

# Our Christian Response to Blessings and Challenges Part One

A Bible Study Course for Adults

by

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Lesson One  
*Our Christian Response to Blessings and Challenges*

## **When We Experience Unmet Needs and Expectations**

### **Goals**

- To grow in the assurance of God's loving, faithful power in our earthly lives.
- To learn to trust that God answers prayers for the good of his believers.
- To learn to be content with God's good and gracious will for our lives.

### **Life example**

Shawn Webster's wife drove her car out of their driveway into the path of an oncoming vehicle. She died instantly. Shawn was left to raise their one-year-old son. After five years, Shawn struggles with inner turmoil over a hope and expectation that God still hasn't filled.

About a year after his wife's death, Shawn began hoping for another Christian wife who would be a loving mother to his son. Shawn feels that God hasn't answered his prayers for a solution to his loneliness (remarriage).

Pastors and friends encourage him to keep praying. They tell him that they know God will answer his prayers, but he still awaits an answer. He has begun to wonder if his expectations are set on the wrong things. He wrestles with the difference between eternal and temporal hope. He wrestles with faith in a God who seems to be the author of both good and evil.

Shawn's attempts to understand the will of God lead to conclusions that are common to human experience and which may often roll from our own lips. He laments that the future holds little more than day after day of the same frustration. There is no prospect of relief on the horizon and no hint that God will intervene, either to grant an answer to his desires or to change those desires so that he can once again experience contentment. He tries to believe that what God is doing is worthy, but at times it seems that God makes himself the enemy. Shawn wonders if he should find hope in the fact that since God hasn't destroyed him completely, there may still be the hope that he will restore him. He often finds himself looking for comfort in a passage from Lamentations (3:31,32): "For men are not cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love."

### **Reflections of faith**

1. The death of his wife represents a tremendous sense of loss for Shawn. Pinpoint some specific losses he may have felt.
  
2. What are Shawn's hopes and expectation from God?

3. As time passes, how might his hopes change?
4. Put yourself in the place of Shawn's friends. How would you likely react to his dilemma?

In what way might that help Shawn?

In what ways might your response further frustrate Shawn?

5. What Shawn heard in the words of his pastor and friends was that God would answer his prayer in the way he (Shawn) wanted it answered. What would have been better words of encouragement from his friends?
6. Think of some unmet needs and expectations that you wrestle with. (You do not have to share these with the group.)
7. Shawn began to wonder whether his expectations rested on the wrong thing. How do you know whether your expectations rest in the right things?

## **Light from the Word**

**Read Romans 8:18-27.**

1. The creation is eagerly waiting "for the sons of God to be revealed." Explain that phrase.
2. We know that in all things God works for our good. Immediately after the fall into sin, God cursed the earth because of man's sin (Genesis 3:17-19), thus subjecting the creation to frustration. What do you think might have been the loving purpose behind that?
3. Verse 22 says, "The whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth." Give examples of that "groaning."

4. In verse 24, Paul makes the point that hope, by definition, looks forward to what we do not yet have. The fact that we have hope affects the way we deal with challenges and troubles in our lives. In what way?
5. When we face frustrations similar to Shawn's, what comfort do verses 26 and 27 give us?

## Breakout/discussion

Imagine that Shawn is your friend. He has shared the frustration of his heart with you. Use Romans 8:18-27 to formulate an encouraging answer to help him.

## Personal reflections

Shawn does not directly say that God is the author of evil, but his lament shows that he is wrestling with that thought. When we feel overwhelmed by something that seems bad, we begin to rationalize that the evil is out of our control. Since we believe God is in control, we conclude that God has permitted this evil to come upon us. Though we may not blame God—we believe that God knows what is best for us, yet, we still feel that God must bear responsibility for this evil because he has permitted it to happen to us. This is the *suspicion* that Shawn expresses. He suspects that in some way God does not want him to fill the loneliness of his life with remarriage and a new mother for his son. God is therefore, in some way, a part of the evil of loneliness and unmet hopes and expectations that is afflicting him. Shawn does not want to have these feelings.

1. Shawn's thinking seems logical. What, however, is missing from the discussion?
2. When have you had suspicions about God's good intent in your life? How might a reminder of God's eternal love and good purpose have helped you?

## Light from the Word

1. **James 1:13-18** addresses our confusion about God's relationship to evil. What do we learn from these verses?
2. Read **1 Corinthians 10:13**. What is that "way out" that God always provides?

3. According to **Job 38:1-4** and **40:1,2**, what errors were at the heart of Job's complaint about the ways of God?
  
4. A person might have faith in God's eternal promise of heaven and yet still feel that for this life God is not meeting his expectations. Why is it sometimes easier for us to believe that God is in control in matters that pertain to eternal life than that he is in control of our future here on earth?
  
5. Some people think that the message of Jesus dying for sin is so basic, we hardly need to mention it. Or at least, they fail to see that the message of Jesus is directly related to Shawn's situation. Why is it important to talk to Shawn about the seriousness of sin and the blessing of forgiveness?

## **Let's think about the lesson**

It is a challenge to pray for God to bless us in specific ways if we do not always know if our expectations are in agreement with God's will for us.

It has been suggested that the following might be a good model for our prayers:

**P = Praise and thanksgiving**

**R = Remember your sin and your Savior**

**A = Ask for specific things**

**Y = Yield to God's will**

Imagine that you are Shawn. Using the prayer outline above, write a prayer that addresses your desires. Remember to look at your troubles in the context of Romans 8:28.

**P =**

**R =**

**A =**

**Y =**



This chart shows the vicious cycle of hurt and denial and anger that develops when people discover that someone has sinned against them in some way. People who are hurt or angry may deny that the offense took place, or they may become more angry or more hurt as they hear more information about their sin. Note that this is called the preforgiveness stage for a reason. As long as a person stays in this stage, he or she will never forgive the one who caused the hurt. People get stuck, spinning their wheels, separating themselves from God rather than living joyful Christian lives. The initial feeling of hurt turns to anger or denial or both. As time goes on, they gather more information about the sin and become more angry and more hurt. Without the intervention of God's Word, they may sin by spiteful words or vengeful actions.

1. Think of specific things others have done that have hurt you. (You won't need to share this publicly if you don't want to.) How did you feel when you were living with the emotions described in the chart?
  
2. As you consider a time when someone hurt you, reflect on the impact the hurt, anger, denial, and information gathering had on your life.
  - Hurt?
  - Anger?
  - Denial?
  - Information Gathering?
  
3. Why do you think the meeting between Sally and Cindy 25 years later was so awkward?

## **Light from the Word**

**Read Genesis 50:15,17.**

1. Compare Cindy to Joseph's brothers.
  
2. Compare Joseph to Sally.

In the following passages, God speaks to us about hurt, anger, and denial.

**Read Ephesians 4:26.**

3. What warning does God give us when we are angry?
  
4. When he tells us not to let the sun go down on our anger, he is telling us to resolve the matter quickly. Why is it difficult to forgive quickly?

5. Why are grudges so dangerous spiritually?
  
6. Read **Colossians 3:13**. List ways the Lord's forgiving you can be a model for your forgiving others.
  
7. What insights do the following passages give us about forgiveness: **Luke 6:37; 17:3,4; and 23:34**.

## **Breakout/discussion**

Sally and Cindy talk, but the conversation is awkward. Sally finally gets up the courage to ask where Ron is. The following scenarios each present a possible answer to the question.

Discuss how Sally might react to each scenario.

1. Cindy says that Ron always had a roving eye and that they divorced after his second affair about 12 years ago. He left her with four kids to raise, so life has been very hard. She and the kids have not heard from him for the past three years. Cindy goes on and on about what a rat Ron is.
  
2. Cindy says that Ron died in an auto accident three years ago. He had been such a good husband and provider, and the insurance money that he left provides for the kids and her very well. They had loved each other very much. She still misses him desperately.
  
3. Cindy points to a table where Ron is sitting. Sally notices that Ron is obviously drunk. He looks about 15 years older than his real age.
  
4. Cindy points to a table where Ron is sitting. Sally sees that he is still very young looking and attractive.

Evaluate the impact of Sally's hurt and anger in each of the previous scenarios.

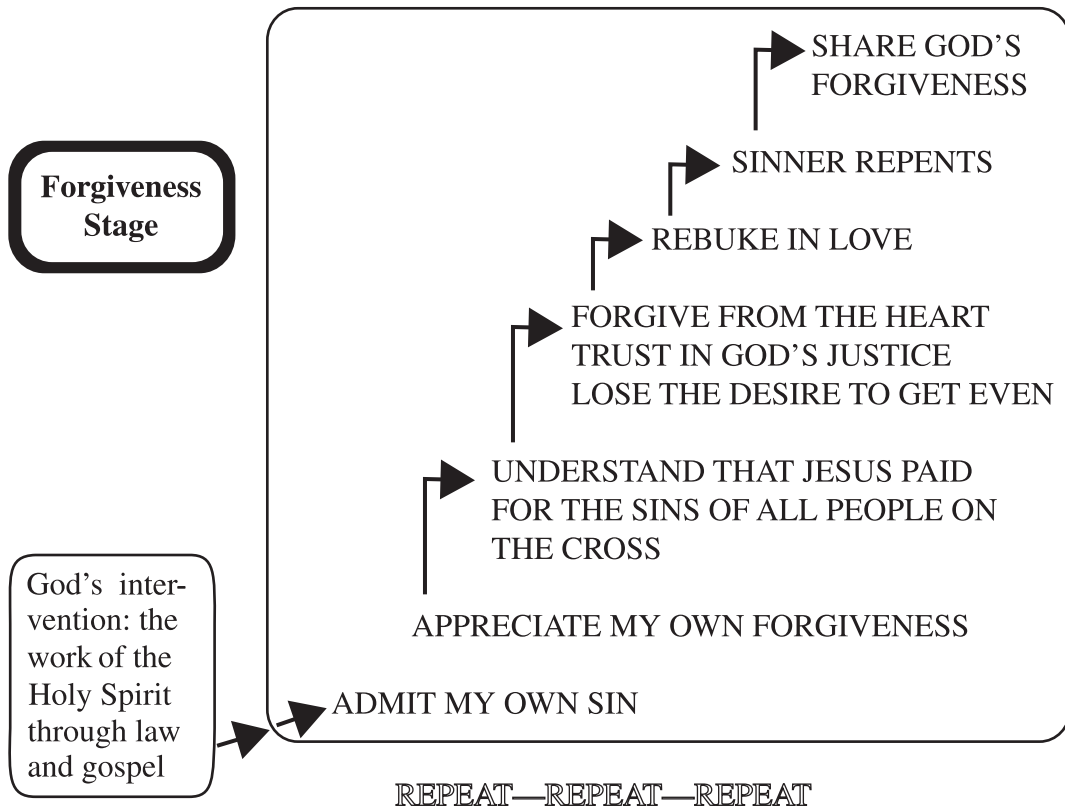


## Personal reflections

Let's imagine that the scenario has changed in that Sally and her husband, Pete, have become Christians.

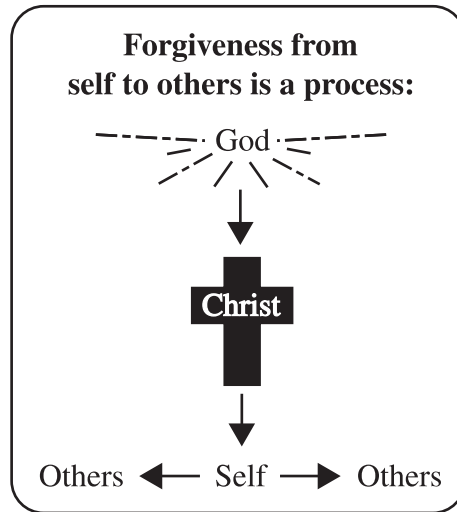
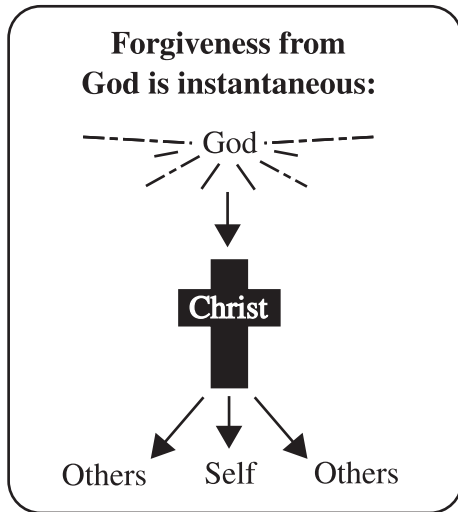
Revisit the four previous scenarios, and consider how the law and gospel passages we studied earlier would influence Sally's thinking.

## Light from the Word



This chart illustrates what happens when God intervenes with his law and gospel when we are angry because someone has sinned against us.

As you start in the lower left corner and work your way up the chart, note how nothing positive and God-pleasing happens without God's intervention. Cindy, Sally, and each one of us would always be stuck in the previous, "preforgiveness," sequence without the work of the Holy Spirit through the law and gospel. "Repeat—Repeat—Repeat" emphasizes that we need to hear and reflect upon the Word of God often.



1. Why is forgiveness from God to us through Christ instantaneous, while forgiveness from us to others is often a process?
2. Explain how each of the phrases (from the box on the previous page) applies to forgiveness.
  - Admit my own sin.
  - Appreciate my own forgiveness.
  - Understand that Jesus paid for the sins of all people on the cross.  
Read **2 Corinthians 5:19,20**.
  - Forgive from the heart.
  - Trust in God's justice.
  - Lose the desire to get even.
  - Rebuke in love.

- Sinner repents.
- Share God's forgiveness.

3. Read **2 Corinthians 5:19,20**. What is the effect of Christ's forgiveness in our lives?

## **Let's think about the lesson**

Reexamine the hurt, denial, anger sequence (see the chart) in relation to the hurts in your own life you identified earlier. Applying God's Word may change the way you feel about the person who sinned against you.

Have you forgiven the person? If not, you need to avail yourself of the intervention of God's law and gospel. Talk to your pastor if the need arises.

If you have forgiven the person, think of some ways your attitude about that person has changed.

Lesson Three  
*Our Christian Response to Blessings and Challenges*

## **When We Struggle with the Desire for Instant Gratification**

### **Goal**

- To learn to apply God's Word and his will to our lives, as we wrestle with decisions regarding the use of God's blessings of our skills, talents, wealth, and possessions.

### **Life example**

Rodney is a gifted 18-year-old high school senior. At one time Rodney had planned to go to college to get a degree in computer science. His parents hope he will do that. But the computer software company he has worked for part-time has offered him a full-time job after high school. His starting salary would be \$30,000 per year, plus stock and benefits.

Rodney is also a very good guitarist and singer. He plays in a rock band. An agent has told the members of the band that they have a chance to make it big if they devote all their time to the band.

### **Reflections of faith**

1. Rodney has some life-changing career decisions to make. They relate to how he will use the various gifts he has been given. List some possible consequences of the decisions he might make.
2. Imagine that Rodney comes to you for advice. It is very important that you listen to him first, because he is nearly an adult and he will want to feel that the decision is his. What issues would you try to get him to think about as he makes his decision?

### **Light from the Word**

1. Now imagine that you are in Rodney's shoes and that you are trying to choose what is the best thing to do. What encouragement does **John 21:17** give you regarding praying to God?

2. Some people, when faced with these kinds of decisions, would be consumed with worry. What comfort would the following passages give you as you make your decision?  
**Deuteronomy 33:27; Matthew 6:34; 19:26; and John 16:23.**
  
3. Suppose a well-meaning Christian friend advises Rodney, “Put the question in God’s hands. Just flip a coin or draw straws.” Evaluate that advice in light of what Jesus says in **Luke 14:28-30.**
  
4. What caution from **1 John 2:15-17** is in order as we make decisions regarding our futures?

## **Life example**

Charles and Nafisa are a young Christian couple (about 30 years old) with a three-year-old son. Both are college graduates (they were married in college), who now have good jobs. They are discussing (not arguing about) the subject of sticking to a budget, which they have had problems doing in the past. Charles would like to save for their future, but he would also like to take nice vacations. Nafisa would like to save for their son’s college education, but she really likes to buy things and have fun. Neither wants to go back to living on a shoestring as they did in college. They feel that they should enjoy the money they have now, but they also know that they ought to save something. With so many things for which they should save, it is hard to make decisions. So they keep putting the decision off.

## **Reflections of faith**

1. What tensions are surfacing as Charles and Nafisa discuss their budget?
  
2. Both Charles and Nafisa feel the need to save. Can you think of examples of how saving money could actually become a sinful abuse of God’s blessings?

Why might failure to save be a sinful abuse of God’s blessings?

## Light from the Word

### Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-14.

1. The inspired writer poetically postulates that there is a time to do certain things and a time to do just the opposite. The decision about which things need to be done at the moment will create a sense of tension in the decision making process.

Evaluate this statement: It is actually good if we experience a sense of tension when we make decisions on how to use what we have.

2. Verses 1 to 8 point to a proper balance in our lives. How might you apply those words to the discussion between Charles and Nafisa?
3. What truths in Ecclesiastes 3:1-14 might help Charles and Nafisa balance the tension in their budget planning?
4. In the parable of the talents (**Matthew 25:14-28**), Jesus talks about managing the gifts God has given to us. What is the significance of the fact that God gave one person five talents, another two, and still another one talent?
5. Jesus teaches us to be faithful with all the gifts he has given us. What specific implications does that truth have for Charles and Nafisa as they plan their budget?
6. The following passages help us recognize the purposes for which God gives us our talents and our possessions: **1 John 3:17**; **1 Corinthians 16:2**; and **Romans 13:6**. List the three purposes.

## Breakout/discussion

1. It has been suggested that people today are consumed more than ever with the desire for instant gratification. They want to have it all, right now (with as little work as possible). What do you think?
2. Think of examples that might support or contradict that proposition.

3. In what way(s) is the desire for instant gratification related to the dilemma . . .  
. . . Rodney is facing?  
  
. . . Charles and Nafisa are facing?
  
4. How can you train your children to look beyond the temptation for instant gratification to plan wisely how they may best use the blessings God has given?

## **Let's think about the lesson**

1. Imagine that you are married with two children, ages 2 and 5. You live in a small house in a lower-middle-class neighborhood. The neighborhood is generally safe; however, you don't allow your children to play outside alone. Father has a full-time job. Mother has to work also, but in order to spend as much time as possible with the children, she works only part-time.

Because you are just barely able to pay the bills now, you have expressed some concern about the future. How will you make additional car payments when the old car needs to be replaced? Will you ever be able to afford a better home? What about tuition for a Lutheran high school and then college?

How might a struggle with the desire for instant gratification have an impact on your family?

2. Now imagine that you unexpectedly inherit \$100,000. Describe some of the issues that would arise as you struggle with the tension between your desire for instant gratification and your desire to plan wisely for your future.

Lesson Four  
*Our Christian Response to Blessings and Challenges*

## **When We Receive Financial Blessings** **(The financial struggle seems to be over)**

### **Goal**

- To apply biblical principles to our decisions about how to use our money and possessions.

### **Introduction**

Think of a time when you faced your most serious financial struggle.

How are things different now?

Although the struggle to survive financially may be over, what present or future struggles still cause you to worry?

### **Life example and Reflections of faith**

When John and Jane were married and just starting a family, they really struggled financially. Jane had a year left of nursing school and John was still an apprentice plumber. Things were tough for them. They lived in a crowded apartment in a run down apartment complex. They spent very little on entertainment, and often found themselves paying for groceries with their credit card because they simply had no cash.

1. What kinds of temptations might we struggle with if faced with situations similar to those John and Jane faced at the beginning of their marriage?

As soon as Jane finished nursing school, the first of three babies came. She was only able to work part-time.

2. How do financial challenges sometimes affect the way people view children?

Eventually things began to change for John and Jane. Though she only worked part time, Jane was paid well. After John completed his apprenticeship program, he found a secure job. He almost always had work, even during construction slowdowns. During this period of their lives they bought a house.

3. What challenges and temptations might we, like John and Jane, face during this time of increasing prosperity?



## Life example

John and Jane sent their kids to Lutheran grade school and high school. During that time, they were able to buy a nicer home in a nicer neighborhood, and they still saved enough to help the two of their children who wanted to go to the local college. By the time the two children were in college, Jane was again working full-time and John was in the highest pay bracket for the plumbing trade. Since they always had money left over after paying their bills, they were able to remodel their house, take nice vacations, and even install a swimming pool in their backyard. Things looked very good and secure for them.

## Reflections of faith

1. What kinds of temptations does such prosperity bring with it?
2. In the subtitle for this lesson, “The financial struggle seems to be over,” *seems* is a key word. What is the significance of the fact that the financial struggle *seems* to be over?
3. Think of a time when you struggled most financially. How are things better today?
4. While the struggle to survive financially may be over, what concerns about the present or future still trouble you?

## Light from the Word

1. Read **James 1:17**. To the thought that God is the author of all good gifts, the apostle attached the statement about the unchangeable nature of God. What do you think the connection is between those statements?
2. In **Deuteronomy 8:17,18**, God reminded Israel that the ability to produce wealth was a gift from him. This gift itself confirmed the covenant he had made to the Israelites to bless them. In a similar way, the blessings God gives to us confirm the promises he has made to provide for us. What are some ways we might react to these blessings? (Refer to Psalm 9:1,2; Psalm 100; and 2 Corinthians 9:11.)
3. God lovingly guides us in the ways we are to use his gifts. Search the following passages for principles that he gives to guide us in the use of our material gifts.

**1 Timothy 5:8**

**1 John 3:17**

**1 Corinthians 16:2**

**Romans 13:6,7**

## Breakout/discussion

Divide the class into two or more groups. Have each discuss one of the two following questions:

1. In 1 Corinthians 4:2 Paul wrote, “Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.”

Evaluate the life story of John and Jane with a view towards God’s directive to *prove faithful*. Look for both positive and negative examples. (Where information is lacking, discuss how they might have applied the principle of being faithful.)

2. What does *prove faithful* have to say about . . .

. . . honesty?

. . . hard work?

. . . gambling?

. . . our relationship with God?

## Life example

Both John and Jane retired. Their grown children have good jobs and live near them. Because Jane’s health has deteriorated dramatically, John can’t take care of her anymore. His years as a plumber have taken their toll on his own knees and back. The children feel that their parents should move into a nursing home.

## Reflections of faith

What emotions might surface as John and Jane think of their life and their wealth?

## **Light from the Word**

1. In **1 Timothy 6:9,10**, the apostle Paul says that the love of money often leads people down a path that ends in the loss of faith. Describe how that might happen in the following situations:
  - in the case of a person who faces serious financial challenges.
  
  - in the case of a person who enjoys financial prosperity.
2. In **1 Timothy 6:6,7** we are reminded that it is a great blessing to be content. How do the words of verse 7, “For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it,” help you keep a proper perspective on your money and possessions?
3. **Hebrews 13:5** tells us that we can be content because God will never leave us or forsake us. What encouragement would you find in those words in the following situations?
  - You have just learned that your business partner embezzled \$100,000 from your business.
  
  - At the age of 60, you learned that because of a corporate merger, you have lost the retirement benefits you were counting on for retirement.
4. **Luke 12:15** defines a greedy person as one whose life consists in the abundance of possessions. What are the pitfalls of such a focus in life?

## **Let’s think about the lesson**

1. What personal challenges do you face in the area of your financial well-being?
2. What Bible passages will you want to remember in your struggle?
3. What can you do to help keep your eyes focused on God’s eternal blessings?
4. Read Proverbs 30:7-9. Formulate a prayer based on the thoughts of these verses.

Lesson Five  
*Our Christian Response to Blessings and Challenges*

## When We Face Moral Desensitization

### Goals

- To be aware of the insidious ways Satan can numb our senses to moral sins.
- To lead us to turn to God's Word for strength to resist moral desensitization.

### Introduction

Years ago Jack Paar was censored for using the term *water closet* on *The Tonight Show*. Today many television shows depict rather graphic sexual humor.

At one time, music written to reach the teenage market included lyrics about a first kiss, wanting to hold someone's hand, going steady, or hot rods. Today some songs written for teenagers talk about torturing and killing one's wife or sexual relations between a son and a mother.

How did we get where we are today?

### Life example

Jason's parents confronted him about the sexually explicit lyrics in the songs he has been listening to. Jason answered: "This is my kind of music. I want to be myself, not just your clone. And teenagers are always pushing the limits. You guys did the same thing with Grandma and Grandpa's generation. Besides, everyone listens to this kind of music. Their parents don't say anything. Even Mandy listens to it, and her dad is a minister. We only listen to the beat. We don't listen to the lyrics."

### Reflections of faith

1. What are the issues as far as Jason is concerned?
  
2. What other issues are involved, however?
  
3. Some people say that the debate is all about censorship and free speech. What do you think?

4. Someone once said that Satan tries to turn every blessing into a curse. How is that true in the case of freedom of speech?

## Light from the Word

### Read Ephesians 5:3,4.

1. What is the significance of the word *hint* in verse 3?
2. Jason says that he doesn't listen to the lyrics. Compare that statement to these words of Scripture.
3. By forbidding sex outside of marriage, God is protecting a very precious institution. Why does God make a point of forbidding coarse joking and foolish talk?
4. Why are sexually explicit lyrics out of place?
5. This passage speaks of greed. In the recording industry, how is greed related to the outrageous actions and immoral lyrics often glorified in song?
6. Mandy (the pastor's daughter) and the others may not actually entice Jason to listen to this kind of music, but peer pressure certainly is a factor. Apply **Proverbs 1:10** to his excuse that everyone is listening to such music.
7. The apostle **James (1:14,15)** says that we are tempted when we nurture evil desires in our hearts and the evil then leads to sin. How might listening to sexually explicit music lead to sinful acts?
8. Read **Psalm 100:2,4,5**; **1 Corinthians 10:31**; **2 Corinthians 5:14,15,17**; and **Colossians 3:17**. What encouragement do these passages give us regarding the way we live our lives in general?
9. Why do we want our lives to glorify God?

## Breakout/discussion

1. Imagine that in a Bible class discussion about the immorality in our world someone makes the statement: “Christians will be unable to enforce morality on a society as corrupt as ours. Our children will be exposed to all kinds of immoral influences in our society. We can’t shelter them from all of them. It’s better to fight the battle in our homes than out in the society in which we live. Therefore, we need to be very open with our children in talking about what is moral and what is immoral.”

Evaluate that statement.

2. What should the Christian church do to discourage immorality?

## Life example

Joe and Jan are a married couple in their 40s with two daughters and a son. Joe has always enjoyed reading *Sports Illustrated*. Because Jan was uncomfortable with the swimsuit issue, she asked Joe not to leave it around where the kids could see it.

Several years ago Jan walked into Joe’s office at the shop and saw two pornographic magazines on his desk. When she confronted him, he said that someone must have dropped them on his desk as a joke because the guys at work know he doesn’t like that stuff. But Jan wondered about his answer.

She knows that Joe watches R-rated movies on cable TV at home. (She does sometimes watch with him, especially if she knows that the movie received high ratings from the critics.) Last week Jan woke up in the middle of the night and noticed that Joe was downstairs. She found him looking at pornography on the Internet.

## Reflections of faith

1. The issue here is more than just a difference of opinion about what is wholesome entertainment. What are some of the issues for both Jan and Joe?
2. Trace the pattern of desensitization that has taken place here.
3. If Joe is not confronted and doesn’t come to repentance, how might the path of desensitization continue?
4. Compare Matthew 5:27,28 and James 1:14,15. Why is it dangerous not to take the sin of lust seriously?

## **Light from the Word**

1. Read **Hebrews 13:4**. When Joe’s pastor talked about this passage, Joe reacted by saying, “Wait a minute. I have never been unfaithful to Jan.” Evaluate his statement.
2. Why will immorality bring judgment from God?

### **Read 2 Corinthians 5:14.**

3. What effect will the knowledge of Christ’s sacrifice have on our lives?
4. How will that affect our moral choices?
5. What guidance does **Ephesians 5:12** give us as we consider our choices of entertainment?

## **Let’s think about the lesson**

1. How much have you become desensitized to immorality? Chose one of the following:
  - For one week, keep track of what you watch on television. For each half hour, note how many jokes have a sexual context. Note also how many references there are to sexual situations.
  - Watch one of the evening talk shows. Keep track of the same things.
  - Watch a late-night network show on Saturday night. Note the sexual content of the material.

Then discuss what programming was like 10 or 20 years ago.

2. What would God have you do about the desensitization that is taking place?
3. What steps can you take to guard your household against becoming desensitized to immorality?