



Session Seven

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTROLLING YOUR ENVIRONMENT

When we listen, we allow what we are hearing to gain our attention and focus, which in turn influences our beliefs and values. These beliefs and values set a standard for our ears that ultimately determines the voices that we pick up in our environment. This standard is also what draws us to certain people more than others. Our values communicate something in the spiritual realm that alerts others with the same values to our presence.

“My son, pay attention to my wisdom; lend your ear to my understanding, that you may preserve discretion, and your lips may keep knowledge” (PROVERBS 5:1-2).

“I am a companion of all who fear You, and of those who keep Your precepts” (PSALM 119:63).



Week 7

VIDEO LISTENING GUIDE

It's not unbelief to recognize a _____ season; it's wisdom.

Values _____ like values—good or bad.

Steps to Controlling Your Environment

1. Evaluate what _____ to your life.
2. Be careful of the _____ of what you are willing to entertain and listen to.
3. Carefully _____ who you are willing to closely share your life with.
4. Recognize seasons in your life when it's wisdom to _____ certain activities and associations.
5. Fellowship is a source of _____.
6. Fellowship is the _____ of life.

Then He said to them, "Take heed what you hear. With the same measure you use, it will be measured to you; and to you who hear, more will be given" (MARK 4:24).

SUMMARY

Jesus' cautionary statement in Mark 4 reminds us that *how* we hear is very important. We determine *how* we hear from people, media, and other avenues by intentionally controlling our environment. If we are going through difficult circumstances or we are in the middle of very fragile personal struggles, there is wisdom that we need to use when considering the messages (and messengers) that we are exposing ourselves to. The very things that may not impact us at all in one season could be life-draining and strength-depleting in another. This is why it is so important for us to control our environments—it is absolutely fundamental to strengthening ourselves in the Lord!

In this session, Pastor Bill offers some very practical advice on how we should control what/who we are exposed to. This is not a call to separatism—isolating ourselves from everyone else and becoming spiritual islands. The world needs the Kingdom solutions we carry. Rather, this is an invitation to wisdom. In the journey of life, there will be seasons where we cannot *closely* associate with certain people, or watch certain media, or be in certain places, or expose ourselves to certain atmospheres. In order to supernaturally change the atmosphere around us, it is essential to pay close attention to the unique seasons where we need to especially guard our personal environment. Our measure of Kingdom effectiveness *to the world* has everything to do with how we steward our private, interior lives.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why it is important *how* we hear? Describe the difference between *what* you hear and *how* you hear.
2. Describe why it's important to discern what is acceptable for one season and what is not acceptable for another (certain associations with people, TV shows, places, media, etc.).
3. How can your environment/atmosphere impact your strength?
4. Why is it so important to discern what company/close fellowship you should keep with certain people?
5. How do people attract people of like values? Discuss how this can work for the positive and the negative.
6. Why it is so important about who you choose to *closely* share your lives with?
7. Discuss how fellowship brings strength to our lives. Share a personal example of this.

ACTIVATION EXERCISE: EVALUATE YOUR ENVIRONMENT

1. Prayerfully consider your current season of life. What are some specific areas you need strength in?
2. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal areas that He wants to adjust. Specifically, ask Him about *people, places, media,* and other *activities* you are presently involved with that might need to be limited/restricted in this season...*for your benefit!*

You can write these out in the space below:

SET A STANDARD FOR WHAT YOU LISTEN TO



“I will look with favor on the faithful in the land, that they may dwell with me; he who walks in the way that is blameless shall minister to me” (PSALM 101:6 ESV).

Strengthening ourselves begins with our choice to listen to God’s voice more than any other.

The standard we set for our ears also determines our ability to strengthen ourselves because strengthening ourselves begins with our choice to listen to God’s voice more than any other.

By the way, I hope it’s obvious that learning to strengthen ourselves does not imply that we are the source of our strength. Rather, *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”* (Phil. 4:13). And Christ “[upholds] *all things by the word of His power*”—including us (Heb. 1:3). Thus, every tool in our arsenal is designed to help us draw from the strength made available to us by hearing God’s voice.

Listening is what enables us to establish agreement with Him through obeying His voice, and our agreement is what releases heavenly strength and resources into our lives and circumstances. However, as I just described, the standard we set for our ears can

attract heavenly strength that comes through interactions with other people who speak and live from a heavenly perspective. Therefore, by purposefully associating with people who share our values and controlling our interactions with people who don't, we strengthen ourselves.

I strongly believe that we are all called to minister to anyone and everyone to whom the Holy Spirit would lead us. We're to accept them unconditionally and show them the love and power of God. Certainly there will also be individuals who God calls us to do business with, to befriend over a period of time in order to introduce them to Jesus, or to disciple in the faith. But these kinds of relationships are a completely different ballgame from friendships in which we open ourselves to the influence of our friend's perspective and values. We need to be careful about who is close to us and gives input into our lives.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What are some ways that you hear God's voice and draw strength from listening to Him speak to you?

2. Can you identify those friends/associations who share your values, live under the influence of the Holy Spirit, and bring a healthy influence into your life? Write these out below, as these are important relationship to cultivate.

If you cannot immediately identify any people like this, ask the Lord to bring them into your life.

EMPOWERMENT PRAYER

God, thank You for the people You have put in my life. Thank You for the ones who are near and for the ones who live far away. Thank You for my acquaintances and thank You for my close friends. I invite You to show me if there is anyone close to me who is not a healthy influence. Show me which relationships should be restricted, and which ones You want me to cultivate more.

Day Thirty-Two

THE POWER OF COVENANT PEOPLE AND RELATIONSHIPS



“Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel” (PROVERBS 27:9 ESV).

When we steward covenant friendships with people of faith, we stay connected to a growing source of strength that often greatly determines our ability to persevere through difficult times.

Our close friendships, especially with our spouses, are powerful, because they are built on covenant. Covenant establishes an agreement that allows the spiritual reality that governs your life to flow to the other person, and vice versa. This is why it is so vital to develop friendships with people whose lives consistently display the fruit of the Kingdom. When we steward covenant friendships with people of faith, we stay connected to a growing source of strength that often greatly determines our ability to persevere through difficult times.

I am blessed to have close friendships with people of genuine faith. Time and time again I have been uplifted and strengthened simply by being with them. Often I was not even able to mention the difficult situation I was facing at the time, yet I left encouraged. There are several reasons for this. First, our love and

honor for one another creates an exchange of life whenever we interact. Because my friends are people of faith, they naturally exude hope, promise, and joy. It doesn't take long when I'm with them for their attitude and spirit to be infectious.

But even more, covenant friendships, when they're built on knowing each other after the Spirit, have the effect of calling us back to who we truly are in Christ. They refresh our connection to our purpose and identity, and when our vision for those things is renewed, usually our strength is too. For this reason, I know that one of the best ways to strengthen myself when I'm tired or discouraged is to grab hold of a friend and spend some time with him.

On the other hand, I have found that when I am in an emotionally vulnerable place, or even if I'm just physically tired, I have to be careful to make sure I am not around people who like to complain or be critical. I have always had strong personal boundaries in place for discerning and interacting with people who speak from a place of negativity or unbelief. Normally I will minister to them, but I will not give them access to my life. When I'm lacking strength, however, I will intentionally avoid them. It may not sound very compassionate, but I am the only one who is responsible for keeping my heart free from doubt and judgment, and I alone can recognize when I am vulnerable to the influence of people who agree with those spirits.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Based on what you read today, what does a healthy covenant friendship look like and what are some of the benefits these relationships provide?

2. Do you have boundaries in place to prevent people who partner with negativity and unbelief from having access to your personal life? If you need to put some boundaries in place, write down an action plan. (Remember, this is not a call to isolation; it's wise evaluation.)
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EMPOWERMENT PRAYER

Father God, it is my heart's desire to have healthy covenant friendships where an exchange of strength can take place. Your Word says that "iron sharpens iron." Help me to be iron that sharpens and strengthens others. I invite You to build, deepen, and strengthen those friendships that are covenant relationships. Help me to see the value of these people and be intentional about investing in them. I also thank You for arranging divine appointments that bring me into new relationships that release strength to each other!

Day Thirty-Three

THE NEED FOR PERSONAL
REFRESHING AND RENEWAL



“Then Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner’” (JOHN 5:19).

Jesus was moved to action not by human need but by His Father’s heart.

The gospels specifically mention occasions when Jesus took His disciples away from the crowds to rest and be together. The testimony of revival history teaches us that very few men and women of God really learn how and when to do this. In case after case, the same person who carried a marvelous anointing that brought salvation, healing, and deliverance to thousands of people lacked the wisdom to see that he wouldn’t be able to sustain that ministry if he didn’t learn to get away from the crowds long enough to get physical rest and cultivate life-giving relationships with family and friends who would reaffirm his or her focus on the Kingdom. As a result, many of these revivalists died young, and many of their family members suffered physically and spiritually.

We can't afford to miss the lesson these stories teach us. If we are going to become people who God can entrust with greater measures of favor and anointing to fulfill our purpose as a royal priesthood, we have to be people who are prepared for the reality that we are going to attract needy people. People's needs can exert tremendous pressure on us, and that pressure will expose the places in our heart that care more about meeting the expectations of others than doing only what Jesus is doing.

In His ministry, Jesus met the needs of many people, but He also walked past a lot of other needy people. He understood that as one man, the only way He could succeed at what He was doing was to keep Himself in a place where what moved Him to action was not merely human need, but the actual heart of His Father. Jesus was moved to action not by human need but by His Father's heart. The same should be said of us, as we are called to follow the example that Jesus set.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Who are some people you admire who have healthy boundaries and are successful in different arenas of their lives (work, ministry, family, recreation, etc.)? Are there some adjustments that you need to make in your life so you also have a healthy balance and not burn out? Ask the Holy Spirit for wisdom.

2. How can you discover what the Father is saying and doing?
Write down your thoughts below.

EMPOWERMENT PRAYER

*Father God, I celebrate all of the good things I get to enjoy.
Thank You that I get to move in response to what You are
doing and not in reaction to the chaos going on around me.
You open my eyes, Holy Spirit, to clearly see the Father's ways.
Thank You that I get to see what He is doing and hear what
He is saying, so I can be about His business.*

Day Thirty-Four

OVERCOMING DISTRACTIONS TO FULFILLING YOUR DESTINY



“Whoever pursues righteousness and kindness will find life, righteousness, and honor” (PROVERBS 21:21 ESV).

Purpose never to let the needs of people you are not in covenant with dictate what you have to give to your close relationships.

I have found that there are three main sources of distractions that we must learn to overcome in order to stay on track with our destiny.

First, there are the distractions from the devil. He plays on our old fears and addictions to get us to sin. Gradually, as our minds are transformed and our senses are trained to hunger and thirst for God, those temptations don't really hold much interest anymore.

Second, in that transformation process we deal more with distractions from ourselves—places where our old, limited ways of thinking keep us from perceiving and responding to what God is trying to teach us.

But in the end, some of the most difficult distractions to avoid are not the ones that come from the devil or ourselves. They're from God. They're the blessings, the favor, the prosperity, the

miracles, and all the amazing gifts that He pours out in our lives. Obviously He gave them to us for our enjoyment and success. But they also have a way of revealing whether we will choose the benefits of friendship above the Friend Himself.

Every time we start to coast on the benefits of our covenant relationships with God and those closest to us, we are going to violate love. It must be settled in our hearts that we maintain a posture of intentionally pursuing these relationships for their own sakes and for what we can bring to them. We also have to purpose never to let the needs of people we are not in covenant with dictate what we have to give to our close relationships. In our commitment to use the strength we have for their blessing, we actually sow into the moment when we will need strength for ourselves. That's the nature of our Father's Kingdom.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Out of the three sources of distraction listed, which one seems the most pertinent to you at this time?

2. Today's reading talked about "distractions from God." How do you think it's possible to get distracted by blessings from God? What are some ways you can avoid this?

EMPOWERMENT PRAYER

Holy Spirit, come and reveal any distractions that are trying to pull me to the left or the right. Thank you for opening my eyes and realigning me with Your purposes for my life. I don't want anything—good or bad—to get between us. You are my most precious Friend and I desire to walk with You toward fulfilling my destiny. Help me to keep my focus fixed on You, no matter what comes my way!

Day Thirty-Five

GET SERIOUS ABOUT JOY



“A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones” (PROVERBS 17:22 ESV).

“Joy is the serious business of Heaven.”
—C.S. LEWIS

One of the best ways you can start getting serious about joy is by being intentional with your connections, especially during life’s challenging seasons.

Most of the people of faith who consistently make a contribution to my life in times of need are also people with a great sense of humor. I tend to take myself too seriously and resist laughter in difficult times. Joy in trial takes faith; but being with people I trust enough to relax around helps to foster the atmosphere where laughter comes easily and often. Sometimes just being together, telling funny stories, sharing joyful experiences, and even laughing at myself is just what the doctor ordered. Laughter really is good medicine.

Next week, we will focus on this topic in greater depth. For the purpose of finishing our current session, it is important for you to stay vitally connected with people of joy in the midst of difficulty. This is not undermining Paul’s instruction to “*rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep*” (Rom. 12:15).

Joy is fueled by our steadfast hope in God. This is why even those who are going through the “dark night of the soul” can still lift their eyes to Heaven, because they know their circumstances have not changed the Father’s nature. He is still the same yesterday, today, and forever. I want to be influenced by this quality in other people. This is why it is most important to consider who you are allowing to influence you in the midst of difficult seasons—times when it’s easy for you to go “either way.” You are being tempted toward absolute discouragement on one side, and then, you know there are people in your life whose joy level could bring you into greater measures of hope. What do you do? Disagree with discouragement and go with joy every time. This is not at all a call to pretend away problems and live carelessly. However, it is amazing how being under the influence of joy can put our circumstances in proper perspective.

As mentioned earlier, I tend to run the risk of taking myself too seriously. This is why I am intentional about connecting with those who have a good sense of humor and a joyful approach to life. I find that by being in their very presence, my awareness shifts. Remember, faith does not deny a problem’s existence; it denies its influence. Joy, on the other hand, is a sure evidence that Heaven is having influence in our lives. The circumstance might still be there; however, it is deprived of its authority to ultimately influence our lives.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Who are some of the most joyful people you know who you can call on to cheer you up when you need it? (If you want to be strengthened, these are the people you should be spending time with.)

2. Describe why you think joy can be such a powerful source of strength.

EMPOWERMENT PRAYER

God, I know You are the same yesterday, today and forever. In every season I know I can find Your joy that will give me hope and perspective over every discouragement. Thank You for the gift of people and connections that help fuel Your joy in my life!

FOR DEEPER STUDY...

Hearing from God <https://shop.ibethel.org/products/hearing-from-god>

Changing Your World <https://shop.ibethel.org/products/changing-your-world>

Personal Restoration <https://shop.ibethel.org/products/personal-restoration>

Serious about Joy <https://shop.ibethel.org/products/serious-about-joy-11-00am-october-28-2012>

Joy to the World <https://shop.ibethel.org/products/joy-to-the-world-6-00pm-december-15-2013>

The Advancing Kingdom <https://shop.ibethel.org/products/the-advancing-kingdom>

OTHER BETHEL RESOURCES

The Supernatural Power of Overflowing Joy by Kevin Dedmon <https://shop.ibethel.org/products/the-supernatural-power-of-overflowing-joy>

Possessing Joy by Steve Backlund <https://shop.ibethel.org/products/possessing-joy>

God's Joy is Our Strength by Steve Backlund <https://shop.ibethel.org/products/god-s-joy-is-our-strength>

Abounding Hope and Joy Curriculum by Steve and Wendy Backlund <https://shop.ibethel.org/products/abounding-hope-and-joy-curriculum>