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INTRODUCTION

Do you ever wish you had someone you could talk to—about guys and girls, jealous friends, family feuds, how to make sense of your life, and how to really know God? I always wanted a friend or big sister who could clue me in on all the important things, including the best way to get a guy's attention! I needed someone who could relate to what I was going through as a teen. I grew up in a wonderful family, but I still struggled to find my place socially, just like every other teenager. It's something we all have to deal with. But sometimes a word or two of advice from someone who has "been there" can be helpful.

That's why I would like to be a kind of long-distance friend or "big sister" to you. Even if you already have a true friend or two, it doesn't hurt to have another one. In this book, I'll pass along some helpful tips that I've learned about God, guys, and growing up. There's so much for us to discuss that will relate to your day-by-day experiences. So, come on, girlfriend . . . let's talk!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Danae Dobson". The script is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Danae Dobson

Check It Out!

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-5

One of the mottoes that I live by is this: Be in the world, but not of the world. That doesn't mean I never listen to secular music or go to movies, concerts, and sporting events. I think it's acceptable to engage in some of the world's pleasures, as long as they're not sinful (chocolate excepted). Only now I'm more conscious about how I spend my time. I find myself frequently asking the WWJD question: "What would Jesus do?"

You may have seen the letters WWJD on rings, bracelets, and necklaces. They're not as trendy as they were a couple years ago, but the concept they convey is important. WWJD is a good question to ask as we make our daily decisions.

Recently, a girlfriend told me that her husband had been invited to a Korn rock concert. He had decided to go, and my girlfriend was unhappy about it. She didn't feel that this type of atmosphere was appropriate for a Christian. I had to agree. The reason is that Korn's music has anti-God/anti-Christian lyrics. Jesus wouldn't go to this type of concert, so why should we?

Some people argue that the reason for going into a worldly environment is to "witness" for Christ. What kind of witness is it to be seen where God's name is being dishonored and immorality promoted? Can you imagine Jesus going to a place like an anti-Christian rock concert except to condemn it? I don't think so! The

apostle Paul told us to “abstain from all appearance of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:22, KJV).

Before deciding to go somewhere controversial, think it over! Ask yourself these questions:

- What is my purpose in going?
- Would Jesus feel comfortable in this environment?
- Have I prayed about this decision?
- How can I have an impact on people for Christ?
- Will I face peer pressure and temptations that could make me feel uncomfortable?
- Will the environment harm me spiritually?

I understand how difficult it can be to turn down an invitation when you *really* want to go. Thoughts run through your mind like “All my friends will be there!” and “I’ll feel left out if I stay home.”

Why is it unwise to hang out with unbelievers and people who compromise? As long as you’re avoiding sin, does it really matter if you get as close to the world as possible? The Bible speaks directly about this subject in 1 Corinthians 15:33, which says, “Do not be misled: ‘Bad company corrupts good character.’” Just like gravity, you have a greater chance of being pulled down than of being lifted up. By “hanging out” with unbelievers and people who are not strong Christians, we expose ourselves to temptations that might weaken our resistance. Human beings are, after all, social creatures. We are inclined to follow the herd. As the prophet Isaiah put it, “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way” (53:6). That’s why it’s important to prayerfully consider the WWJD question (along with the others listed above).

Asking “What would Jesus do?” is not only helpful in the context of choosing friends and activities but also in many other situations. Here are some examples:

- If someone hurts your feelings, WWJD?
- When you’re tempted to compromise your beliefs, WWJD?
- If you’re angry and want to take it out on someone, WWJD?
- When you see a person in need, WWJD?

We find the answers to these questions in the New Testament. It is here that we understand who Jesus is and how we can model our life after Him. As Paul wrote in Philippians 2:1-2, "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose."

Our goal should be to imitate Christ! That's why the WWJD question is important—it holds us accountable. Of course, we're going to stumble now and then, but we should *strive* to be perfect, as He is perfect (Matthew 5:48).

Have you considered what a privilege it is to have a personal relationship with Jesus? To know He has forgiven all your sins and to be able to communicate with Him at any time? When we really know Him—really love Him—we want to be found blameless in His sight. There's no greater joy or satisfaction! Everything hangs on that one question: WWJD?

your turn

1

Describe a time when you made a moral decision based on your relationship with the Lord (for example, whether or not to attend a drinking party).

2

What can happen to a Christian who socializes with unbelievers?

3

What are some ways you can imitate Christ in your life?

CUT!

Check It Out!

PSALM 101:3

It began as just another night at the movies. Some college girlfriends and I drove to the local theater to check out a popular comedy. When we got there, I recognized three guys from school. They happened to be sitting in the row behind us, so we chatted with them awhile before the show started.

Thirty minutes into the film, I was feeling pretty uncomfortable. We had already heard foul language and sexual jokes and witnessed a couple of tasteless scenes. It was about this time that I turned around to say something to one of the guys. I was surprised to see that all three of them were gone! They had walked out of the theater, obviously as a result of the disturbing content.

Their response had a profound impact on me. I really admired the guys (football players, no less!) for adhering to their convictions. It also provoked some interesting thoughts: 1) Was there a standard that all Christians should follow? 2) Shouldn't my girlfriends and I have walked out, too? 3) Why were we still watching the film? Since that experience, I've become much more selective when it comes to movies.

Now don't get me wrong—I *love* a good movie! The right one can make you laugh, cry, or even transport you to another place in time. It can inform, instruct, change your way of thinking (for the better), and leave a lasting impression. Over the years, there have been a number of films that have affected me this way.

On the other hand, let's admit that there's also some pretty terrible stuff out there. Here's where discretion comes in. We need to make a conscious decision about what types of films are off our must-see list.

Whenever I go to the video-rental store, I'm amazed by some of the junk that's on display. Words like *nudity*, *strong language*, and *violence* are frequently used to describe subject matter. The other day I pulled a popular video off the shelf and read the back. This was the basic premise: A teenage boy and girl make a bet about whether or not the boy can get the school principal's virgin daughter to sleep with him. If he succeeds, he also wins the right to have sex with the girl he made the bet with. How's that for a raunchy plot?

Another disturbing aspect of today's movies is how often Christianity is made fun of. Jesus is our Savior and Friend—it's upsetting to see Him mocked or to hear His name raked through the gutter. This sort of thing seems to be occurring more frequently these days. A number of films I saw this year included one jab or another against Christ.

So what do you think is required of us in regard to entertainment? One thing is certain—Psalm 101:3 makes it very clear when it says, "I will set before my eyes no vile thing." That means we must decide ahead of time not to watch anything evil or obscene. We can't always know the content before we see a movie, but in most cases we have a pretty good idea.

Not long ago I became interested in foreign films. I began renting various titles, selecting those that had been applauded by the critics. Not surprisingly, I found some of the videos pretty trashy. The Lord brought one word to my mind: *discretion*. I was not exercising good judgment when renting these foreign films; I needed to be more discerning.

You might be asking, "What's the big deal, anyway? It's only entertainment—why does it matter what we expose ourselves to?" Let me try to explain with a story.

A father of three teenagers set a rule that the family could not watch R-rated movies. This created a problem when a certain pop-

ular movie opened in local theaters. All the teens were bent on seeing the film, despite its "R" rating.

The teens interviewed friends and even members of their church to compile a list of pros and cons about the movie. They hoped that the list would convince their dad that they should be allowed to attend.

The cons were that it contained only a few swear words that misused God's name, only one act of violence ("which you can see on TV all the time," they said), and only one sex scene (and it was mostly implied sex, off camera).

The pros were that it was a popular movie—a blockbuster. If the teens saw the movie, then they would not feel left out when their friends discussed it. The movie contained a good plot and two hours of nonstop action and suspense. There were fantastic special effects! The movie also featured some of the most talented actors in Hollywood. The teens were certain that the film would be nominated for several awards. And Christian friends at their church who had seen the movie said it wasn't "that bad." Therefore, since there were more pros than cons, the teens asked their father to reconsider his position just this once.

The father looked at the list and asked if he could have a day to think about it before making his decision. The teens were thrilled. *Now we've got him!* they thought. *Our argument is too good! Dad can't turn us down!* So they agreed to give him a day to think about their request.

The next day the father called his three teenagers, who were smiling smugly, into the living room. They were puzzled to see a plate of brownies on the coffee table. The father said he had decided that if they would eat a brownie, then he would let them go to the movie. But just like the movie, the brownies had pros and cons.

The pros were that they had been made with fresh walnuts and the finest chocolate. These moist frosted brownies had been created with an award-winning recipe. Best of all, they had been made with care by the hands of the teens' own father.

The brownies had only one con. They had a little bit of dog poop in them. But the dough had been mixed well—the teens

probably would not even be able to taste it. And their father had baked the brownies at 350 degrees, so any bacteria or germs had probably been destroyed. Therefore, if any of his children could stand to eat a brownie that included “just a little bit of poop,” then they also would be permitted to see the movie with “just a little bit of smut.” By now the teens had lost their smug expressions. They turned down the tainted brownies, and only Dad was smiling smugly as they left the room.

Now when his teenagers ask permission to do something he is opposed to, the father just asks, “Would you like me to whip up a batch of my special brownies?”

Philippians 4:8 says, “Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

It's hard to concentrate on things that are noble and lovely while watching a smutty film. In fact, let me ask you this question: Have you ever felt kind of “dirty” when you walked out of a theater? You know, the feeling that comes after hearing one cussword after another and seeing ten characters murdered in cold blood? If you've felt that way, it was because your mind was filled with impurities—you were being consumed by wicked images.

This same principle applies to reading material, music, the Internet, and television shows, too. Recently, *Entertainment Tonight* pointed out that TV sitcoms are now “pushing the envelope” with indecent programming to compete with cable stations. Funny, I can't think of a time when they didn't cross boundary lines, can you? Most sitcoms do not cause us to think about what is true, right, and pure.

The bottom line is that those who love the Lord and want to please Him should “keep [themselves] from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27). If we're exposing our minds to violence, sex outside marriage, greed, foul language, and other worldly sins, is there any room left to be filled with the Holy Spirit? Can we truly experience satisfaction in our communion with God? Think about it.

your turn

1

Why is it important to use discretion when it comes to music, books, TV programs, the Internet, and movies?

2

If your friends asked you to see a raunchy movie with them, what would you say, and why?

3

**How high are your standards regarding entertainment?
What do you think God's standard is for you?**

PARDON MY “FRENCH”

Check It Out!

PSALM 19:14

What do you say when you stub your toe or slam a door on your finger? In moments like these, you gotta say *something!* It just isn't natural to remain silent. I'm sure there are some folks who express their discomfort with a simple "Ouch!" but I'm not one of them. You probably aren't either. "Ouch!" is too mild when you're doubled over in pain.

Maybe that's why some people shout obscenities. Something about screaming the nastiest word that comes to mind just seems to get the point across. Swearing is inappropriate for a Christian, of course, so some of us spout off a string of ridiculous words that don't make any sense.

The other night, I ran barefoot into the cat's scratching post. Are you aware that those carpeted pillars have a hard piece of wood underneath? My poor toes! I think I muttered every *non-cussword* I could think of as I collapsed in agony. For the rest of the night I had to hobble on one foot because it hurt to walk. If there was ever a time to rattle off a string of obscenities, that was it! The next day my toes were a vibrant shade of purple—a tribute to my clumsiness.

One doesn't have to be in anguish to feel tempted to cuss, though. I hear bad language in all kinds of settings—everything from relaying humor to telling a story. Just today I overheard two

guys talking while I was getting my car serviced. One of them chuckled and said a four-letter word in connection with his soft-drink cup. I could tell that he thought nothing about what he said—it was just everyday conversation to him.

Why do you think profanity is so common? I think it's fair to say that some of the responsibility goes to the film industry. I have seen movies where bad language was used in almost every scene.

The interesting thing about foul language in movies is that it serves no purpose. Yes, I've heard the argument about the importance of realistic characters, but that doesn't justify swearing. I've seen many powerful, award-winning films that didn't have cuss-words. Besides, people do all sorts of disgusting things in real life, but we don't want to spend our money to watch them do it. So why would we want to watch realistic characters cuss and swear for two hours?

Peer pressure is another contributor to the widespread use of profanity. When your friends are saying four-letter words on a regular basis, it seems natural to incorporate them into your own vocabulary. It's the old "everybody's doing it" rationale. For whatever reason, the use of profanity seems to be increasing in our culture. I'm sure you hear it almost every day at school, in your neighborhood, or on television. When a person is exposed to "gutter language" over a period of time, a process known as *desensitization* occurs. This means that the shock effect is gone—what was once appalling now seems normal. We have become a nation of foul-mouthed people!

Did you know that God is very displeased by the crude way we talk? That is what we read in His Word. Consider these passages:

- "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" (Ephesians 4:29).
- "Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse

joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving” (Ephesians 5:4).

- “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD” (Psalm 19:14).

As you can see, the Bible is very clear about God’s expectations. He wants us to be conscious of what we say and to bring glory and honor to Him with our words.

This raises a very important point: Some Christians feel comfortable using the phrase “Oh my G——!” in casual conversation. I cringe when I hear people use the Lord’s name disrespectfully, and I wonder if they know how He feels about that. Exodus 20:7 says, “You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.” This warning was significant enough to be included in the Ten Commandments, so it must be taken very seriously by anyone who is trying to do what is right.

I once confronted a friend at school about this. We were walking together after class, and she responded to something I said with, “Oh my G——!”

“You shouldn’t say that,” I told her. “You’re using the Lord’s name in vain.”

“No, I’m not,” she argued. “To use His name in vain means to say it in *anger!*”

Perhaps some people would agree with this girl, but the Bible doesn’t say that. Here is another Scripture that refers to the reverence of God: “If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless” (James 1:26).

The Bible also says, “Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God” (2 Corinthians 7:1). The way we talk reveals how much (or how little) we respect our heavenly Father.

To sum it up, if you aren’t talking *to* God or talking *about* Him, you shouldn’t be using His name. The same goes for Jesus Christ, the “name that is above every name” (Philippians 2:9). He is the

Creator of the universe; the almighty King of kings and Lord of lords. Can we really justify throwing His name around as though it meant nothing?

Here's a question to ask yourself: Are the words of your mouth and the meditation of your heart pleasing to the Lord (Psalm 19:14)? If bad words have slipped out of your mouth lately, here's some good news: You can ask God's forgiveness and start again with a clean slate! God will help you avoid unwholesome talk and the temptation to swear—even when you drop a five-pound book on your toe!

your turn

1

Do your friends use bad language? If the answer is yes, has their speech had an impact on you? In what way?

2

How do you feel when you're in a movie theater and the name of Jesus Christ is used in a disrespectful way? Does it make you uncomfortable, or have you become desensitized?

3

How can your choice of words be a witness to others?

WITHOUT CEASING

Check It Out!

1 THESSALONIANS 5:17-18

Do you believe prayer works? I mean, honestly, are you certain that God hears you when you talk to Him and that He answers you? Do you trust Him with your deepest longings and your secret fears?

Is He interested in our daily life and the challenges that we face? More importantly, does the all-powerful God of the universe actually desire fellowship and communion with us mere mortals? I remember my pastor saying that one of the hardest concepts to grasp is that we're actually being listened to when we pray. I can relate, because I used to wonder about that very thing as a teenager. I struggled with the fact that I couldn't see or converse with God. In my heart, I knew He was listening to every word I said, but a little shadow of doubt was in the corner of my mind. Do you sometimes feel the same way?

Well, let's see what the Bible says about prayer:

- "We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express" (Romans 8:26).
- "Pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:17-18).

Prayer is not only honored by the Lord, but we also are commanded to enter into this personal communion with Him. And what a privilege it is for Christians! We don't need to make an appointment to get His attention. There are no receptionists or secretaries standing in the way. He never puts us off for a later time because He's too busy. Never! We have an open invitation to speak to Him whenever we please. Our God is always ready to listen. He can hear the faintest cry of the sick, the lonely, and the despised of the world—anyone who calls on His name. Each one of us who trusts in the Savior is known and loved by Him, in spite of our imperfection. Truly, the invitation to prayer is an expression of God's love and compassion for humanity. A precious gift!

For years a tiny needlepoint pillow has hung in my parents' living room. The phrase "Without Ceasing" is stitched on the front, taken from 1 Thessalonians 5:17 (KJV), which says, "Pray without ceasing." The little pillow symbolizes the importance of prayer in my family. It also represents my mother's influential role as chairperson of the National Day of Prayer. This significant event is held every year in Washington, D.C., and around the country on the first Thursday in May. It is my mom's responsibility to "rally the troops," so to speak, to pray for our leaders and our nation. She and her staff work twelve months a year to prepare for this one important day. Why all the effort? Because my mother and millions of other believers are convinced that prayer changes things. One of the verses that she frequently quotes is 2 Chronicles 7:14: "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

Our land desperately needs healing! Crime and violence are on the rise, and families are hurting because of divorce, abortion, substance abuse, homelessness, sexually transmitted diseases, and homosexuality. None of these problems can be resolved any other way than through an appeal to our heavenly Father, who hears the prayers of His children. That's why the National Day of Prayer is such a worthwhile effort. Last year there were twenty thousand

prayer events across the country, with two million people participating and forty thousand volunteers. A great volume of prayer ascended to the heavens on behalf of our nation. The Lord surely heard the voice of His people!

So let me ask you: What does prayer mean to you? Has there ever been a time when you cried out to Jesus and received His peace? Have you experienced an obvious answer to a prayer request? Do you know the joy of experiencing spiritual intimacy with the Lord?

In my own life, prayer has helped me to develop a relationship with God. I cherish the time that I spend with Him, talking about whatever is on my mind and listening for His voice. Sometimes I like to drive to my own special place in a quiet neighborhood. I turn off the engine and talk to the Lord. In between sentences, I pay attention to the “still small voice.” This is my way of giving God an open invitation to speak to me if He desires. Over the years, He has brought many inspirational thoughts to my mind. I’m so glad I took the time to listen!

One thing that I’ve learned through the years is that prayer is not about getting what you want—it’s about accepting God’s will. I’ve been denied some requests that meant a great deal to me—things that I really petitioned for. Other times, I’ve been in the “waiting room” a lot longer than I would have liked. This is where trust comes in—banking on the promise that “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28, NASB).

I’ll always remember something that happened ten years ago, while I was still in the “training stage.” I was driving my car, grumbling and complaining to the Lord for not answering a year-long request. “Maybe I should just quit praying,” I griped, almost like I was trying to punish God for His silence. “I’ve been praying and praying and nothing has changed. I feel like giving up!” Believe it or not, ten minutes later I passed a billboard with these words: “Don’t give up! Pray! It works!” If you think that didn’t send a chill down my spine . . . ! It seemed like a personal message direct from God to me, and I suppose that in a way it was.

Jesus actually taught a lesson about this very subject. It's the parable of the persistent widow found in Luke 18:1-5. In this story Jesus described a judge who didn't fear God or care about people. A widow in the town kept coming to him with this plea: "Grant me justice against my adversary." For some time the judge refused. Finally, he said to himself, "Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!" (v. 5).

Jesus used this parable to teach us always to pray and not give up. If a corrupt judge would reward a woman for her persistence, how much more will God bring justice for His chosen ones?

Is there something you've been praying about that seems to have fallen on deaf ears? Don't give up! Rest on the assurance that Jesus loves you and His answers are worth waiting for!

your turn

1

Do you talk to God on a regular basis? If not, why not start a routine by praying at the same time each day?

2

Has the Lord responded to one of your prayers in a miraculous way? Describe what happened.