone else, even more than our own lives. Discipleship demands that we surrender our very lives to Christ's leadership. Just as Jesus carried His cross to His death, He demands that we do the same—not to our literal deaths but to the death of our own goals, dreams, and possessions. We must surrender these priorities to the Lord and allow Him to use them for His glory (Luke 14:17–33).



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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Discipleship

Matthew 28:16–20; Mark 3:13–14; Luke 14:25–33



GETTING TO THE ROOT

Becoming a Learner

The Greek word for “disciple” is *mathetes*, which comes from the verb *manthanō*, meaning “to learn.” A disciple is one who consistently lives by and can be identified with the teachings and points of view of his or her teacher.¹ So, Jesus’s disciples, by way of extensive time spent with Him and His people, must embody His priorities and values. In other words, a disciple has developed the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:14–16) and has been transformed into a living sacrifice by His Word (Romans 12:1–2).

Though biblical knowledge plays a crucial part in our faith, we must remember that discipleship is relational. Disciples not only learn *about* their Master, they grow closer *to* Him. We must spend time with our Master, as well as with other believers who are more mature and who can teach what it means to follow Christ. And we should take time to teach younger Christians what we have learned from walking through trials, tests, and joys with our Savior.



LET’S LIVE IT

Discussions about discipleship often revolve around form instead of function. Memorize a verse a day . . . Study a chapter a week . . . Meet one-on-one . . . Complete this course . . . Check off that activity. Diligent study, fellowship, and church involvement all contribute to growing in Christ. But sometimes we see these activities as an end in themselves. Remember, the goal of discipleship is to know Christ better, to be like Him, and to make Him known.

Do you feel that you know Jesus Christ better now than you did when you started your spiritual journey? Or has your walk come to a standstill? Do you prioritize time with Jesus over other important things in your life?

ENDNOTE

1. Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 609, 615.



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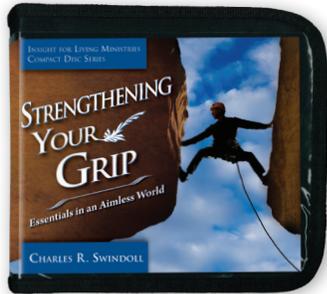
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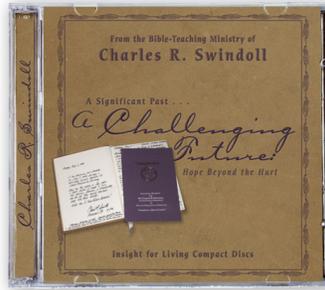
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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Aging

Joshua 14:6–14; Psalm 90



LET'S BEGIN HERE

No series on godly priorities would be complete without addressing the issue of those who are growing older: “senior citizens,” as they are commonly called. All too frequently, however, this particular group is given the message: “You are finished . . . you really do not figure that highly in our future.” Although this is a familiar philosophy within the ranks of humanity, Scripture does not support this view, either in philosophy or practice. The man whose life we unveil today exemplifies God’s desire for the aged. Caleb remained forever young, even though he had every reason to back off, fade into oblivion, and give up with a long, heavy sigh as he snuggled down into a bed of moth balls. No way! As we shall observe, Caleb stayed in the mainstream—in fact, on the front edge of new and fresh challenges.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Erroneous Attitudes on Aging

Before we look at the Bible’s positive perspective on aging, let’s understand several negative attitudes held by those who struggle with getting old.

- *Uselessness*: Too many men and women believe that, as members of a long-gone era, they don’t fit into today’s world. They look at their lives as rusty relics rather than treasure troves of insight gathered from a wide array of experiences.
- *Guilt*: Some older folks look back over their lives feeling a burden of guilt. The pictures hanging on memory’s walls line a haunted house instead of a beautiful art gallery.
- *Self-Pity*: Falling somewhere between blame and bitterness, self-pity cries out, “Nobody cares about me anymore.” Self-pity banishes a person to solitary confinement rather than spurring one toward new freedom and involvement.
- *Fear*: Many older folks fear trying to survive in a world that’s moving too fast. Others fear the specter of fading health. Or being alone. Or becoming dependent. And the gray drizzle of fear overcasts the present, which still pulses with promise.



Quotable

“Don’t just pretend to love each other; really love people.”

— Charles R. Swindoll



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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Aging

Joshua 14:6–14; Psalm 90

2. God's Attitude Toward Aging (Joshua 14:1–25; Psalm 90)

Let's see what God has to say about aging, first through a psalm of Moses and then through the life of Caleb.

Psalm 90 records an ancient song the elderly Moses sang to the Lord. This psalm sums up our lives on earth—we sprout, we wither, we die. But, the value of life isn't measured by the number of our years but by the quality of our days—not how long we live, but *how* we live. In this psalm, Moses prayed for the best use of his life, however long it may last. So the principle we can glean from Psalm 90 is this: *Since every day is a gift from God, live each one enthusiastically for Him.*

In Joshua 14, we find a man who embodied enthusiastic living and trust in God. As Joshua started to divide the newly conquered Promised Land among the Israelites, Caleb, an 85-year-old man, spoke up. Caleb recalled his faithfulness to the Lord as a spy many years before (Numbers 13–14) and requested the hill country of Israel—the place where the giants lived who had scared away ten of the spies many years before. Even as an old man, Caleb still trusted the Lord and had the courage to fight for Him. So God blessed Caleb the rest of his days (Joshua 14:13–14).



A CLOSER LOOK

An Old Man's Courage

"Nevertheless my brethren who went up with me made the heart of the people melt with fear; but I followed the LORD my God fully." —Joshua 14:8

The time had finally come! Many years earlier, God had promised to reward Caleb for his faith, and it was time to claim his inheritance. Moses had sent twelve men, one from each tribe, to survey the land so they could make arrangements to take it over (Numbers 13). Caleb, a gutsy leader, represented the tribe of Judah. Ten of the spies discouraged the Israelites from marching into the Promised Land; only Caleb and Joshua urged the people to step out in faith, believing in God's promise to give them Canaan despite the obstacles. Caleb serves as an example of an encourager. An encourager is a person who knows God's promises, believes that He is faithful, and inspires others with the courage to trust the Lord. As Christians who have received forgiveness and eternal fellowship with God through Jesus Christ, we should be the most encouraging people around!



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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Aging

Joshua 14:6–14; Psalm 90



LET'S LIVE IT

None of us can avoid aging. There is no fountain of youth. So how should we respond to the inevitable process of aging? We should:

- View life as a challenge, *not* a threat
- Follow the Lord fully, *not* half-heartedly

We must remember that there is a Fountain of Living Water and, thanks to Him, we can drink up all this life has to offer—even in our old age!

How are you handling the process of aging? Do you know anyone who needs a ray of hope in the darkness of old age? How can you provide some light?



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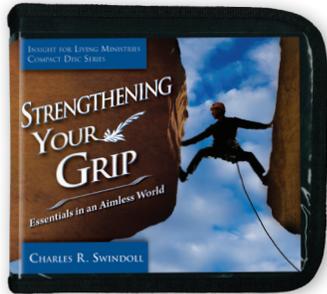
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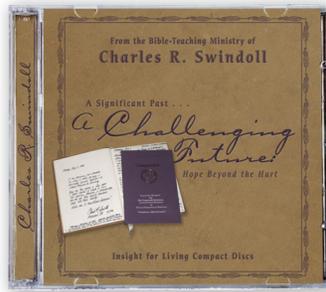
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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Prayer

Matthew 6:5–15; Philippians 4:1–9



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Wait—don't skip this lesson! This isn't a typical guilt-inducing, anxiety-producing, schedule-restricting lesson on prayer. No one will come to our homes to peer over our shoulders, stopwatch in hand, evaluating our devotional time. No one will inspect our knees for callouses caused by long hours of prayer.

No, the goal of this lesson is to help us see prayer as a way to lighten our burdens, not add to them; to relieve anxiety, not to increase it. The last thing we need is for someone to pour fuel on the fire of our angst. We already have enough of that—from not quite being the people we really want to be and from not living the Christian life as abundantly as we'd hoped. Instead, this lesson will help us open up the lines of continual communication with our Lord, giving us joy, hope, and stability in our anxiety-producing world.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. What Everyone Wants but Few of Us Have (Philippians 4:1–9)

Stability . . . harmony . . . joy . . . patience . . . pure thoughts . . . consistency. What spiritually minded person wouldn't want such things? Yet because we don't achieve these in our lives, we become anxious. Add to our imperfect walk with God the unforeseen tragedies, temptations, and pressures that assault us, and our worry needle goes off the scale. The answer is, of course, to *pray*—to exchange our anxiety with the inexhaustible peace that comes from time spent with the Lord. No complicated formula. No rigid schedule. Just talk to God. It sounds so simple. But we have the tendency to take the simple things of God and complicate them with religious formulas and ritualistic drudgery.



Quotable

*“That which
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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Prayer

Matthew 6:5–15; Philippians 4:1–9

2. What Jesus Taught to Set Things Right (Matthew 6:5–15)

By the time Jesus stepped on the scene, prayer had degenerated in at least four ways:

1. It had become formal and ritualistic.
2. It had become long and verbose.
3. It had become repetitious.
4. It had become prideful.

Into this pharisaic system of dos and don'ts came Jesus with His own instructions on prayer. He irritated the self-impressed religious leaders of His time by offering freedom instead of legalism and teaching that prayer was made for God's ears, not man's applause. Jesus taught that we must pray to be heard by God, not to be admired by people. We must pray from our hearts, not with meaningless repetition. And we must forgive others before approaching God. If we follow these simple instructions, we will draw closer to God and to others.

As we share with God every worry that weighs us down, our circumstances may not change but we will. We begin to let Him carry the heavy loads that we can't bear. We start to trust Him to handle the problems that we can't control. And our anxiety lessens as we learn to wait on His timing and His provision.



A CLOSER LOOK

Prayer God Will Answer

If you knew God would answer your petitions, how would that change your prayer life? Would you pray more fervently and more often? Philippians 1:9–11 records Paul's plea for the Philippian church—it was a prayer God was certain to answer.

Joy saturated Paul's prayers for the believers at Philippi. They had joined Paul in the gospel community—as his brothers and sisters in Christ, as his supporters, and as his partners in suffering.

So, Paul sought the Lord on his friends' behalf. He prayed that God would increase their love for God, for one another, and for Paul. Although Hollywood defines love as blind, godly love thrives in an atmosphere of truth. Paul asked God to increase their love “in real knowledge and all discernment” (Philippians 1:9). Real knowledge comes through God's Word, and the Holy Spirit provides Christians with discernment—the ability to distinguish good from evil.

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MM09

STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Prayer

Matthew 6:5–15; Philippians 4:1–9

Continued from previous page

Paul prayed for the Philippians so that they would recognize and pursue the things that please God (Philippians 1:10). Obedience to God begins in the mind. The thought-life of Christians often determines their actions. Later in this letter, Paul highlighted the excellent ideas that should fill the Philippians' minds: "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things" (4:8). Christlike thinking and living will help believers to live holy lives until Christ returns.

Paul reminded the Philippians that God had already produced in them righteous fruit, and that their lives would bring God glory until Christ's return. In Galatians 5:22–23, Paul defined the fruit of the Spirit—"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." When the Holy Spirit invades a believer's life and waters the seed provided by God's Word, He produces these attributes, which reflect the character of God.

So if you want God to answer your prayers for fellow believers, model them after the prayers recorded in Scripture. Let's start asking God to accomplish His plan recorded in His inspired, inerrant Word today!



LET'S LIVE IT

Do you still feel a little anxious about talking with God? Take a few moments to review the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9–13. Using this prayer as a guide, spend some time talking with God. Remember that grace, not guilt, compels us to pray. Our heavenly Father loves us and loves to hear our prayers.

Do you relate to God as your loving Father? If not, how do you see Him?



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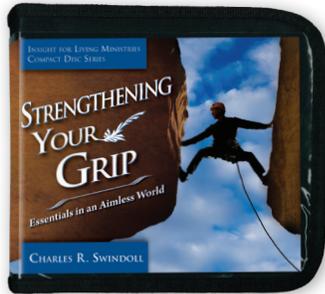
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Strengthening Your Grip on Prayer

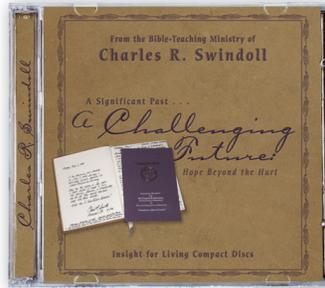
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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Leisure

Genesis 2:1–2; Matthew 6:24–34; Ephesians 5:15–16



LET'S BEGIN HERE

When was the last time you took a long walk, read a good book, or just rested while watching the sunset? Many of us feel guilty when we spend more than ten minutes being “unproductive.” We have been sold a bill of goods that the committed Christian is the busy Christian — constantly involved with people, programs, and producing results.

And because many Christians relentlessly drive themselves to constant productivity, they often view those who enjoy regular leisure time as undisciplined and irresponsible. We've been programmed to believe that fatigue is next to godliness, that it's better to burn out than to rust out. But either way, we're “out,” which means we can't finish the race God has set before us.

So, if your work has become your all-consuming interest or your greatest source of identity, worth, and security, this lesson is for you. Though it may feel unnatural, sit back, put up your feet, and allow yourself to get a grip on leisure.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. The Place to Start: God

A scarcity of leisure in our lives reflects a lack of balance, with the scales tipped heavily toward work. Scripture, though, calls us to be imitators of God (Ephesians 5:1). This requires that, among other things, we use our time wisely. After He created the heavens and the earth, God took time for leisure (Genesis 2:1–3). God didn't rest because He needed it but to set an example for His creatures. Even Jesus, though He had many things to accomplish during His short time on earth, took time to rest, spend time with God, and sleep (Matthew 14:23; Luke 6:12). During our times of rest, God wants us to spend time with Him, building intimacy and trust in His provision.



Quotable

“You can come to church, sit, leave, and NEVER be impacted by another life. That's tragic, you know?”

— Charles R. Swindoll



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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Leisure

Genesis 2:1–2; Matthew 6:24–34; Ephesians 5:15–16

2. Four Guidelines from Genesis (Genesis 2:1–2)

The first three chapters of Genesis show us that leisure should have room for creativity, communication, rest, and relationships.

- **Creativity:** In the beginning, God created everything—from the powder blue skies, to the crystal clear seas, to the intricate beauty of the human body. If we are to mimic God, we must take time to create—to write, make music, dance, paint, bake, or solve problems.
- **Communication:** God exists as three divine Persons: the Father, Son, and Spirit. And when He created Adam and Eve, God desired relationships with them. Since we have been created in His image, we must prioritize communication with God and others.
- **Rest:** On the seventh day, God deliberately stopped working to enjoy His creation and to set an example for us. Rest doesn't mean becoming part of the couch and watching TV for hours but reflecting on God's goodness and thanking Him for His provision.
- **Relationships:** Leisure gives us time to build relationships. God spent time with Adam and Eve, paid attention to their hearts, and anticipated their needs. We must spend time with the people we love in order to understand their hopes, joys, dreams, and needs.



GETTING TO THE ROOT

Be Imitators of God

Ephesians 5:1 reminds Christians that since we are God's beloved sons and daughters, we should imitate God. But how can finite human beings mimic an infinite God? The phrase in Ephesians 5:1 "imitators" is translated from the Greek word *mimeomai*, from which we get our word mimic. This word indicates that we are to use God as our model and, with time and practice, to begin acting like Him.¹ In this verse, Paul exhorted believers to consistently mimic God by loving others and living pure lives. Part of that godly lifestyle includes following God's example of rest and wisely using our time so that we have the margin in our lives for leisure.



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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Leisure

Genesis 2:1–2; Matthew 6:24–34; Ephesians 5:15–16



LET'S LIVE IT

Leisure helps develop in us the capacity to perceive the eternal. It provides the time to get refocused on God and to recall what matters most in life. To strengthen your grip on leisure, hold on to these two pieces of advice:

1. *Deliberately stop being absorbed by worries.* We often worry about nonessential, unchangeable things. Choose not to let worry rob you of peace (Matthew 6:25–34).
2. *Consciously take time for leisure.* Change your routine, plan fun into your schedule, take a walk, or spend time with a friend. Then you will reflect some of the very qualities of God.

How often do you *really* rest? What worries or productivity-addictions are preventing you from taking leisure time to reconnect with people and with God?

ENDNOTE

1. Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 651–52.



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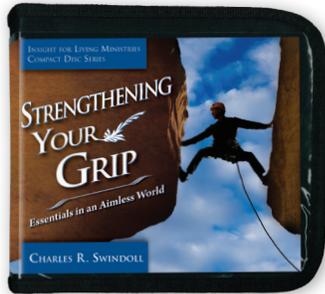
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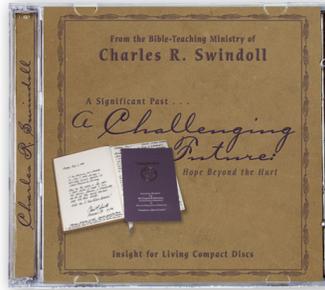
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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Missions

Isaiah 6:1–12



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Most of us like the view from our own backyard better than from anywhere else. Oh, we open the gate now and then to see what's going on in the world. We watch the news or read the paper and shake our heads over the pain, injustice, and persecution in other countries. But that is often as far as it goes. After all, we've got our own lives and our own problems to worry about. We've got our own dreams to fulfill and goals to pursue.

Isaiah probably felt the same way. Born almost thirty centuries ago, likely into an aristocratic family in Judah, Isaiah probably had his life-plan all mapped out. He surely caught reports about the mounting power of Assyria, Judah's notorious enemy. He probably sighed about the pagan customs that had spread their roots across his homeland. He might have mourned about the idolatry, immorality, and ritualism that had begun to erode the foundations of his religion. But, at least from the biblical text, it didn't seem like Isaiah had personally involved himself in changing the moral or spiritual landscape of his country—at least, not until Isaiah faced a heartbreaking loss and then had a life-changing encounter with God.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. God Uses Circumstances to Make Us Aware of His Presence (Isaiah 6:1)

In the midst of an immoral society and the threat of war, Judah's king, Uzziah, died. Since Isaiah had access to the king's courts (Isaiah 36–39), he probably knew Uzziah and took his death hard. In the midst of Isaiah's grief, the Lord visited him in a vision. Isaiah saw the Lord sitting on His throne, in complete control, high above the tragedy and uncertainty in Judah.

2. God Reveals His Character to Make Us See Our Need (Isaiah 6:2–7)

Isaiah came to the temple in grief, but he found himself in worship as God revealed His greatness to Isaiah. For a moment, the heavens opened and Isaiah saw God for who He is; sovereign, sitting on His throne, and encircled by angelic worship. In the face of God's holiness, Isaiah saw his sinfulness. But as God purified Isaiah's lips, He gave Isaiah the ability to serve Him.



Quotable

“Don't just pretend to love each other; really love people.”

— Charles R. Swindoll



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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Missions

Isaiah 6:1–12

3. God Gives Us Hope to Make Us Realize We Are Useful (Isaiah 6:8)

God's heart beats for the world in need. In Isaiah's time, God saw villages spread out like lonely islands, people stranded in a sea of despair. God could have sent His angels with His message, but He chose to send Isaiah. But first, Isaiah had to step outside the ivory tower and catch a vision for God's broader world program.

4. God Expands Our Vision to Make Us Evaluate Our Availability (Isaiah 6:8)

After the grief that brought Isaiah to his knees, after he had seen God in all His majesty, and after God sent an angel to purify Isaiah's sinful lips, then God asked, "Whom shall I send?" After Isaiah's view of God had expanded, he was ready to serve God as His prophet.

5. God Tells Us the Truth to Make Us Focus on Reality (Isaiah 6:9–12)

After Isaiah exclaimed, "Here I am. Send me" (Isaiah 6:8), God had to sober Isaiah's reeling heart with the realities he would face. Though Isaiah would speak God's words, God's people would not listen. So Isaiah would focus his ministry on obeying God, not merely getting results, God told Isaiah ahead of time that he would face dull, unrepentant people.



A CLOSER LOOK

Face-to-Face with the Sovereign One

After Uzziah's death in 739 BC, the bottom dropped out of Isaiah's life. Faced with the death of the sovereign leader of Judah, Isaiah might have wondered where God was. As Isaiah entered the temple and sought God's guidance in the midst of his despair, the sovereign Lord stepped into Isaiah's life and showed him something he wouldn't quickly forget. Isaiah came face-to-face with the holy God and it changed the entire course of his life (Isaiah 6:1).

When the Lord chose to reveal Himself to Isaiah, He pulled back the curtain so Isaiah could see Him as the majestic, sovereign Lord. Even though Isaiah's human king had died, Isaiah's eternal King still reigned. Just as the hem of His robe filled the temple, God's glory and power fill the entire earth.

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Strengthening Your Grip on Missions

Isaiah 6:1–12

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Faced with the immensity of the vision, Isaiah might have wondered: *If God’s glory fills the entire earth, why doesn’t everyone — Jew and Gentile alike — worship and obey Him?*

Next, Isaiah saw several strange heavenly beings, six-winged angels, surrounding God’s throne, continually singing to one another: “Holy, Holy, Holy” (Isaiah 6:3). As Isaiah watched the seraphim, who exist to worship and serve the Lord, he had to face reality; Isaiah had to face his sin. And before Isaiah could serve God, he had to accept God’s cleansing grace (6:5–7).

Now you might be wondering: *If the heavenly beings praise and serve the Lord continually, and that is what God desires from all of His creatures, then how will all the people around the world get the opportunity to become His worshipers and servants?*

That’s where missions come in. Remember: missionaries aren’t just those special people who travel to remote places and share the gospel in the jungles. All Christians are missionaries. The sovereign Lord asks *each* of us: “Whom shall I send?” (6:8).

After revealing Himself to Isaiah, the Lord extended grace to Isaiah and called him into missionary work. Though very few people would listen to Isaiah’s message, God asked for Isaiah’s faithfulness. He would take care of the results. The sovereign Lord also asks for our faithfulness as we live as missionaries every day. And He will take care of the results.



LET’S LIVE IT

Strengthening your grip on missions requires a firm handle on God’s call. The greatest confirmation you need is not the tangible results of your labors but the inner assurance of being in the nucleus of God’s will. Isn’t it time you allowed Him to launch you, like an arrow, into the needy world? Imagine the impact of one arrow, obedient to the bend of the bow, in the hands of the almighty God. No wonder Isaiah volunteered with the eager words, “Here I am. Send me.”

Are you ready to say with Isaiah, “Here I am. Send me”? What hesitations do you feel? How might you overcome your uncertainty?



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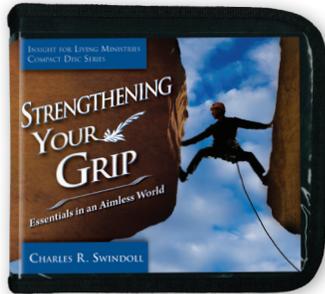
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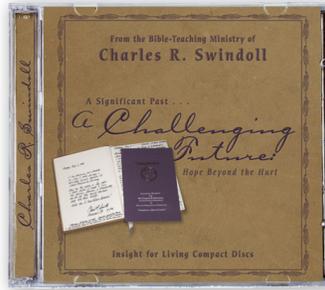
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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Godliness

1 Corinthians 10:1–13



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Have you ever felt like you were surrounded by the things of God—the programs, people, and praise of God—but couldn't find God anywhere? People smack-dab in the middle of Christian organizations sometimes forget about God. Pastors and members of churches. Administrators in parachurch ministries. Children in Christian homes. Students in Christian schools. It's much easier than we think to lose our sensitivity toward God in a Christian environment. When we're around His people regularly, talking His language, watching Him work, enjoying His blessings, we can start to take Him for granted. In short, we can loosen our grip on God while we're handling all the things that pertain to Him.

This problem is nothing new. Who had more of God than the Israelites in Moses's day? They were a people selected by grace to be God's own . . . freed from Egypt's chains . . . rescued from Pharaoh's army . . . sustained by God's miraculous provision in the wilderness. But they were ungrateful, hardened, and faithless. As cold and dark toward God as charred sticks in a doused campfire. Their Great Deliverer, in their eyes, had become a cruel taskmaster.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Israel: So Much of God, So Little Godliness (1 Corinthians 10:1–6)

The Israelites had no reason to cry, "Oh, God, if You would only show Yourself." His presence was all around them. The Lord divided the sea and delivered them from Egypt. He guided and protected the Israelites with a cloud by day and a fire by night. He provided manna from heaven and water from a rock. But God's people complained and disobeyed, and as a result, they wandered in the desert for years.

In Paul's day, the Corinthians also managed to miss God. The apostle tried to convince them that there's more to spiritual growth than simply being exposed to God; that maturity requires self-discipline and consistency (1 Corinthians 9:24–27). In 1 Corinthians 10:1–6, Paul cited Israel as proof that privilege doesn't guarantee piety.



Quotable

*"That which
will keep a
ministry on target
is a faithful
commitment to
the Word
of God."*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Godliness

1 Corinthians 10:1–13

2. Five Perilous Circles (1 Corinthians 10:6–10)

How did the Israelites bring tragedy on themselves? They swam into a swirling vortex of disobedience by taking one stroke at a time—like passing through a series of concentric circles until the suction pulled them down. Let's look at those five perilous, concentric circles.

1. **Craving evil things:** The Israelites knew they should have followed God, but they followed their appetites instead. When the going got tough, they grumbled against Moses, stopped trusting God, and longed for the security of their former captivity.
2. **Idolatry:** When we, like the Israelites, put something besides God on the throne of our lives, it becomes idolatry. Idols slowly and subtly tug at our attention, time, and devotion.
3. **Immorality:** Both the Israelites and the Corinthians had issues with immorality. The Israelites incorporated pagan rituals into their worship of God (Numbers 25:1–4). The Corinthians didn't take steps to rid their congregation of incest (1 Corinthians 5:1–2).
4. **Presuming upon God:** The Israelites' perspective was so distorted by sin that they accused God of carrying out an evil plan. How arrogant, after all God had done for them.
5. **Grumbling:** God didn't judge the Israelites for merely mumbling idle complaints under their breath but for heaping blame on Moses and Aaron for their difficulties and for despising God's chosen leaders (Numbers 16:41–50).



A CLOSER LOOK

The Path That Leads Away from Godliness

Both the Corinthians and the Israelites fell into the trap that hindered them from pursuing godliness. They took one small step at a time down the path that led away from godliness, toward sinfulness and eventually death. Many of God's people perished in the wilderness because of their sin, never laying eyes on the Promised Land.

When we're far from God, we tend to blame Him, and those who speak for Him, for our troubles. We must remember, though, that God does not lure us down the dark path to evil but instead, "Each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death" (James 1:14–15).

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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Godliness

1 Corinthians 10:1–13

Continued from previous page

So how can we determine if we're on the dark path away from God? Here are some tough questions we can ask ourselves.

1. Have I lost my delight in the Lord? Do spiritual things taste a little dry? Am I craving something I shouldn't?
2. Have I stopped taking God seriously? Am I tolerating things in my life that I didn't five or ten years ago? Are there any areas of erosion in my values?
3. Do I realize that I may wander in the wilderness for years if nothing changes? Do I really understand the danger I may be in?
4. Am I willing to confess the deadness of my spirituality to the Lord and to others and let them help revive it?

As we answer these questions, we must not get discouraged. Remember, we serve a risen Savior, so there's no such thing as dead Christianity. He lives and rules in the church, at home, at work, and in our hearts. And He loves to bring us restoration, healing, and hope.



LET'S LIVE IT

As we walk the path toward godliness, let's remember that God knows our limits even better than we do. When temptations come, He won't give us more than we can handle, and He will be right there to provide a way out (1 Corinthians 10:13).

In what areas of your life are you most susceptible to temptation? Who is on the throne of your life, ruling over your passions?



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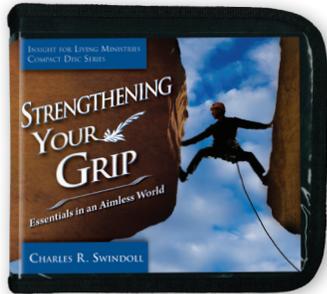
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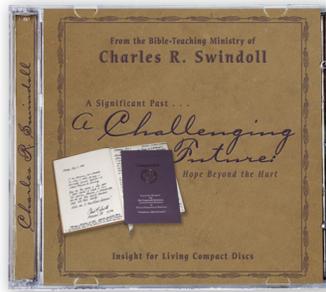
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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Attitudes

Philippians 2:1–5, 14; 4:4–8



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Like a famished dog gnawing away at the last trace of meat from a bone, the Nazis stripped Victor Frankl's life down to almost nothing. They took all his possessions, shaved his head, and stole his freedom. They robbed him of his family; his mother, father, brother, and wife all perished in the concentration camps. Once a renowned psychiatrist, Frankl was reduced to being a slave laborer at the notorious death camp Auschwitz.

Frankl endured hard labor—he once had to dig a water main tunnel *alone*—as well as abuse and starvation. He could have seethed with hate and self-pity but, instead, Frankl realized that the Nazis could never steal, shape, or dictate his attitude. In *Man's Search for Meaning* he wrote:

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.¹



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Attitude: It's Up to You (Philippians 2:1–8, 14; 4:4–7)

Our attitude can have more influence than our past, education, money, circumstances, appearance, skills, failures, successes, or how others treat us. Though most of us will probably never step foot inside the walls of a concentration camp, the borders of our comfort zones will be assaulted by failure, unmet expectations, illness, and broken relationships. We don't, however, have to allow any of these things to dictate our responses. If our minds are guided by the Word of God, we can respond with a godly attitude.



Quotable

*“You can come
to church, sit,
leave, and
NEVER be
impacted
by another life.*

*That's tragic,
you know?”*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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MM13

STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Attitudes

Philippians 2:1–5, 14; 4:4–8

2. Food for the Right Attitude (Philippians 4:8)

Paul, in his typical style, never told us to avoid something without giving us something to practice in its place. But he reminded us that our attitudes start, not in our circumstances, but in our minds. In Philippians 4:8, he provided six thoughts to dwell on that will squelch the voices of blame and self-pity, and help us develop a godly attitude. “Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.”



A CLOSER LOOK

Choose Your Attitude

The apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians because they had a tendency toward disunity. One particular relationship within the church caused the apostle to admonish the Philippians to pursue unity: “I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord” (Philippians 4:2). Disunity and broken relationships often occur when individuals display these and other aggressive or passive attitudes:

- **Blame:** When life doesn’t go our way, we often become aggressive and start looking for someone to blame. Sometimes we even lash out at God, our primary source of help.
- **Self-pity:** Self-pity, the passive response to bad circumstances, keeps us down, makes us feel like the victim of an unfair world, and causes us to believe that no one, not even God, cares.

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Philippians 2:1–5, 14; 4:4–8

Continued from previous page

But instead of fighting one another, Paul encouraged Euodia, Syntyche, and all the Philippians to reflect these positive attitudes rooted in their relationships with Christ:

- **Unselfish humility:** Christians should adopt Christ’s attitude when He came to earth to die for our sins (Philippians 2:3–8).
- **Positive cooperation:** Let’s abandon grumbling and seek to build others up instead (Philippians 2:14).
- **Genuine joy:** Joy is rooted in a Person, not in our circumstances. Prayer shifts the load from our shoulders to God’s, making room for peace and joy (Philippians 4:4–7).



LET’S LIVE IT

Yes, we can control our attitudes. Think of your mind as a safe deposit box. Every day, we make attitude “deposits” into that box. So let’s begin to fill that box with godly attitudes that come from God’s Word—joy, humility, encouragement, forgiveness, and love.

What circumstances are challenging your attitude today? What will you do to keep your mind focused on Christ and the godly attitudes He modeled for us?

ENDNOTE

1. Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, trans. Ilse Lasch (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), 65.



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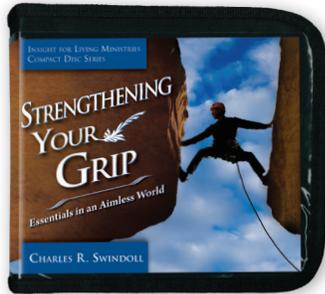
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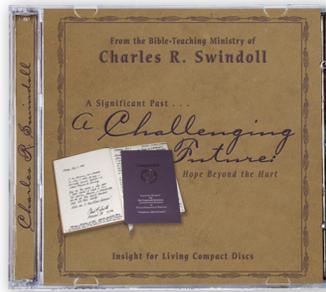
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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Evangelism

Acts 8:25–39



LET'S BEGIN HERE

On your list of desired activities, does sharing your faith rank right up there with getting a root canal? Don't feel alone. It seems that most Christians would rather do anything than witness. Why? First, we don't really know how to go about it. Second, we're indifferent; we have other things to think about, and besides, plenty of evangelists out there can do the job better than we could. Third, we're afraid. Nobody likes to look like a fool because he or she can't answer all of the questions others may have. And what if the response is hostile? The thought of sharing our faith often leaves us intimidated.

We've probably all been in situations—maybe on a plane or at a convention—when the topic of religion came up and we had to face the inevitable dialogue with a nonbeliever. We've usually ended up feeling awkward and uncomfortable, and we've walked away wondering, *What could I have said or done not only to win a hearing but to keep a hearing? How could I have shown Christ to that person in a more understandable way? How could I have kept from sounding so pious or so out of touch with reality?*

Good questions. Acts 8 has some answers for the apprehensive evangelist.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. Philip's Background: From Persecution to Proclamation

In the first century, the seeds of the gospel were scattered by the winds of persecution. With Saul of Tarsus looking on, religious leaders stoned Stephen after his compelling and convicting sermon (Acts 7:52–60). Those stones sent ripples of persecution through Jerusalem, driving believers out to all of Judea and Samaria (8:1). But persecution didn't dampen their spirits—it emboldened them to share their faith. And one of those scattered evangelists was a man named Philip.



Quotable

“Don't just pretend to love each other; really love people.”

— Charles R. Swindoll



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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Evangelism

Acts 8:25–39

2. Philip's Person-to-Person Experience (Acts 8:25–39)

Through Philip, God had stirred up a revival in Samaria (Acts 8:5–13). When the apostles heard that he was up to his ears in new believers, they dispatched Peter and John to help him (8:14–25). Their ministry blossomed, and people started to grow in the love of God. But instead of leaving Philip in this flourishing ministry, God uprooted Philip and sent him on a mission on a desert road. We can learn six principles from Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch.

1. **Sensitivity:** When the angel of the Lord told Philip to take a trip to a desert road, Philip not only heard the message, he also obeyed immediately (8:26–27).
2. **Availability:** Availability focuses on our actions, going wherever God leads. God led Philip to a royal official poring over the prophet Isaiah's words (8:27–29).
3. **Initiative:** When Philip heard the Ethiopian official reading from Isaiah 53, he took the initiative to ask an insightful question and spark a spiritual conversation (8:30).
4. **Tactfulness:** Philip treated the Ethiopian eunuch with respect, courtesy, and dignity. He lovingly led the eunuch through the words of Isaiah to Christ Himself (8:31–34).
5. **Precision:** Starting with the eunuch's frame of reference, Isaiah 53, Philip shared the gospel and kept the conversation focused on Christ (8:35).
6. **Decisiveness:** After trusting the Spirit to work in the eunuch's heart, Philip helped him understand that following Christ involves making a clear decision (8:36–38).



A CLOSER LOOK

Are You Available?

Many believers struggle with the task Jesus gave to His followers right before He ascended into heaven—to tell others the truth about who He is and what He has done for us (Matthew 28:19–20; Acts 1:8). As we seek to obey, our tendency is to focus on ourselves—especially on our fears or expectations regarding what might happen. God has called us to step outside of our comfort zones and to see the world from someone else's perspective. We need to make ourselves available for the opportunities that arise. Our availability begins with a sensitivity to God's leading in our lives. Like Philip, we must be willing to go where God leads (Acts 8:27). Jesus constantly made Himself available to others in His ministry. He was also aware of the needs of those around Him. Likewise, we should be attentive to the needs of people around us—physical, emotional, and spiritual. Will we follow His example?



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Strengthening Your Grip on Evangelism

Acts 8:25–39



LET'S LIVE IT

Many evangelism-shy Christians just want to be silent partners, winning the world to Christ by living godly lives and keeping their mouths shut. While living a godly life forms the foundation for sharing the gospel with others, we must still share the message of Christ with our words.

God has placed you where He has placed no one else. No one in the world has the same network of relationships that you have. God hasn't put you in those places merely to model the truth. Listen for the voice of the Spirit to whisper in your ear, and follow Him wherever He leads.

If someone were to ask you to show him or her what the Bible says about salvation, could you do it? Take some time to write out a gospel presentation using some of these passages: Genesis 3:9–11; Isaiah 53; John 3:1–17; Acts 4:8–12; Romans 5:6–21; 1 Corinthians 15:1–8; Galatians 2:16; and Ephesians 2:1–10. (You can also write out your personal testimony and incorporate some of these verses.)



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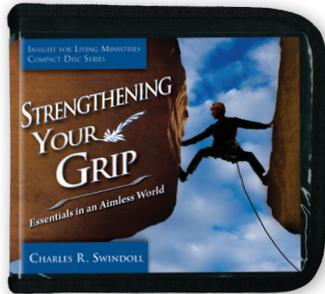
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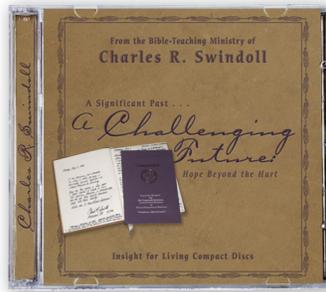
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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Authority

1 Samuel 15



LET'S BEGIN HERE

Authority. That's a bad word to many people. *Question authority* seems to be the motto of our culture, and rebellion seems to be a rite of passage.

How many teachers spend the majority of their class time just trying to get students under control? How many police officers realize that, to many, their badge is no longer an emblem of honor and respect but a target to shoot at? How many bosses get the feeling that their employees would do anything rather than what they're supposed to do? And how many parents know the frustration of having their authority undermined, not just by defiant children but by their peers, the media, and the culture at large?

Let's remember that God has set the authorities in place. Rebellion against earthly authorities amounts to rebellion against God, which is the most serious revolt of all.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. The Roots of Rebellion

All rebellion has its roots in our ancient parents, Adam and Eve. When they disobeyed God, the weeds of defiance invaded the garden of Eden and the entire human race (Romans 5:12). The weeds poked their prickly leaves out of the ground in the life of Cain, Adam and Eve's son who killed his brother in a fit of jealousy (Genesis 4:3–8). Rebellion, however, doesn't always reveal itself in such a drastic way as Cain's murder of Abel. Sometimes it's more subtle, silently convincing our hearts that the time has come to free ourselves from the "tyranny" of our heavenly Ruler—to live life our way instead of God's.



Quotable

*“That which
will keep a
ministry on target
is a faithful
commitment to
the Word
of God.”*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on Authority

1 Samuel 15

2. How Rebellion Reveals Itself (1 Samuel 15:1–35)

King Saul bears the infamous reputation of one who spurned the very God who had appointed him king of Israel. Where David was known as a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14), Saul could rightly be labeled as a man after *Saul's* own heart. Saul's track record shows four primary ways that rebellion reveals itself.

1. **Defying authority to fulfill our desires:** God told Saul to kill all the Amalekites and their animals, but Saul spared King Agag and the best livestock. Rebellion is letting our own desires nudge ahead of the desire to obey God fully (1 Samuel 15:1–9).
2. **Rationalization and cover-up to excuse sinful actions:** Though Saul disobeyed God's command, the king had convinced himself that he had actually obeyed God's command. And when Christians disobey, it is still sin (15:10–13).
3. **Defensiveness when confronted with the truth:** Like a child caught sneaking cookies before dinner, Saul's rebellion was uncovered by Samuel. But instead of owning up to his sin, King Saul was defensive and pinned the blame on others (15:14–15).
4. **Resistance to accountability when wrong has been committed:** Worse than blatantly ignoring God's command, Saul reinterpreted his sin. He refused to be held accountable to anyone but himself and his own agenda (15:16–23).

Finally, under the pressure of Samuel's confrontation, Saul admitted his sin. But it was too little too late. From that point on, God rejected Saul as Israel's king (15:24–35). For Christians, God forgives rebellion, but we can't erase the consequences for our relationships and our ministry.



A CLOSER LOOK

Disqualified by Rebellion

King Saul was a real piece of work. After he became king of Israel, his actions and decisions soon revealed to the people that he wasn't the man they thought he was. He was, instead, a selfish, angry, hateful, mean-spirited man. During the later years of his rule he lost touch with reality, thus disqualifying himself for the job. Early in Saul's regime, when God commanded him to kill all the Amalekites, Saul openly disobeyed God. When Samuel pointed his finger at the king, Saul at first tried to rationalize what he had done, then finally admitted, "I am guilty." But even then, Saul qualified his confession, "because I feared the people and listened to their voice" (1 Samuel 15:24). The tragic story of Saul is that he never, ever fully repented of his sin. Though believers in Christ have received complete forgiveness, unguarded and vulnerable confession to God and others preserves our relationships with the Lord and the people we love.



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Strengthening Your Grip on Authority

1 Samuel 15



LET'S LIVE IT

So how can we avoid rebellion against God's authority? Here are some suggestions for all three stages of life, beginning with children in the home.

- **Children:** *A rebellious nature is conceived in a home where parents relinquish control.* Actually, children don't want complete control; they want limits from loving parents.
- **Teens:** *A rebellious spirit is cultivated among peers who resist control.* Peer pressure exerts a powerful influence. Parents must keep open lines of communication with teens.
- **Adults:** *A rebellious life is crushed by God when He regains control.* We can't resist God's authority forever. Eventually, He will allow our circumstances to teach us the importance of submission. God sometimes has to rock the boat to get us back on course.

Are you in rebellion against any of the authorities God has placed in your life? What will you do to make things right?



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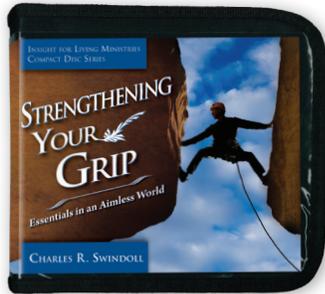
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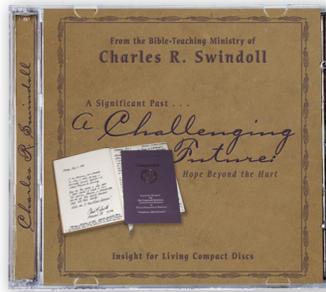
1 Samuel 15



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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on the Family

Psalms 127–128



LET'S BEGIN HERE

What is the family?

In a culture where every role and relationship—from the husband-wife relationship to the parent-child relationship—is in the process of redefinition, it's hard to get a grip on what *family* should look like. Even for Christians, who have many pictures of family life in the Bible, it's hard to make those pictures a present-day reality when our culture paints a very different portrait.

To strengthen our grip on what God intended for the family, let's turn to His Word, specifically Psalms 127 and 128. Though not a detailed manual for successful family life, these two ancient hymns paint a mural of inspired images depicting four stages of family life: the foundation of the home (Psalm 127:1–2), the expansion of the home (127:3–5), the child-rearing years (128:1–3), and the later years (128:4–6). These verses can help us appreciate, as well as improve, our families.



LET'S DIG DEEPER

1. First Scene: The Foundational Years (Psalm 127:1–2)

Any home must rest on a firm foundation, both structurally and spiritually. What good is a home, even an elaborate one, if it's thrown together by an incompetent builder? God is the Master Builder. Unless a husband and wife construct their home according to God's Word and entrust it to His care, their work and watchfulness will be wasted. For the family to survive the wind, rain, theft, and vandalism of today's world, God must be the builder.



Quotable

*“You can come
to church, sit,
leave, and
NEVER be
impacted
by another life.
That's tragic,
you know?”*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on the Family

Psalms 127–128

2. Second Scene: The Expansion Years (Psalm 127:3–5)

When children come along, everything changes! More mouths to feed, more bills to pay, more burdens to bear. But that's not how God looks at children; He calls them gifts, rewards, and sources of strength. Our children belong to God, but He has entrusted these gifts to their parents' care. As earthly stewards of these little ones, we have the joy and privilege of equipping them for life . . . and then releasing them, like arrows, to live with purpose.

3. Third Scene: The Child-Rearing Years (Psalm 128:1–3)

In Psalm 128, the psalmist used agricultural imagery to depict the blessing of a growing, flourishing family. Notice, though, that members of the family grow in their own way. A vine grows differently from an olive plant. So take note, fathers. Your job isn't to make carbon copies of yourself but to help your wife and children grow in the way God designed them.

4. Fourth Scene: The Closing Years (Psalm 128:4–6)

What about the “empty nest” years? Psalm 128 provides encouragement for hanging on after the kids leave. An empty nest doesn't have to mean an empty life. God continues to bless us even after our children have gone. He blesses us personally as we continue to walk with Him. He blesses us corporately as His people. And He blesses us generationally by allowing us to see our children expand their families with children of their own.



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STRENGTHENING YOUR GRIP

Strengthening Your Grip on the Family

Psalms 127–128



A CLOSER LOOK

Fruitless Trees?

Psalm 127 contrasts the anxieties of life (Psalm 127:1–2) with the blessings of life (127:3–5). Those who love life and give life to others will find themselves surrounded by gifts—their children. While many today do desire and yearn for children, it has become increasingly common for couples—even Christian couples—to choose to remain childless. Such a choice, when made despite good health and reproductive ability, is akin to choosing to become a fruit tree that bears no fruit. It denies the nature that God gave us at creation—not to mention His command to humanity to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:28). Our commitment to children in the context of marriage mirrors our confession of new life in Jesus. When physically capable couples affirm life by giving it, they also affirm their commitment to others outside of themselves—a commitment that stands at the very heart of our Christian faith (Matthew 22:39).



LET'S LIVE IT

What is a family? It's an institution built, guided, and blessed by God. And one that honors Him. But perhaps the more important question is, What is *your* family?

Here are some questions to help you evaluate the state of your family:

- Is love in your home unconditional?
- Are you investing the necessary time into your family?
- Are the memories you have created mostly grim or mostly happy?



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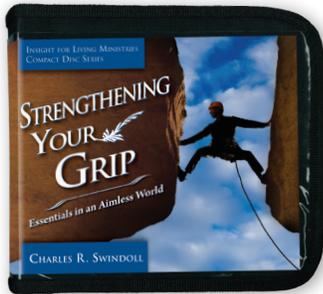
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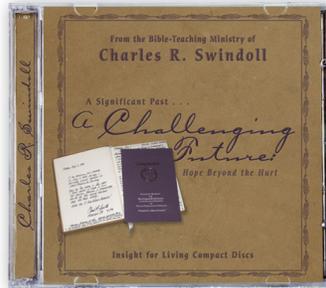
Psalms 127–128



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