



# Maintaining Balance

## Advent Study

### Lesson 1

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**Read: 2 Corinthians 12:7-10**

#### Introduction

“For when I am weak, then I am strong,” said Paul (v.10b). Or, as someone else has put it, “Our strengths can get us into more trouble than our weaknesses.” The point is that when we are under the control of our dominant inclinations—those things that, but for the grace of God, tend to define who we are—we are often at our worst. In answer to Paul’s prayer, the Lord told him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (v.9). When we are functioning in our own strength, we can get into trouble; when we yield to God’s strength, we are at our best.

Advent is a time for personal reflection. This Advent we will be looking at our dominant personality traits. We will see how, apart from God, they can be compulsive in nature and damaging to us and to those around us. But, looked at from the point of view of how God can take those traits and mold them to His purposes, how we can be effective for Him. That is what we mean by “Maintaining Balance.”

From ancient times it has been thought that human beings manifest nine dominant characteristics that could be called compulsions. A compulsion is a strong impulse to act in a certain way. The compulsions from which people tend to operate are: the perfectionist, the people pleaser, the ambitious one, the celebrity, the spectator, the legalist, the playful person, the controller, and the avoider.

Each compulsion has its negative side—when carried to the extreme—and its positive one. What God would have us do is to move away from the negative and toward the positive side of our compulsions, the balance He would have us maintain. To facilitate striking this balance, we will—as to each compulsion—look at a Bible character who exhibits the worst aspects and then one who has, by the grace of God, brought the characteristic into balance. In two instances, Paul and Peter, we will see how this change happened in the life of the same person.

*R&D With which compulsion do you immediately identify? Explain?*

*Prayer: Lord, search us, show us, mold us in accordance with Your wishes.*

### Lesson 2

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**Read: 1 Kings 21:1-10**

#### The Perfectionist: Jezebel

The perfectionist is someone who is discontent and driven to do things in a particular way, the way he or she thinks is the right way. At their worst, the perfectionists among us will pursue a matter to completion that the rest of us think is not very important, and will do so no matter who may get hurt in the process. Jezebel exhibits that type of compulsion in our reading for today.

Naboth was not being arbitrary in refusing to sell his vineyard to King Ahab. He was under conviction that the land belonged to the Lord (Leviticus 25:23) and was held by his family under a perpetual lease. Sale of it, even to the king, would have been an abomination to God in Naboth's mind. For Jezebel, the perfectionist, on the other hand, that was simply a detail that needed to be dealt with, regardless of the consequences. Jezebel was a pagan; she had no room for Jewish beliefs. In her mind, her husband Ahab was the king, and he should have whatever he wanted. All she needed to do was to arrange the death of Naboth, which she did, and the land became Ahab's.

Admittedly, Jezebel is regarded as the most evil woman in the Bible. Perfectionists, at their worst, wouldn't go as far as Jezebel did. But the point is that the perfectionist tends to be discontent with situations and circumstances and is driven to do something about them. And speaking of "driven," most of the rest of us are "driven crazy" by the perfectionist in our midst who insists on his or her way of doing things, regarding as clearly inadequate all options to the contrary. No logic can be used to dissuade the perfectionist.

To the extent that you perceive a perfectionist attitude in yourself, try to soften it. Realize that other people's opinions have value and that you may not always be right. If you want to do God's will, loving your neighbor as yourself, recognize that insisting on your way of doing things may not be the best way.

*R&D To what extent do you see the perfectionist in yourself? Explain.*

*Prayer: Lord, help me always to do well, but not at the expense of others.*

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### Lesson 3

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**Read: Exodus 33:12-23**

#### **Conscientious: Moses**

How do we take the perfectionist compulsion and bring out the best in it? By being conscientious without being overbearing. A person who tends to be a perfectionist *does* want to do things properly. That's much better than the person who just doesn't care. So, we're talking about balance, about being a hard worker, but one who can work effectively with others to accomplish God's will.

Moses is a good example for us. Although the passage of Scripture for today is primarily about God revealing His glory to Moses, look at what Moses says and what he is thinking. "If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people" (v.13). Moses understood his responsibility to God and to God's people, and he wanted to do the best job he could. The fact that, in response to Moses' request, God showed him His glory is clear evidence of how satisfied God was with Moses' performance. We know from many other passages of Scripture how conscientious Moses was. He wanted things done right, but more than that, he wanted them done in accordance with God's purposes.

A perfectionist doesn't like to waste time, seems to worry more than other people, believes it is important to be right, is bothered by things that don't seem fair, tends to be a crusader against injustice, and frequently has a sense of urgency. There's a lot of good in these traits if they are focused in the right direction. Moses exhibited a lot of these characteristics himself. Again, it's a matter of balance. We maintain balance just the way Moses did...by learning God's ways that we may know Him and find favor with Him.

R&D *What can you take from the example of Moses to be a more conscientious person?*

Prayer: *Help me to know You, Lord, and to know Your ways.*

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#### Lesson 4

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**Read: Luke 10:38-42**

##### **The People Pleaser: Martha**

The people pleaser is normally much easier to get along with than the perfectionist. In fact, the people pleaser can become very popular because he or she spends so much of the time doing things for others. This is a compulsion nonetheless and it does have its dark side. The people pleaser is so dependent on the praise of others that there is a tendency to feel slighted whenever their attentions are not suitably rewarded. The people pleaser “wears his feelings on his sleeve” as the old saying goes.

Martha, the sister of Lazarus and Mary, certainly appears to have been afflicted with this compulsion. In our reading for today her whole focus is on doing things for Jesus. Jesus was not there to have things done for him; he wanted to give the sisters an opportunity to get to know him better, to know about the kingdom of God and how they could more effectively be his followers in the days ahead. Mary understood this, but Martha was blinded by her compulsion to be a people pleaser.

As we will see in the following lesson, there are many wonderful aspects of being a people pleaser if this compulsion is kept in balance. But looked at from the negative side, the people pleaser is not a good person to have assisting you in making major decisions; in industry, such a person is called a “yes man” and one who cannot be counted on to look at an issue objectively. The people pleaser is insecure and needs constant reassurance, which can get to be a burden to friends, relatives, and co-workers who are expected to provide the encouragement. At worst, the people pleaser becomes a sycophant, what the dictionary calls a servile, self-seeking flatterer, a parasite. Fortunately, this is a condition that, balanced, can be turned to good.

R&D *Can you identify with the people pleasing compulsion in yourself or others you know? Explain.*

Prayer: *Lord, help me to be true to myself and to You, and not someone who does things for selfish purposes such as building up my own ego.*

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#### Lesson 5

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**Read: Luke 1:26-38**

##### **The Servant: Mary**

The balance to being a people pleaser is being a God-pleaser, a person with a servant’s heart. If those who have an innate desire to please and to be accepted can focus that desire on the Lord, what wonderful ministries can be done through their lives. Immediately the ministries of hospitality, mercy, encouragement, and being a helper come to mind.

Mary, the mother of our Lord, can be a wonderful example for us. “I am the Lord’s servant, may it be to me as you have said” (v.38). That is the response God would like to hear from all of us, but think what it meant in Mary’s case. Mary was the only person present at Jesus’ birth who also witnessed his death. She saw him arrive as her infant son only to watch him die on a cross as her Savior. Although she could not have understood all of this from Gabriel’s announcement, what

seemed impossible was being asked of her. A young, unmarried girl was to give birth to “the Son of the Most High.” Reflect on the complications that could mean in an age when women were stoned to death for adultery, which this would appear to be. And, who would believe any defense she might try to make based on what Gabriel had told her?

Mary’s servant attitude was not limited to this one-time event, however. Her whole life was one of being obedient to God in the most difficult of circumstances. She was humble and attentive, two of the primary traits of servanthood.

How can these attributes translate into our own lives? A person with a servant’s heart likes to take care of others, comes to the aid of people who are in trouble or in embarrassing situations, nurtures those for whom there is a sense of responsibility, is one to whom others come for comfort, and focuses on the needs of others rather than personal needs. Mary was undoubtedly that kind of person, and we can be one too.

*R&D What might be the next step the Lord has for you in the area of servanthood?*

*Prayer: Lord, give me a servant’s heart that I may serve You and others in Your name.*

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## Lesson 6

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**Read: Acts 9:1-2**

### **The Ambitious: Saul**

The next compulsion we want to look at is the person who is success motivated, one we will call the ambitious. As with other character traits we are considering in this study, there is nothing inherently wrong with being ambitious. The problem is in carrying it to the extreme. That kind of ambitious person tends to be a workaholic—scheming, contentious, and intolerant of those who stand in his way. He has goals for himself and will do whatever it takes to reach them.

Saul was that sort of person. He had witnessed and approved the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1) and was now headed to Damascus to locate “followers of the Way” (the early Christians) so that the authorities might also deal with them. Saul had received the very best theological education and was a Pharisee. He believed the Christian movement endangered Judaism, and he was ambitious to see that it was squelched before it could become a force in the world. He wasn’t just somewhat concerned about the situation, he was “breathing out murderous threats” against the Christians. That was Saul before, by the grace of God, he became Paul.

As we know in the case of Saul/Paul, God can take a compulsion that is headed in a negative direction and re-direct it for good. Thank God that is true, because the ambitious person can wreak great havoc on the rest of us unless the impulse is checked. Think of what it does to family life when the breadwinner’s focus is wholly on getting ahead at work to the deprivation of the spouse and children. Image, rather than reality, becomes all-important to the ambitious one. Compromise of one’s standards will likely be considered necessary from time to time. Success in the world becomes more important than obedience to God. And anyone who stands in the way is liable to be trampled on. Fortunately, however, a Saul can become a Paul.

*R&D What ambitious tendencies do you see in yourself that need correction?*

*Prayer: Lord, help me to keep my vocation in perspective. My most important work is whatever You would have me doing.*

## Lesson 7

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**Read: Acts 15:1-21**

### **The Competent: Paul**

If we can take the high motivation that the ambitious person has and turn it toward the Lord, great things can happen. In an age when there is “paralysis by analysis,” fear of offending anyone, and a general feeling of indifference and lethargy, we need people who really care about what God wants and are motivated to do something about it! Dante said, “The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who remain neutral in a time of great moral crisis.” It is motivation that is needed, but motivation toward competence rather than ambition.

Paul is one who showed his competence over and over again in service of the Lord. Our reading today, about the Council at Jerusalem, seems to focus a lot on Peter and James, but Paul is the force behind this meeting, one of the most important things that happened in the early Church. Paul and Barnabas spotted what could have become a major division within Christianity and a misdirection of God’s intent. They did not come to the meeting with opinions, but with facts. Through Paul’s leadership and competence, he and Barnabas had tested their conviction that Gentiles did not have to adopt Jewish practices in order to be Christians. Simon Peter had spoken in favor of Paul’s position, but it was not until Paul and Barnabas had given their own testimony that the decision was made in their favor. Paul had taken the energy and motivation he had before his conversion and brought his ambition into balance for the Lord.

Think what the competent one can do for good in our world today. He wants to get things organized and goals accomplished. He is a person who can make tough decisions. He wants to get things resolved so that what needs to be done can move forward. He is assertive when assertion is needed. He is a true professional, and others can be confident of his work. When these gifts are directed toward God’s will in the world around us good things can happen.

*R&D How many really competent people do you know? Are their gifts being used to the glory of God? If not, why not?*

*Prayer: Lord, help us to be ambitious for only one thing: Your will.*

## Lesson 8

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**Read: Acts 12:19b-23**

### **The Celebrity: Herod Agrippa I**

We truly seem to live in the “celebrity age.” Some of the most popular magazines are all about what is going on in the lives of motion picture, television, music, and sports “stars.” The inside front page of our local newspaper is filled with “the latest” on the celebrities of our day. These people are paid huge sums of money and live strange and often tragic lives. The heavy focus on them is an indictment of our world today. But there were people who fit this mold in other ages, and some of them are in the Bible.

In our reading for today we look at a brief episode in the life of King Agrippa I, a celebrity in his day. Although initially his leadership was only grudgingly accepted by the Jews, when he had James killed and Peter arrested, he came into favor with them. He used the Jewish leaders’ fear of the Christian movement to catapult himself into celebrity status. As we know from our reading for today, having worked out a compromise from troubles he had been having with the people of Tyre and Sidon, Herod appeared before them wearing his royal robes and was called a god. Having attained such a celebrity status did not work well for him, as we see from the passage.

Celebrities, at their worst, are self-centered, shallow people who live on the praise of others. Many have spent so much time developing their talents that they have had little time for interaction with the real world. Lax morals and social collapse (addictions, failed relationships, even suicide) define many celebrities, which makes society's worship of them even more appalling. But, of course, there is another side to the compulsion that leads on to the celebrity status. These are very gifted people, and God can use their gifts. It's a matter of balance.

R&D *What is your feeling about celebrities? Why?*

Prayer: *Lord, help me not to be judgmental of those who are so talented that people regard them as celebrities. You love them as much as You love everyone else.*

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## Lesson 9

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**Read: Nehemiah 2:11-20**

### **The Gifted Nehemiah**

Talented, extraordinary people can be used to the glory of God when He is their focus. Jesus once told a confusing parable about a shrewd manager who, to protect himself, made a shady deal with his master's debtors (Luke 16:1-8). He concludes the story with these words: "For the people of this world are shrewder in dealing with their own kind than the people of light." His point seems to be that people can be really creative in spending their time and effort doing whatever they deem necessary to accomplish their purposes. How would it be, then, if the "people of light" (we Christians) showed that much imagination in dedicating our time, talents, and energy to the things of God?

Nehemiah is one who did. A cupbearer to the king of Persia, Nehemiah led a group of exiles back to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls of the crumbling city. Our reading for today is about his inspecting the walls. Nehemiah could have been a celebrity in his own day. What a story: the cupbearer who becomes the heroic leader of a depressed people, calling them to action and accomplishing the task. A man of enormous talent, he used every gift he had for the glory of God. Notice the shrewdness in his approach to the problem (v.16). Notice, too, how he could stand up to the enemies of the people because he knew he was doing God's work (vv.19-20). Nehemiah was God-centered, creative, and productive. He was a man who knew how to keep his giftedness in balance.

How could extraordinarily gifted people use their talents for God in our day? By their example, these are people who can challenge our creativity, stretch our minds, and show us possibilities that we may never have imagined. They can help us see beauty and order where we have been seeing only the commonplace and disorder. They can encourage us to be better because they can show what they accomplish with what God has given them. Their flare for dramatizing events can grab our attention in a way that others cannot, and thereby impel us into constructive action. They are ones who can rise above troubled circumstances and give us courage to do likewise. Nehemiah was this kind of person and there are others all around us who can be like him if they give their talents to God's use.

R&D *Reflect on the talents and gifts the Lord has given you, and how you are using them.*

Prayer: *Lord, take what I have and mold it to Your use.*

## Lesson 10

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**Read: Genesis 25:19-34**

### **The Spectator: Esau**

The compulsion of the person we might call the spectator or observer is, in its most negative sense, manifested by being uninvolved, uncaring, and detached. This is the person who just doesn't seem to be in contact with the people or the circumstances around him. When we're in the presence of this person we may not be able to figure out whether he's ignoring us or psychoanalyzing us. And, trying to communicate with him may not help, because he's probably uncommunicative as well.

Esau may have been this kind of person. He was the firstborn son of Isaac, although a twin, and thus entitled to his father's birthright. The birthright allowed the holder a double portion of the family inheritance but, more than that, meant that someday he would be the family's leader. The younger twin, Jacob, was sort of a homebody while Esau (to his father's pride) was an outdoorsman and a skillful hunter. Yet it was to Jacob that the birthright came (see Genesis 27); and, in our reading for today, it seems that Esau didn't really care. He was willing to sell the birthright for a meal because he was hungry. He seemed willing to be a spectator in life rather than a leader; he just didn't care.

Not everyone can be a leader, but God would have us involved in life, not just observing others. The spectator, at his worst, keeps his feelings to himself, won't take the initiative, wants his own time and space to the exclusion of others, and is more a taker than a giver. The spectator has trouble reaching out to others even when he is in need. He tends to be stingy with his time, possessions, and self. He gets irritated when people try to get him to communicate with them. It's not a pretty picture; but, the person with this compulsion can, like the others we have looked at, find a balance that God can use.

*R&D Reflect on people you know who might fall into the spectator category. How might you reach them?*

*Prayer: Lord, please give me patience with those who seem not to care about the important issues of our day.*

## Lesson 11

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**Read: Exodus 18:9-27**

### **The Objective: Jethro**

The positive side of the spectator personality is objectivity. If someone caught in this compulsion can shift away from the negative aspects of it that we looked at in the last study and move toward the positive, some really good things can happen in his life and in the lives of those around him. An objective person is one who is not so caught up in the turmoil around him as to be either rendered inoperative or carried along with the crowd. As opposed to the "yes person" (the people pleaser) who is seldom helpful in times of crisis or decision-making, the objective person can be of tremendous help. Such a person tends to be discerning, fair-minded, and prayerful.

Jethro may be a good example of the objective person. Jethro was Moses' father-in-law. He was not an Israelite, but he did worship God. It was easy for him to give glory to God when he learned of all that God had done through Moses in freeing the Jews from Egypt. As he visits with Moses and his family he observes something happening that does not seem logical to him. Why should Moses try to handle every dispute and situation that arose among the Jews? It was wearing

him out and not accomplishing the best purposes. Instead, Jethro suggests a way of delegating authority to others. Following that method, only the really big issues needed to come before Moses. Order prevailed in the midst of chaos because Jethro knew how to be an objective observer instead of isolated spectator.

If we have a tendency to be silent and withdrawn, there is much to learn from Jethro's example. If the observer wants to be God's person rather than simply his own person, God can use his objectivity in many ways. The person who is an introvert by nature is often a deep thinker. In that silent space can be a storehouse of wisdom. The observer who cares can be a wonderful intercessor, not only because he has more time than the person who is more actively engaged but also because he will tend to be more discerning about what really needs prayer. Realize also that such a person may also be an effective information gatherer and depository of ideas as Jethro was. God can use all kinds of people to accomplish His purposes, if they are open to Him.

*R&D Think of an instance in which someone who seemed to be uninvolved but observing a situation came up with an objective solution.*

*Prayer: Lord, help us to be attentive to those around us who may have wisdom and knowledge that we have never recognized.*

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## Lesson 12

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**Read: Luke 7:36-50**

### **The Legalist: Simon the Pharisee**

A person doesn't need to be much of a Bible scholar to know that Jesus had a problem with the Pharisees; and, of course, they had a problem with him. The Pharisees were the epitome of legalism. They had taken the Law of Moses and embellished it with multitudes of laws of their own. And, those laws were relentlessly applied. Unfortunately, there are many with the compulsion of legalism among us today, including many Christians who have fallen into the trap of looking at the letter of God's Law rather than the spirit of it. At his worst, the legalist is judgmental, rigid, and self-righteous.

Simon the Pharisee was such a man. He had perhaps invited Jesus to dine with him out of curiosity, maybe to be able to judge him close-up. He may have intended to trap Jesus rather than to learn from him. In any event, he had not extended to Jesus the common courtesies of the day (having Jesus' feet washed, anointing his head with oil, and offering him a kiss of greeting). What Simon did do, in his own mind, was to attack Jesus for letting the woman minister to him, something Jesus either perceived supernaturally or from the look on Simon's face. To a Pharisee, it would have been highly inappropriate to let a prostitute (for that is what the woman apparently was) minister to you. Simon's legalism stood in the way of understanding what the love of God is all about, illustrated by Jesus in this situation.

The compulsion to be a legalist, at its worst, renders a person to be so blinded by the letter of the law that as to not be able to see the spirit of it. Often such a person is unwilling to do what obviously needs to be done in a situation for fear of going against some rule or regulation. Things are very "black or white" to the legalist, with little or no room for ambiguity or compromise. The legalist is quick to judge others, and often to judge harshly. To this person, loyalty to his or her group is of paramount importance. But, as we will see in our next study, there can be balance to the legalistic compulsion, and it is centered in loyalty.



R&D *What tendencies toward legalism do you see in yourself or others?*

Prayer: *Lord, help me to be slow to judge and quick to forgive.*

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### Lesson 13

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**Read: Luke 23:50-56**

#### **The Loyalist: Joseph of Arimathea**

The person of a legalistic nature has some positive assets that can be used for the glory of God. First of all, he is loyal by nature; if that loyalty is to Christ and his fellow Christians, he is someone who can be counted on to do the right thing. He will be reliable. Because he will tend to be traditional in his approach to issues, others will most likely know what his position will be. In other words, he won't be erratic in his decisions because he makes them on the basis of his background, learning, and experience. He will be a steady hand at the wheel of whatever he is asked to do.

Although we know little of Joseph of Arimathea from Scripture, he was probably such a man. He was a Jewish leader and member of the ruling Sanhedrin, so could perhaps be categorized as a legalist. Yet, he did not allow that to blind him to truth. He had obviously seen in Jesus something that the other Jewish leaders either did not see or did not want to see. His loyalty—probably at great expense to himself—had been transferred from the Sanhedrin to Jesus. In asking for Jesus' body, providing a tomb, and wrapping the body in linens, he was making a courageous gesture. Normally the body of an executed criminal was either left unburied or put in a pauper's field. Following Jewish tradition, preparation day was the Friday before the Sabbath which was about to begin, and during which time further treatment of Jesus' body could not be done. The women, having followed Joseph, knew what needed to be done when the Sabbath was over. Joseph had done his part, courageously and straightforwardly.

Joseph of Arimathea is a good example for us, but what other traits of someone of a legalistic compulsion might be used to the glory of God? Before making a decision, such a person weighs the alternatives rather than being impulsive. He has a strong sense of duty and responsibility. He is more discerning of dangers and threats than others normally are. He can spot contradictions and errors more clearly than most. He wants facts and truth rather than speculation and theories. And, as noted above, he is reliable and steady. In other words, he's a good person to have on your team when you are about the Lord's work.

R&D *Who is the Joseph of Arimathea in your midst? Is he being properly appreciated for the contribution he can make? Why or why not?*

Prayer: *Lord, give me the courage to do those things You would have me do that might not be popular with others.*

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### Lesson 14

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**Read: Judges 14:1-20**

#### **The Playful: Samson**

The compulsion of the playful person is to not take life seriously. He tends to be the practical joker who gets enjoyment out of other people's discomfort. Not rooted in reality, he is totally unpredictable. Because he doesn't take life seriously, it is hard to take him seriously; in fact, it is foolhardy to do so. He is simply undependable.

Samson appears to have had these traits. Although from a devout family and raised as a Nazirite—a person dedicated to God—and possessed of enormous strength, he was largely a failure. He came along in the time of the Judges of Israel and it was hoped that he would deliver the Israelites from the dreaded Philistines. Instead, he spent his time in practical jokes and getting out of trouble. In our reading for today, he showed his strength by killing a lion with his bare hands. But, instead of being grateful to God for the strength God had given him, he makes light of the situation. He concocts a riddle and makes an extravagant wager. Then he lets his wife manipulate him into telling her the riddle which she, in turn, tells to her kinsmen, and Samson loses his wager. How does Samson honor his bet? He kills thirty Philistines and gives his wife to someone else!

The compulsion of playfulness, carried to the extreme, can easily lead to failure in life, as it did for Samson. People quickly grow tired of the one who always wants to be the life of the party, as the playful one does. He also tends to jump from one thing to another without going into depth about anything. In the meantime, he is likely suspicious of others because they seem to take life seriously. His focus is on himself and almost never on the needs of others. When you're in need of sympathy and understanding, you can't count on the playful one to be any help; he's more likely to make a joke of it all. He carries optimism to an extreme. Yet, as with the other compulsions we have considered, there can be balance in the life of this person. In God's hands, his optimism can lead to blessings for himself and others.

*R&D Do you see traits of the playful person in yourself or among those you love? Explain.*

*Prayer: Lord, help me to take life seriously, but not so seriously that I and those nearest me miss Your joy.*

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## Lesson 15

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**Read: Genesis 39:1-6**

### **The Optimist: Joseph**

The playful person in the hands of God can be a blessing, and God can use him to bless others. When things seem bleak, we need the optimist to paint a more positive picture of the situations and circumstances we face. We need the one who can see good in what otherwise seems disastrous to us. The person who sees the good is also a thankful person and helps us to be grateful for what God is doing in our lives. He easily reflects joy as a gift of the Holy Spirit. His sense of humor can brighten our day. Things just seem to work out better when he is around.

Joseph was undoubtedly this kind of person. Badly treated over and over again, he always came up a winner. Because God was with him, he always seemed to take the optimistic approach no matter how bad the things were that happened to him. Rather than allowing himself to be burdened by the injustices he had suffered, he looked ahead for the next challenge. As a result, he inspired the confidence of those around him and kept climbing the ladder of success. Our reading for today recounts how, after having been sold into slavery by his brothers, he became the trusted caretaker of his master's estate. As we undoubtedly know (see vv.7-20), Joseph was soon to be the victim of treachery again, but would ultimately become the second most important person in the most powerful nation in the world at that time. Why? Because God was with him, and he could see good where others saw disaster.

What can we learn from the story of Joseph and from the nature of the optimist to see how this person can glorify God through his life? Such a person is less suspicious and judgmental of others than many of us are. He is quick to forgive. He is unlikely to become discouraged although

those around him may be; in fact, in any situation, he will be looking for the positive side of it. He will tend to have happy memories and be glad to share them. He will cheer people up when they need it the most. His attitude of gratitude will help others see God's hand in the blessings that are being realized. He will be a hopeful person, enthusiastic about the future. In other words, when things are stressful, doubtful, or depressing, he will be a great person to have around.

*R&D What can you learn from the optimist that will help you become more of an encourager to those around you?*

*Prayer: Lord, there is often good to be seen in challenging situations; help me to see what You would show me.*

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## Lesson 16

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**Read: Matthew 16:21-28**

### **The Controller: Peter**

The controller compulsion manifests itself in wanting to control the situations and circumstances encountered in life. As with other traits we have considered in this study, that attitude is not necessarily always bad. But, when carried to the extreme, the person with this compulsion can be very demanding of others and overbearing toward them. He thinks he sees what needs to be done, is quick to let everyone know what he thinks, and is ready to "roll up his sleeves" and dive into the problem. He tends to want to get involved in things that are really not his concern, interfering where his opinions and actions are not wanted.

Prior to Pentecost, Peter appeared to be that kind of person. Immediately before our reading for today, Peter had, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, proclaimed Jesus as Messiah (vv. 13-20). Now, however, in today's Bible passage, functioning in his own strength, he takes a contrary position. After Jesus has told his followers what lies ahead for him (suffering and being killed, but later being raised to life), Peter takes it upon himself to straighten Jesus out. "No such thing!" Peter basically says. Not only is he telling his leader (someone he has proclaimed Christ, Son of the living God) that he doesn't know what he is talking about, he also implies that he (Peter) simply will not let it happen. This is typical of a controller who is out of control.

The controller, at his worst, is often dissatisfied with the way other people are doing things and is quick to let them know about it. He enjoys power and can be very confrontational. He is aggressive and assertive to a fault. He has trouble just letting things be and always thinks he knows how to do them better. He tends to think other people create their own problems, and he has no patience with that. He has trouble expressing his more tender, gentle side. He is easily bored because he always wants things to keep moving. He is definitely not the kind of person you want as a boss or supervisor but is the kind of person who often ends up being one. Fortunately, the person who tends to be a controller also has many positive attributes that, when turned to the glory of God, can accomplish much good.

*R&D Wherein do you see the controller compulsion manifesting itself in your life or the lives of others around you?*

*Prayer: Lord, help me to be conscious of what needs to be done but not so bullheaded that I force my way on others.*

## Lesson 17

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**Read: Acts 2:14-41**

### **The Leader: Peter**

If we try to look, from a positive point of view, at many of the attributes of the controlling personality from the prior study, we may see how a person of this nature, in the hands of God, can be a faithful and effective leader. This is someone who wants to lead rather than simply being a follower. By nature, he is willing to tackle the problems from which others shy. We seem to have fewer leadership type people in our world today. There is a lot of complaisance in our day, sometimes even among Christians. People are afraid of offending or of seeming to be superior to others. They'd rather let someone else do it than take the risk.

Well, Peter was a risk taker if there ever was one! We know this from many passages of Scripture that tell of his attitudes and actions. In today's reading, we see Peter not so much as a controller but as a leader. Something of crucial importance has happened, and Peter has changed. Jesus, as predicted, has suffered, died, and been raised from the dead. Moreover, Pentecost has just occurred. Peter not only knows the full story now but he has been filled with the Holy Spirit. The result: When people saw how strange the disciples seemed to be acting after the Holy Spirit had fallen them, it is Peter who immediately gets up not only to explain what has happened, but what it means. This fisherman with limited education speaks to the crowd in such intelligent and convincing fashion that 3,000 people apparently committed their lives to Christ that day! That's a leader doing the will of God.

Like Peter, the controller who has, by the grace of God, become a leader, is not afraid to stand up and "tell it like it is." He has an ability to discern people's needs and to see what should be done to meet those needs. He has a strong sense of justice and injustice. He knows how to get things done. He is protective of those people for whom he has a sense of responsibility. He is a hard worker. In short, he is a true leader, someone others can have confidence in, look up to, and be willing to follow.

*R&D What is your feeling about whether or not there are too few leaders in our day, and why?*

*Prayer: Lord, give me the strength to lead when You want me to lead and the humility to follow when You have chosen others to lead.*

## Lesson 18

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**Read: Matthew 27:11-26**

### **The Avoider: Pontius Pilate**

Now we come to the last of the compulsions we have been considering in this study. It is the compulsion to avoid making decisions, getting involved or dealing with issues. It is not that the avoider takes life less seriously than others (as does the playful person); it is just that he is unwilling to be put on the spot. He's a procrastinator. He is probably somewhat lethargic; it's hard to get him moving about anything. He probably has a tendency to blame others for anything unpleasant that is going on. He is passive-aggressive by nature; unwilling to make decisions, he is then critical of whatever decision has to be made.

Pontius Pilate seems to have been a classic example of the avoider if what happened in his encounter with Jesus is any indication. He was the Roman governor. He was the guy in charge under Roman authority, and no one could be put to death without his decision. There were good reasons to ignore the charges against Jesus. Pilate saw no wrong in Jesus and probably suspected

the Sanhedrin had convicted him on trumped-up charges, out of prejudice or jealousy. Furthermore, his wife had had a disturbing dream about Jesus through which she was convinced of his innocence, and she had pled with Pilate to let him go. Trying to avoid the fateful decision, Pilate offers the crowd a compromise. According to custom, Pilate had the option of releasing a prisoner. So, he gave the crowd what he hoped was the “horrible alternative” choice: he could release Jesus or a notorious criminal, Barabbas. Spurred on by the Jewish leaders, the people amazingly called for the release of Barabbas. Having exhausted all of his easy options, Pilate resisted doing the one thing he should have done: release Jesus. Instead, this avoider washed his hands of the matter and let an innocent man die.

At his worst, the avoider believes there is nothing so urgent that it can’t wait until another day. He is always looking for ways to make life easier for himself. No matter how important a matter is, he just won’t let it bother him. He always knows the line of least resistance and takes it. He has trouble listening and paying attention to what is going on around him. He enjoys being able to do absolutely nothing. His motto is: Why stand when you can sit; why sit when you can lie down? When we look at these attributes of the avoider, it is hard to see how God can use him at all! But, some of the innate features of a person who tends to have this compulsion, in the hands of God, can be of positive value.

*R&D To what extent can you see the avoider in yourself or others around you? Explain.*

*Prayer: Lord, help me not to avoid doing those things You would have me do. Energize and inspire me to do Your will in all things.*

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## Lesson 19

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**Read: Acts 11:19-26**

### **The Peacemaker: Barnabas**

There are some good qualities inherent in the person who seems to be an avoider. Not all people are, by nature, leaders. We need those who “go along to get along” if, in doing so, they are living by Christian principles and teaching. They tend to be reconcilers and peacemakers. In the best sense of the word, they are willing to compromise when compromise is the godly thing to do. They are unlikely to get agitated and fractious about issues that really aren’t all that important. They can be a quieting influence in times of crisis.

Barnabas may not have had many of the characteristics of the person with a tendency toward being an avoider, but he was one of the best examples of a peacemaker in Scripture, and being a peacemaker may well be the finest trait of a person who leans toward being an avoider. Although it is not obvious from our passage for today, Barnabas was willing to take a back seat to Paul. He apparently saw in Paul leadership abilities he did not see in himself. His nature was such that, learning of Paul’s conversion, he was the one who brought Paul to the apostles and stood up for him when others were in fear of him (9:26-28). And, in today’s reading, we see Barnabas once again turning to Paul and bringing him into fellowship with other Christians. Barnabas was obviously a peacemaker and reconciler; and, as we know from our passage, was “full of the Holy Spirit and faith.” Later, when Paul had reservations about John Mark, it was Barnabas who stood by the young man (15:36-39) who would later write one of the Gospels and be a helpful fellow worker with Paul (2 Timothy 4:11). Barnabas saw the good in people and tried to bring peace in the midst of turmoil and doubt.

There are a number of helpful characteristics of people with the tendency toward being avoiders but who, by the grace of God, are keeping themselves in balance. They can sense when people are getting too worked up over a matter and provide a calming influence. It is easier for them to wait on the Lord than the person of a more activist nature who has a tendency to get ahead of the Lord. They are more accepting of other people than many are. They are easygoing and pleasant to be around. They don't let unimportant things bother them. They are good at arbitrating disputes because they tend to have a balanced and unprejudiced view of others. They seem to play things down in order to get people settled down. Perhaps most important of all, they are most likely humble, and humility is one of the primary characteristics the Lord want of us.

*R&D Who are the peacemakers in your midst? How is God using them?*

*Prayer: Lord, You call all Christians to the ministry of reconciliation; help us to take that ministry more seriously that we may effectively be Your people in the world today.*

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## Lesson 20

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### Read 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

#### Encourage and Build One Another Up

This Advent, we have been looking at the personality traits of people from both the negative and positive side toward maintaining balance in our lives. In doing this, we have studied people in the Bible who seemed to represent the negative side of a compulsion and then another who manifested the positive. Hopefully, we have seen ourselves from time to time in some of these people. That has given us an opportunity for self-examination, something we are to do during Advent. Perhaps we have seen some traits within ourselves that we need to correct but have also seen some on which we need to build in order to grow in faith and faithfulness.

There is yet another way to reflect on the issues we have dealt with in this study in order to balance our lives. Our reading from Paul tells us not to live in darkness but in light that we may live together for the Lord. Specifically, he tells us (v.11) to encourage one another and build one another up. Let us consider, as another “balancing act,” one way we can do that. By doing both things—finding the best in my own compulsive nature and considering the suggestion below—we can become more the person God wants us to be and can encourage others in seeking to be more effective disciples of the Lord.

To balance my primary compulsion, I could consider the good qualities of a person whose compulsion I view as the opposite of mine. For instance, if I tend to be a controller, I would perhaps see the people pleaser as my opposite. In that case I would try to balance my compulsion by practicing servanthood. Likewise, if I see myself as a legalist, I would probably view my opposite as the playful person, and if so, I would try to be more spontaneous, fun loving and optimistic. By trying to move away from my compulsion and toward the best in another, I am very likely to become more tolerant and understanding of people who are different from me and will want to see the best in them. In the process I will undoubtedly become one who encourages and builds up my brothers and sisters in Christ.

*R&D Which compulsion do I see as opposite of mine and how might I adopt the good aspects of it to my benefit and the benefit of others?*

*Prayer: Lord, help me to be—above all else—the person You want me to be.*

*by Harry C. Griffith*

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