

Spiritual Growth Lessons from Christian Ambassadors

Lesson 35

The Wondrous Things God Has Done

By Sharon K. Griffiee

Proverbs 22:6 (KJV) - *Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.*

In the Book of Proverbs there are only two ways a child can go, the way of the wise and the righteous, or the way of the fool and the wicked. Don Vickery, now a senior citizen, can look back on his life and see the wondrous things God has done in his life. The teaching of his early childhood had been instilled in him in such a way, that he could come back from a life of crime into complete fellowship with the Lord. Now a minister of the gospel, his message to young people today, comes with a word of warning. *Be strong in the Lord and do not waver from the good things He has taught you to do, because the devil will try to drag you down to the very bottom.* Brother Vickery knows first hand, through his own experience on the dark side, that the Lord is the answer to all that is put before us. His admonition is to flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness (**2 Timothy 2:22**).

Proverbs 24:1-2 (NIV) - *Do not envy wicked men, do not desire their company; for their hearts plot violence, and their lips talk about making trouble.*

Desiring the company of evil men is where his downfall began. He can pinpoint it to his late teens, when his character started changing with his change of clothing. He wanted to be noticed by his peers with the clothing he wore. He started slipping away from the teachings of Christ, because he wanted to please man, more than God. He began running with a group of guys whom he describes as rebellious, troublesome. He recalls how they just seemed to want to be mean. It started slowly, first with shoplifting. Then they would do things like stealing milk from the porches of their neighbors. Or they would sneak out and steal from the neighbor's gardens when it was dark and everyone was asleep. When they were older they were able to get alcohol. They began to run in packs, see who could be the meanest, cause the most trouble.

At the age of eighteen things came to a head. They broke into a school and stole typewriters and tore things up. It got so bad the police were after them and they were constantly on the run. They broke into a department store and stole clothes and suitcases. Walking down the street with suitcases full of clothes, they stole a car with the keys in it and went over the state line. Things went from bad to worse. He found himself serving ninety days on a county farm. While at the county farm, Don had such a bad attitude problem that he spent a lot of his time getting into fights. Each time he got into a fight the punishment became more severe.

During that time the Spirit of the Lord came to deal with him. When he was in a dark room, in solitary confinement, he made a proposition with the Lord. He promised the Lord; if He would get him out of this mess, he would straighten up his life. He would attend church, try to do everything he could to please Him, and stop running with his friends. After the ninety days at the county farm, he went to federal court and got three years probation. He kept his word with the Lord for about three weeks. Then he hooked up with his same old friends, doing the same old things. He went back to drinking, carousing, fighting, stealing.

Then he met an actor in the movie business. He started traveling and got away from those friends. However, his new friends led him even further away from the Lord. He would work on the movie set during the day, and go to the bars at night. He got married during that time and had three kids, but he had absolutely no commitments to anything. So he eventually lost his family.

Resolving not to get married again, Don lived with a woman for about three years. Then his life took another turn for the worse. He caught his girlfriend with another man. Don went crazy. He got angry, grabbed a shotgun, and shot the man twice. Though he didn't kill him, the shotgun wounds caused permanent damage to one arm and one hand.

Back in jail once again, he knew the severity of charges he was facing. Sitting in the jail cell he got to thinking, *"I wouldn't be in this predicament now, if I had kept my promise to the Lord"*. At the trial, he was found guilty on three counts; attempted murder, assault with a deadly weapon, use of firearms in the act of a felony. He got a minimum 15-year prison sentence in the State of California.

After the verdict, Don's mind was reeling. A feeling of total despair and hopelessness came over him. He knew one thing; he had had it with prisons! It is very hard to escape a situation like that and he knew he couldn't do that. So, he decided to take what he thought was the easy way out and commit suicide.

He had it all planned out on how he was going to do it. In fact, he had seen other men do the very same thing. He called his brother on the phone and told him the verdict of the case. As he was talking to his brother, his awareness was heightened that his brother had been a good Christian all his life. For some reason, the Spirit of the Lord came upon him and Don asked his brother to pray for him. This was totally out of character for Don to ask anyone to pray for him.

After his phone call to his brother, he went back to his jail cell. He laid there on the bunk with full knowledge that there is a God and there is life after this life. He knew he had to do something to prepare himself for what he was about to do. So, he said a very simple prayer:

"I'm sorry for the mess I have made of my life – forgive me, but here I come!"

As soon as he was finished with that simple prayer, a feeling came over him that stopped him from taking his life. Then, all of a sudden he looked up to a corner of the jail cell and there was a light. It started out very small at first. He couldn't keep his eyes off of it. It kept getting bigger and bigger, and brighter and brighter, and more brilliant. It got to the point where the light was so bright it caused everything else – the bars, the bunks, the walls of that cell to disappear. It gave him a feeling as though he was floating on air. This light became so overwhelming at that point – just as though someone was standing right there, nothing was spoken out loud, but just as plain as could be in his head, the words came to him:

"You are forgiven. Don't do this, I will watch over you, I will protect you. I love you."

Though he could not see a thing because of the bright light, at that very moment he felt as though arms went around him and hugged him. From that point in his life, things changed. That experience caused Don to have a change of heart and mind. He didn't think the same way after that. He couldn't even swear, and he had had a very filthy mouth before this experience. To his amazement, the desire to swear had completely been taken away from him.

There was a Bible in the jail cell. It was very tattered, not from being used like it should be, but from being used as a pillow most of the time. Though parts of the Bible were missing, he had the greatest desire and obsession to read it, because he needed to know about the experience he had just had. Because of his burning desire, he read the Bible completely through four times.

While waiting to be transferred to a more permanent prison facility, he was moved temporarily to San Quinton Prison. It was a dark, dreary place. There were gang wars going on almost all the time. He noted that out of about 1400 inmates at that time, there were only about 14-16 professing Christians. The inmates made a lot of fun of the Christians. But Don said that doesn't mean a whole lot when you really believe in the Lord. *"As a Christian you are willing to take a lot of abuse and do a lot of things you wouldn't do, if you were just in the world type of a person."*

Eventually Don was sent to Susanville, a minimum-security prison in northern California. He was in a prison where you could learn a trade. He decided that rather than lay around in a prison cell and do nothing for fifteen years, he would learn a trade and use his time wisely. He made the decision to learn the trade of "Baking". Not realizing it at first, the Lord was using his baking instructor to help build his character, to prepare him to survive the toughest circumstances.

Don described his Baking instructor as the most miserable person to get along with. He said everyone disliked him, because he gave them a hard time. He pressured the students in the class all the time. No matter what he did, Don said he could never do it right. His instructor always had something negative to say against his work. He remembered in the scriptures that the Lord said to pray for your enemies. What he wanted to pray was that something would fall on his instructor's foot. Over time he knew that

wasn't what the Lord meant when he said, "pray for your enemies". The Lord wanted him to pray for his instructor's well being.

When Don went up for the third time for parole, he was in for a big surprise. While sitting there his instructor came walking in. Don thought, "Oh, brother, I'm in trouble now, cause he has never liked anything I have done. He has never given me a compliment the whole time I have been here. I'm really in trouble if he starts telling all that stuff."

Quite the contrary. His instructor told the parole board what a fine person Don was. He said, "*For three years I tried to get him angry at me, to do something foolish, but Don never lost his temper and was always kind to me.*" He went on to tell the parole board how talented Don was, and that he believed he could get a job anywhere with his talents.

Lesson learned! Doing what the Lord says and praying for our enemies, the right way, actually worked! Because the Lord's peace was with Don, he had been able to control himself and not lose his temper. It was a great experience for Don.

Galatians 6:9-10 (NIV) – "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people..."

Don was amazed. He believes the good things his instructor said about him was a big factor in his release. By not giving up, at the proper time he reaped his harvest. The Lord had his hand in that. Don got out of prison in four years. He did not have to serve the fifteen years. Paroling to his Christian brother's home, he discovered his brother's church had been praying for him. It was there that he met and married his wife. Because of what he had been through, Don has been able to talk to people in prison who were planning to commit suicide. The Lord has truly done wondrous things in his life.

II Timothy 2:19 (NIV) – "...God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness."

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1. When training up a child, the Book of Proverbs speaks of two ways a child can go. What are those two ways?
2. Don Vickery's message to young people today comes with a word of warning. What is that warning?
3. Don can pinpoint the exact time when his character started changing. What brought about the change? Who was he trying to please?
4. What promise did Don make to the Lord when he was in solitary confinement at the county farm? How long did he keep his promise?
5. Finding himself back in jail again after shooting a man with a shotgun, he remembered his promise to the Lord. Describe his regret at not keeping his promise to the Lord.
6. What was the reason behind Don's plan to take *what he thought* was the easy way out, and commit suicide?
7. While Don was talking to his Christian brother on the phone about the verdict of his case, what did the Spirit of the Lord prompt Don to do?
8. Don gave a simple prayer in preparation for committing suicide. He asked the Lord to forgive him. Describe the overwhelming experience Don had in his prison cell after he finished his prayer. What words did the Lord give to him that caused a change of heart and mind?
9. Don had a filthy mouth before this experience with the Lord. How did his vocabulary change?
10. While in San Quinton Prison, Don discovered there were only about 14-16 professing Christians out of 1400 inmates. How was Don able to deal with their criticism of Christians?
11. What life-changing lesson did Don learn from the Lord's instruction to pray for your enemies? How did it help him gain early release from prison?

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Questions for personal or group study: