

LOVE THE LORD



Lesson Twelve - Why is it important to recognise our coping mechanisms?

August 2023

Summary of key points

- A coping mechanism is how we adapt to stress, either consciously or unconsciously driven by our desire for control and comfort.
- Coping mechanisms rely on our flesh, not on the Holy Spirit.
- Coping mechanisms are formed in our subconscious minds overtime and become hardwired and instinctual. We need God's help to overcome them so that we can follow God faithfully.
- To start, we need to recognise our subconscious emotions that drive us to cope in our own sinful ways (with 50 examples).
- Strong emotions can even trigger physical sensations in our bodies (with examples).
- To be free from our emotional triggers, we need to forgive those who have caused us emotional stress and learn to go to the Holy Spirit for wisdom, counsel, understanding, and comfort.
- God's children do not cope with life's stressors, we learn to conquer them with His help.

Watch the lesson online

<https://youtu.be/-EovRALFezg>

Transcript

Welcome to lesson 12 of Love the Lord where we talk about how our coping mechanisms can become strongholds that keep us from going to God for all our needs. This lesson includes quite a lot of practical information and will require more time than usual. Please set aside at least one hour for your own self reflection.

Let us begin by inviting God to speak to us personally through this study. Please follow along as we pray together. Click pause at any point if you need more time.

First, let's thank God for His perfect character and will for us.

Next, please tell Him about the things that have been stressful and ask for His help and guidance.

Let us confess the ways we have sinned against God and against others, and put down our burdens of sin. We can ask for His forgiveness.

Please confess the ways others have sinned against us, and forgive them in Jesus' name.

Next, let us ask God to purify and open our hearts to receive His teaching.

Finally, please repeat these words, "In Jesus' name, I silence all distractions and voices that are not from God. Amen."

Let's begin the lesson for today. Why is it important to recognise our coping mechanisms?

Let's start this lesson by defining what a coping mechanism is. Dictionary.com defines a coping mechanism as "an adaptation to environmental stress that is based on conscious or unconscious choice and that enhances control over behaviour or gives psychological comfort." How is that relevant to us as believers?

Perhaps we can break it down this way. A coping mechanism is how we adapt to stress, either consciously or unconsciously driven by our desire for control and comfort. The focus is on ourselves. Stress is a normal phenomenon in life. Any type of change can cause some stress. But as disciples of Jesus Christ, we are not meant to be led or moulded by the stresses of this world. We are meant to overcome them with the help of the Holy Spirit.

As children of God, we are called to be renewed and adapt to God's commandments by conscious choice and desire to love God and love people. Our focus is on God Himself.

The challenge for us is that our subconscious desires can sometimes overpower our conscious thoughts.

To understand this further, let's take a look at how our brains are designed.

Our brain is the organ in our body that consumes the most energy by weight. It uses over 20 percent of our entire body's entire daily energy. To save on the large amount of energy needed to process information, our brain automates much of what we do in our subconscious mind, so as to save time and energy.

It is estimated that up to ninety-five percent of our brain operates on a subconscious level. This is how we can do certain things without having to actively decide or think about them. Our subconscious mind plays a very important role in our life

It runs how we instinctively breathe while we sleep, brush our teeth, or chew on our food without ever having to think twice. It is where we store our learned behaviours and form our habits

The subconscious mind is also where we store our memories, together with their related emotions. These subconscious pieces of information will, over time, form the foundation for our beliefs and our desires.

By contrast, our conscious mind relies on will power. It is where we make an effort and expend a lot of energy to analyse information, reflect on ourselves, problem solve and make decisions.

So we see that our subconscious thoughts and behaviours are often made on instinct, they are automatic. We are not always aware of what we are doing and certainly not fully aware of sin.

Understanding how we think, both conscious and subconsciously, is important because it affects how we walk with God. If our minds are on auto-pilot 95% of the time and learn through repetition and what is familiar, then our un-renewed minds that learnt our sinful behaviours can become the true masters of our lives and rebel against God without our full awareness.

If we were to give a visual comparison of how dominant our subconscious mind is compared to our conscious mind, just take a look at the text on this diagram.

Embedded in our subconscious are some very powerful drivers for behaviour: these include our memories, emotions, beliefs, and desires.

To save the most energy, our brains will quickly switch on our learned behaviours and habits. This how our subconscious coping mechanisms form over time, and become more and more hard-wired or addictive the more often we repeat them.

Let's illustrate this with an example. Suppose one of our parents used to be very stressed at work, and would come home and lose their temper at us. This made us very fearful and anxious. After attacking us, our parent would then buy us an ice cream as a way to make peace. This pattern lasted for two to three years.

During that time, our subconscious minds learned to associate sweet things with emotional comfort after any highly stressful incident. Now, as adults, we find we instinctively turn to sugary foods for comfort, instead of to God. If we don't learn to practice forgiveness towards those who caused us stress, we will continue to rely on the things of this world for some relief and resolution of the un-confessed inner emotions we still hold inside of us.

In previous lessons, we talked about how our desires are not bad in and of themselves. In our example, it was a desire for comfort. But our desires can lead to ungodly coping mechanisms when we don't filter our

thoughts for sinful patterns. These patterns are usually driven by our experiences, our memories, emotions, and beliefs, rather than on God's Word.

Many times we sin because we are actually over-reacting to a desire to deal with some internal stress and anxiety.

Galatians chapter 5 verses 19 to 21 gives us examples of some other sinful coping mechanisms. These are sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and so on.

Galatians 5:19-21 When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. (NLT)

Let's look at three of these more closely: sexual immorality, impurity, and sorcery.

Some people may turn to sexually immoral acts or pornography out of boredom, but many more turn to it to derive some pleasure or positive kick back in response to some unhappy feelings, such as the stress of not feeling loved, just as an example. This is because sex activates the body's natural painkillers: hormones called endorphins and oxytocin. These hormones boost our emotional state. Hence, we may subconsciously use sex as a temporary distraction or relief from emotional stress, without realising it. Does this look familiar to you?

The next example is impurity. We are all tempted to think impure thoughts. We may wish to curse someone or imagine bad things happening to them. Such a behaviour may be a response to feeling rejected or disrespected. We may not forcefully take revenge or retaliate, we simply start to subconsciously hate them in our hearts. This may help us feel some sense of control over a situation that is not in our favour. Does this sound familiar too?

Some people resort to sorcery. Sorcery involves the use of spells, drugs or potions, fortune telling, witchcraft, or speaking to spirits. At its heart, sorcery is about the control and manipulation of our environment or people through spiritual powers other than God, that is, through Satan and evil spirits. For example, some people use sorcery to foretell the future, seek good fortune and blessings, consult spirits of dead relatives, curse others, and ask for protection. Many do this out of a fear of uncertainty or insignificance and a subconscious desire for control over their fate. Does this also sound familiar?

These are just three examples from Galatians 5 of sinful coping mechanisms.

Sometimes, we do not even recognise our sinful coping mechanisms for what they are, because we are compelled to react in certain ways through habit. We are not used to crying out to God for His strength and salvation.

1 Chronicles 16:11,35 Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always. Cry out, "Save us, God our Savior; gather us and deliver us from the nations, that we may give thanks to your holy name, and glory in your praise." (NIV)

For instance, when we are confronted with stressful situations, we may feel that we need to take over and take charge. Or perhaps we need to ensure that everyone else is happy. Sometimes, we give into peer pressure. Or we self-comfort with food, drugs, sex and other things. Or we fight back in order to prove other people wrong or focus on other people's faults.

We don't see that when we dominate, people please, yield, self soothe, take revenge, or judge and slander others, we could just be coping with the stress in our own ways without turning to God as our true God and Saviour. It is important, therefore, that we pay closer attention to and understand why we do the things we do. This calls for wisdom.

Thankfully, we have the Holy Spirit to help us. He is the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

Isaiah 11:2 And the Spirit of the LORD will rest on him— the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. (NLT)

When we allow the Holy Spirit to lead and control the way we think, we will experience spiritual vitality and peace. On the other hand, our own ways of coping with stress will lead us into spiritual death.

Romans 8:5-6 Those who are dominated by the sinful nature think about sinful things, but those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit. So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace. (NLT)

Let us read Romans chapter 8 verses 5 to 6 together, "*Those who are dominated by the sinful nature think about sinful things, but those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit. So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace.*" (Romans 8:5-6 NLT)

Galatians 5:19,21 When you follow the desires of your sinful nature ...anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God. (NLT)

Galatians chapter 5 verse 21 concludes by saying that “*anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.*”

One way to ensure that we do not forsake our place in God’s Kingdom is to identify the desires that trigger our coping mechanisms so that we are able to quickly bring them to God for His loving healing and ask the Holy Spirit to renew our desires.

Galatians 5:17 The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires ... (NLT)

For today’s lesson, we will focus on understanding the emotions that cause us stress because such strong emotions cloud our ability to think clearly. They will also mould our desires and beliefs, and influence how we view ourselves and colour the way we think about our memories. They may also be the cause of our hardened hearts. We often harden our hearts as a way to protect ourselves from emotional stress, but if this self-protection becomes an inbred way of coping with stress, we will also resist giving up control of our lives to the Holy Spirit.

We may notice that our bodies react in certain ways whenever we experience stressful emotions. For example, our minds can't seem to quiet down, our brains are always flooded with different thoughts. We find it hard to focus our thoughts. Our mouths turn dry and we clench our teeth. A lump forms in our throats. Our chest feels tight, we hold our breath without realising it and find it hard to breathe. Our heart rate increases. We don't know why but we constantly feel fatigued or weary even though we have had enough sleep. Our bodies feel weak or tense. Sometimes, we experience body tremors or our muscles stiffen up from the stress. We develop skin problems and have trouble falling asleep or sleeping well. We may feel as if our stomachs are constantly churning. We lose our appetite, feel nauseous and develop digestive problems.

Do you recognise any of these reactions as your own too? Our bodies can react to emotional stress even if we are not consciously thinking about it.

If we are to overcome our sinful coping mechanisms, we need to become more aware of the stressful emotions that trigger our behaviours.

The human spirit is capable of a vast variety of emotions because we are made in God’s image. God is capable of an infinite number of ways to express Himself.

Some emotions are triggered by other emotions. For example, we may become angry when we feel misunderstood or abandoned. Our anger is a secondary emotion that reacts to our primary emotions of feeling misunderstood or abandoned.

Another example of a secondary emotion is sadness. We may feel sad in response to feeling unloved, betrayed, and rejected.

Sometimes, secondary emotions of anger or sadness can feel so overwhelming that we are unaware of our true primary emotions. Is it any wonder that the Bible calls our hearts deceitful?

The challenge is that many of us have not been taught how to admit to or express our true emotions — especially the ones that we have been told will make us look silly or vulnerable, such as feeling misunderstood, abandoned, unloved, betrayed, or rejected. There can be occasions where we don't even know what we truly feel inside us or how to verbalise and name our feelings.

Another possible reason is that some emotions have stayed within us for so long since childhood that our brains now recognise and react to them automatically on a subconscious level. We are not conscious of what we are doing.

When we have become so familiar with some emotional states, we may even think that they are normal and that everyone also feels the same way.

One very important reason why we want to learn how to recognise our subconscious and conscious emotions is because the fruit of the Holy Spirit involves our emotions. Just take a look at Galatians chapter 5 verses 22 to 23, and see how many of these involve our feelings.

Galatians 5:22-23 But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things! (NLT)

So, for today's lesson, we will go through a list of 50 emotions that may lead to other stressful emotions, outside of the fruit of the Holy Spirit. This is to help us identify and recognise what else could be going on in our hearts, on a subconscious level.

Before we start, we encourage you to please prepare something to write with so that you can make a record of the emotions that trigger stressful sensations in your body. Each emotion is numbered so you can take note of it easily. For each emotion, we also try to provide a generic description of how it may feel like.

Fifty emotions may sound like a lot but they do not fully represent all the different ways we can feel and express ourselves. This only goes to illustrate what a broad spectrum of emotions God has gifted us with.

As we go through these examples one by one, please keep a record of the emotions you have identified, so that you can ask the Holy Spirit after this lesson to lead you to the reasons why these emotions make you stressed and invite God to start you on a journey of healing.

In future lessons, we will explain how the Holy Spirit brings healing to the places of our hearts that are still impacted by these emotions.

Ready? Let us begin.

1. Abandoned - we feel like no one will stand up for us or take care of us.
2. Alienated - we feel out of place or like we don't belong.
3. Angry - we feel very indignant, upset or hostile towards something or someone.
4. Ashamed - we feel we have to hide ourselves because somehow we done something wrong or bad.
5. Betrayed - we feel let down by someone we trusted
6. Bitter - we feel disappointed, resentful, and angry that certain things didn't turn out in our favour.
We hold on to grudges that slowly poison our perspectives on life and on people.
7. Brokenhearted - we feel devastated and grieved over something.
8. Conflicted - we feel torn between two equally important choices.
9. Confused - we don't know what we feel about something and how we ought to feel about it.
10. Defeated - we feel overcome and unable to recover from something.
11. Depressed - we feel sad, isolated, and hopeless.
12. Desperate - we feel fearful, frenzied, and deeply anxious.
13. Disappointed - we feel upset that our expectations were not met.
14. Disapproved - we feel that nothing that we do will please someone, maybe it is because they don't like us.
15. Disconnected - we feel detached from other people, and have difficulty experiencing deep and meaningful relationships.
16. Disgusted - we feel repulsed or put off by something that is very unpleasant.
17. Disillusioned - we feel like we have completely lost faith or trust in something or someone.
18. Dismayed - we feel gravely disappointed about something we did not expect to turn out so badly.
19. Disrespected - we feel offended or hurt that we have been disregarded.
20. Fearful - we feel constantly frightened and worried that things might turn out badly for us.
21. Frustrated - we feel annoyed, discouraged, and upset about something that is left unresolved.
22. Guilty - we feel bad and sorry for something we regret doing or being a part of.
23. Hatred - we feel strong repulsion or animosity towards something or someone.
24. Humiliated - we feel disgraced, ashamed, and made to feel small and unworthy.

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25. Impoverished - we feel like we never have enough, materially and relationally.
 26. Inadequate - we feel like we are never enough
 27. Inferior - we feel like we are always below or worse off than other people.
 28. Ignored - we feel that other people don't pay us attention.
 29. Insecure - we don't feel confident, we feel worried that we may lose something valuable.
 30. Insignificant - we feel small, negligible, and unworthy of people's attention.
 31. Isolated - we feel alone and cut off from other people.
 32. Lonely - we feel like no one cares, understands, or connects with us.
 33. Miserable - we feel deeply unhappy and stuck.
 34. Overwhelmed - we feel overpowered by our circumstances, like we can't breathe.
 35. Overlooked - we feel forgotten and ignored.
 36. Nervous - we feel agitated, tense, and restless.
 37. Powerless - we feel helpless and defenceless.
 38. Repulsed - we feel disgusted and put off.
 39. Resentful - we feel unfairly treated and hold a grudge.
 40. Rejected - we feel like other people exclude us intentionally.
 41. Ridiculed - we feel disrespected, mocked, and put down.
 42. Sad - we feel downcast and unhappy.
 43. Self-hate - we have strong negative feelings towards ourselves.
 44. Sorrowful - we feel grieved and deeply sad.
 45. Terrified - we feel high levels of anxiety and fear, with strong reactions in our body.
 46. Victimised - we feel subjected to other people's cruelty and feel helpless at the same time.
 47. Vulnerable - we feel exposed and unprotected.
 48. Weary - we feel exhausted and drained of strength.
 49. Worried - we feel mentally troubled and distressed.
 50. Worthless - we feel like we have no value.

How many of these emotions can you relate to? Do they help you understand how you feel inside and why you do the things you do? The more emotions we are stressed by, the more likely we rely on sinful coping mechanisms without even being conscious of it.

The good news is that we can ask the Holy Spirit to heal our hearts and guard our minds, so that we do not have to be stressed about anything. Let's read Philippians chapter 4 verses 6 to 7 together, "*Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*" (Philippians 4:6-7 NIV)

Such is the inheritance for all of God's children. We are not meant to cope with life stressors, we are meant to overcome and conquer them with the Holy Spirit's help. The first step is to understand the emotions that trigger stress in us, and quickly seek God's help for His wisdom, understanding, counsel, and comfort.

Philippians 4:6-7 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (NIV)

Now, if you are ready, we can humbly go to God to confess the stressful emotions we have stored up in our spirits and cry out to the Holy Spirit for help and comfort. Here is a guided prayer you can do at any time.

1. Describe all your stressful emotions and confess them to God.
2. Repent of relying on fleshly coping mechanisms that you have probably built up since childhood.
3. Ask the Holy Spirit who you need to forgive for your emotional stress that you are still feeling. Forgiveness releases you from those unhealthy emotions that past events or people still cause inside you.
4. You may find that you also need to forgive yourself and let yourself of some burdens you have been carrying on yourself
5. Next, invite the Holy Spirit to guard your heart and mind with God's Word and truth.
6. Thank God for His faithfulness, that He never forsakes anyone of us.

We will end this lesson today with two reflection questions as well as a testimony to watch. Please prepare your answers before your group meeting. We pray you will be blessed. See you next time.

Time for reflection

1. What are your coping mechanisms?
2. How have they kept you from relying on God?

Watch the testimony for this lesson



Personal notes