

# Chapter Four

THE FINGERPRINTS OF SHAME



If you have shame, it has fingerprints, and they are found in your life, in your relationships, and in your sense of self. You may be completely unaware of these fingerprints, but they are left on your daily interactions, your personal relationships, and your sense of self-esteem. Shame manifests itself in how you act and react every day.

## THE FINGERPRINT OF CONTEMPT

One of the fingerprints of shame is contempt. There are two types of contempt. The first is other-focused contempt, and the second is self-focused contempt. Other-focused contempt is easy to spot. We've all met the woman who feels that everyone who doesn't do life like she does is "stupid." She has little introspection into her motives and emotions, yet she judges others freely. She makes statements like, "How could she...?"; "What kind of person would...?"; "I would never..."; or, "What an idiot...". This shows her contempt for others. She is prickly, and people tend to avoid her. You certainly can't be transparent and honest about your shortcomings with her, as you will be met with, well... contempt.

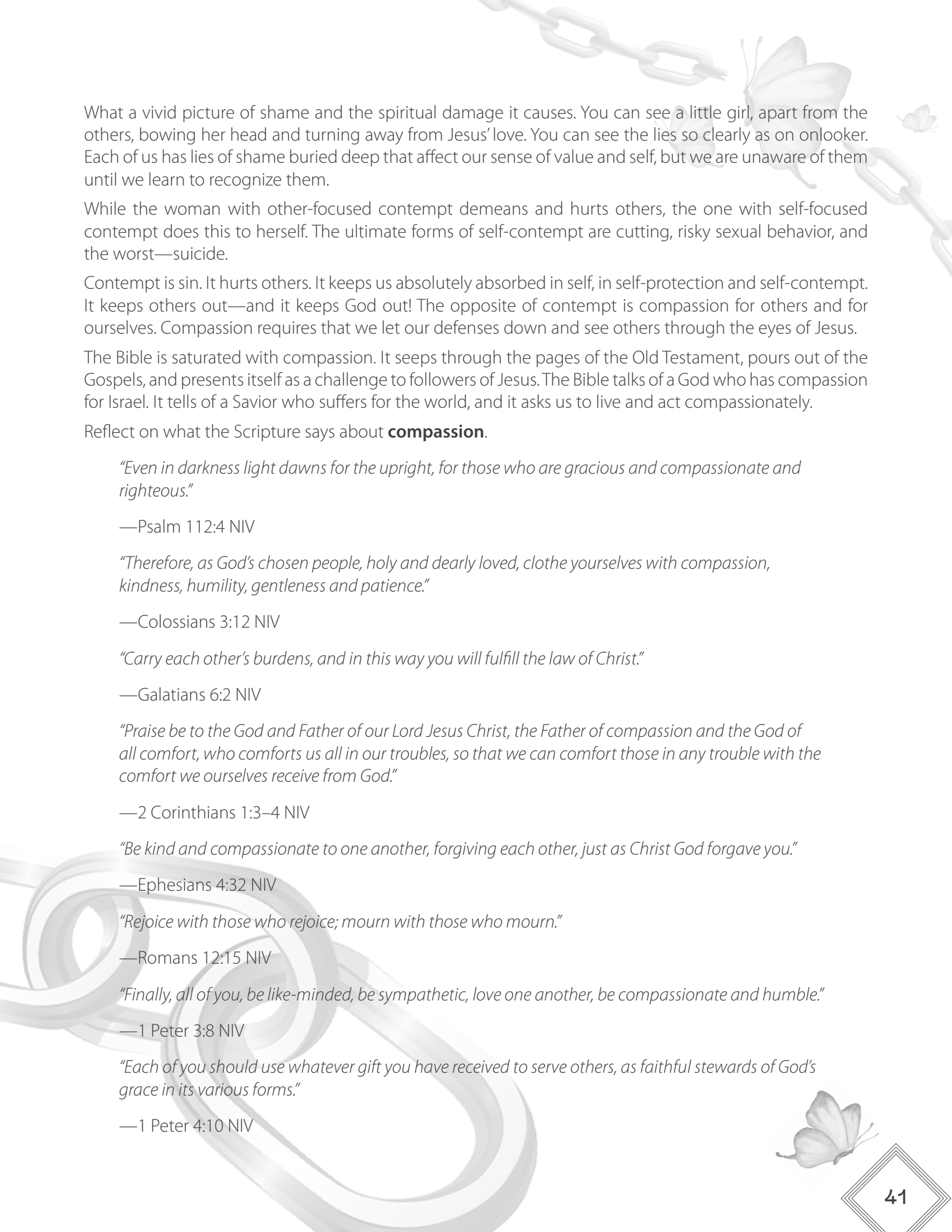
It is hard to believe, but this woman actually has shame at her core. She may be controlling, overbearing, or harsh, but the contempt she wears is like steel armor that keeps other people out! She cannot risk anyone (or herself) seeing past her armor, because they will expose her core belief that she is hopelessly, disgustingly flawed. (This isn't the truth, of course, but that is the lie that keeps her in bondage.)

The second form of contempt is self-focused contempt. It is the ruthless evaluation of our own performance, our own words and actions. Women with this form of self-contempt are always comparing themselves to others, and they don't fare well in the comparison. If only they were more spiritual, more disciplined, smarter, more clever, stronger, meeker, prettier, thinner—on and on the list of failings goes.



I remember talking to one woman from church. She was always volunteering, and people would have described her as the sweetest Christian woman they knew. She participated in Bible studies, and she never missed church. She came off unsure of herself, but that was overshadowed by her service and her sweet personality. Once, on a church camping trip, she and I started talking. Having counseled other women for so long, and seeing beyond words, I was able to direct the conversation, and it quickly went to her feelings of inadequacy and self-contempt. As we talked, she shared the saddest thing. She did not believe she was saved! She felt that she could not do enough for God, that when He looked at her, she felt He found her wanting and disgusting. Without knowing it, she had expressed the very essence of shame. How could this be? During sermon after sermon, Bible study after Bible study, she had listened to the plan of salvation and the concept of grace. She agreed in theory, yet she felt it wasn't meant for her!

I remember another woman who had been terribly abused (you will meet her later through her poetry). I was trying to bring her to a place of acceptance and love of herself as a little girl. But she couldn't grasp it. I told her to close her eyes and imagine Jesus sitting, opening His arms to her when she was a little girl, drawing her close in a comforting embrace. She looked at me and said, "You want to know what I see when I imagine this? Jesus is sitting there, and He opens His arms and draws the children to Him. But when I come up. He looks at me, points His finger, and says, 'Not you. You get out of here!'"



What a vivid picture of shame and the spiritual damage it causes. You can see a little girl, apart from the others, bowing her head and turning away from Jesus' love. You can see the lies so clearly as on an onlooker. Each of us has lies of shame buried deep that affect our sense of value and self, but we are unaware of them until we learn to recognize them.

While the woman with other-focused contempt demeans and hurts others, the one with self-focused contempt does this to herself. The ultimate forms of self-contempt are cutting, risky sexual behavior, and the worst—suicide.

Contempt is sin. It hurts others. It keeps us absolutely absorbed in self, in self-protection and self-contempt. It keeps others out—and it keeps God out! The opposite of contempt is compassion for others and for ourselves. Compassion requires that we let our defenses down and see others through the eyes of Jesus.

The Bible is saturated with compassion. It seeps through the pages of the Old Testament, pours out of the Gospels, and presents itself as a challenge to followers of Jesus. The Bible talks of a God who has compassion for Israel. It tells of a Savior who suffers for the world, and it asks us to live and act compassionately.

Reflect on what the Scripture says about **compassion**.

*"Even in darkness light dawns for the upright, for those who are gracious and compassionate and righteous."*

—Psalm 112:4 NIV

*"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience."*

—Colossians 3:12 NIV

*"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."*

—Galatians 6:2 NIV

*"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us all in our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God."*

—2 Corinthians 1:3–4 NIV

*"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as Christ God forgave you."*

—Ephesians 4:32 NIV

*"Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn."*

—Romans 12:15 NIV

*"Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble."*

—1 Peter 3:8 NIV

*"Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms."*

—1 Peter 4:10 NIV

*"This is what the LORD Almighty said: 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.'"*

—Zechariah 7:9–10 NIV

*"Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in 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 of one mind."*

—Philippians 2:1–2 NIV

## THE FINGERPRINT OF ISOLATION

Shame leaves people feeling isolated. In the early years of my ministry, I would sit across from a client at the pregnancy care center and see a beautiful, promising young woman. I would be sure to compliment and encourage her. I would say, *"You are a beautiful, capable woman."* Yet as I came alongside so many women and they unraveled their shame, they would tell me that when they are told they are pretty they think, *"Oh, I have you fooled!"* As for being smart or capable, they think, *"If she really knew me, she would know that isn't true."*

Someone with a core of shame is constantly on guard to keep people out. Such people can be nice or funny, smart, accomplished, or any number of positive things. But they always have the feeling that they are acting, that they will be found out someday. When someone comes too close, their defensive systems go into play. *"I must keep people from seeing the real me at all cost!"* The result of this is a pervasive sense of isolation. After all, the cry of a woman's heart is to be known and to be loved and accepted in that knowing. But shame says, *"If they knew you, really knew you, they would recoil and reject you."* And if rejection comes in the normal course of life (because face it, it is a part of life from the time we are little girls), it only reinforces that lie. Because of shame, the rejection is loaded with evidence that you are fundamentally flawed. The rejector may be a jerk who is acting badly, but in your heart, the rejection proves these lies about you. And this feeling is so uncomfortable to see, much less feel, that you close yourself off further, putting another layer of paint and glitter on the mask you must wear to cover up the real you. Because of these lies, women who love God and who are good *"church ladies"* often feel alone and fearful, and they loathe themselves.

I think of Sharon. She was fifty-seven. She was well dressed and put together. She was the assistant to the president of a large bank. She was a Christian of many years, having all the right phrases and Bible quotes to back it up. Sharon was in the audience at the back of the crowd when I was speaking to a packed room at a Focus on the Family conference about this subject. As I got into my speech, she shrank visibly, her rigid shoulders hunching and her head dropping low. Toward the end, silent sobs went through her like tremors before an earthquake. I was the only one who could see her, and I prayed that she could get through the rest of the talk without the earthquake of emotions leveling her. I had exposed the very fears she had kept locked up tight for all those years. I had put words to something she thought was well hidden. I had seen behind the well-cultivated mask. Over the next year, she and I worked together over the phone. Her past was heartbreaking, and the lies it had spawned in her soul were like chains wrapped around her heart, locked with a rigid control. As we dismantled the shame link by link, she changed. Joy replaced wariness. She began to recognize and call





out the lies herself. It is a lifetime journey. It isn't "fixed" after one year. But she now has the tools to recognize and challenge the lies with truth

I have a dear friend who said it so well. Terri grew up in rejection and abuse. It continued in her adulthood with an abusive husband and the deaths of her two daughters. She is funny and smart. She is well loved by most everyone who knows her. She is a professional woman who is highly respected in her profession. She loves the Lord with all her heart. When we were talking, she made this statement: *"In any group of women, I never feel like I fit. I always feel like I am on the outside, different and unacceptable."* My heart hurts for her. Because of shame, she can't see the Truth.

What is the Truth? The Truth is, we now belong to Jesus. We are restored to our Father in heaven through Christ, and we **BELONG**. We are loved and accepted by the Creator of the universe! We are a part of the family of Christ.

Reflect on what the Scripture says about your **identity**.

*"Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."*

—John 1:12 NIV

*"And, 'I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.'"*

—2 Corinthians 6:18 NIV

*"God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure."*

—Ephesians 1:5 NLT

*"All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it."*

—1 Corinthians 12:27 NLT

*"But you are not like that, for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light."*

—1 Peter 2:9 NLT

## THE FINGERPRINT OF CONTROL

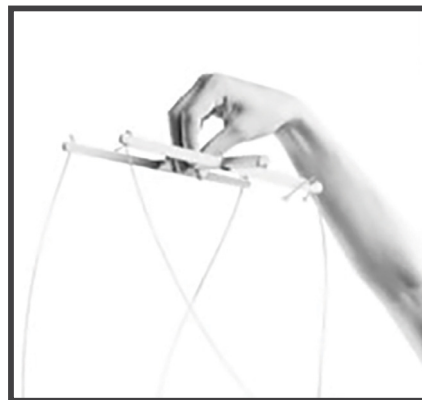
We all have met her. Maybe we are her. The woman we would describe as a control freak. She always knows what is best for her life—and ours. She is a paragon of Christian activity. Busy, busy, busy. Her life seems so "together." She has the answers to your life's issues and gives advice freely. When she is working on a group project, her way is the only way. But her need to control is not just about the physical. It is about what those in her circle should think, should feel, should be.

While she is often the leader of organizations, this commentary isn't about leadership in general. Leaders make decisions and steer the organization in the right direction. A good leader isn't a controller. She is an inspirer. Even people who disagree with a good leader still feel valued. A controller turns leadership into dictatorship. As a Christian, she says all the right Christian words, and she diligently has her devotional time. Her faith is under control also. But what she doesn't realize is the control she desperately craves is actually the **OPPOSITE** of faith.

Control serves a purpose for the controller. It keeps fear at bay. It offers an illusion that she can keep life safe, painless, and running smoothly—both her life and the lives of those in her inner circle. But to keep life painless and smooth, she needs others to do everything her way! This comes at a high cost. Relationships suffer as people resent her. Bridges are burned. People don't feel safe to be "themselves" around her because they will never get it right. Children grow up feeling like they never measure up—that they were not good enough! Her relationship with God is also defined by her control. She strives to prove herself worthy of being a Christian. A truly open, intimate relationship with God isn't possible for her because it's too unpredictable. And with shame at her core, if she did open up to Him, she knows He will find her wanting and disgusting. The very thing the controller wants—harmony, peace, safety, predictability, and love—is what she drives away. When things spin out of control, she is left spiritually, emotionally, and physically exhausted.

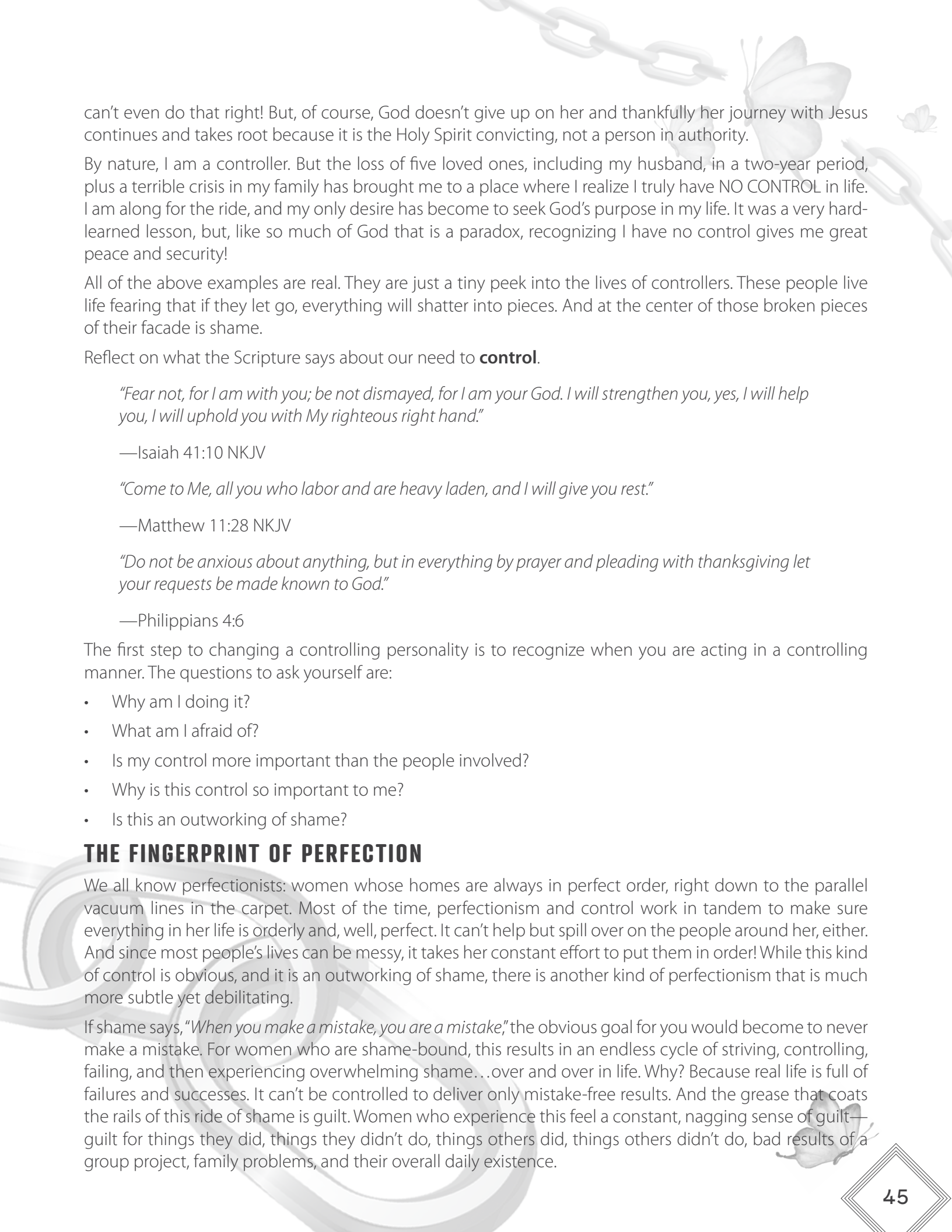
When all is stripped away, control serves the same purpose as contempt. It keeps people from seeing the shame. It keeps people from discovering that the controller feels "fundamentally flawed." It is hard to see into this type of woman because she is so competent and "together." But think about it: Control is about appearance management. Everything has to look and be perfect. What happens when things spin out of control (which is inevitable in life)? It triggers the controller's feelings of shame. It whispers in their ear the fear that they are a phony, inadequate, a mistake. The small voice she keeps at bay most of the time starts murmuring its lies. The sad result of this is often that the controller goes into hyperdrive. Consider these true-life scenarios.

A Christian mom has managed to get her child through toddlerhood and into the teen years, and for the most part it went smoothly. She was always involved in her child's school life, friends, and activities. Then her daughter entered puberty. She started pulling away and voicing thoughts that were contradictory to the family's beliefs. Mom, in a panic, went into shaming mode with battles that included reminding her how ungrateful her daughter was, how wrong she was to believe those ideas, how she was making the family look bad, how she could even think such a thing, and more! Fearing she was losing her daughter, the mom engaged in behavior that actually drove her daughter away.



A church lady is on a committee, and people are not wanting to do things her way, so she pushes harder and demands more. The end result is that people give in to her demands, but they don't want to be around her. She reads this as rejection, which sets up the shame response. Instead of looking inward and asking herself why these things are happening, she blames others. And her grip becomes more viselike. Here's the sad thing: This woman really wants to help, to make a difference, and to be involved. Shame keeps her from experiencing the joy and fruit of being in ministry with other women because of her need to control.

A caring Christian woman takes a single mom with some serious issues into her home and family. The young woman has accepted Christ and is trying to live a clean and sober life. The Christian woman sets rigid rules and expectations. The young mom, who is so shame-bound she oozes it, begins the relationship by trying to please. But ultimately, she fails, and it is brought to her attention daily. Of course, that failure screams that she is a flawed human being. The host mom starts to panic. She had written a script in her mind of how this relationship should unfold. She would rescue the young woman, she would grow and change under the woman's care, and then she would move on to a productive, happy life. But the young woman is not following the script written for her. The response of the hostess is to clamp down with more control. In the end, the young woman rejects the host family and gives up on her Christianity because she



can't even do that right! But, of course, God doesn't give up on her and thankfully her journey with Jesus continues and takes root because it is the Holy Spirit convicting, not a person in authority.

By nature, I am a controller. But the loss of five loved ones, including my husband, in a two-year period, plus a terrible crisis in my family has brought me to a place where I realize I truly have NO CONTROL in life. I am along for the ride, and my only desire has become to seek God's purpose in my life. It was a very hard-learned lesson, but, like so much of God that is a paradox, recognizing I have no control gives me great peace and security!

All of the above examples are real. They are just a tiny peek into the lives of controllers. These people live life fearing that if they let go, everything will shatter into pieces. And at the center of those broken pieces of their facade is shame.

Reflect on what the Scripture says about our need to **control**.

*"Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand."*

—Isaiah 41:10 NKJV

*"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."*

—Matthew 11:28 NKJV

*"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and pleading with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."*

—Philippians 4:6

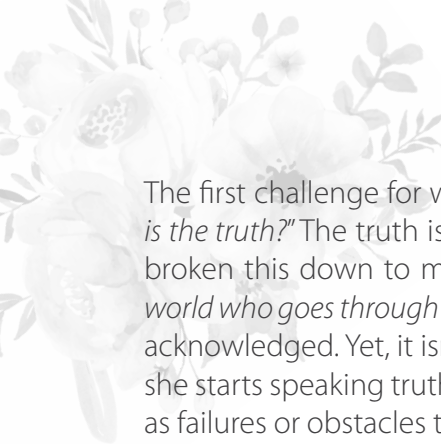
The first step to changing a controlling personality is to recognize when you are acting in a controlling manner. The questions to ask yourself are:

- Why am I doing it?
- What am I afraid of?
- Is my control more important than the people involved?
- Why is this control so important to me?
- Is this an outworking of shame?

## THE FINGERPRINT OF PERFECTION

We all know perfectionists: women whose homes are always in perfect order, right down to the parallel vacuum lines in the carpet. Most of the time, perfectionism and control work in tandem to make sure everything in her life is orderly and, well, perfect. It can't help but spill over on the people around her, either. And since most people's lives can be messy, it takes her constant effort to put them in order! While this kind of control is obvious, and it is an outworking of shame, there is another kind of perfectionism that is much more subtle yet debilitating.

If shame says, *"When you make a mistake, you are a mistake,"* the obvious goal for you would become to never make a mistake. For women who are shame-bound, this results in an endless cycle of striving, controlling, failing, and then experiencing overwhelming shame...over and over in life. Why? Because real life is full of failures and successes. It can't be controlled to deliver only mistake-free results. And the grease that coats the rails of this ride of shame is guilt. Women who experience this feel a constant, nagging sense of guilt—guilt for things they did, things they didn't do, things others did, things others didn't do, bad results of a group project, family problems, and their overall daily existence.



The first challenge for women who live on this roller coaster of shame is to recognize it and to ask, “*What is the truth?*” The truth is, it is impossible to go through life without making mistakes. Period! When I have broken this down to many women, my next question is, “*So, you are striving to be the only woman in the world who goes through life mistake free?*” When I put things this way, the ridiculousness of this expectation is acknowledged. Yet, it isn’t the cognitive acknowledgment that changes a woman. Change happens when she starts speaking truth to that lie in the midst of the battle. The truth is, God doesn’t view our weaknesses as failures or obstacles to closeness with Him; He sees them as opportunities to pour in His love, Truth, and growth as we become honest with Him!

The saddest part of this perfection mindset is that not only do women—good Christian women—feel like they are failures, but they also feel like they have “let God down.” This may not be a conscious thought, but it is there, in the back of their minds, waiting to be brought out into the Light. How at odds this is with grace! How ridiculous it is to think that we can let the Creator of the universe down. The truth is, there is **NOTHING** we can do to make God love us more or less. His love is all-encompassing and not dependent on anything we do! He loved us as much when we were in the depths of depravity as He does when we can check off our daily devotions for a week!

In her blog, Kelly Balarie puts it beautifully:

*“I try so hard to ‘do good.’ I try so hard to keep everyone happy. I try so hard to keep things in order, to make others feel good, to do things the right way, to be all that I can be—and to be who others want to see.*

*“I try and I try and I try. But I fail and I fail and I fail. It can be tiring. It leaves me worn, discouraged, and wishing I could be better than—me.*

*“Even worse, I notice that in my pursuit of perfection, I tend to hurt others. I don’t want to do this. But I do.*

*“It is a common day when simple words of feedback turn into living giants of criticism. They come and tower over me with pointed fingers, telling me that I am not ‘good enough,’ ‘talented enough,’ or ‘wise enough’ to handle life. They push me to strive harder and reinforce the idea that I am failing.*

*“Why do we let these giants hold so much power?*

*“When we seek to set our own worth, we fail.*

*“Because only One defines worth.*

*“Any worth found outside of Him is worthless.*

*“God writes the definition of who we are and why we are.*

*“I may seek worth in bills paid, things in order and a happy family, but God gives us His worth. We are worthy because we are His children, loved and fully accepted.*

*“God has a greater glory that is greater than our manufactured version. His glory surpasses expectations. It exceeds our wildest dreams. It is bigger than you or me. But we miss seeing it when our mind is focused on our perfect ways.*

*“His glory unfolds in the midst of weakness. In the place of imperfection. In the land of mess.*

*“God is greater than our perfect. He shows up in our faults. He is present in our weaknesses.*

*“This is where beauty is unveiled, and I want to see it. Christ makes my imperfect—perfect. Perfect in Him, as I trust Him.*

*“I want this better way. Let’s remind ourselves of God’s truth as we move toward Him with authentic, open, and receiving hearts. He will be faithful to touch us in just the right way.”*



Reflect on what the Scripture says about our distorted sense of living a life of perfection. After you do, choose five scriptures that speak to you, then write them on cards and place them around the house in places where you will be constantly reminded of the truth!

*"It is God who arms me with strength, and makes my way perfect."*

—Psalm 18:32 NKJV

*"But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me."*

—2 Corinthians 12:9 NIV

*"Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."*

—Philippians 1:6 NIV; see also Philippians 3:12; 2 Corinthians 7:1

*"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love."*

—1 John 4:18 NIV

*"Because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy."*

—Hebrews 10:14 NIV

*"The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?"*

—Psalm 118:6 NIV

*"The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."*

—Psalm 103:8 NIV

*"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God."*

—Ephesians 2:8 NIV

*"I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well."*

—Psalm 139:14 NIV

*"For I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, 'Fear not, I am the one who helps you.'"*

—Isaiah 41:13 NIV



*"Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."*

—Matthew 11:29 NIV

*"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."*

—Romans 3:23 NIV

## THE FINGERPRINT OF COMPARISON

I remember in the early years of my Christian walk. I was utterly shame-bound, but I would have rejected even the thought of it. Contempt, control, and emotional isolation were the outworkings of shame in my life, yet I had the facade of having it all together. After a period of rebellion, my husband and I started going to church. Where I should have found peace, I found condemnation. Not from other women, though. I found it within myself. I constantly compared myself to other women. Most, I was sure, were spiritually superior to me.

Comparing myself usually left me feeling "less than." So, I tried harder to convince people I was spiritual. I said the right Christian clichés, exuded my contrived "joy of the Lord," and saw devotions as a duty to prove myself. Occasionally I would find someone who would, by comparison, make me look good. Not very often, though. What an exhausting, self-absorbed, phony existence for one who called herself Jesus' beloved. Fortunately, God brought me out of that through His grace and some very painful life experiences!

Through my years of talking with other women, I have found that my experience was not unusual. So many Christian women are shame-bound. Because of this, they are constantly comparing themselves to other Christian women and finding themselves lacking. Someone is always prettier, smarter, holier, kinder, more spiritual, etc., etc., etc.

I remember one woman who came to me for post-abortion counseling. She told me she had stood at the back of the church and looked over all of those women. She could not imagine another one of them having aborted a child. She felt like she was the only one. No matter how hard she tried to be a "better Christian," she felt she never measured up. She was sure all the women in church "had it together." The truth was, one in five women in our pews has had an abortion. Women sit, Sunday after Sunday, hiding their guilt and shame, sure they are alone in their sin.

Comparison and striving to be "like" another Christian woman only result in bondage. You will never be at peace with yourself or with God. The outcome is that you live a lie, fearing that you will be found out. Instead of being more like Jesus, you strive to be more like someone else. Jesus came to set us free, yet we so often choose bondage because of our shame!



Reflect on what the Scripture says about our need to **compare ourselves with others**.

*"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me."*

—Galatians 2:20 emphasis mine

*"But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."*

—1 Samuel 16:7

*"For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God."*

—Colossians 3:3

*"And to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."*

—Ephesians 4:24

*"You are altogether beautiful, my darling; there is no flaw in you."*

—Song of Solomon 4:7

The very concept of Jesus' sacrifice for our salvation, and restoration to our Father in heaven, goes against our need to control, our contempt for others and ourselves, our self-imposed isolation, and our constant comparison. We are called to die to self and let Jesus live in us and through us. Yet all of these actions have one thing in common: **SELF** is at the center. We are always protecting, contriving, and comparing our **SELVES**. It is not freedom—it is bondage! Jesus came to set us free from this!

The good news is that when you identify the lies of shame in your life and apply God's truth to them, these things slowly lose their foothold and are replaced with true joy, peace, and an understanding of your value in Jesus!

