

LIFE LESSONS

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When we were planning the 2018 Conclave of New Testament Elders, Clay Sterrett, Chairman of the Planning Committee, asked me to give a talk on lessons I have learned over a lifetime of Christian ministry. Clay said, "I heard Charles Swindoll give a talk on *16 Life Lessons* and it was very practical and very good, and I think that it would be helpful if you could do something like that at the Conclave." I resisted this suggestion. I never want anything to be about me, nor do I ever want anything to be the "Jim Garrett Show." Clay persisted, and the Planning Committee agreed with him. So, though the following probably is not what Clay and the committee envisioned, it is given as an act of obedience to these brothers. I could present many more Life Lessons, but I have chosen to opt on the side of brevity and limit this presentation to ten – a *Decalogue*. (caveat: I have not read Swindoll's, *16 Life Lessons*; thus, I have not been tempted to plagiarize nor copy his presentation).

Most of you have read, *The Doulos Principle*, which is my life-message. Anything of worth that I have learned in more than 70 years of ministry¹ is related, immediately or remotely, to this principle. Sometimes, as I look back on my early years, before I learned this principle, I can see how much I erred when I was operating with a different understanding of life. Thus, it is difficult to avoid rehashing the lessons contained in the book and I must begin by restating that underlying principle. I also must state that I never have had a mentor, nor a discipler, nor a father in the faith, nor anyone to whom I could look for answers, but I have had to learn and to grow on my own. Whether that is a good thing or a bad thing, a strength or a weakness, who can say - it is just a fact.

LESSON ONE: The most important thing that I have learned is that obedience to Our Lord must be the reason for all that I do, both in ministry and in life as a whole.

I once heard a speaker describe obedience as, "God's love language." Jesus' statements recorded in the Apostle John's writings, would indicate that this is true.²

- *"If you love Me, you will keep My commandments. (John 14:15)*
- *"He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him." (John 14:21)*
- *Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him. (John 14:23)*
- *"If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. (John 15:10)*
- *For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome. (1 John 5:3)*
- *And this is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, that you should walk in it. (2 John 6)*

¹ I am now 87 years old. I taught my first Bible class when I was 17 years old.

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I have learned that if I am obedient to My Lord, I am not responsible for the results of my obedience.

Describing the success of the evangelistic endeavors in Corinth, Paul wrote, *I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth.*⁷ *So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth.* (1 Corinthians 3:6-7)

- If I am obedient My Lord is responsible for the results, whatever they may be.
- If I am not obedient to the Lord, then I am responsible for the results.

Describing his lifetime labors, Paul wrote, *But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.* (1 Corinthians 15:10)

When I stand before God in judgment, if everything I have undertaken has had no visible results, yet it can be said truthfully that all of my undertakings were done in obedience to my Lord, then I will be labeled as a success.

If I have huge results, but what I did was not done in submission to Our Lord, I will be a failure, reminiscent of those whom Jesus described in the closing words of the Sermon on the Mount.

*"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter."*²² *"Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?'"*²³ *"And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness.'* (Matthew 7:21-23)

Thus, for me, success is not measured by results, but by my level of obedience.

To know God's Will and to do it – this is the *doulos principle* - and it is the desire of my life to live by that principle.

LESSON TWO: Prayer is as necessary for my spiritual life as is breathing to my physical life.

Concerning the Word of God, Hebrews states,

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

Yet, for me, in addition to the authoritative voice of Scripture, I must have lengthy, undistracted times before God asking Him to audit my life.

It is vital for me to sit before God, in the predawn hours, several mornings each week, asking Him to audit my life and to expose the motives that drive me, each day. It is a great blessing to be able to sit spiritually naked before Our Lord, desiring to hide nothing, eagerly listening for His truth concerning who I am, and why I am what I am.

Self is so deceptive and pernicious that only He can turn the searchlight on those hidden corners of my soul and reveal the truth concerning what is hidden there.

It is in prayer that I receive direction concerning the word to be brought on Sunday morning, or at any other time, when it is my responsibility and privilege to be God's spokesman. I do not want to get into the pulpit and just give a good talk – although it might be appreciated by some of the congregation. I need to know God's specific word for the group before whom I am speaking. I know of no other way to discover that, apart from extended, undistracted, prayer.

Also, in undistracted prayer, I receive from Our Lord the necessary direction for my dealing with the lives of the many people I care for each day. As, I sit in God's Presence and meditate on each situation, Proverbs 3:5-6 becomes a reality, *Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He will make your paths straight* (more on this later).

LESSON THREE: In order for me to fulfill the particular calling and role that Our Lord has chosen for me, it is necessary for me to devote myself to responsible, accurate, exegesis of Holy Scripture.

For me to do this, I must understand and practice the principles of sound hermeneutics. Furthermore, a working knowledge of the original languages, biblical culture, and Church History, have been very important to me. Only by diligent application of these principles and knowledge can I be certain that what I am teaching and preaching, is the true apostolic message. When Scripture is ambiguous, and I form an opinion, I must clearly state that, "it is my opinion that...."

Not only is the application of these tools essential to my being certain that I am preaching and teaching the truth, but also these tools are important when I am in the role of evaluating various teachings and movements that have presented themselves to the Church. More than once, I have encountered a popular movement that has influenced a local church for which I have some degree of responsibility, which, upon evaluation, displays an ignorance of the language or other relevant facts. In some instances, the proponents of the movement have given no thought to pursuing accuracy in these matters. Frequently, the "newly discovered truth" has declared some exciting new spiritual insight, or perhaps has produced an exciting experience, and that is enough for some people.

Sometimes, the aberrations are serious enough for me to take opposition to the movement, and at other times, the aberrations are of such insignificance that it is best to leave it alone. It is important for me, in prayer, to seek God's will for what I should do in these situations.

LESSON FOUR: When I am in the pulpit, I am representing God, and I had better get it right.

This is a natural follow-up to the previous lessons - i.e., the necessity of hearing from God, concerning what is to be presented, and sound Scriptural exegesis to make certain that what I present is an accurate expression of God and His will.

I have never known stage fright, even when I was a child. It always has been easy for me to speak to an audience. However, when I enter the pulpit, it is important for me to do so with a holy fear of God – I must not make a mistake in describing Him or His Will.

Someday, I will stand before His Throne, and I will have to give account for how I have presented Him to His people and to the world. My prayer is that Our Lord will not say to me, "Jim, why did you say that – that's not Who I am nor is that My Will." In order to make certain that I am not misrepresenting Him, nor describing Him inaccurately, I must seek Him in prayer and in sound exegesis of Scripture. I cannot think of any activity for which a casual attitude is more inappropriate, nor any activity that should be approached with greater sobriety, than preaching.

LESSON FIVE: Anyone who is serious about serving Our Lord, sooner or later, will have his reputation stained.

A baseball player may begin a game with a clean white uniform – but if he really is in the game, that uniform will become stained with dirt and sweat. If he comes out of the game with a clean uniform, he obviously didn't do much during the nine innings of play. So it is with the reputation of anyone who is fully in the ministry game. Sooner or later, Satan will make certain that someone will speak ill of you, gossip about you, and seek to exploit some personality trait that can be criticized.

I have learned that when this happens, it is important for me to stop and evaluate the situation to see if there is any truth in the criticism. If there is, I thank God for bringing it to light and seek, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, to make a correction.

If there is not any truth in the slander, or if there is some distortion of the truth, or if someone just doesn't like me for whatever reason, then I thank God that He has allowed me to experience what Our Lord experienced in all of the false and hateful things that were put forth concerning Him. Like Paul, He has allowed me, in a very small way, to *know the fellowship of His sufferings*.

One important thing that I have learned, concerning such slander, is that if I am being obedient to Christ, I must not defend myself. I leave my defense in the hands of the Lord whom I serve.

LESSON SIX: If I follow Our Lord, with a full heart, and if I take a stand for truth, I will be rejected by some people.

This lesson became very apparent to me when, through exegesis of Scripture, I rejected the *Cessationist* view of the Holy Spirit. The *Cessationist* view was and is the position held by the Restoration Movement, in which I had spent my childhood and the movement in which I had ministered throughout my early adult life. In the mid-1970's, when the Charismatic Movement exploded in America, I began to re-examine my position on the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit. Through exegesis, not through experience, I changed my beliefs concerning the Holy Spirit.

This caused me to be rejected by those with whom I had labored for decades. I had been a part of a team that planted thirteen churches in eastern Oklahoma. I had been a guest lecturer at Bible colleges. At one point, I was approached about whether or not I would be willing to be considered for the presidency of one of the Bible colleges. I had written articles for the nationally distributed, *Christian Standard*. I had written studies and articles for the annual *Standard Publishing Teachers Manual*. I had been on the faculty of Sunset Bible Camp, usually for six weeks every summer and then, for a few years, I was the camp manager. I had conducted evangelistic meetings and revival meetings in several states. I was the editor and publisher of the *Northeastern Oklahoma Evangelistic Association* monthly newsletter, *The Beacon*.

When, through exegesis, I no longer could accept the *Cessationists'* position, I became *persona non grata* in all of these venues.³ No longer was I welcomed into the pulpit of churches that I had helped to plant and establish. No longer was I welcomed on the campgrounds. Negative

³ It should be noted that neither do I agree with some Pentecostal doctrines. If it necessary to give me a label, I am what some have labeled, a *Continuationist*.

articles were written about me by certain ones, whom I always had considered to be my brothers. On and on I could go describing the places, churches, and ministries that barred my participation. None of this bothered me, because I knew what I believed and why - and that the stand that I had taken was the truth and that my actions were pleasing to Our Lord. I remembered the words of Jesus,

Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.³⁵ For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;³⁶ and a man's enemies will be the members of his household.³⁷ He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.³⁸ And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.³⁹ He who has found his life shall lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake shall find it. (Matthew 10:34-39)

Although those who rejected me were not my biological family, but my spiritual family, the principle elucidated in these verses was what I experienced. This is not the only time that such has taken place, when I have taken a stand on a Scriptural truth that others have not liked. Even so, being obedient to my Lord, and His Word is the most important thing in my life – regardless of who chooses to reject me because of it.

It also is important for me to avoid viewing those who have rejected me as being bad people. They must answer to God and not to me.

LESSON SEVEN: If I am a threat to Satan, he will attack me and my family.

No real battle occurs, unless there is the potential for wounding of the combatants on both sides of the battle. Satan will study me, my weaknesses, my tendencies, and my character traits, in order to find things that he can exploit in spiritual warfare.

When Satan hits me with a strong blow, and I do not waver, he then goes after my family, seeking to distract me from my mission or to intimidate me by the pain and seduction that my loved ones experience. That, of course, is what Satan did with Job – killing off his servants and his children, and then having his wife say to him, *why don't you just curse God and die* (Job 2:9).

It also is important for me to remember that Paul wrote,

No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it. (1 Corinthians 10:13)

The noun rendered, *temptation*⁴, and the verb rendered, *tempt*⁵, can refer to any sort of test, including enticement to sin. Thus, Our Lord knows me and knows what I can take. If something happens to me and I say, “I can't take one more thing,” and then one more thing happens, I need to remember that Our Lord has expressed confidence in me – he knows what I can bear, even if I do not know what my limits are.

One of my prayers for the families of church leaders is for God to assign some powerful angels to protect them from assaults of the enemy, including his demons.

⁴ Πειρασμός (*peirasmos*)

⁵ Πειράζω (*peirazo*)

As I have sought to understand, *the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it*, I can see how this applies to enticement to sin. Often, the way of escape is to flee the scene, so to speak. However, in other sorts of tests, this is not always clear. It is here, that I must seek God in prayer. Usually, in my experience, it has been His will for me not to escape, but to endure, and by doing so, to give God the victory.

LESSON EIGHT: Friendship does not require agreement.

I have learned that I can have deep friendships with those with whom I disagree. Sometimes, this even involves exegetical disagreements. Disagreement does not mean rejection. I can and do have genuine friendships with those who do not agree with me on matters of politics, doctrine, or other matters, yet both of us are seeking to serve God with a whole heart. As an example, the late Dale Rumble and I were friends and had deep respect for one another. However, we disagreed over some elements of the Latter Rain Doctrine - of which Dale was an advocate. Sometimes, we joked about our differences, but those differences did not abrogate our friendship, nor mutual respect for one another, nor did it abrogate our expectation to someday walk the streets of heaven together.

There are disagreements that do require the forfeiture of a friendship. Paul refers to this necessity in I Corinthians Chapter 5. In this chapter he discussed a situation in Corinth in which a man in the congregation was having sexual relations with his father's wife.⁶ Paul concludes his admonition in verses 9-11.

*I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people;*¹⁰ *I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters; for then you would have to go out of the world.*¹¹ *But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler-- not even to eat with such a one.* (1 Corinthians 5:9-11)

Clearly, I cannot have a friendship with someone *who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace* (Hebrews 10:29)

Yet, short of someone's having such a disregard for the sacredness of Christ, His Blood, and His amazing grace, I can have as a friend someone who does not see things the same way that I do. Friendship does not require agreement.

LESSON NINE: I should not feel the need to apologize for, nor deny, the differences in taste that set me apart from my brothers.

Some people like chocolate pie and some people like lemon pie. There is just a difference in taste and that is a reality.

There are many examples that I could give concerning this difference in taste, but one area in which this manifests itself for me, is in church music. Many of the modern worship songs are not my "heart language." Many of the songs in the hymnal are. A significant number of the modern worship songs fit the definition of, "hymn," more than many of the songs in the book

⁶ This would not have been the church member's mother. Perhaps his father's first (the mother of the accused) wife had died, or a divorce had taken place between the man and his first wife – or perhaps the church member whom Paul accused of sin had been born out of wedlock.

that we call, *The Hymnal*. So, it cannot be said that I prefer the hymns. It is more a matter of a musical style.

Even though there is this difference in musical preference – at times even the inability to relate to some of the newer songs – it is important for me to cooperate and participate in singing with gusto, songs that are not my heart language. It is important for me to be an encouragement to the rest of the congregation and a supporter of those who are called to the ministry of leading worship. The songs that are not my style, are a worship vehicle for those who are about me and so I must support and encourage them in their worship. However, if the lyrics are expressing bad theology, or something with which I cannot agree, I would be a hypocrite should I sing them.

LESSON TEN: I cannot solve everyone's problems, nor alleviate everyone's suffering.

This is one of the most difficult ministry realities for me. I deeply care for people and I feel the weight of their burdens. The pain I feel for other's suffering often becomes difficult to bear – at times, almost debilitating.

Furthermore, it is a part of my nature to be a “fixer.” Because that is my nature, I have had to learn that my instinctive response to people's troubles may be motivating me to interfere with God's dealing with something in a person's life – or perhaps shortcutting God's efforts to bring spiritual growth to that person.

So, one of the roles that Our Lord has given to me is to suffer in behalf of others, as He suffers when He observes the consequences of our human condition – even as Jesus did when He wept before the tomb of Lazarus.

Once again, it is important for me to stay close to God in order to know when I should restrict my action to prayer, or to take some action to relieve someone's pain. Regardless of which direction is taken, it seems that it is not my lot to escape the pain that I experience in behalf of others – this is the price of love and an inescapable dimension of Christian ministry.