

## THE FIFTH TOOL FOR BUILDING A SPIRITUAL HOUSE

### LISTEN FOR PRINCIPLES

Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment (Hebrews 6:1-2).

Remember we are picking up these tools in order to enjoy God forever. So we want to know what pleases Him and understand more and more about Him. We want to do what is right because He has sought us, saved us, and renewed our hearts. Thus, understanding what the Bible says is crucial and listening to sermons or other teaching is a major part of this whole process. The British Puritans used to call this sitting under the means of grace.

### OH NO! NOT PRINCIPLES AGAIN...

One way of listening effectively is to look for biblical principles. We've talked about this before and, hopefully, you and your teen have been searching for principles as you use your Bible reading plan or practice turning words into images. Webster's Dictionary says, "A principle is a fundamental truth,..from which others are derived, or on which others are founded." It is a general truth. It is used that way in Hebrews 6:1, "Therefore, leaving the *principles* of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on to perfection," where Paul is talking about moving on to other general truths in addition to those connected with Christ and His work. He lists as elementary the principles of repentance, baptism, judgment, etc. He wants to discuss assurance of salvation, God's faithfulness to us, our boldness to expect His acceptance of us in Christ. These are biblical principles--truths on which to build and apply. The following are examples of other foundational truths related to Christ:

- God promised to send a Savior to His people to save them from their sins and close the gap sin caused between He and them.
- Jesus is that Messiah, the Promised One, and was presented that way throughout the gospels.
- Jesus is mysteriously God, yet human in every way except for a sinful nature.
- Jesus's death was self-sacrifice sufficient for meeting God's

demand for justice.

An example of a principle helping us to move on to maturity is:

- God deems it necessary for you to go through this trial, sickness, or triumph.
- He mysteriously orders and directs everything for your good and His glory.
- A wise person accepts it all as from the hand of a good and wise God who never allows any of His children to be snatched out of His caring hand.
- God is faithful to remember our works for Him. He will not forget.

These are foundational truths in dealing with trials and problems we run across in this life.

A principle is also defined by Webster's as a governing law of conduct, "a belief which exercises a directing influence on the life or behavior." See how these principles are directing or influencing us in how we face trials or think about Christ. They are fundamental and foundational; they affect what we believe and how we act. Instead of getting a checklist from someone on what to do when cancer hits us, we order our life on principles and figure out what is the best course to take under our individual circumstances. In other words, biblical principles govern us instead of letting other people's expectations rule over us. That is what we mean by applying the principles. See how useful it is to know principles? So you want your teen (and yourself) to be able to recognize them in Bible studies and sermons. After all, you have structured your family life around attending these means of grace and he/she already has attending church as a habit. But, simply being there isn't enough; you want it to really serve as a time where the Holy Spirit can show unmerited favor to your whole family by convicting of sin, magnifying the Lord Jesus, and stirring hearts to love and serve God.

### **DON'T LEAVE YOUR MIND AT THE CHURCH DOOR!**

Unfortunately, not every preacher or teacher thinks and speaks in principles. Some even want to give us their checklist and lord it over our conscience. Some haven't learned to teach the principles clearly; they burden us down with detail after detail, fact after fact, without ever seeing the principle themselves. In cases like this, we need to formulate the principle for ourself as we listen to their details. You need to be thinking about general truths as they are talking. So the tool you need is another thinking skill similar to "What Does the passage say?" or "What Does the Passage Mean?"

Now you need to train yourself and your teen to think in principles. It doesn't pay to leave your mind at the church door!

## **HOW TO THINK IN PRINCIPLES**

Learn to listen for verbal clues. Words like, "The first thing I want to talk to you about is..." Most speakers will give you a topic here. They might tell you their three main points. They will sometimes try to make them all start with the same letter or some other method to help you remember them. Like "Rest, Rely, Repent, Restore" for a sermon on turning to Christ away from sin. Your thinking chore is to figure out what biblical truth relates to each topic. For instance, "rest" might refer to "Christ's death has paid the final bill for each of your sins so you can *rest* in that." Keep looking at the scripture passage as you listen. The truth is somewhere in there and your pastor or teacher should be helping you find it. The topic or sermon division is a clue to the foundational truth. It will help answer your search for what the passage is saying and what that means. As you think about those, the principles should become clearer.

Of course, some speakers make it easier for us. Their clue might be "Our first principle here is....." and then summarize the passage as evidence of that principle. Often, the answer to the meaning of the passage will be found in the principle. They might tell you: "This means that Jesus has paid it all; you do not have to add anything to His work! So *rest* in that." Clues vary with the speaker and listening to the same pastor week after week makes this thinking task a lot easier than it sounds here. You will get use to his style through repeated listening. Then it becomes easier to pick out the general truths. Remind your teen to:

**Look for the clues.**

**Recognize the principles.**

Just a reminder: Using this skill, like the other thinking skills, should never be just an academic exercise. Remind your teen his/her goals here are spiritual: to know God and enjoy Him, and to direct her inner life and outward acts so as to please Him and make Him shine brightly to others. You need to practice the skill until the thinking process becomes habitual. But the process must be tied to the heart as well so your love is stirred and you are grateful for all of God's mercies and grace. That's why you need God's grace for yourself and your teen. Depend on it; pray for it!

**PRACTICE THE SKILL**

Read the following devotional together aloud. It is from William Jay's *Morning Exercises*. Remember, he was the English pastor who had difficulty learning to read, but his visualization skills helped him preach and write so others could see what he meant. Practice looking for clues to the principles whether directly stated or not. Try to keep the Bible passage open before you as you read so you see the principles in the context of the passage.

## DECEMBER 9

"I am a burden to myself." JOB 7: 20.

AND perhaps this is not all-perhaps you are a burden to others also.

But we will leave this, and inquire whether you are a burden to yourself. We may put the complaint into the mouth of four classes.

It is sometimes the language *of the afflicted*. Thus it was the exclamation of Job. We talk of trouble. He could say, "Behold, and see if ever there was sorrow like unto my sorrow ." Read the affecting relation, dwell on all the dismal items, and wonder not that *he* should say, "I am a burden to myself." If we cannot approve of the strength of his complaint, we hardly know how to condemn it. God himself overlooks it, and only holds him forth as an example of patience. All sufferers cannot indeed say truly as he did, "My stroke is heavier than my groaning." Yet the heart's bitterness is known only to itself. We cannot determine the pressure of another's mind under suffering; for the feeling of affliction may be actually much greater than we should have supposed from the degree of it. But afflictions may be great in themselves from their number and frequency, and suddenness and subject. Is this thy case? Yield not to impatience and despondency. Such afflictions have often introduced a train of mercies, and the valley of Achor has been a door of hope. How many in heaven, how many on earth are now thanking God for their trials. He knows how to deli *ver*. Say, "Lord, I am oppressed; undertake for me." "Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and he shall sustain thee."

It is sometimes the language *of the disengaged and idle*. None so little enjoy life, and are such burdens to themselves, as those who have nothing to do; for

"A want of occupation is not rest ;

A mind quite vacant is a mind distressed."

Such a man is out of God's order, and opposing his obvious design in the faculties he has given him, and the condition in which he has placed him. Nothing, therefore, is promised in the Scripture to the indolent. Take the indolent with regard to exertion. What indecision;

what delay; what reluctance; what apprehension I "The slothful man saith, There is a lion without; I shall be slain in the streets." " The way of a slothful man is as a hedge of thorns: but the way of the righteous is made plain." Take him with regard to health. What sluggishness of circulation; what depression of spirits; what dullness of appetite; what enervation of frame! Take him with regard to temper and enjoyment. Who is pettish and fretful ? Who feels wanton and childish cravings ? Who is too soft to bear any of the hardships of life ? Who broods over every little vexation and inconvenience ? Who not only increases real, but conjures up imaginary evils, and gets no sympathy from anyone in either ? Who feels time wearisome and irksome ? Who is devoured by ennui and spleen ? Who oppresses others with their company, and their questions, and censorious talk ? The active only have the true relish of life. He who knows not what it is to labor, knows not what it is to enjoy. Recreation is only valuable as it unbends us; the idle know nothing of it. It is exertion that renders rest delightful, and sleep sweet and undisturbed. That the happiness of life depends on the regular prosecution of some laudable purpose or lawful calling which engages, helps, and enlivens all our powers, let those bear witness who, after spending years in active usefulness, retire to *enjoy themselves*. Prayers should always be offered up for their servants and wives, and for themselves too. They are a burden to themselves.

It is the language *of the wicked*. Not always, indeed; but much oftener than they are willing to own. It may not come from them in the circle of their companions, but it is sighed out in private, when the charm of amusement has ceased, and conscience tries to be heard. They may pretend--for hypocrisy is not confined to religion--to be peaceful, but they know that one thought of God is sufficient to destroy all the calm. They may profess to admire the world, but they know it affords them no satisfaction. They know they return jaded from all their excursions of avarice, ambition, and sensuality; still asking, Who will show us any good ? They know that in this uncertain state they are always trembling for the idols of their heart; that they look for no support in trouble, and dread the approach of death, to the fear of which they are all their lifetime subject to bondage. Sin and sorrow are inseparable. God himself has told us that the way of transgressors is hard, and that there is no peace to the wicked. Many sins bring their own punishments along with them. Envy is the rottenness of the bones. "Pride is restless as the wind." What a torment is the spirit of revenge. What must be the apprehension of the thief, and the terror of the murderer ? What the remorse or a villain who has seduced a fellow- creature from the path of virtue, and made her ignominious and wretched for life ? What the feelings of a drunkard, who has ruined his business, and covered his wife and children with rags ? How often does the sinner

become the contempt of the neighborhood. How often docs he contract infirmities and diseases which lie down with him in the dust. Yes ; *he* may well say, I am a burden to myself; and to get rid of the intolerable load, he not rarely lays violent hands upon himself, saying, with Cain," My punishment is greater than I can bear."

I t may be the language *of the godly*. We mean, not only or principally as they are afflicted-then they would coincide with the first class of complaints. Many indeed are the afflictions of the righteous, and they are not required to be insensible under them. But there are things which they feel more painfully than outward trouble: the temptations of Satan; a world lying in wickedness; the imperfections of their graces; the remains of corruption within them; wanderings in duty; an evil heart of unbelief; distrust of their best Friend; the grievings of his Holy Spirit. Another cannot enter into all this j it requires the feelings of a renewed mind: but this induces the believer to say, " I loathe it, I would not live always." O wretched man that I am! said Paul; who shall deliver me from the body of this death ?

Is there any relief? The very experience is a token for good. Your case is not peculiar. All your brethren, while in this tabernacle, groan too, being burdened. You will not be a burden to yourself always. You now say, Behold, I am vile: wherefore I abhor myself in dust and ashes. But you will soon be reconciled to yourselves without pride. Your knowledge will be without obscurity, your services without imperfection, your pleasure without pain. And He who is now keeping you from falling, will present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy.<sup>1</sup>

- Write four general Bible truths. You may compare what you found to mine in note<sup>2</sup>.

1.

2.

3.

4.

- How can you apply at least one of these principles?

- What touches your heart and warms it toward God?

You need to keep returning to these principles and the application with your teen. Ask questions about them; wonder at their wonderfulness; rejoice in what they teach about Christ. Your goal is for them to influence their life decisions, to have them become governing influences over what you do and how you live. Don't use the tool and then casually throw everything away like wadding up a math assignment and tossing it into the trash. This is different. It involves what you believe and how you live!

## **DON'T STOP SHORT**

It takes a lot of practice to use any tool. This thinking skill will help you immensely in the Christian life so keep on practicing it. Avoid making this just like an academic skill! That is why looking for the part that warms your heart, uplifts Christ and His work, exposes the character of God is so important. Academics can be cold; true Christianity never is. Don't stop short! See that your heart is uplifted and encouraged to love God more and enjoy Him even more.

One of my favorite preachers, Dr. D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, felt thinking skills were extremely important.

"I am coming increasingly to the opinion that the way in which a man thinks tells you as much about him as what he actually says. His whole method of thinking is one which is of supreme importance."<sup>3</sup>

He was talking about pastors. When you are listening to a sermon, you need to keep thinking yourself as you watch how he thinks. Does he think in principles or belabor details? Does he "put down" scholarly research and use of the mind? Is he afraid of reason? Or does he elevate reason and scholarship above the scripture, drawing his beliefs from academics rather than from the plain reading of the Bible. Both extremes should be avoided by a teacher or preacher intent on clearly presenting Bible truths. Look for that balance in your pastors and you will profit more in your Bible study and its application.

Another way to put this tool above ordinary academic skills is to keep thinking about the principles once you've recognized them. To be useful, these general Bible truths must become a governing influence over how you act as well as what you believe. Having a visual picture in your mind helps. Remember that skill? Having a specific application also keeps the principle before you and causes you to think about it more. Don't just get up from

the sermon, lesson, or in this case, the devotional, walk away and forget it all. That is easier and easier to do in our computer lifestyle. Click. We're off to something else. But, keep thinking, applying, asking questions, wondering etc. Then the principles become influences over you and actual govern how you respond to life's circumstances and people. They become your life principles. You've made them your own. That is very different from a cold orthodoxy or an intellectual exercise.

For instance, I recently listened to two pastors with very different preaching styles and cultural backgrounds discuss suffering. One used Philippians 1 and while the other used 2 Corinthians 4-5. I heard the sermons seven months apart. I listened for principles in each. One communicated his principles clearly while I had to search for the principles in the other one. But, both sermons contained some clear biblical principles. My listening skills and meditation and application habits made them more useful. That is why you want to expose your teen to this kind of thinking. Don't stop short of putting the principle to work in your life through cleaning out sin and warming your heart because of the goodness of God.

## **REDEEM THE TIME LEFT**

Remember you're the coach; this is not a one time "event" but something to keep coming back to over time. The teen years last forever! Or at least that's what you'll feel like when you're dealing with them! But, the time left under your direct influence is fast disappearing.

1. Keep the thinking activity in the forefront with your teen. Instead of rushing off to other activities straight after church, pause for awhile and pose the right questions. (Not How did you like the sermon? or Did you like Pastor's tie today? or Why does he keep preaching in such a boring style?)

What were the verbal clues to principles he used today?

What were his topics?

What were the principles you heard in the sermon today? Compare this with what you heard without being dogmatic. It is possible for more than one principle to be in there.

Have you seen any of these principles in your Bible reading?

2. Sometimes applications are too personal for your teen to share with you. That's okay; give them some space. But, you can ask if they found anything to apply.

3. Make a 3x5 card for your teen to keep in his Bible. Ask them if they used it.

#### Identifying Principles

1. Listen for verbal clues
2. Figure out the general truth to go with each topic.
3. Use the sermon divisions as guide to the principles.
4. Keep the Bible passage open in front of you.
5. Think or write down the principles.
6. How do these principles point me to Christ?
7. How do they change what I believe or how I act?

4. Do you think I've flipped out expecting a teen to develop these kind of skills? Discuss the following quotes of Christian teens from former days:

William Jay preached in England for more than sixty years during the late 1700's through 1853. In his autobiography, he relates the intensity of his spiritual experiences as a young teen:

"I remember, indeed one act of gross transgression (it pains me now in review); it was the uttering of a know and repeated falsehood, accompanied with an oath, to carry a point, as I was as intensely at play. For this my conscience so smote me that I was soon constrained to withdraw from my companions, and went home, and retired to implore forgiveness. But, though free from vice, I now began to see and feel deficiencies with regard to duty, and to be dissatisfied with the state of my heart towards God. ....(Upon hearing a non-conformist service on a Saturday night)... "...the apparent affection and earnestness of the speaker, peculiarly affected me: and what he said of 'the faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners,' was like rain upon the mown grass, or cold water to a thirsty soul. I scarcely slept that night for weeping, and for joy;" <sup>3</sup> [Autobio. p. 22-23](#)) He was soon leading his family in worship, and was later, at age 15 or so, praying at church services. He soon was preaching from village to village and in London at the age of 18.

Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) read the Puritan preachers as a child, and came to London at sixteen to preach for the remainder of his life. If Jay was the first 'boy-preacher,' then Spurgeon was the second. In his autobiography, Spurgeon says, "Let none despise the strivings of the Spirit in the hearts of the young; let not boyish anxieties and juvenile repentances be lightly regarded. He incurs a fearful amount of guilt who in the least promotes the aim of the evil one by trampling upon a tender

conscience in a child. No one can guess at what age children become capable of conversion. I, at least, can bear my personal testimony to the fact that grace operates on some minds at a period almost too early for recollection. When but young in years, I felt with much sorrow the evil of sin. My bones waxed old with my roaring all the day long. Day and night God's hand was heavy upon me.....For five years, as a child, there was nothing before my eyes but my guilt; and though I do not hesitate to say that those who observed my life would not have seen any extraordinary sin, yet as I looked upon myself, there was not a day in which I did not commit such gross, such outrageous sins against God, that often and often have I wished I had never been born....It was my sad lot, at that time, to feel the greatness of my sin, without a discovery of the greatness of God's mercy." <sup>4</sup>(Autobio., Vol I, p. 79-80) He went on to be pointed to Jesus and to preach that mercy to multitudes in London--even as a teenager.

We don't have to have such low expectations spiritually of our teens. Keep on coaching. And wash your efforts in prayer for the Holy Spirit to come with power and bless your efforts.

**FIND AND APPLY BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES SO  
YOUR HEART THAT THEY WARM**