

## Transforming Principle 1

# UNDERSTAND SCRIPTURAL TRUTHS

*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.*  
—2 Tim. 2:15

**I**f you're struggling in a relationship that has become dysfunctional, as a Christian you may be asking yourself what God wants you to do. It seems peace is unattainable. You pray, but you still worry and react. You wonder why God doesn't answer your prayers or even seem to care that your heart is breaking. Your loved one may even use your faith manipulatively by calling you a hypocrite in an effort to get you to do what he or she wants, saying, "A good Christian wouldn't do that."

It's therefore important that you understand the scriptural truths that give you a firm foundation on which to stand. Jesus spent time with difficult people, and He loved them.

God values relationship so much that He created us to have relationship with Him. When we became *difficult* by choosing again and again to sin, He cared enough to come after us, pursuing us with a love so great that He sacrificed His only Son.

He also wants us to have good relationships with others. Much of the New Testament was written to individuals and local churches about how relationships should be conducted. The fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—

are all qualities that enhance relationships (Gal. 5:22-23). The hardest place to live your faith is in the context of relationships with sinful, broken people, but that's precisely what God wants you to do. Your love for God can best be measured by your love for others (1 John 4:7-21).

## WHAT IS CHRISTIAN LOVE?

Phil's wife is having an affair. She left him to care for their three children on his own. Phil wants his wife back, and he believes that loving her means he must continue to take care of her needs while she's living with another man, all the while praying that she'll come back home.

Joan and Ron continue to support their son, who is on drugs. They're afraid that if they cut off his money, he'll feel unloved and get worse.

Rita and John disapprove of their daughter's decision to marry Brad. Since she continues to stay with him in spite of his alcoholism and abuse, they won't have anything to do with either one of them.

Each of these situations exemplifies a misunderstanding of love. As Christians, we sometimes misapply the Bible because we have a tendency to look at truth too simplistically. We surmise that if love means never showing disapproval, then that's all it means. Or if love suffers long, then it means to hold on no matter what. If love means to confront sin, then it must be harsh and confrontational. We tend to ignore the fullness of God's truth by not recognizing that love is multifaceted.

## Love Is Treating Your Neighbor as Yourself

Jesus commanded you to love others as yourself (Matt. 22:37-39). In practice, this requires you to put the other person in a higher position than yourself. It's the opposite of selfishness or self-centeredness. If an action would benefit you but hurt another, it's clear that you're to put the

good of others first. “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31) means that you love by treating others at least as well as you treat yourself. If you’re unsure, measure your actions by how you would like to be treated. Love is not dependent on feeling affection; it’s an act of the *will*, in which you choose to put another’s best interest ahead of your own.

This does not mean that taking care of yourself is prohibited, however. “Make every effort to do what leads to peace and to *mutual* edification” (Rom. 14:19, emphasis added). It’s not in the best interest of the other person to allow him or her to mistreat you. Phil. 2:4 says, “Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.” You’re responsible primarily for yourself. You must attend to your interests in order to do that.

“Love does no harm to its neighbor” (Rom. 13:10). You harm others when you enable them to do things that hurt themselves or others—including you. It’s hurtful to your loved one if you financially support irresponsible and destructive behaviors, cover sin, or react in ways that are emotionally damaging.

## Love Is Unconditional

The ultimate standard is to love as Christ loved us (John 15:12). Christ’s love is permanent, unchanging, and unconditional (Rom. 8:35-39).

God showed us this love by sending His Son to die for us (Rom. 5:8). We show unconditional love to others when we treat them lovingly for who they are, valuable children of God, not because of what they do or don’t do. Paul showed unconditional love toward the Corinthians even when it was not returned (2 Cor. 6:12). This means that no matter what your loved one does, you continue to act in ways that show love. You can love your loved one while hating the sin that enslaves, controls, rules, and destroys.

The confusion surrounding unconditional love is that it's often confused with approval. It's possible to show disapproval without withholding love, and it's possible to love without approving. In fact, showing disapproval can sometimes be the most loving thing you can do.

## Love Is Compassionate Toughness

Having compassion means you have sympathy and feel sorry about the difficulty your loved one is encountering even if it's a result of his or her choices. The words "mercy" and "compassion" are often used interchangeably. "Compassion" and "kindness" are often found together. They're the opposite of a judgmental or condemning spirit. Rom. 2:4 tells us that it's God's kindness, not harsh judgment, that leads to repentance.

God has compassion toward us. When the Israelites suffered as slaves in Egypt, they cried out to God. Exod. 2:24 says, "God *heard* their groaning and he *remembered* his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God *looked* on the Israelites and was *concerned* about them" (emphasis added). He said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people. . . . I have heard them crying out . . . and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them" (Exod. 3:7-8). God *cares*—even when suffering is the result of sin.

As there is a time for compassion and mercy, there is also a time for tough love. Tough love is love that makes it possible for you to allow your loved one to suffer in the hope that he or she will be saved. Tough love allows you to draw boundaries, to speak the truth in love, to say no, and to allow consequences. Tough love is not administered in anger but out of a deep understanding of the needs of the person and a concern for his or her long-term well-being.

Compassionate toughness confronts without destroying. Paul confronted the Early Church with its sin. He said, "I

wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you” (2 Cor. 2:4). He says of one particular man that the punishment he received was enough so that now he should be forgiven “so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him” (2 Cor. 2:7-8).

Jesus treated sinners with heartfelt compassion. The Pharisees refused to have relationships with difficult people, but Jesus went to them, and as a result, they believed His message (Luke 7:29-30). The Pharisees brought an adulterous woman to Jesus (John 8:2-11). Jesus refused to condemn her, instead telling her to leave her sinful life. He forgave it without excusing it while expecting her to change direction. Jesus spoke kindly to the divorced Samaritan woman living in adultery (John 4:4-26). If Jesus were on earth today, He would go first to the difficult people: the addicts, the emotionally wounded, the mentally ill, and the sexually immoral.

### **Love Is Severing a Relationship Only When Necessary**

There are times when a relationship must be broken—but as a last resort and for serious situations only. Paul occasionally exhorted the church to expel a member for persistent and unrepentant sin, but it was to be done in a way that treated him or her like a brother or sister rather than an enemy with the hope it would produce repentance and restoration (2 Thess. 3:13-15; 1 Cor. 5:1-13).

Defending yourself and your family by cutting off extremely dangerous or destructive relationships is permissible. Jesus withdrew himself repeatedly from men who were trying to harm Him (John 7:30; Luke 4:30).

However, you would not want to sever a relationship to show disapproval of what the person is doing, to manipulatively get your own way, or to communicate a threat. Main-

taining a relationship in which you can love unconditionally and be an influence for good is the right alternative in all but extreme situations. Many broken, wounded people have said that they first felt God's love through the unconditional love of a spouse or family member.

### **Love Is Seeking Reconciliation When Possible**

Reconciliation is the highest goal. God desires unity and peace whenever possible (Rom. 12:18), but it takes two people who want to work toward restoring honesty, trust, mutual concern, and respect to restore a broken relationship.

You may have family members or friends with whom you have a broken relationship. If you would like to reestablish that relationship, initiate contact in a small way, such as via a phone call, a card, or an E-mail. Reconciliation cannot take place unless the other person wants it also, of course, and that will happen only when he or she is ready. You can let your loved one know that you want a restored relationship. Your responsibility is to keep the door open.

### **Love Is Custom-ordered**

A loving act to one person may be enabling or insulting to another. For instance, it may be insulting to one daughter for you to make inquiries regarding her college education because she perceives your questions as an indication that you don't trust her ability to do it right. A different daughter may welcome your concern as a loving gesture, viewing your willingness to spend time on her as positive and helpful. Take your loved one's circumstances, personality, and perceptions into consideration. True love discovers the needs and adapts itself to them.

### **Love Is Willing to Say No**

"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord" (Eph. 5:21-22). In these verses submission infers subordinating your

needs to act in the best interest of the other. Both persons in a relationship should act in this manner toward each other.

God has established order within the home. The husband is the head of the family in a structural way. Someone has to be in charge when there are impasses; however, that does not imply that the wife is unimportant or unable to fully participate in decisions, nor that the husband rules like a dictator. Decisions should always be agreed upon, when possible, in a cooperating partnership that values both individuals equally. The wife submits to her husband by respecting him, loving him, and honoring him, as long as it does not require her to violate her conscience or God's Word. The husband should also submit to his wife in the context of loving and caring for her as his own body, as long as it does not violate his conscience and his responsibility to act in a way that increases her holiness (Eph. 5:25-29).

Submission is always voluntary and can be withheld. Each individual has control over his or her life. Submission is not the same as obedience. Obedience implies a parent-child relationship (Eph. 6:1). A husband-wife relationship is based on love and mutual respect, not obedience. Each has a responsibility to bring insights, talents, and varying viewpoints into the relationship, including the ability to say no. Adult children are no longer under the authority of the parents; however, parents have the right to set rules for their household, as do adult children for theirs.

As you deal with your difficult loved one, there are times you'll have to do what you believe is right, even if it's not what others want you to do. But remember—you have to live with yourself. You must follow your conscience.

Paul tells us to submit to authorities in government (Rom. 13:1-7) unless the government's orders go against God's commands. Peter was told by the authorities not to preach Christ, and he refused to obey, stating, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). The apostle Paul was thrown into jail

many times for disobeying the law by preaching. Hebrew midwives refused the king of Egypt's command to kill baby boys (Exod. 1:15-21). For the higher good of saving her people from death, Queen Esther disobeyed her husband by speaking against his edict to kill Jews (Esther 5). Abigail disobeyed her husband to save lives by bringing David and his men the provisions Nabal refused them (1 Sam. 25). Following righteousness *always* comes before submission.

Consider these modern examples:

- Maggie continued to have a relationship with her son in prison even though her husband had forbidden her to see him.
- Jackie stayed by her sister's side even though the rest of the family disowned Jill because of the man she married and the lifestyle they lived.
- Rick continued to have a relationship with his brother even though Rick's wife got angry.
- Megan helped pay for treatment of her daughter's mental illness even though her husband refused to admit she suffered from one.
- Jared continued a relationship with his adult children from his prior marriage even though his new wife was jealous and didn't want him to.
- Peter's family got angry when he refused to give money to pay for his brother's bail, but he stood firm.

When it's a matter of standing up for good, standing against wrong, following your conscience, and protecting others and yourself from harm, you don't have to put the needs and wishes of others before your own.

### **Love Is Being Faithful in Prayer**

Pray for your loved one and everyone who touches his or her life. Also pray for wisdom for yourself in the situation and for those who influence you regarding your loved one. Paul prayed day and night for the people God put into his life (2 Tim. 1:3).

However, prayer isn't all you're called to do. Some Christians use prayer as an excuse to avoid the responsibility to take action and make changes that need to be made. God wants you to put your faith into action (James 2:14). Jesus told us to love, do good, bless, *and* pray for those who mistreat us (Luke 6:27-31).

## **Love Is Bearing Good Fruit**

“Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth)” (Eph. 5:8-9). What is the fruit of your action or inaction in your dysfunctional relationship? Does it produce righteousness in your loved one and yourself? Or does it result in sin, dissension, anger, and other evils? Are you allowing your loved one to continue in destructive behaviors without consequences? Is what you're doing leaving you feeling discouraged, angry, bitter, ashamed, and broken? Are your actions exposing sin and bringing it to the light, or are you covering up sin in the hope of keeping the peace for the time being?

Taking a hard look at the fruit can help you determine if your choices are right. Before listing the fruit of the Spirit, Paul lists the acts of a sinful nature: “sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like” (Gal. 5:19-21). He then lists the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). Which of these lists best describes your difficult relationship? Passive tolerance of wrong results in sin in your life and your loved one's life by the fruit it produces: anger, resentment, self-pity, careless words, contentiousness, pride, unbelief, revenge, enabling, hatred, turmoil, and sinful acts. It destroys physical health, dignity, and self-esteem. It is also a bad example to others.

Eph. 5:11 says, “Have nothing to do with the fruitless

deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.” This means you are not to cover up or make excuses for evil. Gal. 6:7-9 says, “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” When you interfere with God’s law of reaping and sowing by preventing your loved one from reaping the fruit of his or her actions, you are acting out of fear and insecurity rather than out of trust and faith. How many times have you known what was right in your heart but not been willing to suffer or allow temporary negative consequences—so you did not take a stand? I ignored that conviction many times and deeply regretted it when I saw the fruit of ungodliness in my relationships.

Loving your difficult loved one means loving him or her enough to have strong boundaries that say no to sin in his or her life, in your life, and in your home. God does not leave us alone. He goes after us, convicts us, allows us to suffer consequences and pain, and disciplines us with the purpose of bringing us to repentance (Heb. 12:5-11).

Standing up for good means standing against sin even if it causes unpleasant consequences for you or your loved one. 1 Pet. 3:17 says, “It is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.” When you take a stand against wrong, any consequences you endure qualify as suffering for doing good. Taking a stand against sin is often more difficult than passively allowing things to continue. You will suffer for not taking a stand as you endure mistreatment, anxiety, emotional turmoil, and other difficulties. It is better to suffer for doing good. That kind of suffering pleases God.

### **Love Is Asking for Respect**

Respect is a necessary part of a good relationship, demonstrated by showing honor and esteem toward people you

value. God told children to respect their parents (Lev. 19:3), the Israelites to respect the elderly (Lev. 19:32), slaves to respect their masters (Eph. 6:5), wives to respect their husbands (Eph. 5:33), husbands to respect their wives (1 Pet. 3:7), and the church to respect elders and pastors (1 Thess. 5:12).

The Prov. 31 woman “is clothed with strength and dignity” (v. 25), and “her husband is respected at the city gate” (v. 23). Strength is defined as either an intellectual or moral power as a result of influence and authority. Dignity is defined as conducting oneself in a way that indicates self-respect. You cannot demand that your difficult loved one treat you with respect, but you will get more respect when you treat him or her with respect and *expect* the same in return.

In Matt. 5:38-39 Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” Jesus used this example to explain the differences between the old covenant and the new covenant. Old covenant law required an eye for an eye as punishment. Jesus was not condoning physical abuse or the tolerance of mistreatment but was encouraging an attitude of forgiveness rather than revenge. He was not saying you could not ask for respect in a relationship.

## **Love Is Maintaining Your Rights**

Some mistakenly believe Christians do not have rights, proving their point by saying that we’re to lay down our lives for others and die to self, thereby implying that it’s wrong to ask for our needs to be met, to say no to abuse or mistreatment, or to demand respect.

As Christians, we do give up the right to having sin in our lives. Col. 3:3 says, “You died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.” Verse 5 continues with “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature.”

We are told to put our sinful natures to death. The death we experience is a death to self and to sin. We die to self when we forgive, respond with gentleness to anger, choose right over wrong, and stand up for right even though we're afraid. We die to self when we serve one another. Dying to self does not mean allowing others to mistreat us without standing up for what's right or not asking for our needs to be met in relationships.

Governments guarantee rights to their citizens. Paul reminded the Roman authorities twice that his rights as a Roman citizen were being violated (Acts 16:37; 22:25). America was founded on a belief that we have inalienable rights given by God. We do not consider it sin to demand our inalienable rights from the government. We defend ourselves to make sure we're treated fairly in civil and criminal matters. We have rights under the law: the right to property, due process, free speech, legal representation, free association, religious freedom, and to be considered innocent until proven guilty. If we have no rights as Christians, why don't we just lay down these rights any time we're challenged? Because we understand that in these areas it's not inconsistent with Scripture to make a stand for justice. Neither is it unloving to take a stand for rights in relationships.

### **Love Is Long-suffering and Persevering**

"Love never fails" (1 Cor. 13:8). "Long-suffering" means enduring injury or trouble long and patiently. It means hanging in there through rough times rather than walking away from difficult relationships when you first encounter a problem. It means fighting for the relationship and for the good of the other person. It does not mean, however, accepting anything that comes your way without responding appropriately.

Love perseveres (1 Cor. 13:7). Persevering means persistently pursuing something even though you encounter opposition and obstacles. God's love motivates Him to allow

consequences and to discipline us for our own good in order to produce righteousness in our lives.

Love holds out for the best outcome and does not stop even when a relationship is estranged. It means we continue behaving in a loving way even when the object of our love is rebellious, confused, and unloving. Like Jesus, the Good Shepherd, it continues to seek the lost sheep (Luke 15:4-7).

## **Love Is Gentle**

Don't confuse gentleness with walking on eggshells to "keep the peace." Rom. 12:18 says, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." This peace refers to harmonious, reconciled relationships, not the absence of conflict. We are to do everything we can to have good relationships with all the people in our lives. Being a doormat does not result in genuinely harmonious relationships.

Gentleness and quietness are associated with meekness and describe an inner spirit that rests and trusts in God regardless of outward circumstances. Isa. 30:15 says, "In quietness and confidence shall be your strength" (NKJV). It is the opposite of a spirit of unrest and turmoil.

This does not prevent you from speaking the truth or confronting wrong. When you refuse to speak out against what you know is wrong, your spirit is actually full of unrest, fear, anger, resentment, distrust, and confusion. Love is administered in a spirit of quiet strength and confidence in God.

## **Love Is Forgiving**

Forgiveness is often misunderstood to be passive tolerance and acceptance of everything without boundaries. Your loved one may manipulatively say that you're required to forgive him or her because God tells you to. You do need to forgive, or you'll become resentful and bitter—but forgiveness does not mean that you lie down and say, "Step on me again—I like it," nor does it mean you passively accept everything your loved one does without limits and conse-

quences. Forgiveness means only that you give up your right to take revenge.

Dysfunctional relationships are quite complicated. However, the biblical truths still apply. As we explore the remaining transforming principles, you'll be enabled to love your tough loved one with loving toughness.