

WHERE ARE WE HEADED?



ONE SUNNY SATURDAY morning, many years ago, I was sitting outside watching my children race their tricycles. My daughter, Melanie, was five and enjoyed lapping her three-year old brother, David, who was just beginning to master pushing the pedals and steering at the same time. As I read the newspaper, I glanced up every so often to observe the race. Suddenly, things became quiet. They were sitting on their trikes involved in a deep conversation. As I listened, they were discussing the fact that God made two kinds of people. I heard my daughter say, “God makes half boys and half girls.” She continued by explaining to her little brother how girls grow up to be moms and boys grow up to be dads.

Then I heard my son ask the big question, “But when the baby is born, how does the doctor know if it’s a boy or a girl?” I instinctively leaned forward in my chair, thinking to myself, “This should be interesting.”

My daughter confidently replied, “David, the girls have bows!”

Satisfied with his sister’s explanation of life, my son turned the wheels on his tricycle, and began another lap around the patio.

Life is so simple when you’re five. The world is innocent and rational. Simple explanations are satisfying. The pressures and worries of adulthood are gratefully absent. But when we grow up, life soon becomes complex.

If not for my thirty-plus years as a Christian counselor, I would most likely assume that people work out the complexities and challenges in

their lives and get on with life the best they can. However, I write this book knowing full well that quite the contrary is true. Countless believers are looking at their lives and admitting, “I’m just not getting it. Will my life ever change?” They’re overwhelmed with life. Their relationship with God is not what they would like it to be, and they are unhappy with many of the important relationships in their lives.

We all want our lives to change—in big ways and small ways. We want to enjoy the full life that God desires for his children. In most cases, we’re more than willing to put in the effort required. We try harder, pray harder, and yet the results are often less than desired. Because we don’t fully understand the true source of the problem, we’re stuck in a frustrating holding pattern, and we don’t know how to escape.

Jesus said, “Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32).

Deep change requires a fundamental understanding of several life-changing truths given to us by God—powerful truths that are easy to miss, truths that make life work so much better, because they set us free to live a satisfying and successful life.

Simplified Christianity

How do we live a successful life? Jesus said the two most important things for us to do each day are to love God and to love others. He called this the Great Commandment. Jesus said the whole law can be summarized in the Great Commandment, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matt. 22:37-39). If you were able to follow just this one commandment and nothing else, you’d automatically be following all of the commandments. Everything else is included in the command to love God and to love others.

Love is the ultimate test of our spiritual maturity. It is the most important measure of our lives. 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 NLT says,

If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn’t love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God’s secret plans

and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing. If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing.

Nearly fifteen years ago, I was browsing through a bookstore while attending a Christian counseling conference at Glen Eyrie Conference Center in Colorado. Always one to enjoy a good laugh, I picked up a book entitled, *Church Cartoons*. One particular cartoon in the book got me laughing so hard that I actually attracted a crowd. The cartoon caption read, "The Key to the Christian Life." It showed a bewildered looking man sitting in a church pew buried up to his neck in keys. Directly in front of him was the pastor standing behind the pulpit, throwing yet another key onto the pile.

As funny as that cartoon was, the cartoonist was conveying an important message that needs to be taken seriously. Have we created so many "keys for successful Christian living" that many Christians are overwhelmed and immobilized by all the good things they should be doing? *God's plan for us is not easy, but it is simple.* Although there are certainly many important keys to living the Christian life, there is only one master key. We are to love.

Unfortunately, we often get so caught up in doing good things that we get distracted from doing the most important thing. If we focus primarily on the one master key—the command to love God and love others—we won't become buried in all the other less important keys. We won't lose our focus and risk missing the main thing.

Simply put, the effective Christian life means that we learn to live what we call a *Love Focused* life. To be Love Focused is to make God's command to love him and others our highest and most important purpose and motivation each day. To be Love Focused is to use the yardstick of love to measure everything we do.

This book is about learning to live a Love Focused life and putting an end to a mediocre, dissatisfying life. It's about a dramatic shift in our understanding of why we act and feel the way we do. It's about exposing a fundamental flaw in our thinking about life that keeps us living on a treadmill of pressure and fear. Finally, and most importantly, this book is about why a common misbelief about God prevents us from successfully

fulfilling our highest calling and keeps us from having a life overflowing with peace and joy. By attaining our highest purpose, we will find our greatest personal fulfillment. A life of love leaves no regrets—only fond memories of a life well invested in eternal things.

Where to Begin

When I first see a client in my office, the yardstick I use to determine their level of maturity is the yardstick of love. *How free are they to love others?* That's the best yardstick, because it is God's yardstick.

As a family therapist, I have come to see that the reason Christians fail to love usually has very little to do with a lack of knowledge. The vast majority of Christians know that they are supposed to love other people, and in most situations, they know *how* to love another person. They know they should be patient and kind. They have heard of the Golden Rule and know they should, "Do unto others as you would want them to do unto you."

The more fundamental problem is that Christians do not understand *why* they so often fail to love. Learning to live a Love Focused life requires that we look beyond the common beliefs about love and delve into the root of the problem. If we are to learn to love each other as God commands, we must first understand what motivates our behavior, and how that motivation relates to our struggle to love others.

WHY WE ACT THE WAY WE DO

Do you ever wonder why human beings act the way they do? In my office, I'm asked this question all the time—from parents who can't figure out why their teenagers won't talk to them, to wives who are desperate to get their workaholic husbands to come home from work. They ask, Why does my teenager insist on wearing baggy jeans? Why do I get angry and yell at my children when I really want to love them? Is it genetics? Is it our upbringing? Is it our choice? Do others make us do the things we do?

And why is it so hard to do what we know is right? Why is it so hard to change? Why is it so difficult to follow God's plan of loving him and loving others?

In Romans 7, Paul talks about his inner struggle to do right. He said, “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me.”

When Jesus strongly rebuked the Pharisees for their self-centered motivations, he made it very clear that a person’s motivation is just as important as his behavior. 1 Samuel 16:7 says, “...The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”

Why is it that though we know we should be Love Focused, we don’t make it a priority? Why do we so often fail when we deeply desire to love? How many times do we feel challenged to serve the needy and witness to our neighbors, yet we struggle to follow through? Perhaps we hear a moving sermon on love. We leave church determined to trust God more and do a better job at loving our family. But by the time we get home, we’ve angrily snapped at our children. Once again we decide to try again another day.

Unfortunately, desire and determination aren’t usually enough. The underlying causes are not obvious, but still we must understand them before we can change. Until we understand the cause of the problem, deep change is not likely because deep change requires a very different look into what motivates our behavior.

Traditional Psychology

Traditional psychology has taught us that our present behavior is the combined result of our childhood upbringing and our past experiences. It teaches that our past experiences cause us to be who we are today. When we observe strange behavior in others, we often conclude that something must have happened in their childhood to make them act that way. Is this assumption true? Do we have more choice in who we are today than we have been taught?

Our past experiences certainly do have a large influence on how we act today. Things like childhood traumas, family dynamics, divorce, parental addictions, abuse, and many other experiences understandably affect people in many negative ways. However, while our past certainly

influences our present behavior, it does not *make us* behave in any particular way today. Being rejected by her father does not force a young woman to have low self-esteem or prevent her from having close, intimate relationships. Being raped does not *make* a young woman become promiscuous. Experiencing parental divorce does not *make* a young man insecure. There are too many examples to the contrary. God has created us with a free will. We always have a choice in how we interpret and respond to life experiences, though sometimes it can be very hard.

Unfortunately, traditional psychology has often taught that the only path to change is through healing past wounds. That position is neither biblical nor logical, although it can be attractive to our self-centered human nature. Thinking that our past makes us behave in certain ways locks us into a victim mentality and reduces our responsibility for how we respond today to our past. It provides an excuse for people to justify and continue their unhealthy behavior. It also puts the primary focus for growth on using psychological techniques for healing past wounds before people can change.

Certainly, when painful things happen, they affect us deeply and are hard to get over. In many ways, they make life more difficult. These deep emotional scars definitely need to be addressed in a loving, supportive setting.

However, when the primary focus becomes healing childhood wounds so we can feel more comfortable, safe, and secure with others, we can become further entrapped with ourselves and less focused on God and others. Fortunately, we do not need to spend years of therapy healing *all* our past wounds before we can begin to see positive changes in our lives.

We Are What We Think

There is a more accurate way to explain our present behavior than simply using our past experiences. The Bible says, “For as he thinks within himself, so he is” (Prov. 23:7 NASB). In other words, our actions and emotions are the result of what we think and believe. If we want to change a behavior or an emotion, we need to first change our thinking.

Unlike some aspects of traditional psychology that teach our actions and emotions are the result of what happens to us, the Scriptures clearly teach that our thoughts and our interpretation of an event determine our response. Proverbs 23:7 does *not* say, “As a man feels, so he is.” It does *not* say, “What has happened to you determines what you do and feel.” It says what we *think* is most important. When we change our thinking, our behavior and feelings change, too.

All Behavior Is Goal-Driven

While our thinking clearly causes us to be the people we are, to fully understand why we act as we do we must also look at our goals for the future, because the goals we pursue show what we truly believe. Therefore, if we want to fully understand a person’s behavior, instead of asking what happened in their past, we also need to ask, “What do they want to achieve in the future?”

All human behavior is goal-driven. Behavior is always purposeful and never random or arbitrary. We act for specific reasons, always driven by a known or unknown goal. Each day we perform hundreds of behaviors designed to accomplish our goals.

For example, if my goal is to get something to eat, going to a restaurant or to the kitchen makes sense. If my goal is to get in shape, working out at the gym makes sense. If my goal is to stay dry in the rain, using an umbrella makes sense. If my goal is to love others, being patient and kind makes sense. The goal determines our behavior. The purpose of our behavior is always to accomplish our goal.

I will never forget an unusual case I had many years ago when I was just starting out as a counselor. A very nice Christian woman told me that she took a shower every day that lasted four hours. When I asked her why she had to stay in the shower for four hours, she said, “I don’t know.” Behind her unusual behavior was a wrong belief causing her to pursue a very specific goal. Knowing that her unusual behavior actually had a goal or purpose helped us to figure out why she did it. When she understood her goal was to “perfectly clean herself so God could love her again,” we had the opportunity to challenge that wrong belief, and replace it with the truth of God’s Word. As she learned about God’s grace and forgiveness, she was free to change her goal from cleaning

herself physically to thanking God that she was already spiritually clean. Because behavior is goal-driven, when her goal changed, her behavior changed.

Many of our goals are healthy and good because they are consistent with loving God and loving others. For example: We may want to listen more to our children, or be more encouraging to our family and friends. Other goals we pursue are more self-centered, like demanding our own way, or being the center of attention.

We are usually aware of our goals, because we usually know why we are doing something. However, we also pursue many goals every day that we are unaware of. It is often these unknown goals that trip us up and have a far greater effect on our lives. Common examples are goals like: I have to do everything perfectly; I have to be right; and I have to make sure everybody likes me. Other goals we can unknowingly pursue include: I have to keep my husband from getting mad; I have to keep my wife happy; I have to make sure my kids don't embarrass me; I have to get my own way; and I have to be understood.

I remember a husband and wife who came to see me who complained they rarely had a pleasant conversation. Their conversations usually ended in arguments. After I observed the way they communicated, a major part of their problem became clear. They were both pursuing the same goal, and they were both completely unaware of it. Each of them had the goal of "being right." More often than not, when one of them would make a statement about something—like what the weather was last Christmas—the other one would correct them about some detail. Then they'd go back and forth about what was correct until the discussion escalated into an argument. When they realized that self-centered goals were causing their arguments, they were able to change their goals and relate to each other more lovingly.

The Bible is filled with examples of men and women whose behavior reflected the pursuit of a definite goal. Peter's goal was to avoid trouble, so he denied Christ three times. Noah's goal was to obey God, so he built the ark in spite of great ridicule. Adam's goal was to protect himself from God, so he hid behind a tree.

Why was the apostle Paul so spiritually mature? Why did he behave so courageously and selflessly for the cause of Christ? The answer is

simple: his goal was to glorify God in everything he did. His life goal is stated in Philippians 1:21: “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” His goal of living for Christ and not himself determined his behaviors. His goal of following Christ caused him to act in courageous and sacrificial ways.

Jesus himself was a reflection of a man whose behavior was clearly driven by definite goals. Jesus’ goal was to glorify his Father (John 17:4) and “always do what pleases him” (John 8:29). Jesus’ behavior reflected these two goals in all he said and did.

We Pursue the Goal That Is Most Important to Us at the Time

At any given time, we will pursue the goal that we think is most important. If we think studying for tomorrow’s test is the most important thing to do, we will do that. But if we think it is more important to be with friends, we will do that.

When I was in the seventh grade, I was a member of my junior high school swim team. Being a typical twelve-year-old guy, I was somewhat protective of my self-esteem, so I was careful to avoid embarrassing situations. I was also quite competitive. I loved the challenge of the race, and I trained hard to win. I had some ability as a swimmer, and I often won my best event, the fifty-yard butterfly.

One warm June afternoon, my teammates and I gathered for the last and biggest meet of the year, the All-City Junior High Swimming Championships. Because this was the championship meet, several hundred spectators lined the sides of the pool. There were even cheerleaders sitting at the far end of the pool to cheer us on.

The fifty-yard butterfly was the last race of the day. I knew if I gave it my best, I had a good chance of winning. When my coach told me our team would win the city championships if I won, fear and pressure doubled my excitement. Now I had no choice. My goal was to win, and I was determined to reach that goal.

As the starter raised his starting pistol and yelled, “On your mark,” an intense wave of panic overcame me. I suddenly realized that I had forgotten to tie the string in my swim trunks and that they would not stay on if I dove into the pool. My concentration suddenly shifted from

the race ahead to horrifying images of swimming my race with my trunks around my ankles. In a split second, I had a major decision to make. Stop and tie my string, and leave the starting blocks late or dive in with nothing holding up my trunks. I thought of the spectators lining the pool, and especially the cheerleaders at the end of the pool. Should I try to win the race or should I protect myself from embarrassment?

In the split second before the starter's gun went off, I made my choice. I would go for the win. To achieve my goal, I knew I had to ignore my untied string and dive in. The moment I hit the water, the inevitable happened. The laws of physics had forced my trunks down to my knees and I was now swimming the championship race essentially naked! To make things worse, of all the strokes to be swimming in this precarious condition, the butterfly stroke was by far the worst.

By quickly glancing to my left and right, I could see I was in first place. Suddenly, a second wave of panic hit me when I realized I was swimming a fifty-yard race in a twenty-five-yard pool. That meant I would have to make a turn at the end of the pool and push off. All I could think of was my trunks coming completely off. Fortunately, after making my turn, they only went down to my ankles. At least I would have something to cover up with at the end of the race.

I was glad I could not see the faces of the people on the pool deck as I swam by. Just imagining them was humiliating enough. Somehow, in spite of the circumstances, my hunger for victory kept me focused enough to swim a competitive race. Amazingly, I touched the wall in first place. However, my desire to celebrate my victory was quickly overtaken by my need to pull my trunks back on and to remove myself from the pool area as quickly as possible. The last remnants of my deflated pride told me that escape was more important than celebration. I quickly jumped out of the pool and ran as fast as I could to the lockers. To this day, I have no idea if anyone said anything to me, or if they were laughing or cheering. All I remember is getting out of the pool, feeling totally embarrassed, and never wanting to see any of those people ever again.

Sitting alone in the locker room, my embarrassment was overwhelming. My pride was totally destroyed. Yet I also felt an exhilarating sense of satisfaction. In spite of all the obstacles, I had achieved a very important goal. I had won the race, and our team had won the championship.

While standing on the starting blocks at the beginning of the race, I had clearly chosen the goal of winning over the goal of protecting my pride. Perhaps on another day, I might have chosen instead to protect myself from embarrassment. But on this day, at this time, the goal of winning was the most important to me, so that was the one I pursued.

The More Important the Goal, the More Strongly We Pursue It

The more importance we place on achieving a goal, the more strongly we will be motivated to accomplish it. Suppose a teenage boy has a goal of being popular, and he thinks dying his hair purple will make him more popular. The more strongly he believes that, the more strongly he will be motivated to get his hair dyed.

I will never forget a story my college chemistry professor told that illustrates this point. The professor told us that his first teaching job several years prior was at a minimum-security prison. His job was to teach the inmates about physical fitness, a class the inmates found very boring. They were not motivated to do the workouts because they didn't see any personal benefit in it. Wanting to show the warden what a good teacher he was, my professor decided to teach the inmates some track and field events, hoping they would enjoy it and make him look good as a teacher. Since my professor had been a pole-vaulter in high school, he decided to teach the inmates how to pole-vault.

For the first time, the inmates got excited about their physical fitness class. My professor was amazed and excited. The warden was going to be very impressed with his teaching and motivational skills. It only took a few weeks to figure out what was really going on. When seven of the inmates escaped the prison by pole-vaulting over the prison's fence, it became clear their real goal was personal freedom, not getting an A in the class. Their increased interest, excitement, and motivation to excel in the class was directly related to the importance they placed on achieving their new goal of escaping from the prison.

We Choose the Behavior That We Think Will Best Achieve Our Goal

One reason we all behave so differently from each other is that we have all developed very different behaviors in order to accomplish our goals. We choose specific behaviors because we *think* they will best accomplish our goals.

If my goal is to lose ten pounds in the next two months, and I think jogging every day is a better way to lose weight than swimming, I will probably be motivated to do some jogging. If my goal is to get an A on my next English test, and I think that memorizing the vocabulary words is a better way to get an A than reading the textbook, I will probably be motivated to memorize the vocabulary words.

Goals Are the Greater Influence

Though we have often been taught that our past is what causes us to act the way we do, it is clear that our goals are a far greater influence on our behavior.

We act the way we do because we believe that behaving in certain ways will best help us reach our goals. Our goals are the *primary* influence on our behavior. Our past experiences have a more *indirect* influence because we form our goals in response to those past experiences. For example, if we grew up very poor, we may as an adult pursue the goal of becoming wealthy. If our mother died when we were young, we may pursue the goal of good health. If we were raped as a child, we may pursue the goal of avoiding relationships with men. Our past certainly influences our choice of goals, but it is the goal itself that ultimately determines why we act the way we do.

It is common to see siblings from the same alcoholic family choosing entirely different responses to their chaotic, abusive upbringings. Like many children of alcoholic homes, one sibling might choose the goal of escaping from his pain by also becoming an alcoholic. The second sibling might choose the goal of being a healthy parent so his children never have to experience the pain that he did. A third sibling might choose the goal of trying to control people to avoid the chaos of his alcoholic

upbringing. In all three situations, their chosen *goal* determined how they lived, not their common childhood experiences.

Now that we understand that we are not victims of our childhoods, and our behavior is the result of choosing to pursue certain goals, how does that apply to every day life? Because our goals determine what we do, in order to change our daily behavior and emotions, we need to change our goals.

Ultimately, we also need to change our goals if we are to learn to be more Love Focused, because our goals either help or hinder our ability to love. This will be the focus of the next several chapters.

NOW WHAT DO WE DO?



THOUSANDS OF YEARS ago Adam and Eve fell asleep under the shelter of a large olive tree after another perfect day in the Garden of Eden. But then every day in the Garden of Eden was perfect. The sun had been warm, but not too hot. It didn't matter what day it was. All the days were the same, exactly the way Adam and Eve wanted them to be. On this day in the Garden of Eden, there had been no overloaded schedules. No broken cars or computer crashes. No traffic jams, schedules to keep, or problems to solve.

They had no childhood memories of being rejected or abused by family members or regrets over words spoken to friends or loved ones. No worries over money, no fear of a lost job or of lab test results. No heartache over a troubled marriage or a wayward child.

After a light afternoon snack of cool coconut milk, Adam wanted to talk with God. So he just pulled up a rock (padded), and God sat down and talked with him. There was no effort to know and feel God's love and presence. Adam felt completely loved, accepted, and safe with God all the time. He felt nothing but pure contentment, joy, and peace as the day came to a close. Tomorrow would be another day to enjoy a perfect relationship with God and Eve, sitting in the sun with the animals and walking by the cool waters.

I often like to imagine living just one day in the Garden of Eden. As I reflect on the past twenty-four hours of my life, it has been starkly

different from Adam's typical day. At 6:00 A.M. when my alarm sounded, I rolled out of bed and realized I had a sore throat and a terrible head cold. Nothing particularly traumatic had happened the past twenty-four hours, but I was already sick and worn out from the usual struggles of life.

The day before, my calendar had been booked with seven hours of counseling sessions. I had looked forward to meeting a friend for lunch, but he had gotten stuck in traffic, and I ended up eating alone in a crowded, noisy restaurant. My daughter called and told me the textbooks for one of her five nursing classes cost over \$200. I had been late for my first appointment because I couldn't find my car keys. My wife called at 10:00 A.M. and asked where I wanted our son's car towed. It was the last day of summer before his senior year in high school, and he was going surfing with some buddies. He never made it to the beach. His car had broken down and was going to need a tow for the second time in two days. Needless to say, my day was a little different than Adam and Eve's day in the Garden of Eden.

When Adam and Eve disobeyed God, the world went from being a paradise to a world of pain, heartache, and struggle. This event in history is referred to as the Fall, because Adam and Eve's disobedience in eating from the forbidden tree caused them and all mankind to fall into a state of sin.

Because of the Fall, we must now live our entire lives in a world that is broken and will never be fixed. The human experience now includes the pain of conflict, grief, fear, selfishness, anger, and loss. "Because of the Fall, *imperfection permeates the whole universe.*"¹

David Seamands summarizes the far-reaching effects of the Fall as follows:

- We Lost Natural and Ecological Perfection.
- We Lost Physical Perfection.
- We Lost Mental Perfection.
- We Lost Emotional Perfection.
- We Lost Relational Perfection.
- We Lost Spiritual Perfection.²

Over the last thirty years, as I have counseled with a wide variety of individuals, I've come to realize that though each client was unique and each had his own reason for seeking counseling, they were all similar in one fundamental way. Because of the Fall, they were all struggling with the challenge of living in an imperfect, fallen world.

Our Fundamental Problem

Adam and Eve's disobedience destroyed the perfect relationship they had with God, and spiritually separated all mankind from their Creator. As a result, man's greatest problem is spiritual. Because our pride makes us rebel against God and pursue our own purposes, we are lost and in need of reconciliation. We need God's grace and forgiveness to restore our relationship with him. Most importantly, we need his gift of salvation that only comes by putting our faith in him.

How we define man's problem is very important because the solution for the problem is determined by the diagnosis. If we fail to see that man's greatest problem is spiritual, we will look to man-made solutions. We have a natural tendency to define man's primary problem by using psychological terms like recovery from childhood pain, abandonment, trust issues, etc. This only superficially defines the problem and puts the solution into the hands of self-appointed experts, counseling, and our own feeble efforts to change without relying on God.

This approach is like giving oxygen to a man who is having difficulty breathing because he is choking on a piece of meat. The cause of his problem is not his difficulty breathing. That's only a symptom of the problem. Until the stuck meat is removed, the man will continue to have trouble breathing.

In the same way, while painful life experiences certainly make life more difficult, they are not our biggest problem. Our primary problem began long before we were born into a family with hurtful, sinful mothers and fathers. It began at the Fall when our prideful rebellion against God separated us from God. Instead of obeying God, our natural response now is to rely on ourselves and pursue our own purposes rather than trusting and following his plan.

When we superficially define our problem in psychological terms, we are forced to solve the problem with an incomplete solution. However, when we correctly define our problem as a much deeper spiritual problem that started at the Fall, then our only solution is God.

Consequences of the Fall

Having grown up in church my whole life, I was certainly familiar with the story of Adam and Eve's disobedience in the Garden of Eden and the concept of the Fall. Many times I had heard that the world was totally different because of the Fall and that it would never be the same. I heard that because of Adam and Eve's sin, I inherited their sin and would need a Savior to once again be right with God. But I don't recall hearing much about the *practical consequences* of Adam and Eve's disobedience.

Growing up as a Christian, I didn't understand the many ways the Fall could actually hold me back from growing spiritually. I didn't see the connection between the Fall and my fears, insecurities, and need to control and please others. I don't remember understanding the practical connections between the problems created by living in a fallen world and how they directly affected my ability to love God and others.

Having listened in my office to the countless stories and struggles that people face, I see how the Fall affects our lives in ways far beyond the obvious and in ways that most of us are completely unaware. It is critical to understand the practical consequences of the Fall and the role it plays in our ability and capacity to love freely and to live life fully.

Neediness

Because most explanations of the Fall are usually limited to how and when sin entered the human race, most Christians see the account of Adam and Eve only as the start of sin and disobedience. As a result, they miss another major consequence of the Fall—neediness.

Prior to the Fall, Adam and Eve never feared that any of their needs would be unmet, so they never experienced neediness. Sin entering the world was, no doubt, the greatest and most damaging consequence of

the Fall. However, we often fail to recognize the destructive consequences of two areas of neediness that also resulted from the Fall:

1. Unmet emotional needs—our need for love and approval, for value and purpose
2. The problem of pain—our need to cope with the pain of living in a fallen world

Understanding our neediness is vital to understanding how and why we do things. In addition, our natural response to these two areas of neediness creates a serious spiritual problem in our lives. Our wrong response to our neediness is a primary reason why we pursue unhealthy goals instead of being Love Focused. It is also a major reason why we sometimes fail to enjoy the full life that God desires for us.

PROBLEM 1: WE ARE EMOTIONALLY NEEDY

Whether we are aware of it or not, many of our behaviors, thoughts, and feelings are connected to our emotional need for love and approval and for value and purpose. When we see ourselves as loved and approved of, and having value and purpose, we tend to think, feel, and behave differently than when we believe these needs are unmet. Not a day goes by when our lives are not touched in some way by an awareness of these two basic needs.

Love and Approval

“As soon as man was separated from God by sin, his *capacity* for love was no longer filled and was therefore experienced as a *need*—a need for love...”³

Our need for love and approval involves a deep longing to be unconditionally cared for and accepted, just the way we are. It is “a convinced awareness of being unconditionally and totally loved without needing to change in order to win love, loved by a love that is freely given, that cannot be earned and therefore cannot be lost.”⁴

Sit outside any junior high or high school and watch what goes on. The funky hair, the baggy jeans, and the “creative” language are

all desperate attempts to get the world to satisfy the need to be loved and valued. Adults often poke fun at young teenagers for their extreme attempts to get others to love and accept them, but adults do the same thing. We're just a little more sophisticated. We may not wear baggy jeans, but we wear designer labels. We do things like name dropping and hinting at our net worth or the latest "toy" we purchased. We stay in abusive relationships because it "feels" like love. Our schedules are overloaded to make us look important or to keep people happy with us, so they will love and accept us.

Mother Teresa said, "There is more hunger for love and appreciation in this world than for bread."⁵

Value and Purpose

Our need for value and purpose involves the need to know there is significance to our lives, that we are important, and our lives have purpose. This need requires that we live for something more important than just ourselves.

As young children, how many of us dreamed of becoming a famous athlete, actor, or President of the United States? We all have a God-given longing to do and be something great. We instinctively want to live a significant life.

The Purpose Driven Life, by Dr. Rick Warren, begins with these words: "It's not about you. The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness."⁶ This book has become a blockbuster best seller. It confirms that our need for purpose and value is incredibly strong.

"Whether labeled *self-esteem* or *self-worth*, the feeling of significance is crucial to man's emotional, spiritual, and social stability and is the driving element within the human spirit. Understanding this single need opens the door to understanding our actions and attitudes."⁷

PROBLEM 2: THE PAIN OF LIVING IN A FALLEN WORLD

At any given moment, our lives are filled with varying degrees of sadness and pain. From the pain of rejection by our parents in childhood,

to the diagnosis of a terminal disease, to the heartbreak of losing a spouse or a child—pain is part of everyday life. The world will never, ever be the way we would want it to be. We will never experience a perfect day. Consequently, we all live in pain, and we are forced to cope with that pain each and every day.

Pain From Many Sources

Much of our pain comes from sources beyond our control. We are victims of a fallen, physical world where natural disasters, accidents, and disease can strike at any moment.

While many people experience chronic physical pain every day, much of the pain we experience each day is emotional. Our emotional pain comes from a world made up of imperfect, selfish, and undependable people, ourselves included.

During the important developmental years of childhood, many people were deeply hurt by their parents' rejection. Instead of being loved unconditionally, one or both of their parents miserably failed them, leaving deep emotional scars. Their home was not a place of safety and peace but one of fear and turmoil.

Unfortunately, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God, we all inherited their fallen human nature. That sin nature causes us to rebel against God and to think of ourselves first. Because of our self-focus, our relationships are strained and filled with disappointment, hurt, and conflict. The result is daily relational pain. Every relationship we have includes some degree of disappointment and pain. We inflict it on others, and others inflict it on us—every day.

We Are Afraid of Pain

Because no one likes pain, we all live in fear of getting hurt again. This fear of experiencing more pain is actually a form of pain itself and motivates our behavior far more than we realize. Sometimes we experience the fear of pain as mild anxiety, and other times it terrifies and controls us. Often we're aware of our fear, but many times, in many situations, we are not.

Unfortunately, whether we are aware of it or not, our fear of getting hurt can become the controlling force in our lives. For some, it's a fear of rejection, failure, or being embarrassed. For others it's a fear of financial loss, their children getting hurt, or loss of a loved one. Either way, our fear of getting hurt can cause us to live on a treadmill of tension, trying to eliminate or neutralize all the possible things that might cause pain in our lives. Our fear so easily becomes the rudder that steers the boat. Instead of allowing the Holy Spirit to motivate and control us, our fear of getting hurt motivates and controls us.

This happened to Adam in the Garden of Eden when he experienced fear for the very first time. Genesis 3:8-10 says,

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you"? He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."

What was Adam afraid of? Pain. The pain of being disciplined by God for disobeying God's command. As a result, Adam's fear motivated him to hide from God behind the tree instead of obeying him.

TWO CHOICES

Faced with our emotional neediness and the problem of pain, we have two choices: We can either look to ourselves and other people to meet these needs, or we can look to God.

Choice 1: Looking to Ourselves and Other People

As sinful human beings, we have a natural tendency to look to other people to fill our neediness. We think, "If that person loves me, then I'm loved." Or, "If I can get that person to like me, then I'm safe from being rejected." However, imperfect people are not capable of meeting all our needs. Neither can we meet all of our needs ourselves.

Of course, there are times when we will enjoy the satisfaction of our own success. Sometimes when we work hard, the boss notices and gives us a raise. There are many times when other people give us love and

appreciation. Some of our need for love and value will be met by others or by our own accomplishments. There are times when a hug from a friend, a word of encouragement, or a week's vacation will help us deal with the pain in our lives. Yet, total fulfillment can never be found in the world or in others.

While we all naturally look to other people to satisfy our needs, we also look internally, to ourselves, to accomplish that task. When we do so, what we think of ourselves and how we feel becomes the most important measure of truth. We become dependent on our own performance to meet our need for love and value. In order to earn our own approval, we must do things right. Be perfect. Never fail. Be successful. We become driven and determined people. Yet, we're never completely satisfied with ourselves.

Such pressure-filled thinking is often behind many compulsive behaviors. I once had a client who had each day scheduled into fifteen-minute increments every day of the week, including weekends. Because he was trying to earn his worth by personal accomplishment, he thought such extreme scheduling made perfect sense. He measured himself by how many miles he ran a week, how many hours he worked, and how many business deals he put together. He was so focused on his own achievement that his children had to schedule an appointment to see him, even on the weekends. By the world's standards, he was highly successful, but by his own internal standards, he constantly feared personal failure. He could never quite put enough deals together or run enough miles to convince himself that he was a person of worth and value.

It is essential to accept the reality that the world is not capable of providing all our needs. The world is fallen and imperfect. It is not designed, equipped, or committed to meeting all our needs. Every time we experience some form of disappointment, we are reminded of this fact. Sometimes the boss *doesn't* notice our hard work. People don't *always* love and appreciate us the way we would want. They're too busy, too self-focused, and often just plain unkind.

When we look solely to an imperfect world to get our needs met, it's only a matter of time before we come up short. The world can certainly meet some of our emotional needs. It can provide some comfort

for some of our pain and disappointment, but not completely and not permanently.

Unfortunately, the world has an amazing ability to deceive and tease us into thinking that if we can just arrange the right circumstances, or get the right people to treat us the way we want, we will be satisfied. Most TV commercials and advertisements are designed to appeal to this false belief that the world can satisfy our deepest needs. In many ways, we actually believe the world can satisfy because we so desperately want it to be true. We believe that just the right vacation will take away our pain. We think that if we can just marry the right person or have the right number of children we will finally be satisfied. That's our secret hope. But it's not a reality that will ever happen, no matter how hard we try.

Choice 2: Looking to God

Since the world is not a dependable solution to our neediness, the only other choice is God. The Bible says that as Christians we can freely go to God with all our needs and that he will always be dependable to completely meet those needs. Philippians 4:19 NLT says, "And this same God who takes care of me will supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus."

When God says he will supply all our needs, he is *not* saying that we should not desire, pursue, and enjoy relationships with others. In Galatians 6:2, God commands us to "Carry each other's burdens." God uses our relationships with others to encourage us, express his love and care, and to help us grow. We cannot live the Christian life in a vacuum. It is in loving and serving one another in community with other believers that we learn to live as God intended. That is why our involvement in small groups such as Bible studies, support groups, or recovery groups is so important.

However, God never intended for us to use our relationships as the *primary* source for filling our unmet needs. Matthew 6:33 commands us, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Unfortunately, our natural tendency is to first seek our friends and family to meet our needs and not God.

GOD PROVIDES WHAT WE NEED

The good news is, God clearly provides us with a reliable solution for all our needs. When God promises to meet all our needs, he promises that he will give us all that we need to live effectively for him and to accomplish his purposes. His promise includes providing all our emotional needs and giving us all we need to deal with our hurt and sadness.

However, since the Fall, God must now provide for our needs in an imperfect world made up of imperfect people. That means he does so in an environment of chaos rather than perfection. That changes things dramatically. After being banished from the Garden of Eden, Adam would still be provided with food and shelter, but he'd have to work for it, and it wouldn't be easy. He'd still be completely loved and valued by God, but his perception of that love would be less than perfect because of an imperfect environment.

While God would still meet Adam and Eve's needs, for the first time they would feel uncertainty, doubt, and frustration. They would sometimes have to wait for things and wonder, "Will God really come through? Is he still listening like he used to in the Garden? We can no longer feel his warm touch—Does he still love us?"

In the midst of God's provision, we experience the same consequences of the Fall. We experience fear, doubt, pain, and conflict. We struggle to love others and question whether God loves us or whether we are even lovable. Fortunately, the negative consequences of the Fall do not change the truth that God still meets our needs.

Feelings and Experience

The fact that God is meeting all our needs is independent of our feelings or experience. The truth is, we are fully loved and valued at all times, whether we feel it or not. Feelings and experience do not change the truth. Wearing earplugs at a rock concert does not change the truth that loud music is blaring. The music is still playing whether or not we're hearing it. Sitting alone in a crowded room, I may feel alone, but I'm really not. I'm just not experiencing relationship at that moment. However, if while sitting in that same room, someone comes up to me and starts a conversation, I'm more likely to *experience* the truth that I'm not alone.

I can't emphasize enough the importance of separating the truth that God is always meeting our needs from the *experience* of that truth. God is wonderfully kind and creative in giving us the experience of being loved and valued and in providing for us when a fallen world causes us pain, heartache, and disappointment. God uses many ways to help us experience the truth. Sometimes through the Holy Spirit, a word or touch from a friend, a wet lick from a puppy, a beautiful sunset, a needed vacation, or special gift, God gives us a taste of love and grace.

Though we may not perfectly experience being loved and valued, and though we sometimes experience disappointment and pain, these do not change the truth. God is always providing what we need. Experience is the cherry on top of my ice cream sundae. It is *not* the sundae. It's an extra bonus when I get it, and it makes my ice cream more enjoyable, but it does not change the fact that I already have the ice cream.

Dr. Larry Crabb says in his book *The Marriage Builder*,

Our personal needs for security and significance can be genuinely and fully met only in relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. To put it another way, all that we need to function effectively as persons (*not necessarily to feel happy or fulfilled*) is at any given moment fully supplied in relationship with Christ and in whatever He chooses to provide."⁸

Needs Versus Desires

As I have counseled with Christians over the years, I have found that most Christians know that God promises to meet all their needs. Many believers have memorized Philippians 4:19 and can quote it perfectly. However, though we know the verse word for word, we do not totally believe it's true in our everyday circumstances. To many people, it seems like God's promise to meet all our needs is a spiritual doctrine to be learned but not a practical truth to be lived. Part of the reason for this lack of trust is that most people fail to make a clear distinction between their *needs* and their *desires*.

As a young counselor just out of graduate school, I picked up a book on Christian counseling entitled *Basic Principles of Biblical Counseling*⁹, by Christian psychologist Dr. Larry Crabb. One of the most helpful

concepts presented in that book is the distinction between *needs and desires*. God promises to meet all our needs, not all our desires.

When God says he'll meet all our needs, he's not promising to correct the Fall and take away the pain of living in a fallen world. He's not promising to create heaven on earth. While God promises we will never have any unmet needs, we will certainly experience the disappointment of having many unmet desires. We no longer live in the Garden of Eden where all of man's desires were perfectly met. As much as we all long to wake up to a day filled with complete satisfaction, that will never happen on earth. That pleasure awaits us someday in heaven, yet we so yearn to have it now that we easily convince ourselves that to function effectively we absolutely must have more than we really need.

Believing that we have unfulfilled *needs* prevents us from being Love Focused and from enjoying the full life that God wants for us. Living with unmet *desires* does not. We feel compelled to take action when we have unmet needs, but we are not forced to do anything about our unmet desires. When I'm out in the desert without water, my need for water motivates me to put all my focus on finding water. In contrast, when I'm sitting in my office dreaming of a double scoop of rocky road ice cream, I don't have to immediately cancel all my clients and go find an ice cream shop. Unmet desires do not keep me from focusing on the needs of others. Unmet needs do. If I am consumed with what I need, I am not free to focus on anyone else's needs.

When God promises to meet all our needs, it does not mean he is promising to give us everything we want. From God's perspective, if I do not have something, I do not need it. If I needed it, God would have provided it. Unfortunately, that is not always our perspective, because we often fail to make a distinction between our needs and desires. We just lump them all together and call them "needs." Although I yearn for something, that doesn't mean I need it.

In his best-selling book, *A Love Worth Giving*, Max Lucado says, "God withholds what we desire in order to give us what we need."¹⁰

In Philippians 4:11, Paul was able to be content because he was looking to God to meet all his needs. When we misunderstand the difference between needs and desires, we get stuck on a treadmill of

frustration and discontentment. Seeing a desire as a need, we become angry and frustrated when God won't give it to us.

God's Provision for Problem 1: Our Emotional Needs

How does God meet our emotional need for love and value? In his book, *Healing Grace*, David Seamands says,

God's love for us is unconditional; it is not a love drawn from God by something good in us. It flows out of God because of His nature. God's love is an action toward us, not a reaction to us. His love depends not on what we are but on what He is. He loves because He is love. We can refuse the love of God, but we cannot stop Him from loving us. We can reject it and thus stop its inflow into us, but we can do nothing to stop its outflow from Him.¹¹

God also fully meets our significance needs for value and purpose. We have value and purpose because God "chose us in Him before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). We have value and purpose because he paid the ultimate price for our sins, his own death. We have value and purpose because "we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph. 2:10).

God's promise to meet our needs is not conditional. It does not depend on us being faithful. It only depends on God being faithful to his promise. Because of God's faithful character, we can be absolutely sure that God will meet all of our needs.

LEARNING TO TRUST GOD WITH OUR EMOTIONAL NEEDS

In order to understand how God meets our emotional needs through our relationship with him, we must understand how he loves and values us. Most people naturally believe that love and value must be earned. We learn this from many of our human experiences. We've often heard: Work hard and you'll be rewarded. Be lazy and you'll get nothing. You get what you deserve. Do your homework, get good grades, be good and you'll be rewarded. With these experiences as our framework, we conclude that we are responsible for whether we are loved and valued.

We think, “If I am lovable, then I will be loved. If I have something of worth to offer, then I am valuable.” Recently a client worded it to me this way, “If I can be just the right person, then I’ll be loved.” That’s the thinking that I hear many people express.

However, contrary to such commonly held beliefs, love and value are ultimately *given*, not *earned*. Every day we see examples of this. In modern societies, diamonds are more valuable than wood. But in a primitive society where wood is required for basic housing and heating, wood is more valuable. Ultimately, the value of an item is determined by *what someone is willing to pay for it*.

For example, an artist may think his latest painting is worth \$500, but the true value is determined by what someone is willing to pay for it. It may be worth more or less than \$500, depending on the value someone else *places* upon it. *Value has nothing to do with the item itself*. Rather, it is determined by the value *given to it*.

A good example of how love is given and not earned is parenthood. At the moment of birth, a parent chooses to love his child. At two minutes old, a baby can’t possibly have done anything to earn his parent’s love. Love is given to him by his parents.

The cross is, of course, the ultimate demonstration of love and value being given, not earned. The Bible says in Romans 5:8, “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Before we were born, before we could do anything to win God’s love and approval, he chose to love and value us (Ephesians 1:4).

God paid the absolute highest price possible for his children. He paid with the blood of his only Son. We are far more valuable than we could ever imagine because we were bought with the blood of the Son of God. There’s no greater price.

What the world says we are worth and whatever value we may have earned have nothing to do with our true worth and value. Our worth and value have nothing to do with us or what other people think of us or how they treat us. Our worth and value are totally independent of us and anything we do or don’t do, our status in life, or what we have done in the past or will do in the future.

Our worth and value are *totally* dependent upon God. We do not earn it, and we cannot lose it. It is bestowed on us simply by virtue of

the fact that God has declared us valuable by choosing to love us, forgive us, and include us in his perfect plan.

To illustrate, let's say your telephone rings, and it's the President of the United States calling to tell you he has just appointed you to be his new Secretary of State. Immediately, you would go from being a normal citizen to a VIP. You would be an important person because the most important person, the President, chose you to be a part of his team. In the same way, because God has chosen you (Eph. 1:4), you are important as well.

God's Provision for Problem 2: Our Pain

How is God the solution to the problem of pain? When God says he meets our needs, that includes providing all we need to handle the pain of living in a fallen world. It is important to remember that when God promises to provide what we need to deal with our pain and our fear of pain, he isn't promising to erase the effects of the Fall. He doesn't promise to erase all our pain here on earth. He does promise to give us whatever we need *to handle* whatever pain we experience. Isaiah 41:10 and 13 says,

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand...

For I am the Lord your God, who takes hold of your right hand, and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.

God is clear that there will be pain in our lives, but he assures us that he will hold our hand through it. Using other people, circumstances, and the Holy Spirit, he will give us everything we need to deal with both our existing pain, as well as the fear of getting hurt.

Specifically, God promises to provide four things to help us deal with this second problem of living in a fallen world: grace, comfort, strength, and courage.

GOD PROVIDES GRACE

2 Corinthians 12:9 says, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” When God promises that his “grace is sufficient,” he is speaking directly to the problems we face as a result of living in a fallen world.

God is not promising to give us grace *today* for what will happen *tomorrow*. When tomorrow comes, the grace will be there. It will come only when we need it, and it will be enough.

The Bible is clear that all the grace we will need to handle the pain, hurt, and sadness of life is available from God. It’s all there. We just need to use it. Hebrews 4:16 says, “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

GOD PROVIDES COMFORT

2 Corinthians 1:4-7 NLT says,

He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us. For the more we suffer for Christ, the more God will shower us with his comfort through Christ. Even when we are weighed down with troubles, it is for your comfort and salvation! For when we ourselves are comforted, we will certainly comfort you. Then you can patiently endure the same things we suffer. We are confident that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in the comfort God gives us.

Again, God’s promise is very clear. He is going to give us all the comfort we need, both now and in the future, to deal with all the pain, sadness, disappointment, and loss we experience. Sometimes he comforts us through his Holy Spirit, and sometimes he uses other people and circumstances to help us experience comfort in more tangible ways. Whatever combination he chooses to use, it will be all that we need to make it through the trial.

GOD PROVIDES STRENGTH

Dealing with present pain or the fear of future hurt often requires exceptional strength that we do not have on our own. When we face a difficult or painful situation, God promises to provide the strength we need. Philippians 4:13 says: “I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”

As humans, we so often worry ourselves into emotional turmoil by wondering how we will ever be able to handle all the “what ifs” in the future. God’s promise of strength does not cover worrying over “what ifs.” But the strength will be there for whatever does happen tomorrow, and it will be all that we need.

A story told by Christian author and teacher Corrie ten Boom helps illustrate this point. As a little girl, she came across the lifeless body of a baby and realized that someday death would strike her family, too. She couldn’t bear the thought of being without her father or mother or her sister, Betsy.

For days, she worried about this, until one day, her father wisely explained to her, “Corrie, when you and I go to Amsterdam, when do I give you your ticket?”

“Why, just before I get on the train,” she answered.

“Exactly,” he continued. Then he gave her advice that would prove to be invaluable throughout her life. He told her that a wise God knows when she will need things, too. “Don’t run out ahead of God,” he cautioned her. “When the time comes that some of us have to die, you will look into your heart and find the strength you need—just in time.”¹²

During World War II, Corrie and her family risked their lives by hiding Jews in their home after the Nazis occupied Holland. As a result of their activities, Corrie and her family were sent to Nazi concentration camps. Corrie suffered greatly while in the Nazi camps and witnessed atrocities that she would have never thought imaginable.

Corrie’s sister, Betsy, her father, and many other friends died in the camps. Only Corrie survived. Just as her father had promised her many years earlier, God was faithful and gave Corrie the strength she needed to handle unimaginable hardship and pain, as well as the strength to be a faithful witness for God to her fellow prisoners.

GOD PROVIDES COURAGE

God also promises to give us the courage to face difficult situations. 1 Thessalonians 2:2 NLT says,

You know how badly we had been treated at Philippi just before we came to you and how much we suffered there. Yet our God gave us the courage to declare his Good News to you boldly, in spite of great opposition.

In the same way that God gave David courage to fight Goliath and gave Daniel courage in the lions' den, he also promises to give us courage to handle the difficult times in life.

GOD IS FAITHFUL

Without question, God promises in his word that he will meet a Christian's every need. He is always providing everything necessary to handle our emotional neediness and the pain of living in a fallen world. There will never, ever be a time in a Christian's life when God stops providing. Having God as the source for our needs is like a thirsty man living next to Niagara Falls. He'll never again have to worry about being thirsty. Like that man, we never have to worry about our needs being unmet.

King David said in Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul." When we look to the Lord as our shepherd, we will not go without. We will not always have everything we desire, but we will always have everything we need.

Part Two

IDENTIFYING THE
PROBLEM

WHAT'S YOUR AGENDA?



NEARLY FIFTEEN YEARS ago, Judy and I were enjoying a long-anticipated vacation in Hawaii with our two preschool-age children. Whenever we talk about that trip, the conversation inevitably turns to one funny memory—the Dole pineapple plant tour. We had spent most of the first few days of the vacation playing in the warm water of Waikiki Beach. But by the third day, we were looking for something to do to escape the sun for the day. I had read that you could take a tour of the Dole pineapple plant where they process and can the freshly picked fruit. That sounded like fun, and it would help us avoid the sun for a few hours.

We arrived at the pineapple plant just in time for the twelve o'clock tour. The tour was quite interesting, and our tour guide was a wonderful young woman who put her heart and soul into her talk. My daughter, Melanie, was her usual talkative self, eager to see everything that was going on. Her brother, David, watched but didn't say a word the entire time. As the tour concluded, our tour guide explained that she had a big surprise for us. In the next room, we would be treated to chilled pineapple that had been picked just hours before.

"In addition," she smiled, "If you look in the corner of the room, you'll find a drinking fountain that is filled not with water, but fresh, chilled pineapple juice. And you can have all you want. So enjoy!"

She was so pleased to be able to offer us such a special treat. Everyone in the room clapped to thank her for the wonderful tour. Then, in the

silence that followed, I heard my son speak his first words since we'd arrived. Loud and clear, from the back of the room, David said, "But I don't LIKE pineapple." His sister looked at him in disbelief. My wife and I thought about pretending we didn't know him. And after a short pause, the entire room burst into laughter.

Our family's Dole pineapple plant experience goes down in my memory as a good example of how not to handle things. When you're a preschooler, you don't always handle things the right way. Fortunately, at four years old, saying inappropriate things can be funny. But as an adult, responding to life situations the wrong way is no longer cute or funny. In fact, it can have very damaging consequences.

As I go through my day, I am often aware that I am not handling things the way I know God would want me to. I may handle an important phone call defensively. I may get angry and impatient over the littlest things. I may fail to listen attentively to my wife or children. Sometimes I choose to avoid things altogether. Knowing that everyone else does the same things makes me feel a little better, but it is still no excuse, and more importantly, it does not explain why I do it.

Many people I talk with are also not handling certain areas of life well, and have tried very hard to change but with little or no success. They've read the latest Christian books. They've prayed, and many have sought counseling. They are sincere people who truly love God and who deeply desire to change, but they have been unable to do so. In many cases, they have quit trying. They may still attend church and participate in church activities, but they have given up trying to grow spiritually. Unfortunately, some people eventually give up on God altogether.

Recognizing the Whole Problem

As I've observed this process in the lives of many people over a period of years, I've realized that a major part of the problem is failure to recognize why we don't change. We're trying to fight a battle we don't completely understand or see. As a result, we are powerless to fight the battle and enslaved by an unknown enemy.

One of the most famous surfing spots in the world is Huntington Beach in Southern California. Huntington Beach is known as "Surf City." Even on days when the waves are small, there is always an ocean current below the surface that is constantly pushing swimmers toward the

pier. As a teenager, it was one of my favorite bodysurfing spots, but you always had to fight the current to keep from being injured. For tourists who were unfamiliar with how ocean currents operate, it was particularly dangerous. The ocean currents were strong, powerful, and unseen. Tourists who were unaware of how dangerous they were, often ended up being rescued by lifeguards just before smashing into the pier.

Just like those dangerous ocean currents, there is an unseen force operating in each of our lives that it is constantly pushing us in a dangerous direction. This unseen current often controls our lives and explains why growth and change are so difficult. But like tourists unfamiliar with ocean currents, we are often ineffective at fighting its controlling power. We don't know it is there, we don't understand it, and we don't know how to handle it.

Handling Our Two Problems

As members of a fallen world, we must get up every morning and face two fundamental realities: we are emotionally needy, and we live in a world that will likely hurt us. Unfortunately, most Christians are unaware of the strong connection between their handling of these two problems and their inability to live powerful and effective Christian lives. How we handle our emotional needs and the pain of living in a fallen world has a far greater effect on our lives than may seem obvious at first. How each of us handles these challenges each day is one of our most important decisions.

When our neediness is incorrectly handled, our wrong response is what causes much of our self-centeredness and unhappiness. This response can create anger, frustration, and distance in our relationships. It can cause us to be dishonest, controlling, prideful, and critical. In more extreme cases, our response can cause divorce, suicide, and criminal behavior. Even more importantly, how we handle these two challenges greatly affects our ability to be Love Focused.

OUR AGENDA

During my years of counseling with thousands of people, I've realized that each of us has a self-focused agenda designed to help us deal with the pain and neediness of living in a fallen world. When we believe

that God is failing to meet our needs, we are on our own to try to get our needs met. As a result, we are forced to come up with our own solution for our emotional needs and our pain. This solution becomes our *personal agenda*.

The dictionary defines an agenda as “an underlying often ideological plan or program.”¹ Our personal agenda is the plan we develop apart from God to get the world to solve the problem of our neediness. It is *our man-made solution to our neediness*. When we do not believe that God is meeting all our needs, or at least not the way we would like, the pursuit of our agenda becomes the driving force in our lives. Our personal agenda operates just like the ocean current I fought while bodysurfing next to the Huntington Beach Pier. It becomes an unseen force that sends us off in the wrong direction and pushes us toward the danger and damage of a self-focused life.

Perceived Neediness

When we do not believe our needs are being fully met by God, we will act like we are still needy. We are really not needy. We just think we are. That causes us to live in a state of *perceived* neediness. Because of our perceived neediness, we spend unnecessary time and energy trying to fill needs that actually are already met. We act like millionaires begging for food on a street corner, refusing to acknowledge the truth that we already have everything we need.

Perceived neediness causes us to go outside of God’s plan to meet needs that we believe we still have. Such was the case with Adam and Eve. Perceived neediness played a major role in Adam and Eve’s decision to disobey God in the Garden of Eden. Satan had tempted them to believe that God was withholding something good from them. Satan convinced them that they still had needs that were unfulfilled, that they needed more than God had already provided. They needed to be “like God.” All their needs were already being perfectly met by their loving Father. They just didn’t believe it.

Even the most mature Christians do not fully accept God’s provision for all their needs. We deny this truth in many different ways. As a result, trying to solve the problem of our neediness becomes an automatic, built-in response. It becomes our top priority. Getting our

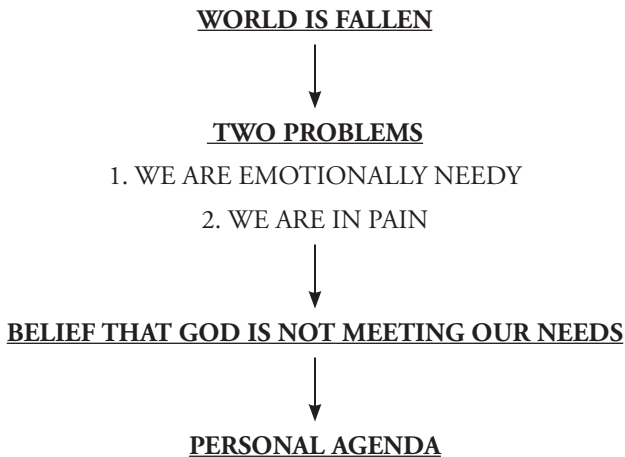
needs met isn't something we *want* to do. It's something we *have* to do whenever we see ourselves as needy.

Back in the Garden

The internal pressure we all feel to pursue our personal agenda rather than trust God to meet our needs is a natural response to the consequences of the Fall. Because we want so badly to live a pain-free life with all our emotional needs *and desires* perfectly met, we deny that the world is fallen and we set out to try to fix it. Thus, our agenda reflects the belief that we can create a slice of heaven on earth. If God won't let us back into the Garden of Eden, we'll just create a little bit of heaven ourselves.

Although we logically know it is not possible to return to the Garden of Eden, we still won't give up the hope of creating our own Garden of Eden anyway. We actually think we can. We think we can manage all the people in our lives to get them to love us and never hurt us. But trying to control others will never fix the Fall. We think, "If we always do the right thing and never make a mistake, that will do it." But perfectionism cannot fix the Fall. We think, "If I can just get the government to fix things, that will do it." But politics will never fix the Fall. We even think we can manipulate God in different ways to get him to cooperate with our agenda. But legalism will never fix the Fall either.

The following diagram describes the progression from a fallen world to our personal agenda.



Our Agenda: Looking to the World to Meet Our Needs

It is important to understand that there is nothing wrong with *desiring* others to love and accept us and to experience a minimum amount of hurt in life. It is normal and healthy to want to be loved and to be emotionally happy. The problem occurs when our agenda puts the focus on the world rather than God to solve our neediness. Because our agenda is designed to solve our own neediness, it wrongly becomes a primary focus of our lives. Our ability to powerfully share God's love with others is then greatly diminished.

I will never forget a client I saw several years ago. Jim was a single, thirty-year-old Christian man who strongly desired to serve God and others. For the past year, Jim had been a full-time missionary in Africa serving as the pastor of an established church in Kenya. Unfortunately, after only a year in Africa his mission board brought him back home for counseling.

In our first counseling session, when I asked him what his problem was, he said he didn't know. He said the members of his church in Africa had two complaints about him. First, they said his weekly sermons were too long (2 hours) and second, that he was never available during the week to spend time with the people in his church.

Jim went to the mission field with the goal of loving his congregation and helping them to grow spiritually. Unknowingly, Jim also had a personal agenda in addition to being a good pastor—to get his congregation to meet his emotional needs. In order to prevent church members from hurting him, he tried to make sure he was never criticized. To achieve this, he tried to make sure everyone in his church understood and agreed with everything he preached.

To accomplish his self-centered agenda, Jim compulsively studied for 30-40 hours each week and preached for at least two hours each Sunday. He thought this would cause everyone to understand everything he said. Accomplishing his self-centered agenda left him little time for his people and produced very long, boring sermons.

Unfortunately, Jim's personal agenda was more important than spending time with church members. As a result, his agenda was an unseen force that unknowingly affected everything he did. Like the unsuspecting beach tourists pushed by the current, his agenda pulled

him away from serving God and others. It prevented him from loving his church members and ultimately made him fail in his ministry.

Proverbs 16:25 says, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.” With our sin nature always at work, our natural inclination to follow our own agendas rather than God’s plan always leads us in the wrong direction.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF OUR AGENDA

1. It Makes Us Self-Centered

Our agenda of getting the world to meet our needs is a driving force behind our natural tendency to live self-focused rather than Love Focused lives. When we go out the door in the morning pursuing our personal agenda, we become self-absorbed with getting what we think we need, preoccupied with gaining the love and acceptance of other people (self-fulfillment) and trying to prevent pain, loss, or disappointment (self-protection). To whatever degree we pursue our agenda, to that degree we focus on ourselves. The needs of others automatically become a lesser priority. Unknowingly, we end up living as if the Great Commandment said: “Make sure you get your needs met and never experience pain.”

Unfortunately, many workaholic fathers are a good example of how our personal agenda can cause us to become self-centered. I recently had a client tell me how painful it was to have a father who never attended any of his childhood activities. When he asked his dad if he would come and watch him at his Little League all-star game, his dad told him he couldn’t because “work was too important.” After my client received the same response again and again from his father, he understandably stopped asking his father to come to his activities. The father’s personal agenda was the underlying cause of self-centeredness that broke his son’s heart and caused this man to fail to love his son.

2. It Controls Us

Unless we make a conscious choice to follow God’s plan, our personal agenda will control many of our decisions and behaviors. The more we’re motivated to accomplish our agenda, the more it controls us and

the more desperate we become in trying to achieve it. We become like heroin addicts, controlled by the heroin we think we need. Believing we need people to respect us, we become obsessed with trying to impress people in different ways. Believing we need to avoid and eliminate pain in our lives, we become controlled by our efforts to avoid conflict and keep people happy. When our reasonable efforts don't work and the world doesn't meet our needs, we can become desperate. We resort to going outside of God's plan. In desperation, we turn to such strategies as lying, cheating, stealing, and various types of immorality.

People often hear a good sermon on Sunday, and then do just the opposite on Monday. I remember a mother who described such an experience. She described a powerful, convicting sermon she heard on Sunday about the importance of a mother being patient and not yelling at her children. Because she knew being impatient and yelling at her children was wrong, she told me she cried during the whole sermon. She promised herself she would never yell at them again. When I saw her on Tuesday of that week, she told me she had already yelled at her children again. Why would this happen?

Often the explanation given for such a common experience is simply that our sin nature is very powerful. That is, of course, true. But such an explanation is only partly helpful because it doesn't address a large part of the problem. In addition, it locks us into a victim mentality that lacks hope and produces frustration.

A more helpful explanation for why we so often fail to do what we know we should is that we fail to recognize what lies beneath our decision to sin. While we may understand what many of the major sins are, most Christians fail to understand how their sin nature operates. We fail to address the underlying, self-centered purpose, belief, and motivation that is actually energizing our sin. As a result, we end up tackling the wrong problem. We're like a linebacker in a football game letting the guy with the ball run right by us while tackling the guy without the ball. It makes us feel like we're doing something to win the game, but our effort isn't terribly effective.

Knowing that all behavior is purposeful and goal directed, as I talked with my client that day I wanted to help her understand what she was trying to accomplish by yelling at her children. What was more important

to her than loving her children? What was making it so difficult for her to do what she knew was right?

During our counseling session on Tuesday it became very clear that she unknowingly had an underlying agenda. When I began to explore why she had yelled at her children so soon after the sermon on Sunday, she said it usually happened just before her husband came home from work. She said she often became anxious at that time because she was afraid her husband would get mad at her if the children were not well behaved. She also shared how painful it was for her when her husband got mad at her and how she felt like a total failure as a mother. She thought, "If I can just get my children to behave, then my husband will love me and won't get mad at me."

Unknowingly, her agenda of looking toward the world to meet her needs was the driving force behind her impatience with her children. Until the real cause of her failure to show love to her children was exposed, she remained stuck, frustrated, and unable to change. Just being told to "be a patient mom" had not helped her, because her impatience wasn't the real problem. It was only a symptom of the real problem. The real problem that needed to be addressed was her agenda, the underlying current driving her impatience.

3. It Is Motivated by Fear

When we do not believe God is providing all we need, we're left in an uncertain and vulnerable place. In this state of uncertainty, we become afraid that we'll feel the pain of unmet needs. I have counseled many single women who have admitted their fear of not finding a man to marry. Unfortunately, it is common for a single woman to marry a man against the counsel of family and friends, just because she's so afraid she'll never find a husband.

If we allow this kind of fear to control us, we can pursue our agenda with the intensity of a deer running from a wildfire. The stronger our fear, the more controlled by our fear we become and the stronger our motivation to accomplish our agenda. Like a drowning man who fears dying, our fear can cause us to become totally self-focused and desperate.

4. We Are Unaware of It

As we said earlier, our agenda operates like an underlying ocean current in our lives, an undertow. One reason undertows are so dangerous is that they are unseen. Because our personal agendas are largely unseen by the majority of people, their damaging influence usually goes undetected. The average Christian is unaware that they are often driven more by their self-focused agenda than by God's command to be Love Focused. That's because we are often unaware of our underlying motivation. We often think we're following God's plan, but we're actually trying to fulfill our own self-focused agenda. Many Christians I've worked with have had no idea they had a hidden agenda and that part of the motivation behind their efforts to help other people was self-serving.

It is easy to identify this self-focused behavior in the lives of others who are obviously self-centered. However, it is important to be aware that we are all guilty of pursuing our own agenda to some degree or another. At times, this self-focus may not seem obvious, like that undertow. Sometimes it may appear that we are concerned with meeting others' needs more than our own, but when we take a closer look at our core motivations, the exact opposite is often true.

Of course, some people pursue their personal agendas more often than others. The Mother Therasas of the world are certainly following God's plan of love far more than the person who constantly needs to be the center of attention or the person who always has to be right. Yet, we all live to some degree or another according to our own personal agendas because we are finite, sinful, human beings. This agenda unknowingly affects our decisions, actions, attitudes, and emotions. It affects how we spend our time, the commitments we make, and the quality of our relationships. Most importantly, because we are not fully trusting God, our agenda is an unseen obstacle to our ability to love God and others and to enjoy a full and satisfying life.

Recently I spoke with a young mother who was confused by her seventeen-year-old daughter. Her daughter had angrily rejected her suggestions for improving her school project. In an effort to help her daughter get a good grade on the project, she had suggested she make several changes. Her normally receptive daughter thanked her mother but said that she wanted to turn it in the way it was. The mother became

a little irritated, and pushed her daughter a little harder. That's when the daughter became angry.

The mother said to me, "What did I do wrong? All I wanted was to help her get a good grade. I thought I was being a good mother."

When I asked her how she felt when she thought her daughter's project was poorly done, she said, "I was afraid she would get a bad grade. Her teacher is a friend of mine, and I would have felt embarrassed every time I saw her."

As it turned out, this mother's attempt to help her daughter was not aimed at a good grade. Instead of trusting God that her needs were already met, she was looking to her daughter's teacher to feel accepted and avoid the pain of embarrassment. Like the unsuspecting beach tourists, her agenda was an unseen current that unknowingly affected her relationship with her daughter.

Fulfilling Our Agendas

A few years ago, we added a new member to our family—a golden retriever puppy named Abby. Needless to say, things at our house have changed considerably. I've learned that if I want socks with no holes, I can no longer leave them lying on the floor. Our son has been permanently cured of throwing his schoolbooks on the floor after discovering his seventy-dollar history book chewed up into tiny pieces. Our daughter has gained a new appreciation for parenthood, faced with having to say no to pleading puppy-dog eyes that want to go in the car with her to work. We've learned that one hundred-dollar cordless telephones taste better than two-dollar bones from the pet store. And we've all learned to shut the shower door tight, lest our four-legged friend join us in the shower. While Abby is only a dog, we have been somewhat surprised that in some ways, she's just like us.

From the moment Abby bounds into the master bedroom at 6:00 A.M. every morning ready to play, she has an agenda. Her agenda for each and every day is exactly the same—to have fun and avoid boredom.

Just like a human, our retriever seems to be amazingly goal-oriented. In order to accomplish her agenda, she pursues a very specific set of goals. Get mom to think I'm cute so she will stop doing the laundry and pet me. Get dad to play ball with me when he gets home from work. Get

everyone to give me a treat. Those are some of our golden retriever's goals that will assist her in achieving her agenda.

Recognizing and understanding the underlying power of our personal agenda is critical to our spiritual growth, but it is equally important to understand the type of goals that we pursue to try to fulfill that agenda. Accomplishing our agenda requires the pursuit of a very specific type of goal. This specific type of goal will be the subject of the next chapter.