

INTRODUCTION

Even if you’ve never served in the military, you’ve probably heard of basic training. According to the U.S. Army recruiting Web site, “Basic Training lasts only nine weeks, but you’ll remember those nine weeks for the rest of your life. You’ll spend the best nine weeks of your life learning what it means to be a soldier in the U.S. Army. And when it’s over, you’ll discover some amazing things. Your mind will be sharper, your body will be lean and hard, and you’ll be more confident than you’ve ever been before.” Sounds like an army recruiter wrote that!

A friend of mine who served in the army has some interesting stories about basic training. He once told me about a surprise inspection of their barracks. If they passed inspection, they would get a weekend pass, but if they didn’t, they would have to stay and clean the barracks all weekend. My friend and 37 others passed inspection—but two didn’t. Those who passed were ready to celebrate until they found out the two’s failures meant everyone failed and therefore *everyone* would be spending the weekend cleaning. You can imagine how everybody felt toward those two soldiers. Now the drill sergeant did not do this to be cruel but rather to teach them that they were a unit and not just individuals.

The same is true in the Christian life. It is impossible to be a lone ranger Christian. We are responsible for one another. In Luke 17, Jesus shares what I call basic training for disciples. God’s purpose for your life is that you become a fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ. In the previous chapters, He was speaking in the presence of his enemies, those religious leaders who wanted to accuse Him. In these verses He is speaking to His disciples. If you are a follower of Jesus, these words are for you. In these ten verses Jesus gives four important keys to becoming a stronger disciple.

1. WARNING: DON’T CAUSE ONE OF GOD’S CHILDREN TO SIN!

Jesus said to his disciples, “Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. So watch yourselves.”

It’s bad enough when you personally commit a sin before God, but Jesus said if you *cause* someone else to sin, it’s even worse. And heaven forbid, don’t you dare lead a little child into sin—you’d be better off to take a short rope attached to a huge rock, tie the rope around your neck and toss the stone into the deepest part of the ocean! Those are strong words!

We live in an age when there is an increase in sexual abuse of children. Child pornography is growing at an alarming rate and the internet has become a means to spread this vile disease. What do you think is going to be God’s judgment upon people who are so wicked they enlist innocent children in such activities? Jesus said they’d be better off dead. I wouldn’t be opposed to making child pornography a crime punished by lethal injection. There are wicked people who lead young people into drug use or prostitution, surely the hottest places of hell should be reserved for them.

Child pornography and drug abuse are simply the most extreme examples of causing someone else to sin, but there are other ways to cause others to sin. Remember, the Bible teaches there are different kinds of sin: anger, pride, bitterness, gossip, unforgiveness, worry and prejudice—the list goes on. These are the sins of attitude we find so common among Christians. Most children learn to sin from their parents. Paul warns parents in Ephesians 6:4 to “not provoke your children to wrath, but to bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” That word “provoke to wrath” means we shouldn’t lead them into a sinful attitude of anger. Few parents would ever physically poison their kids, but many have poisoned their children’s minds and attitudes. If your behavior causes someone else to embrace the sins of disposition, Jesus said you also need a big rock and a short rope as well.

The word Jesus uses for “cause someone to sin” is the word *skandalon*, from which we get our word scandal. It was a word meaning the bait in a trap that enticed an animal. Later the word came to mean a stumbling block. If you entice someone else to sin, or you put a barrier in someone’s life causing them to trip up, it’s a terrible scandal in God’s eyes.

Paul warns in Romans 14:13: “Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way.”

People are always watching you, especially your children. How many of you parents have taken your kids to the beach and as you walk down the beach you turn around and there is your child walking in the footprints you’ve left in the sand? Or if you like to snow ski, you’ve seen your children stepping in the prints you left in the snow? We must be careful that we never do anything to cause another to stumble or sin. The Bible says we should avoid even the *appearance* of sin.

I heard about a man who woke up one morning and it was pouring rain. He asked his wife if he could borrow one of her umbrellas and she said, “Absolutely not. You’ve borrowed four or five of my umbrellas already and you keep leaving them at work.” So he leaves in the downpour and catches the bus to his office. Sitting across from him, he notices a Quaker who has an umbrella. Quakers are peace-loving, gentle souls who speak in King James language. The guy said to himself, “That’s a Quaker, I could take his umbrella, and because he’s a pacifist, he wouldn’t do a thing.” But his better nature said, “No, that’s stealing and it wouldn’t be right.” But as he arrived at his stop, he reached out and took the Quaker’s umbrella and walked off the bus. As he was leaving work that afternoon, he remembered to gather up his wife’s umbrellas left at the office, so when he got on the bus he was carrying six or seven of them, including the Quaker’s. As luck would have it, guess who sat down next to him on the bus? Yep, the same Quaker. The old Quaker looked at the man and looked at his pile of umbrellas and said, “Thou hast had a good day!” People are always watching!

In military basic training, could you imagine the chaos if soldiers kept tripping each other up while they were marching? But that’s what a lot of Christians are doing. There are many ways you can make someone stumble. If another believer sees you do something or hears you say something that doesn’t fit the Christian life, they may think that it’s okay, so they step into sin from your example. Nothing we do or say is totally neutral. Jesus said we are either “gathering

for Him or scattering people away from Him.” Every word, every action we produce either has a positive or a negative impact on others.

Isn't it strange that princes and kings
And clowns that caper in sawdust rings
And common folk like you and me
Are the builders of eternity.
To each is given a bag of tools,
A shapeless mass and a book of rules;
And each must make, ere time is flown,
A stumbling-block or a stepping-stone.
R.L. Sharpe

After the warning comes a procedure:

2. PROCEDURE: MAINTAIN GOOD RELATIONSHIPS BY FORGIVING OTHERS!

“If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.”

It's sad, but sometimes Christians can be extremely rude and cruel to other members of the Body. Someone once said Christianity is the only army that shoots its wounded. How do you react when another disciples sins against you?

The only way to maintain good relationships with other believers is to be willing to quickly forgive others when they hurt you. For some people that's a hard thing to do. C. S. Lewis wrote, “We all agree that forgiveness is a beautiful idea until we have to practice it.”

Jesus said forgiveness should be practiced even if the person sins against you seven times. That number is not to be taken literally. In other words you can't keep count of the times you forgive a person, and on sin eight say, “Forget it, I'll never forgive you because you just passed the limit!” In Jewish writing, the number seven was a “perfect number” which meant it could even mean “unlimited.” We should be willing to forgive others an unlimited number of times.

You can see this clearly by what Jesus said to Peter. At that point Peter got up enough nerve to ask, “Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?” Jesus replied, “Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven.” (Matthew 18:21-22 *The Message*) And Jesus didn't mean you stop forgiving after number 490—seventy times seven means “unlimited.”

Can you think of an example right now of when another Christian sinned against you by doing or saying something that deeply hurt you? If you can't think of anyone right now that's good, because it proves you have probably done a good job forgiving them! But others of you are thinking of people and occasions when you've been wounded. What do you do?

Jesus gave a simple procedure to be followed. Remember this procedure is for believers only; it won't work if the person who sins against you is not a follower of Jesus. This is a procedure for

two disciples to follow. Step one in this procedure is the SIN itself. A Sunday School teacher was trying to teach her class about God’s forgiveness. She was talking to them about what it means to confess your sins so you can be forgiven. As she concluded, she asked them, “Now, boys and girls, what must you do before you can be forgiven?” The right answer was “Confess yours sins,” but nobody answered the question, “What must you do before you can be forgiven?” One little boy figured it out and said, “Well, before you can be forgiven, first you’ve gotta sin!”

Before you initiate this procedure, make sure the other person has really sinned against you, not just said something or done something you didn’t like. There is a difference between being “sinned against” and just having your feelings hurt. But if someone has disobeyed the Word of God in relation to you, then you’re ready for step number two: you should rebuke them. If that person is truly listening to the voice of God, you may be able to skip this step, because the Holy Spirit will convict them without you rebuking them, and they will come and ask for forgiveness without being rebuked. We think of the word “rebuke” as a loud, powerful statement as in “I rebuke you in the name of Jesus!” That may be appropriate when you are talking to demons, but when you are dealing with people you must be gentle in your rebuke. If someone sins against you, you should go to them privately and lovingly point out the error. When you do that it’s like you put the ball in their court and they need to respond.

The next step in the process is repentance. After you have lovingly confronted the offending person, they should be willing to repent. Repentance involves more than simply saying, “I’m sorry.” It involves a change of mind that produces a change of behavior. If you are the person who has sinned against another disciple, and they lovingly rebuke you, how would you respond? If you are carnal, you’ll say something like, “Who are you to tell me what I’ve done is wrong!?” Or you’ll start looking for something in their life to point out as sin. However, if you are walking in the Spirit, you’ll say something like, “I’m so sorry. Will you please forgive me for what I did? I assure that it won’t happen again.” Once you have sinned against someone, you can’t “unspill the milk” but you can certainly offer to clean up the mess. An important part of repentance is making restitution. The best way you can tell if someone has truly repented is if they offer evidence by making restitution.

The final step in the procedure is forgiveness. You should be willing to offer them full and complete forgiveness—and not just once, but many times. Through the years I’ve been disturbed to hear Christians say, “I’ll *never* forgive him/her for what he/she did to me.” That’s a dangerous thing to say because Jesus also said, “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive you.” (Matthew 6:14-15) The only person who can afford the luxury of unforgiveness is the person who doesn’t need to be forgiven!

Forgiveness is not a feeling or an emotion—it is a choice. It is your decision not to want to punish that person for what they’ve done to you. The Bible word for forgiveness is *aphemi*, meaning to “cancel the debt” or “set one forever free from the obligation.” Our forgiveness should be a reflection of the forgiveness God offers us. He places our sins behind our back and remembers them no longer. I’ve heard people say, “Well, I’ll forgive them, but I won’t forget it.” If you actively choose to continue to remember what that person has done to you, you haven’t truly forgiven them.

When the first Christian missionaries arrived among the Eskimos, they found there was no Eskimo word for forgiveness. So when they began to translate the Bible into their language, they took several Eskimo words and linked them together to make a new word for forgiveness. The Eskimo word is: *Issumagijoujungnainermik*. It literally means, “Choosing-not-to-think-about-it-anymore.” When another believer has wronged you and has repented, you must forgive them, in other words, you must “choose not to think about it anymore.” You may object, “But I can’t *forget* it.” Forgetting is passive, but *choosing* not to remember is an active task.

If someone hurts you, and repents and asks you to forgive them, you should choose to not think about it any more. If you keep bringing up what they have done over and over again, it’s a sign your forgiveness is not complete. But what if the person doesn’t repent? Go ahead and forgive them anyway; at least you have done your part in the procedure, and you are only accountable to God for your role.

When God forgives us, He doesn’t keep bringing up our sin—but the devil keeps trying to make us aware of our own sin and the sins others have committed against us. That’s why the Bible calls him the accuser of the brothers.

Johnny was trying out his new slingshot at his Grandparents’ farm one day. He aimed at one of their ducks and to his surprise and horror, the stone flew straight at the duck and it fell over like a...dead duck. He was mortified. He panicked and hid the dead duck in the woodpile. That’s when he noticed his older sister, Ann, witnessed the whole thing.

After lunch, Grandmother asked Ann to help with the dishes and she said, “Oh, I think *Johnny* wants to help with the dishes.” The she whispered to Johnny, “Remember the duck?” The next day, Grandpa offered to take Johnny into town and Ann said, “I think Johnny wants to stay here and do my chores and let me go into town, *don’t* you?” And her look said it all, “Remember the duck.” After several days, Johnny couldn’t stand it any longer. He went to his grandmother and confessed to the whole dirty deed. His grandmother hugged him and said, “I know Johnny, I saw the whole thing from my kitchen window, and because I love you, I forgave you then.” He said, “But why didn’t you tell me?” She said, “I was just waiting to see how long you’d let your sister make a fool of you!” That’s what God must surely say to us when we continue to worry about our forgiven sin. He says, “Because I love you, I have forgiven you, so don’t let the devil make a fool out of you!”

3. STRATEGY: EMPLOY THE SECRET WEAPON OF FAITH!

The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” He replied, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.”

Like many disciples today, the followers of Jesus thought they needed *more* faith. But we don’t need more faith, because faith is such a powerful weapon, that only a tiny amount can do incredible things. I agree with those who say the U.S. was justified in dropping the atomic bombs on Japan to end World War II. But it’s still mind boggling to me that the splitting of a tiny atom

can produce that kind of energy and power. Faith is the secret weapon of the Christian life, but it doesn't destroy—it does the impossible. A mustard seed is smaller than the head of a pin, but it has something in it a rock will never have: it is alive. It doesn't take faith to uproot a mulberry tree; all you need is a shovel. But it takes a faith to produce the miracle of planting it in the sea! Faith always operates within the realm of the impossible.

I want to share with you three verses in the New Testament that are what I call the ABC's of faith. First, what is faith? The answer is in Hebrews 11:1, “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” If you ever say, “I'll believe it when I see it.” That's not faith. Faith always says, “When I believe it, I'll see it.” How to you get faith? The answer is found in Romans 10:17, “Faith comes by hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ.” The only way to get faith and strengthen faith is from hearing, and reading the Word of God. Finally, how do you know when you really have faith? James 2:17 says, “Faith by itself if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” If you just say you have faith, but you don't ACT on your faith, your faith is dead.

You cannot be a disciple of Jesus without exercising faith. Without faith it is impossible to please God. A few years ago, Lee Ann Womack from Jacksonville, Texas wrote and recorded a song that went all the way to number one on the country music charts. It's a song about a mother giving advice to her daughter. I have always liked one of the lines in the lyrics: “I hope you still feel small when you stand beside the ocean, / Whenever one door closes I hope one more opens, Promise me that you'll give faith a fighting chance, / And when you get the choice to sit it out or dance.” That's what Jesus is saying to His disciples—give faith a fighting chance. And when you have the choice of sitting by passively or acting on your faith—I hope you go for it!

4. DUTY: “JUST DOING MY JOB, SIR!”

“Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, ‘come along now and sit down to eat’? Would he not rather say, ‘Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink’? Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’”

When a good soldier does the job he has been trained to do and ordered to do, he doesn't expect to get a medal. He does his job because there's a job to do. His response is “I'm just doing my job, sir.” Jesus said a servant of the Lord shouldn't expect to receive accolades or special recognition. We obey because it's our job. If you are serving the Lord for the reward or recognition you may receive, you have the wrong motive.

A true servant serves because it is his duty; he even claims to be an unworthy servant. David wrote in Psalm 40:8, “I delight to do your will O, my God, and your law is within my heart.” God's reward for good service is more service. We are to serve the Lord with gladness simply because we have been saved and we love the Master.

Here is the discipleship principle: The master has every right to demand complete obedience from his slave, but the slave has no right to demand anything from his master.

As a disciple of Jesus you must not only have faith, you must have *faithfulness*. Do you know the difference? Faith can be exercised in moments of need. But faithfulness is a continual process of being an obedient servant of the Lord. You really cannot call yourself a disciple if you are not faithfully serving the Master in some spiritual capacity.

As unworthy servants, you shouldn't expect any accolades in this life. But if you are an obedient servant, one day, you will hear Jesus say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

CONCLUSION

There are four important things on Jesus' list to know about basic training for disciples. A disciple never puts a stumbling block in the spiritual path of others. A disciple forgives quickly and often. A disciple exercises faith and demonstrates faithfulness. Do you claim to be a disciple of Jesus?

Alexander the Great was a brave and brilliant general. Once, one of his officers appeared before him to stand for charges brought against him for insubordination and behavior bordering on cowardice. Alexander the Great asked the officer, “What is your name?” The officer replied, “Sir, my name is the same as yours. My name is Alexander. The general stared at the officer and shouted, “Alexander? Then either change your name, or change your behavior!” As Christians, we cannot be called disciples of Jesus unless we are willing to follow his orders. We must change our name or change our behavior.

OUTLINE

1. WARNING: (1-3) DON'T CAUSE ONE OF GOD'S CHILDREN TO SIN!

“Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way.” *Romans 14:13*

2. PROCEDURE: (4) MAINTAIN GOOD RELATIONSHIPS BY FORGIVING OTHERS!

At that point Peter got up enough nerve to ask, “Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?” Jesus replied, “Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven.” *Matthew 18:21-22 The Message*

3. STRATEGY: (5-6) EMPLOY THE SECRET WEAPON OF FAITH!

“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” *Hebrews 11:1*

“Faith comes by hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ.” *Romans 10:17*

“Faith by itself if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” *James 2:17*

4. DUTY: (7-10) “JUST DOING MY JOB, SIR!”

“I delight to do your will O my God, and your law is within my heart.” *Psalms 40:8*



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes