

THE FIVE PRINCIPLES

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Over my lifetime, I have developed principles by which I try to live. I have not applied them perfectly, but when I do, these principles have freed me from irritation, impatience, and ill-advised decisions. When I have used one or more of these principles in counseling sessions, people have been helped by them. Here are my five principles for living.

Reality

The Principle The first principle is the Principle of Reality. The Principle of Reality is seeing and accepting what really is. Jesus said, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free” (Jn. 8:31). The Greek word translated “truth” means “reality.” Jesus is saying knowing reality, that is, what actually is, makes us free. Later in the passage, He explains that He is talking about freedom from sin (Jn. 8:34). The apostle Paul lists some sins that are common among Christians. He says, “Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice” (Eph. 4:31). Accepting reality sets us free from such sins as irritation, anger, and more.

The Problem This principle sounds simple, but there is a problem. Simply put, we do not face reality. For example, the classic example is the young woman who falls in love with a young man who asks her to marry him. Her family and friends say, “Do not marry him.” They see that he has problems that will cause trouble when they get married. She says, “He is not perfect, but he will change.” That is a classic example of not facing reality. In other words, we have a picture of what we think ought to be that blinds us to what it really is. To say the same thing another way, we have expectations of what we want that prevent us from seeing reality. We focus on the ant on the bark of the tree and don’t see the tree, much less the forest. We suffer from tunnel vision. When our picture doesn’t get developed, when our expectations are not met, we get upset, angry, bitter, and sometimes even vengeful. *The Practical Application* So what do we need to do? We need to think realistically. We must see every situation for what it really is, not what we think it ought to be, nor what we want it to be. In short, accept reality.

Here is a dose of reality: Life is not fair. Life is tough. Life is full of curve balls, that is, things you did not expect or even anticipate. Here is another dose of reality: People are selfish, self-centered, self-serving, self-absorbed, and self-justifying. You probably think that assessment is hard, even harsh. Granted, some people can do good things some of the time, but in the final analysis, people are selfish. If you do not understand this, you will be disappointed, angry, bitter, and thus be in bondage to those negative emotions and sins. There was a time when driving in Los Angeles traffic drove me crazy. It was not unusual for me to get stuck in traffic, get irritated, and even get angry. Then I would feel guilty because I was irritated and angry. One day I decided once and for all I was going to solve my problem of my reaction to Los Angeles traffic. As simple as this may sound, I did it by simply accepting the reality that if I was going to drive in Los Angeles, I was going to have to drive in bad traffic. Accepting reality set me free from the irritation of LA traffic.

Revelation

The Principle The second principle is the Principle of Revelation. The Principle of Revelation is knowing, understanding, believing, and doing what God has revealed in His Word. When Jesus said, “You shall know the truth,” He was referring to the Word of God. The apostle John records in his gospel, “Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, if you abide in my word, you are my disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free” (Jn. 8:30-32). Abiding in the Word sets us free from being infuriated with life.

The Problem The problem is, we do not know the Word of God. Many who think they know the Word of God do not understand the Word of God. Many who understand the Word of God do not believe it and obey it. In short, most people just do not “get it.” My brother is a professional counselor in Dallas, Texas. In a counseling session, my brother once told a woman client that she needed to practice forgiveness and unconditional love. Her response was, “Give me something practical to do.” My brother’s remark was, “What I said to her never really occurred to her. She didn’t get it.” The Practical Application Think biblically. Look at life through the lens of Scripture. In short, abide in the Word.

Here is a dose of revelation: God is sovereign, which means He is in control. As a child of God, nothing can happen to me without God allowing it. That does not mean He orders it. It simply means that He permits it. Also, God gives grace to help us (Heb. 4:16) and His grace is sufficient to help us through our difficulties (2 Cor. 12:9). Here’s another dose of revelation: God is a loving Father. That means, “All things work together for good to those who love God and to those who are called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28). By the way, His purpose is that I be conformed to the image of His Son (Rom. 8:29), Jesus Christ, Who is “full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14).

Permit me a personal illustration. Two years ago, I lost the use of my legs. I spent more than a year in a wheelchair. I still can only walk with the aid of a walker. I have not been angry. I have not complained. I am aware that this is an unusual response to becoming disabled. And I’m also aware of how I did it. Just before they wheeled me into the operating room for emergency surgery, I said to the doctor, “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” I was able to do that because I know the Lord, His Word, and His grace. Abiding in the Word set me free from being infuriated with being in a wheelchair.

Relationships

The Principle The third principle is the Principle of Relationships. The Principle of Relationships is that you should advance your relationships with people close to you. Jesus said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment and the second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt. 22:37-39). The most important thing in the universe is relationships. It is so important God sent His Son to establish a relationship with us. Paul says, “None of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself” (Rom. 14:7). No man is an island. It is not good for man to be alone. People need people. Advancing a loving relationship sets us free from being impatient with people.

The Problem The problem is that when we do not get our way, we get impatient, angry, bitter, and resentful. We argue. We would rather be right than have a loving relationship with the other person. The Practical Application Think relationally. The most important thing in relationships is to make sure that you are a loving person. In short, advance the relationship. Here is a dose of reality: We are to forgive others as God has forgiven us. Paul says, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:32). My brother asks people, “Would you want God to treat you like you treat other people?” When they say, “No,” he says, “Well then, treat others as God treats you.”

Here’s another dose of reality: Being loving is being patient and kind. Paul says, “Love suffers long and is kind” (1 Cor. 13:4). I have a friend who lives in another state. He calls me periodically to ask me questions about the Bible. Since I love to answer questions about the Bible, that is a sheer delight. In his case, however, a week later, he will call and ask me the same question. I answer it again. A week later, he will call and asked me the same exact question. After he has asked me the same question three or four times, I would get impatient. I wanted him to learn, but frankly, my attitude was less than loving. After this kind of thing happened repeatedly, it dawned on me that I was giving him biblical answers in an unloving way. So I decided that it was more important for me to have a loving attitude toward my friend than it was for me to be a great Bible scholar. Having a loving relationship sets me free from being impatient with people.

Responsibility

The Principle The fourth principle is the Principle of Responsibility. The Principle of Responsibility is assuming my responsibility and accountability to God. Jesus said, “I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give an account of it in the day of judgment” (Mt. 12:36). We are accountable to God for our thoughts, emotions, words, and actions. Assuming responsibility sets us free from being inflamed with anger.

The Problem We blame others, like the little boy who was doing poorly in school. One day with a somber look on his face, he approached his teacher’s desk and said, “I don’t want to scare you, but my daddy says if I don’t get better grades.... somebody is going to get a spanking.”

Scott Peck, the psychiatrist, tells the story of a young wife in Okinawa who cut her wrists with a razor blade and was brought into the emergency room where he saw her. When he asked why she had done this to herself, she replied, “To kill myself, of course.” When he asked her why she wanted to kill herself, she replied, “Because I can’t stand it on this dumb island. You have to send me back to the States. I’m going to kill myself if I have to stay here any longer.” Peck then asked her what it was about living on Okinawa that was so painful for her. She began to cry in a whining sort of way and said, “I don’t have any friends here, and I’m all alone all the time.” When Peck asked her why she couldn’t make friends, she explained, “Because I have to live in a stupid Okinawa housing project and none of my neighbors speak English.” Peck suggested that she drive over to the American housing area or to the wives’ club so she could make some friends. She said she couldn’t do that because her husband drove the car to work. When Peck asked her why she couldn’t drive her husband to work so she could have the car during the day, her answer was that the car had a stick shift and she could only drive an

automatic. When he asked why she didn't learn how to drive a stick shift car, she glared at him and said, "On these roads? You must be crazy" (Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*, p. 34).

How many times have you said, and how many times have you heard somebody else say, "He made me mad." That's the perfect illustration of not assuming responsibility and practicing blame-shifting. No one can make you mad. You choose to get angry; other people can't make you get angry. My wife was visiting her father when she saw a Post-It note on his bathroom mirror, which said, "You are looking at the only problem you will have today."

The Practical Application Think responsibly. Stop blaming others. In short, assume your own responsibility. Here is a dose of reality: As long as you blame others, you will be stuck in a rut. You will be in bondage to anger, bitterness, resentment, and a general negative attitude. Here's another dose of reality: You will only grow, spiritually and emotionally, as you accept your own responsibility in situations. Peck says, "We must accept responsibility for problems before we can solve them. We cannot solve a problem by saying, 'It's not my problem.' We cannot solve a problem by hoping that someone else will solve it for us. I can solve a problem only when I say, 'This is my problem and it's up to me to solve it'" (Peck, p. 32). Accepting responsibility sets me free from being inflamed with anger.

Results

The Principle The fifth principle is the Principle of Results. The Principle of Results is understanding that all choices have consequences. Jesus taught that we should consider the consequences. If you have two choices of where to build a house, either on the rock or on the sand, remember that when the storm comes, the house built on sand will fall, but the house built on the rock will stand (Mt. 7:24-27). Anticipating results sets us free from ill-advised decisions.

The Problem We live for the immediate, not the ultimate. We sacrifice the permanent on the altar of the immediate. We choose the temporary over the eternal.

The Practical Application When you are contemplating a course of action, think about the results. In short, anticipate the results. Here is a dose of reality: Decisions have consequences in time. Destination determines decisions. If you are in Los Angeles and you want to go to San Francisco, the destination necessitates that you choose to take I-5, not I-10. Interstate 5 takes you north from Los Angeles to San Francisco. Interstate 10 takes you east to Phoenix, Arizona, Houston, Texas, and eventually Jacksonville, Florida. If you take I-10 instead of I-5, you will end up in Jacksonville, complaining about the heat and humidity. Here is another dose of reality: Decisions have consequences in eternity. "For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister" (Heb. 6:10).

I teach the Bible contextually because I am convinced that someday I will stand before the Lord and give an account of everything I said from the pulpit. Frankly, if I did not believe that, I would be tempted to preach some of my ideas, instead of God's ideas. Anticipating the results sets me free from ill-advised decisions.

Summary: If we think realistically, biblically, relationally, responsibly, and about results, we will be free from being irritated, infuriated, impatient with people, inflamed with anger, and making ill-advised decisions. There are several different ways to summarize these principles.

Reality Revelation Relationships Responsibility Results

Accept reality. Abide in God's revelation. Advance your relationships. Assume responsibility. Anticipate the results.

**Reality Truth Revelation Faith Relationships Love Responsibility Obedience Results
Wisdom**

In any given situation, the first thing you need to do is give yourself a reality check. Look at the situation as realistically as you can. Look at it through the lens of Scripture. Get input from spiritually wise people. Then decide what your own responsibility is, considering the result in time and eternity. Many years ago, this story was told by Bernard L. Brown, Jr., president of the Kennestone Regional Health Care System in the state of Georgia (Bits & Pieces, September 16, 1993, p. 2224). Brown once worked in a hospital where a patient knocked over a cup of water, which spilled on the floor beside his bed. The patient was afraid he might slip on the water if he got out of the bed, so he asked a nurse's aide to mop it up. The patient didn't know it, but the hospital policy said that small spills were the responsibility of the nurse's aides, while large spills were to be mopped up by the hospital's housekeeping staff. The nurse's aide decided the spill was a large one and she called the housekeeping department. A housekeeper arrived and declared the spill was a small one. An argument followed. "It's not my responsibility," said the nurse's aide, "because it's a large puddle." The housekeeper did not agree. "Well, it's not mine," she said, "the puddle is too small." Suppose they had applied the five principles. The first person on the scene would have seen the reality of water on the floor, would have realized that the patient might slip on it, and would assume the responsibility of cleaning it up. The problem would have been solved in a matter of and the patient would not have been hurt. Instead, they focused on some vague rule and both shifted responsibility to the other person with the potential result of someone getting hurt. Back to the story as told by Brown: The exasperated patient listened for a time, then took a pitcher of water from his night table and poured the whole thing on the floor. "Is that a big enough puddle for you two to decide?" he asked. It was large enough, and that was the end of the argument. Get real. Look at reality and act responsibly in light of the revelation of God, your relationships with people, and the results of your action o