Stop and Count to Nine!

By Dr. David Jeremiah

I’m often asked about the tone of our national discourse. Not since the Civil War, people tell me, has our nation been so divided. Well, I remember the riots of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and I’m not sure how to compare the social temperature of various generations. But I’m as troubled as anyone at today’s angry rhetoric, divisive speech, racial unrest, and cultural division.

I have deep convictions about equality, fairness, charity, love, and sound biblical teaching on issues of holiness. My positions on various topics have been molded over a lifetime of Bible study and personal interaction. But it isn’t enough to have biblical positions. We have to communicate them in a biblical way.

In recent months as I worked on my book, *A Life Beyond Amazing*, I’ve evaluated my life and reactions in terms of nine words found in Galatians 5:22-23—love, joy, peace, compassion, generosity, integrity, self-control, humility, and patience. These traits are the outgrowth of a Spirit-filled life, and they represent nine decisions we must practice if we’re to respond correctly to the pressures of a society coming apart at the seams.
Let me put it in simple terms. In tense moments, we must learn to count to nine.

Traditionally, people are taught to count to ten, but nine will do nicely. When we feel peeved or provoked, let’s pause long enough to remind ourselves of these nine decisions that can give us a life beyond amazing and a personality beyond reproach.

Think of it as a “Countdown to Character” or as a spiritual checklist to click through before you fly off the handle. Ask yourself:

1. **Am I demonstrating God’s love?** Even the most aggravating people in our lives represent souls for whom Christ died, and our approach to them should be layered in charity. They may hold a different set of values than you or I, but they need the same grace we’ve received. If God so loved the world, we should do likewise, empowered by His Spirit within us.

2. **Am I spreading joy?** Since the fruit of the Spirit includes joy, our cheerfulness should never evaporate under any circumstances. Some conversations are more difficult than others and we all go through tough times. But our joy isn’t in our situations but in our Savior, and that enables us to pass along encouragement, even in dark days.

3. **Am I promoting peace?** We must do our best to promote unity in our divided age. It’s not always possible. Jesus said, “Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division” (Luke 12:51). He warned us to expect hatred from the world (John 17:14). But if people are offended, it should be the offense of the cross—not because we are offensive people. When we have the peace of Christ in our
hearts, it flows into our relationships and enters our interactions, making it possible to be peacemakers.

4. **Am I acting with compassion?** Compassionate people connect with the unseen emotions of others, exercising sympathy and empathy, understanding before seeking to be understood. When the Good Samaritan saw his neighbor bruised and bleeding in the ditch, he had compassion on him (Luke 10:33). Nothing more quickly changes our perspective about another than a dose of Christly compassion.

5. **Am I being generous?** The word “generosity” makes us think of money and charitable giving. But benevolent hearts are generous in all things. They train themselves in the generosity of listening, of understanding, of forgiving, and of helping.

6. **Am I exercising integrity?** The other decisions connected with the fruit of the Spirit are anchored by a solid core of integrity, purity, and biblical insight. We can’t change the world by acquiescing to its errors. We must be honest with our words, feeling, facts, and motives; but our honesty shouldn’t come across as acrimony but as integrity.

7. **Am I practicing self-control?** When provoked, it’s the hardest thing in the world to remain calm and collected. Yet the Bible says, “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly” (Proverbs 15:1-2). We must exercise the discipline to think, to ask for advice, and to pray before acting and speaking.

8. **Am I a humble spirit?** Humble people don’t think of themselves as higher or lower than others. They don’t think of themselves as superior or inferior. They just don’t think of themselves very much at all—they consider the other person more. Many of our
discussions become face-saving tirades or contests to get in the last word, but a humble spirit wins the day by rising above the noise with wisdom from above.

9. **Am I patient?** There is short-term patience, which means we don’t easily lose our tempers. And there is long-term patience, which we call perseverance and keeps us going for the long haul. The Spirit of Christ combines both elements, and His words are true in every moment: “By your patience possess your souls” (Luke 21:19).

Nine questions—a litmus test of maturity. This is what is missing from cable news, from pundits and politicians and talking heads and blaring radios. It’s disappeared from university campuses, public rallies, office water coolers, and often from family suppers and Sunday pulpits. Few people on social media stop to count to nine. As a result, we’re finding what it’s like to live in a society devoid of the fruit of the Spirit.

Christ-followers must interact with our culture in a way beyond amazing—pausing long enough to ask ourselves these nine questions and remind ourselves of nine choices we need to make, even in the heat of the moment. Though we don’t always feel like demonstrating the NINE, they will make us wiser in our speech and behavior, with fewer messes to clean up and fewer apologies to make.

NINE is a lot to remember, you say. Well, that’s the problem. We haven’t internalized the fruit of the Spirit as we should, and these traits don’t come as naturally as they could if we simply learned and lived Galatians 5:22-23. Imagine the difference if Christians across America made it a project to memorize those two verses, or at least to
learn the list of these nine traits. What if we meditated and prayed over the NINE frequently? What if we chose to live that way? To talk that way?

That’s the best answer I know to the anger bubbling up in our society right now. We cannot be responsible for what a secular world does, but we are responsible to convey the love of Christ, and His joy, peace, compassion, generosity, integrity, self-control, humility, and patience. We cannot force the world to change, but we can demonstrate a better way.

These NINE provide a template for our attitudes, words, behaviors, and actions. And they also suggest a standard by which to gauge our participation in outside groups, activities, causes, personalities, and movements.

As Christians, we can exert incredible influence in our culture, if we will pause a moment and count to NINE.