

Resources by John Ortberg

*An Ordinary Day with Jesus*  
(curriculum series, with Ruth Haley Barton)

*Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them*  
(book, audio, curriculum)

*God Is Closer Than You Think*  
(book, audio, curriculum)

*If You Want to Walk On Water,  
You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*  
(book, audio, curriculum)

*The Life You've Always Wanted*  
(book, audio, curriculum)

*Living the God Life*

*Love Beyond Reason*

*Old Testament Challenge*  
(curriculum series, with Kevin and Sherry Harney)

[ EXPANDED EDITION ]

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ALWAYS  
WANTED

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for ordinary people

JOHN ORTBERG

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# PREFACE

How do I grow? What does a spiritually mature person even look like? Why does it seem so hard, and go so slowly? Will I ever really be any different?

To paraphrase Lew Smedes: If you have ever been frustrated with what you know of spiritual life, ever wondered if real change is possible, ever felt confused or stuck—you're my kind of person. I wrote this book for you.

The Christian gospel insists that the transformation of the human personality really is possible. Never easy. Rarely quick. But possible. I see it happening in people sometimes—occasionally even in myself.

It begins to happen anytime people become intensely serious about learning from Jesus how to arrange their lives. Wise people across the centuries have devoted themselves to this. But the Way of Jesus needs to be restudied and reapplied to every age and social setting.

This book is an attempt to make some of that wisdom accessible to people who live in a world of freeways and corporate ladders and Nintendo rather than monasteries and deserts. I hope you will take it as an invitation to live Christ's Way, because it is the only invitation that really matters.

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In particular, I want to express a debt of gratitude to Dallas Willard, whose thinking and writing about spiritual formation have had an enormous impact on my life and ministry, as it has on so many others. (In fact, one of my private working titles for this book was *Dallas for Dummies*.) While I wouldn't want to saddle him with any of its deficiencies, much of whatever merit this book has is due to him.

# "WE SHALL MORPH INDEED"

## The Hope of Transformation

Now, with God's help, I shall become myself.

SØREN KIERKEGAARD

I could not quiet that pearly ache in my heart that I  
diagnosed as the cry of home.

PAT CONROY

*I am disappointed with myself. I am disappointed not so much with particular things I have done as with aspects of who I have become. I have a nagging sense that all is not as it should be.*

Some of this disappointment is trivial. I wouldn't have minded getting a more muscular physique. I can't do basic home repairs. So far I haven't shown much financial wizardry.

Some of this disappointment is neurotic. Sometimes I am too concerned about what others think of me, even people I don't know.

Some of this disappointment, I know, is worse than trivial; it is simply the sour fruit of self-absorption. I attend a high school reunion and can't choke back the desire to stand out by looking more attractive or having achieved more impressive accomplishments than my classmates. I speak to someone with whom I want to be charming, and my words come out awkward and pedestrian. I

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am disappointed in my ordinariness. I want to be, in the words of Garrison Keillor, named "Sun-God, King of America, Idol of Millions, Bringer of Fire, The Great Haji, Thun-Dar the Boy Giant."

But some of this disappointment in myself runs deeper. When I look in on my

children as they sleep at night, I think of the kind of father I want to be. I want to create moments of magic, I want them to remember laughing until the tears flow, I want to read to them and make the books come alive so they love to read, I want to have slow, sweet talks with them as they're getting ready to close their eyes, I want to sing them awake in the morning. I want to chase fireflies with them, teach them to play tennis, have food fights, and hold them and pray for them in a way that makes them feel cherished.

I look in on them as they sleep at night, and I remember how the day really went: I remember how they were trapped in a fight over checkers and I walked out of the room because I didn't want to spend the energy needed to teach them how to resolve conflict. I remember how my daughter spilled cherry punch at dinner and I yelled at her about being careful as if she'd revealed some deep character flaw; I yelled at her even though I spill things all the time and no one yells at me; I yelled at her—to tell the truth—simply because I'm big and she's little and I can get away with it. And then I saw that look of hurt and confusion in her eyes, and I knew there was a tiny wound on her heart that I had put there, and I wished I could have taken those sixty seconds back. I remember how at night I didn't have slow, sweet talks, but merely rushed the children to bed so I could have more time to myself. I'm disappointed.

And it's not just my life as a father. I am disappointed also for my life as a husband, friend, neighbor, and human being in general. I think of the day I was born, when I carried the gift of promise, the gift given to all babies. I think of that little baby and what might have been: the ways I might have developed mind and body and spirit, the thoughts I might have had, the joy I might have created.

I am disappointed that I still love God so little and sin so much. I always had the idea as a child that adults were pretty much the people they wanted to be. Yet the truth is, I am embarrassingly sinful. I am capable of dismaying amounts of jealousy if someone succeeds more visibly than I do. I am disappointed at my capacity to be small and petty. I cannot pray for very long without my mind drifting into a fantasy of angry revenge over some past slight I thought I had long since forgiven or some grandiose fantasy of achievement. I can convince people I'm busy and productive and yet waste large amounts of time watching television.

These are just some of the disappointments. I have other ones, darker ones, that I'm not ready to commit to paper. The truth is, even to write these words is a little misleading, because it makes me sound more sensitive to my fallenness than I really am. Sometimes, although I am aware of how far I fall short, it doesn't even bother me very much. And I am disappointed at my lack of disappointment.

Where does this disappointment come from? A common answer in our day is that it is a lack of self-esteem, a failure to accept oneself. That may be part of the answer, but it is not the whole of it, not by a long shot. The older and wiser answer is that the feeling of disappointment is not the problem, but a reflection of a deeper problem—my failure to be the person God had in mind when he created me. It is the "pearly ache" in my heart to be at home with the Father.

### Universal Disappointment

One of the most profound statements I have heard about the human condition was one I first encountered when I was only five years old. It was spoken by my hero, Popeye the Sailor Man. When he was frustrated or wasn't sure what to do or felt inadequate, Popeye would simply say, "I yam what I yam."

Popeye was not a sophisticated guy. He had never been in therapy and was woefully out of touch with his shadow self and his inner child. He did not have much education as far as we know. He knew who he was: a simple, sea-faring, pipe-smoking, Olive Oyl-loving

**I am in a state of dis-appointment. I am missing the life that I was appointed by God to live.**

sailor man, and he wouldn't pretend to be anything else. He "owned his story," as Lewis Smedes puts it. "I yam what I-yam."

But I always thought there was a note of sadness in Popeye's expression. It was generally offered as an explanation of his shortcomings. It does not anticipate much growth or change. It doesn't leave him much

of a shot at getting to be what he yam not. "Don't get your hopes up," he seemed to say. "Don't expect too much. I yam what I yam—and [he would add in his bleakest moments] that's all that I yam."

That is the sad cry of the human race. You have said those words, in your own way, and so have I. This is the struggle between disappointment and hope.

### **Dis-appointing God**

The word itself is apt: I am in a state of dis-appointment. I am missing the life that I was appointed by God to live—missing my calling. And I have dis-appointed God. I have removed him from the central role he longs to play in my life; I have refused to "let God be God" and have appointed myself in his place. I yam what I yam.

But that's not all that I am. I am called to become the person God had in mind when he originally designed me. This is what is behind Kierkegaard's wonderful prayer, "And now Lord, with your help I shall become myself." This book is about spiritual growth. It is about that holy and mysterious process described by the apostle Paul when he said he was "in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you." The goal of such growth is to live as if Jesus held unhindered sway over our bodies. Of course, it is still *we* doing the living. We are called by God to live as our uniquely created selves—our temperament, our gene pool, our history. But to grow spiritually means to live increasingly as Jesus would in our unique place—to perceive what Jesus would perceive if he looked through our eyes, to think what he would think, to feel what he would feel, and therefore to do what he would do.

~~X~~ The goal of this book is to help us to grow spiritually. But it is hard to write about spiritual formation in a way that captures the urgency of the subject. Too often people think about their "spiritual lives" as just one more aspect of their existence, alongside and largely separate from their "financial lives" or their "vocational lives." Periodically they may try to "get their spiritual lives together" by praying more regularly or trying to master another spiritual discipline. It is the religious equivalent of going on a diet or trying to stick to a budget.

The truth is that the term *spiritual life* is simply a way of referring to one's life—every moment and facet of it—from God's perspective. Another way of saying it is this: God is not interested in your "spiritual life." God is just interested in your life. He intends to redeem it.

### **God's Work of Art**

One of the great works of art in the Western world is Michelangelo's *Pietà*, a marble statue of an anguished Mary holding the crucified Christ. Some years ago a fanatic nationalist rushed upon the masterpiece and began smashing it with a sledgehammer. Although the damage was significant, Vatican artists were able to restore the statue to near-perfect condition.

You were created to be a masterpiece of God. Paul writes, "For we are God's *poiēma*"—a word that can mean God's "workmanship," or even God's "work of art." God made you to know oneness with him and with other human beings. God made you to be co-regent with him—to "fill the earth and subdue it," to "have dominion" over creation under his reign and with his help. It is the goodness of God's work in creating us that makes our fallenness so tragic. This is why my disappointment in myself runs so deep.

But God is determined to overcome the defacing of his image in us. His plan is not simply to repair *most* of our brokenness. He wants to make us new creatures. So the story of the human race is not just one of universal disappointment, but one of inextinguishable hope.

### **Inextinguishable Hope and the Gospel**

Frederick Buechner once wrote that every age has produced fairy tales. Something inside us believes, or wants to believe, that the world as we know it is not the whole story. We long for the re-enchancement of reality. We hope that death is not the end, that the universe is something more than an enclosed terrarium. So we keep spinning and repeating stories that hold the promise of another world.

But these stories don't simply demand that another world exists. A common feature of fairy tales is that the enchanted world is not far away. You step into a wardrobe and you're in Narnia. You walk through a forest and stumble on a cottage with seven dwarfs. This other world turns out to be far closer than you thought.

In fact, the stories that endure are the ones that most deeply touch this longing inside us. Buechner quotes J. R. R. Tolkien:

It is the mark of the good fairy-story, of the higher or more complete kind, that however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to the child or man that hears it, when the "turn" comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art.

Furthermore, fairy tales are not just stories about the transformation of the world around us. They are usually about the transformation of the central characters: frogs becoming princes, ugly ducklings becoming swans, wooden marionettes becoming real boys. George MacDonald gives to his hero, Curdie, the magical gift of being able to tell by the touch of someone's hand what he or she is turning into.

These are all features, Buechner says, that the gospel has in common with fairy tales, with this one great difference: The gospel is true.

Jesus' announcement of the gospel is simply the announcement of the existence and availability of another dimension of existence,

another world. "The kingdom of God has come near," he said. "Repent, and believe in the good news." The Good News—the word we translate "gospel"—is that this fallen world as we know it is not the whole story. There is another realm. It is as real as the chair I sit in and the book you read.

These words of Jesus announce the great "turn" in the history of the world. The lid is off the terrarium. Anytime someone heard Jesus say them—really heard them—these words would bring a catch of the breath, a beating and uplifting of the heart, and sometimes tears. They still do.

The good news is especially that this world—the kingdom of God—is closer than you think. It is available to ordinary men and women. It is available to people who have never thought of themselves as religious or spiritual. It is available to you. You can live in it—now.

This means in part that your story is the story of transformation. You will not always be as you are now; the day is coming when you will be something incomparably better—or worse.

C. S. Lewis expressed that hope this way:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. . . . There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.

**The story of the human race is not just one of universal disappointment, but one of inextinguishable hope.**

This is why Jesus came. This is what spiritual life is about. This is your calling—to become what Lewis calls an "everlasting splendor."

### The Need to "Turn Aside"

God holds out the possibility of transformation. One day when the human race had not heard a word of hope for a long time, a man named Moses walked past a shrub. He had seen it before, perhaps a hundred times. Only this time it was different. This time the "turn" comes; this time the wardrobe opens into Narnia; this time the bush is on fire with the presence of God.

And Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." Everything turned on Moses' being willing to "turn aside"—to interrupt his daily routine to pay attention to the presence of God. He didn't have to. He could have looked the other way, as many of us would. He would have just missed the Exodus, the people of Israel, his calling, the reason for his existence. He would have missed knowing God.

**Moses had seen the shrub before, perhaps a hundred times. Only this time it was different.**

But he didn't miss it. He stopped. He "turned aside."

God said he wanted to begin a new community of human existence, and he wanted Moses to lead it. He wanted Moses to go to Pharaoh, the commander-in-chief

of a superpower, and tell him that his vast Israelite labor force is no longer available.

But God's sense of timing seemed strange to Moses. Forty years ago maybe—forty years ago he was young and strong and the product of the greatest education the advanced civilization of Egypt could produce. Forty years ago he had powerful connections and high hopes. But now he was a nobody, an anonymous shepherd in a forgotten desert, rejected by his own people and a fugitive from the Egyptians.

"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?" Moses asked. "Nobody knows me. I am slow of speech and slow of tongue. I am disappointed in myself. I yam what I yam."

God said to Moses what he has said to you and me and millions of other Moseses: "I know all about that. It doesn't really matter much. For *I* will be with you. Your guilt and your inadequacies are no longer the ultimate truth about you. *You are what you are—but that's not all that you are. You are what you are, but you are not yet what you will be.* I will be with you."

To which Moses responded, logically enough: "Who are you? What if I go to the people and tell them the God of our fathers has sent me, and they ask me his name—what should I tell them?"

And God answered: "I am what I am." God wanted to be known intimately, by name. This same God had already been active in human history, ready to transform anyone then or now who is willing to turn aside before a burning bush: "I am the God of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebekah; I am the God who cares for my people. I have seen the misery of my children when they thought I was not looking. I have heard their groans when they thought I was not listening. I am the God who saw you in the reeds when you were hidden, in the desert when you fled as a fugitive." For this is the God who hides in burning bushes and speaks in a still small voice.

"Get your hopes up!" God says. "You know me. I yam what I yam."

### Transformation the Goal

A few years ago, the dominant interest of six-year-olds in the United States was a group of teenage superheroes called the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers. The shows were an unlikely hit—originally produced on a very low budget in Japan, then badly dubbed into English.

The key to the show's appeal was the characters' ability to "morph." Ordinarily they were normal adolescents, but as needed they could access a power beyond themselves to become martial arts heroes for justice. Their rallying cry in moments of crisis was "It's morphing time!" and they would be transformed with the ability to do extraordinary things.

The show became such a huge hit that the term *morph* has begun creeping into magazine articles and everyday conversations

and may become part of our permanent vocabulary. It became a standard phrase around our house if someone was in need of serious attitude adjustment: "It's morphing time."

Of course, it is not just six-year-olds who want to morph. The desire for transformation lies deep in every human heart. This is why people enter therapy, join health clubs, get into recovery groups, read self-help books, attend motivational seminars, and make New Year's resolutions. The possibility of transformation is

The possibility of transformation is the essence of hope.

the essence of hope. Psychologist Aaron Beck says that the single belief most toxic to a relationship is the belief that the other person cannot change.

This little word *morph* has a long history. It actually comes from one of the richest Greek words in the New Testament, and in

a sense this little word is the foundation of this whole book. *Morphoo* means "the inward and real formation of the essential nature of a person." It was the term used to describe the formation and growth of an embryo in a mother's body.

Paul used this word in his letter to the Galatians: "... until Christ is *formed* in you." He agonized until Christ should be born in those people, until they should express his character and goodness in their whole being. Paul said they—like us—are in a kind of spiritual gestation process. We are pregnant with possibilities of spiritual growth and moral beauty so great that they cannot be adequately described as anything less than the formation of Christ in our very lives.

Paul used another form of this word when he told the Christians in Rome that God had predestined them to be "conformed to the image of his Son." This word, *summorphizo*, means to have the same form as another, to shape a thing into a durable likeness. Spiritual growth is a molding process: We are to be to Christ as an image is to the original.

Still another form of the word appears in Romans when Paul says we are not to be conformed to the world around us but "*transformed* by the renewing of your minds." This word is *metamorphoo*,

from which comes the English word *metamorphosis*. A creeping caterpillar is transformed into a soaring butterfly—yet as the children of God we are to undergo a change that makes that one barely noticeable.

When morphing happens, I don't just *do* the things Jesus would have done; I find myself *wanting* to do them. They appeal to me. They make sense. I don't just go around trying to do right things; I *become* the right sort of person.

These are audacious statements. Ordinary people can receive power for extraordinary change. It's morphing time, Paul says.

To help people remember this, I developed a little liturgy at a church I served. I would say to the congregation, "It's morphing time." They would reply, "We shall morph indeed."

The primary goal of spiritual life is human transformation. It is not making sure people know where they're going after they die, or helping them have a richer interior life, or seeing that they have lots of information about the Bible, although these can be good things. Let's put first things first. The first goal of spiritual life is the reclamation of the human race. It's morphing time.

Not only that, but this goal can be pursued full-time. For a long time in my own life a very bad thing happened: I had reduced my "tools for spiritual growth" to a few activities such as prayer and Bible study or a few periods of the day called a quiet time. I took an embarrassingly long time to learn that every moment of my life is an opportunity to learn from God how to live like Jesus, how to live in the kingdom of God. I had to discover that there are practical, concrete ways to help me "turn aside." Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote:

Earth's crammed with Heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God,  
But only he who sees takes off his shoes—  
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.

The purpose of this book is to help you learn how to use every moment, every activity of life, for morphing purposes.

### A Case Study: The Morphing of Mabel

It can be helpful to see how God brings about transformation in the lives of ordinary people, so I would like to introduce you to a friend of a friend of mine. Her name is Mabel. This is what my friend, Tom Schmidt, wrote:

"The state-run convalescent hospital is not a pleasant place. It is large, understaffed, and overfilled with senile and helpless and lonely people who are waiting to die. On the brightest of days it seems dark inside, and it smells of sickness and stale urine. I went there once or twice a week for four years, but I never wanted to go there, and I always left with a sense of relief. It is not the kind of place one gets used to.

"On this particular day I was walking in a hallway that I had not visited before, looking in vain for a few who were alive enough to receive a flower and a few words of encouragement. This hallway seemed to contain some of the worst cases, strapped onto carts or into wheelchairs and looking completely helpless.

"As I neared the end of this hallway, I saw an old woman strapped up in a wheelchair. Her face was an absolute horror. The empty stare and white pupils of her eyes told me that she was blind. The large hearing aid over one ear told me that she was almost deaf. One side of her face was being eaten by cancer. There was a discolored and running sore covering part of one cheek, and it had pushed her nose to one side, dropped one eye, and distorted her jaw so that what should have been the corner of her mouth was the bottom of her mouth. As a consequence, she drooled constantly. I was told later that when new nurses arrived, the supervisors would send them to feed this woman, thinking that if they could stand this sight they could stand anything in the building. I also learned later that this woman was eighty-nine years old and *that she had been here, bedridden, blind, nearly deaf, and alone, for twenty-five years.* This was Mabel.

"I don't know why I spoke to her—she looked less likely to respond than most of the people I saw in that hallway. But I put a

flower in her hand and said, 'Here is a flower for you. Happy Mother's Day.' She held the flower up to her face and tried to smell it, and then she spoke. And much to my surprise, her words, although somewhat garbled because of her deformity, were obviously produced by a clear mind. She said, 'Thank you. It's lovely. But can I give it to someone else? I can't see it, you know, I'm blind.'

"I said, 'Of course,' and I pushed her in her chair back down the hallway to a place where I thought I could find some alert patients. I found one, and I stopped the chair. Mabel held out the flower and said, 'Here, this is from Jesus.'

"That was when it began to dawn on me that this was not an ordinary human being. Later I wheeled her back to her room and learned more about her history. She had grown up on a small farm that she managed with only her mother until her mother died. Then she ran the farm alone until 1950 when her blindness and sickness sent her to the convalescent hospital. For twenty-five years she got weaker and sicker, with constant headaches, backaches, and stomachaches, and then the cancer came too. Her three roommates were all human vegetables who screamed occasionally but never talked. They often soiled their bedclothes, and because the hospital was understaffed, especially on Sundays when I usually visited, the stench was often overpowering.

"Mabel and I became friends over the next few weeks, and I went to see her once or twice a week for the next three years. Her first words to me were usually an offer of hard candy from a tissue box near her bed. Some days I would read to her from the Bible, and often when I would pause she would continue reciting the passage from memory, word-for-word. On other days I would take a book of hymns and sing with her, and she would know all the words of the old songs. For Mabel, these were not merely exercises in memory. She would often stop in mid-hymn and make a brief comment about lyrics she considered particularly relevant to her own situation. I never heard her speak of loneliness or pain except in the stress she placed on certain lines in certain hymns.

"It was not many weeks before I turned from a sense that I was being helpful to a sense of wonder, and I would go to her with a pen and paper to write down the things she would say. . . .

"During one hectic week of final exams I was frustrated because my mind seemed to be pulled in ten directions at once with all of the things that I had to think about. The question occurred to me, 'What does Mabel have to think about—hour after hour, day after day, week after week, not even able to know if it's day or night?' So I went to her and asked, 'Mabel, what do you think about when you lie here?'

"And she said, 'I think about my Jesus.'

"I sat there, and thought for a moment about the difficulty, for me, of thinking about Jesus for even five minutes, and I asked, 'What do you think about Jesus?' She replied slowly and deliberately as I wrote . . . :

I think about how good he's been to me. He's been awfully good to me in my life, you know. . . . I'm one of those kind who's mostly satisfied. . . . Lots of folks wouldn't care much for what I think. Lots of folks would think I'm kind of old-fashioned. But I don't care. I'd rather have Jesus. He's all the world to me.

"And then Mabel began to sing an old hymn:

Jesus is all the world to me,  
My life, my joy, my all.  
He is my strength from day to day,  
Without him I would fall.  
When I am sad, to him I go,  
No other one can cheer me so.  
When I am sad He makes me glad.  
He's my friend.

"This is not fiction. Incredible as it may seem, a human being really lived like this. I know. I knew her. *How could she do it?* Sec-

onds ticked and minutes crawled, and so did days and weeks and months and years of pain without human company and without an explanation of why it was all happening—and she lay there and sang hymns. *How could she do it?*

"The answer, I think, is that Mabel had something that you and I don't have much of. She had power. Lying there in that bed, unable to move, unable to see, unable to hear, unable to talk to anyone, she had incredible power."

Here was an ordinary human being who received supernatural power to do extraordinary things. Her entire life consisted of following Jesus as best she could in her situation: patient endurance of suffering, solitude, prayer, meditation on Scripture, worship, fellowship when it was possible, giving when she had a flower or a piece of candy to offer.

Imagine being in her condition and saying, "I think about how good he's been to me. He's been awfully good to me in my life, you know. . . . I'm one of those kind who's mostly satisfied." This is the Twenty-third Psalm come to life: "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want."

For anyone who really saw Mabel—who was willing to "turn aside"—a hospital bed became a burning bush; a place where this ordinary and pain-filled world was visited by the presence of God. When others saw the life in that hospital bed, they wanted to take off their shoes. The lid was off the terrarium. Then the turn came, with a catch of the breath, and a beating of the heart, and tears. They were standing on holy ground.

Do you believe such a life is possible for an ordinary human being? Do you believe it is possible for you? This is promised in the gospel—the Good News proclaimed by Jesus: "The kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." The good news as Jesus preached it is that now it is possible for ordinary men and women to live in the

Here was an ordinary human being who received supernatural power to do extraordinary things.

"WE SHALL MORPH INDEED"

presence and under the power of God. The good news as Jesus preached it is not about the minimal entrance requirements for getting into heaven when you die. It is about the glorious redemption of human life—your life.

It's morphing time.

# SURPRISED BY CHANGE

**The Goal of Spiritual Life**

If you are weary of some sleepy form of devotion,  
probably God is as weary of it as you are.

FRANK LAUBACH

"Spirituality" wrongly understood or pursued is a major  
source of human misery and rebellion against God.

DALLAS WILLARD

## **The Man Who Never Changed**

Hank, as we'll call him, was a cranky guy. He did not smile easily, and when he did, the smile often had a cruel edge to it, coming at someone's expense. He had a knack for discovering islands of bad news in oceans of happiness. He would always find a cloud where others saw a silver lining.

Hank rarely affirmed anyone. He operated on the assumption that if you compliment someone, it might lead to a swelled head, so he worked to make sure everyone stayed humble. His was a ministry of cranial downsizing.

His native tongue was complaint. He carried judgment and disapproval the way a prisoner carries a ball and chain. Although he went to church his whole life, he was never unshackled.

A deacon in the church asked him one day, "Hank, are you happy?"

Hank paused to reflect, then replied without smiling, "Yeah."

"Well, tell your face," the deacon said. But so far as anybody knows, Hank's face never did find out about it.

Occasionally, Hank's joylessness produced unintended joy for others.

There was a period of time when his primary complaints centered around the music in the church. "It's too loud!" Hank protested—to the staff, the deacons, the ushers, and eventually the innocent visitors to the church.

We finally had to take Hank aside and explain that complaining to complete strangers was not appropriate and he would have to restrict his laments to a circle of intimate friends. And that was the end of it. So we thought.

A few weeks later, a secretary buzzed me on the intercom to say that an agent from OSHA—the Occupational Safety and Health Administration—was here to see me. "I'm here to check out a complaint," he said. As I tried to figure out who on the staff would have called OSHA over a church problem, he began to talk about decibel levels at airports and rock concerts.

"Excuse me," I said, "are you sure this was someone on the church staff that called?"

"No," he explained. "If anyone calls—whether or not they work here—we're obligated to investigate."

Suddenly the light dawned: Hank had called OSHA and said, "The music at my church is too loud." And they sent a federal agent to check it out.

By this time the rest of the staff had gathered in my office to see the man from OSHA.

"We don't mean to make light of this," I told him, "but nothing like this has ever happened around here before."

"Don't apologize," he said. "Do you have any idea how much ridicule I've faced around my office since everyone discovered I was going out to bust a church?"

Sometimes Hank's joylessness ended in comedy, but more often it produced sadness. His children did not know him. His son had a wonderful story about how he met his wife at a dance, but he never told his father because Hank did not approve of dancing.

Hank could not effectively love his wife or his children or people outside his family. He was easily irritated. He had little use for the poor, and a casual contempt for those whose accents or skin pigment differed from his own. Whatever capacity he once might have had for joy or wonder or gratitude atrophied. He critiqued and judged and complained, and his soul got a little smaller each year.

### Do We Expect Transformation?

Hank was not changing. He was once a cranky young guy, and he grew up to be a cranky old man. But even more troubling than his lack of change was the fact that *nobody was surprised by it*. It was as if everyone simply expected that his soul would remain withered and sour year after year, decade after decade. No one seemed bothered by the condition. It was not an anomaly that caused head-scratching bewilderment. No church consultants were called in. No emergency meetings were held to probe the strange case of this person who followed the church's general guidelines for spiritual life and yet was nontransformed.

The church staff did have some expectations. We expected that Hank would affirm certain religious beliefs. We expected that he would attend services, read the Bible, support the church financially, pray regularly, and avoid certain sins. But here's what we didn't expect: *We didn't expect that he would progressively become the way Jesus would be if he were in Hank's place. We didn't assume that each year would find him a more compassionate, joyful, gracious, winsome personality. We didn't anticipate that he was on the way to becoming a source of delight and courtesy who overflowed with "rivers of living water."* So we were not shocked when it didn't happen. We would have been surprised if it did!

Most of us want to be changed, to become more like Christ. But is it happening? According to a Gallup poll, nine of ten Americans

say they pray daily, and 84 million Americans—almost a third of the population—say they have made a personal commitment to

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Christ as Savior. But as William Iverson writes, "A pound of meat would surely be affected by a quarter pound of salt. If this is real Christianity, the 'salt of the earth,' where is the effect of which Jesus spoke?"

Because by and large we do not expect people to experience ongoing transformation, we are not led to question whether perhaps the standard prescriptions for spiritual

growth being given in the church are truly adequate to lead people into a transformed way of life.

I believe we need to say that this state of affairs is simply not acceptable. It is not God's plan for his community. As C. S. Lewis said in another context, we are "like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

In fact, Hank's problem is not just that he is failing to change. His problem—and the problem of all of us who become "far too easily pleased"—is that we may end up changing in ways that leave us worse off than before.

### **The Danger of "Pseudo-Transformation"**

The great danger that arises when we don't experience authentic transformation is that we will settle for what might be called *pseudo-transformation*. We know that as Christians we are called to "come out and be separate," that our faith and spiritual commitment should make us different somehow. But if we are not marked by greater and greater amounts of love and joy, we will inevitably look for substitute ways of distinguishing ourselves from those who are not Christians. This deep pattern is almost inescapable for religious people: If we do not become changed from the inside-out—if we don't morph—we will be tempted to find external methods to sat-

isfy our need to feel that we're different from those outside the faith. If we cannot be transformed, we will settle for being informed or conformed.

### **Boundary-Marker Spirituality**

James Dunn notes that in the first century A.D. a vast amount of rabbinic writing focused on circumcision, dietary laws, and Sabbath keeping. This seems odd, because no devout rabbi would have said these matters were at the heart of the Law. They knew its core: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." So why the focus on these three practices?

The answer involves what might be called "identity" or "boundary markers." Groups have a tendency to be exclusive. Insiders want to separate themselves from outsiders. So they adopt boundary markers. These are highly visible, relatively superficial practices—matters of vocabulary or dress or style—whose purpose is to *distinguish* between those inside a group and those who are outside.

For example, imagine that you were driving through the Haight-Asbury district of San Francisco in the 1960s. If you came to a stoplight and a Volkswagen van pulled up next to you, plastered with peace signs and "Make Love Not War" bumper stickers and driven by a long-haired, tie-dyed, granny-glasses wearer, you would have known you were driving next to a hippie. If it were the 1980s and you were to see a BMW with a driver wearing Gucci shoes, a Rolex watch, and moussed hair and nibbling on brie, you would know you were driving next to a yuppie. Bikers, too, are recognizable by their preference in fashion color (black), fabric (leather), skin ornamentation (tattoo), and beverage of choice ("great taste, less filling"). Farmers and doctors and politicians and rock stars all have their own ways of distinguishing who is in their fraternity or sorority.

With this in mind, the importance of circumcision, dietary laws, and Sabbath keeping in the first century becomes clear. These were the boundary markers; the highly visible, relatively superficial

practices that allowed people to distinguish who was inside and who was outside the family of God. What is worse, the insiders become proud and judgmental toward outsiders. They practiced what might be called a "boundary-oriented approach" to spiritual life: Just look at people and you will know who are the sheep and who are the goats. This is pseudo-transformation.

### Spiritual Life Defined by Its Center

With Jesus it was not so. Jesus brought a message that spoke to the deepest longings of the human heart to become not simply conformed to a religious subculture but transformed into "new creatures." Instead of focusing on the boundaries, Jesus focused on the center, the heart of spiritual life. When asked to identify what the law is about, Jesus' response was simply "Love God, love people." He named a fundamentally different way of identifying who are the children of God: "Do they love God, and do they love the people who mean so much to him?"

Jesus' early followers understood this clearly. The apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth about the significance of having many spiritual "markers" but lacking the center: "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing." John put it even more bluntly: "Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love *does not know God*, for God is love."

This is why the religious leaders of Jesus' day so often fought with him about circumcision, dietary laws, and the Sabbath. Jesus was not just disagreeing with them on how to interpret the Law. He was *threatening their very understanding of themselves as the people of God.*

### Boundary Markers in Our Day

The search for identity markers did not die out in the first century. The church I grew up in was a fine church, and I am deeply in its debt, but we also had our own set of markers there. The senior

pastor could have been consumed with pride or resentment, but as long as his preaching was orthodox and the church was growing, his job would probably not be in jeopardy. But if some Sunday morning he had been smoking a cigarette while greeting people after the service, he would not have been around for the evening service. Why? No one at the church would have said that smoking a single Camel was a worse sin than a life consumed with pride and resentment. But for us, cigarette-smoking became an identity marker. It was one of the ways we were able to tell the sheep from the goats.

That is why the marker held an emotional charge far beyond its theological significance. For the pastor to smoke a cigarette would have caused a scandal, not because we were so naive that we thought it an evil thing to do, but because it would have violated an unspoken boundary marker. It would have threatened our sense of identity.

Of course, many beliefs and values will inevitably divide those who choose to follow Christ from those who don't. Jesus himself said he came not "to bring peace, but a sword." But what makes something a boundary marker is its being seized upon by the group as an opportunity to reinforce a false sense of superiority, fed by the intent to exclude others.

Religious boundary markers change from generation to generation. The Christian college I attended in the late seventies still had in effect a rule against the performance of jazz music on campus, a regulation instituted in the early twentieth century. Fifty years later, no one was willing to rescind it for fear of appearing to compromise essential beliefs. The irony is that students were perfectly free to listen to punk rock or heavy metal—but Louis Armstrong was off-limits. On Sundays the tennis courts were locked up, but for some reason the volleyball court was left accessible. As a tennis player, I always maintained that volleyball was the more worldly of the two

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sports, as it was more closely associated with California and was often played on the beach.

If you give it much thought, whether your religious background is liberal or conservative, Protestant or Catholic, you can probably come up with your own set of identity markers.

A boundary-oriented approach to spirituality focuses on people's position: Are you inside or outside the group? A great deal of energy is spent clarifying what counts as a boundary marker.

But Jesus consistently focused on people's *center*: Are they oriented and moving *toward* the center of spiritual life (love of God and people), or are they moving *away from* it? This is why he shocked people by saying that many religious leaders—who observed all the recognized boundary markers—were in fact outside the kingdom of God. They were—like Hank—increasingly dead to love. And this is why Jesus could say that “the tax collectors and the prostitutes” who were a million miles away from the religious subculture, but who had turned, converted, and oriented themselves toward God and love, were already in the kingdom.

This was the great irony of his day: The “righteous” were more damaged by their righteousness than the sinners were by their sin.

### The Distortion of Spirituality

X The misunderstanding of true spirituality has caused immense damage to the human race. Tragically, it is possible to think we are becoming more spiritual when in fact we are only becoming more

**The misunderstanding of true spirituality has caused immense damage to the human race.**

smug and judgmental. Pseudo-transformation means becoming what Mark Twain once called “a good man in the worst sense of the word.” Winston Churchill, told that a political opponent of his by the name of Cripps—who was widely disliked for his smug self-righteousness—had just stopped smoking cigars, commented, “Too bad. Those cigars were his last contact with humanity.”

(Another time, the story goes, Churchill saw Cripps passing by and remarked, “There, but for the grace of God, goes God.”)

Getting clear on what spiritual life looks like is no casual affair. This is life or death to the soul. Sheldon Vanauken wrote that the strongest argument for Christianity is Christians, when they are drawing life from God. The strongest argument against Christianity? Also Christians, when they become exclusive, self-righteous, and complacent.

Dallas Willard writes,

How many people are radically and permanently repelled from The Way by Christians who are unfeeling, stiff, unapproachable, boringly lifeless, obsessive, and dissatisfied? Yet such Christians are everywhere, and what they are missing is the wholesome liveliness springing from a balanced vitality with the freedom of God's loving rule. . . . Spirituality wrongly understood or pursued is a major source of human misery and rebellion against God.

So how do I know if I am settling for pseudo-transformation instead of the real thing? In the gospel according to Matthew, Jesus offers a list of warning signs in capital letters. Here are a few that I find helpful.

#### 1. Am I spiritually “inauthentic”?

“Woe to you. . . . For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.” X

Inauthenticity involves a preoccupation with *appearing* to be spiritual.

Someone once asked me whether I thought that the church where I worked might be worldly.

“What do you mean by ‘worldly’?” I asked him.

“Well, you use drama, and people are used to that in the world. And you play contemporary music just like they're used to hearing. So how will they know you're any different? Everybody knows that

as Christians we're supposed to be different from people in the world by being more loving and more gentle, and everybody knows that we're not. So don't we have to do something to show we're different?"

In other words, if we can't be *holy*, shouldn't we at least be *weird*?

I act like that. I recently reread a letter I had written to a friend many years ago. Most of the letter was a review of current activities, and it sounded casual and natural. Then I wrote a few lines at the end about God and my spiritual life. But they didn't feel natural. They felt calculated and artificial, as if I were saying things I thought a spiritual person is *supposed* to say.

I realized I have a hard time even *talking* about God without trying to convince people I'm "spiritual." I try to hide my sin. I work harder at making people think I'm a loving person than I do at actually loving them.

A little boy went to Sunday school, where he knew the sort of answers you're supposed to give to questions. The teacher asked, "What is brown, furry, has a long tail, and stores up nuts for winter?"

"Well," the boy muttered, "I guess the answer is Jesus, but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me."

I act like that. I try to say spiritual-sounding things, even when I don't know what I'm saying: "I guess the answer is Jesus. . . ."

## *2. Am I becoming judgmental or exclusive or proud?*

"They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues."

Pride is a potential problem for anyone who takes spiritual growth seriously. As soon as we start to pursue virtue, we begin to wonder why others aren't as virtuous as we are. The great mystic St. John of the Cross wrote:

When beginners become aware of their own fervor and diligence in their spiritual works and devotional exercises, this prosperity of theirs gives rise to secret pride. . . . they conceive a certain satisfaction in the contemplation of their

works and of themselves. . . . They condemn others in their heart when they see that they are not devout in their way.

Lee Strobel, my colleague at Willow Creek Community Church, is fond of quoting the reply Homer Simpson's fundamentalist neighbors gave when Homer asked them where they'd been: "We went away to a Christian camp. We were learning how to be more judgmental."

Where is that camp, and why is it so well attended?

I was in a small group with people I had just met, and immediately I found a little voice inside me categorizing everyone: "This one is needy and dependent—stay away. That one is bright and has much to offer—try to connect." Why do I constantly find myself rating people as if they were Olympic contestants and someone appointed me judge? Why do I so often *compare* myself with them as if we were in some kind of competition?

This tendency is one reason why God sometimes graciously hides our own growth from our eyes. Jean Caussade said that while God is always at work in us, many times his work "is formed, grows, and is accomplished *secretly* in souls *without their knowledge*."

## *3. Am I becoming more approachable, or less?*

"They love . . . to have people call them rabbi."

In Jesus' day, lepers and prostitutes and tax collectors were especially careful to steer clear of the rabbis, who were considered especially close to God. The rabbis' had the mistaken notion that their spirituality required them to distance themselves from people. The irony is that the only rabbi the outcasts could touch turned out to be God himself.

Jesus was the most approachable person they had ever seen. The religious leaders had a kind of differentness that pushed people away. Jesus had a kind of differentness that drew people to him. True spirituality is that way.

#### \* 4. Am I growing weary of pursuing spiritual growth?

"They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others."

The pursuit of righteousness is always an exhausting pursuit when it seeks a distorted goal. Steven Mosley speaks of how we trivialize goodness, becoming

a "peculiar people" set at odd angles to the world rather than being an attractive light illuminating it. As a result, our morality calls out rather feebly. It whines from the corner of a sanctuary; it awkwardly interrupts pleasures; it mumbles excuses at parties; it shuffles along out of step and slightly behind the times. . . . It's often regarded by our secular contemporaries as a narrow, even trivial, pursuit.

He captures the dynamic of the boundary-marker quest: "Tragically, conventional religious goodness manages to be both *intimidating* and *unchallenging* at the same time."

"Both intimidating and unchallenging at the same time." This is the hallmark of spiritual life defined in terms of boundary markers.

**The pursuit of righteousness is always an exhausting pursuit when it seeks a distorted goal.**

Intimidating—because it may involve thirty-nine separate rules about Sabbath keeping alone. Unchallenging—because we may devote our lives to observing all the rules and yet never open the heart to love or joy.

This is why people inside the church so often get weary. Observing boundary markers, conforming to a religious subculture, is simply not a compelling enough vision to

captive the human spirit. It was not intended to be.

#### 5. Am I measuring my spiritual life in superficial ways?

"You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!"

Suppose someone were to ask you, "How is your spiritual life going these days?" Quick—what's the first thing that comes to your mind?

For many years I thought about this only in terms of a few special activities. If someone asked me how my spiritual life was going, my first thought would be how I was doing at having a quiet time—praying and reading the Bible each day. If I had prayed and read the Bible for several consecutive prior days, I was likely to say that my spiritual life was going well. If not, I was likely to feel guilty and downcast. So prayer and Bible study became the gauge of my spiritual condition. As long as I did those two things I could go through the day confident of God's approval.

I often use a journal in these quiet times. But I discovered that sometimes when I was in a hurry and didn't really want to take time to be with God, I would still get out my journal and scribble a few sentences simply so I had an entry in it for that day. (I'm not sure why I did this. Did I think I was going to have to hand it in?) I found myself measuring my spiritual life by the regularity of journal entries. I even devised a strategy in case there was an embarrassingly long gap between entry dates: I could keep two journals and merely write in one: "See other journal."

But God's primary assessment of our lives is not going to be measured by the number of journal entries. I recently received a book of which the stated goal was to enable the reader to get up to "340 or 350 quiet times a year"—as if that were the point.

I suspect that if someone had asked the apostle Paul or the apostle John about his spiritual life, his first question would have been, "Am I growing in love for God and people?" The real issue is what kind of people we are becoming. Practices such as reading Scripture and praying are important—not because they prove how spiritual we are—but because God can use them to lead us into life. We are called to do nothing less than to experience day by day what Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus: "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ."

Many years ago I took one of my daughters to see her first movie: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. For an hour and a half we lived in another world. I had forgotten how dark movies can be for

a two-year-old. My daughter cried at the wicked stepmother, at the bite of the apple, at the coming of the curse.

My tears came at another place. Snow White was cleaning out the cottage and singing, "Someday, my prince will come." Suddenly it was as if it were my little girl on the screen, and I was thinking about the day when her "prince"—whoever that was to be—would come and she would go away and they would be together.

In that moment I had new empathy for the dwarfs. In this story they give their home and risk their lives for this foolish girl who eats the forbidden fruit and falls asleep and breaks their heart. And then the prince comes and awakens her with a kiss, and she runs off with him without a regret. But of course that is how it must be. That is her destiny.

And that is ours, too.

Each of us has tasted the forbidden fruit. We have all eaten the apple. We have all fallen under the curse. We are all, on our own, in a kind of living death.

But still the Prince comes, to bring freedom from the curse, life from death. Still the Prince comes, to kiss his bride. And every once in a while, somebody, somewhere, wakes up. And when that happens—that's life.

"Sleeper, awake!

Rise from the dead,  
and Christ will shine on you."

# TRAINING VS. TRYING

## The Truth About Spiritual Disciplines

Christianity without discipleship is always  
Christianity without Christ.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

Imagine a group of people coming to your home and interrupting your Twinkie-eating, TV-watching routine with an urgent message: "Good news! We're from the United States Olympic Committee. We have been looking for someone to run the marathon in the next Olympics. We have statistics on every person in the entire nation on computer. We have checked everybody's records—their performance in the president's physical fitness test in grade school, body type, bone structure, right down to their current percentage of body fat. We have determined that out of two hundred million people, *you* are the one person in America with a chance to bring home the gold medal in the marathon. So you are on the squad. You will run the race. This is the chance of a lifetime."

You are surprised by this because the farthest you have ever run is from the couch to the refrigerator. But after the first shock passes, you are gripped by the realization of what's happening in your life. You picture yourself mingling with the elite athletes of the world.

You allow yourself to imagine that maybe you do have what it takes. At night you dream about standing on the podium after the race and hearing the national anthem, seeing the flag raised, and bending low to receive the gold medal.

You begin to feel a sense of urgency. It will be your body wearing those little racing togs, with a billion people watching on

**Trying hard can accomplish only so much. If you are serious, . . . you will have to enter into a life of training.**

television. But greater than any external pressure is the internal drive that says, "This is the race I was created to run. This is my destiny. This is why I was born. *Here's my chance!*"

This race becomes the great passion of your life. It dominates your mind. It occupies every waking moment. To run the race well—to win it if you can—becomes the central focus of your existence. It is what

gets you out of bed in the morning. It is what you live for. It is the chance of a lifetime.

Then it dawns on you: Right now you cannot run a marathon. More to the point, you cannot run a marathon *even if you try really, really hard*. Trying hard can accomplish only so much. If you are serious about seizing this chance of a lifetime, you will have to enter into a life of training. You must arrange your life around certain practices that will enable you to do what you cannot do now by willpower alone. When it comes to running a marathon, you must train, not merely try.

This need for training is not confined only to athletics. Training is required for people who want to play a musical instrument or learn a new language or run a business. Indeed, it is required for any significant challenge in life—including spiritual growth.

**Training Vs. Trying to Be Like Jesus**

I devote this chapter to the single most helpful principle I know regarding spiritual transformation. It is by no means original with me. People who are wise in the ways of spiritual growth have under-

stood it for centuries. I came across it at a time when I felt frustrated and stagnant in my own life with God, and through it I gained a firm hope that I really could grow. Through it—in a way I didn't recognize at the time—God was speaking to me. Here is the principle: *There is an immense difference between training to do something and trying to do something.*

I wish I could describe the hope I felt when I first came to understand this truth. I found it in Dallas Willard's book *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, and most of this chapter flows from the spirit of understanding that underlies his work. For much of my life, when I heard messages about following Jesus, I thought in terms of *trying hard* to be like him. So after hearing (or preaching, for that matter) a sermon on patience on Sunday, I would wake up Monday morning determined to be a more patient person. Have you ever tried hard to be patient with a three-year-old? I have—and it generally didn't work any better than would my trying hard to run a marathon for which I had not trained. I would end up exhausted and defeated. Given the way we are prone to describe "following Jesus," it's a wonder anyone wants to do it at all.

**Given the way we are prone to describe "following Jesus," it's a wonder anyone wants to do it at all.**

Spiritual transformation is not a matter of trying harder, but of training wisely. This is what the apostle Paul means when he encourages his young protégé Timothy to "*train* yourself in godliness." This thought also lies behind his advice to the church at Corinth: "Everyone who competes in the games goes into *strict training*. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever."

Athletics was familiar imagery to Paul's audience. Corinth was the site of the Isthmian Games, second only to the Olympics in prominence in ancient Greece. Paul himself had probably been in Corinth during the games of A.D. 51 and, according to Gordon Fee, may even have made tents for the visitors and contestants needing

accommodations. That a competitor would strive for the crown by simply “trying really hard” apart from training was unthinkable. In fact, any athlete who entered the games was required to undergo ten months of strict training and could be disqualified for failing to do so. Paul said he, too, had entered a life of training, “so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.”

Respecting the distinction between training and merely trying is the key to transformation in every aspect of life. People sometimes think that learning how to play Bach at the keyboard by spending years practicing scales and chord progressions is the “hard” way. The truth is the other way around. Spending years practicing scales is the easy way to learn to play Bach. Imagine sitting down at a grand piano in front of a packed concert hall and having never practiced a moment in your life. That’s the hard way.

This need for preparation, or training, does not stop when it comes to learning the art of forgiveness, or joy, or courage. In other words, it applies to a healthy and vibrant spiritual life just as it does to physical and intellectual activity. Learning to think, feel, and act like Jesus is at least as demanding as learning to run a marathon or play the piano.

For me, this truth brought light to the darkness. For the first time as an adult, I found the notion of following Jesus a real, concrete, tangible possibility. I could do it. Following Jesus simply means learning from him how to arrange my life around activities that enable

**Following Jesus simply means learning from him how to arrange my life around activities that enable me to live in the fruit of the Spirit.**

me to live in the fruit of the Spirit. The traditional term for such activities is “spiritual disciplines.” But for many people, that term carries associations of legalism, or attempting to earn God’s goodwill, or something like New Year’s resolutions—good intentions that are neither practical nor world-changing. Richard Foster’s book, *Celebration of Discipline*, discusses twelve such activities for spiritual growth. When I read that book years ago, my imme-

diate response was, “I already feel guilty about not reading the Bible and praying enough; the last thing in the world I want is ten other things to feel guilty about not doing.”

My next response was to draw up a very ambitious plan for spiritual advancement that would immediately incorporate all twelve practices into my life so I could feel good about my spiritual growth. I tried this strategy for a few weeks, but I soon felt overwhelmed and exhausted by it. And my response after that was to give the whole project up as something practical only for monks and saints.

So before getting into what spiritual disciplines are, let’s consider a few things spiritual disciplines are *not*:

### **1. *Spiritual disciplines are not a barometer of spirituality.***

Many people become burdened because they think God measures their spiritual performance on the basis of certain disciplines. The truth is both challenging and liberating.

Martin Luther begins his book *The Freedom of the Christian* with this paradox:

“A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.”

“A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”

Nowhere is this more true than with spiritual disciplines.

As we have seen, the true indicator of spiritual well-being is growth in the ability to love God and people. If we can do this without the practice of any particular spiritual disciplines, then we should by all means skip them. We are free of having to impress God or anyone else with our spiritual commitment. *Spiritual disciplines are to life what calisthenics are to a game.* Once the game starts, basketball players get no bonus points based on how many free throws they shot in practice. The only reason to practice them is to be able to make them in a game.

It is possible to spend every waking moment “practicing spiritual disciplines” but doing them in such a way as to make us less rather than more loving. In that case, of course, we would be better off if we did none at all.

**2. Spiritual disciplines are not necessarily unpleasant.**

What makes something a discipline depends on what we are training for. If we are training for a triathlon, we will pursue one set of practices. But if we are training for a pie-eating contest, our preparation will look like something else—mostly, consuming vast amounts of pie. If we keep at it long enough, we will be amazed at how much pie we can eventually put away compared with what we can now. What counts as “training” can only be determined when we know what it is we are training for.

Many of us got the impression somewhere that for an activity to count as a spiritual discipline, it must be something we would rather not do. However, if we are in training for a life characterized by joy, peace, and affection, we should assume that some of the practices are going to be downright enjoyable. Many of us need to discover “disciplines” such as celebration that will regularly produce in us rivers of wonder and gratitude.

**3. Spiritual disciplines are not a way to earn favor with God.**

Spiritual disciplines are not about trying to be good enough to merit God’s forgiveness and goodwill. They are not ways to get extra credit, or to demonstrate to God how deeply we are committed to him. They exist for our sake, not God’s. They have value only insofar as they help us morph.

In particular, spiritual disciplines don’t oppose or exist in tension with grace. People who live under the bondage of legalism and then hear the message of grace are sometimes leery that talk of disciplines might lead to another form of religious oppression.

But spiritual disciplines are simply a means of appropriating or growing toward the life that God graciously offers. This is why they are sometimes called a “means of

**Spiritual disciplines . . . are not ways to get extra credit, or to demonstrate to God how deeply we are committed to him.**

grace.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer seemed to have this thought in mind when he wrote,

We must therefore attempt to recover a true understanding of the mutual relation between grace and discipleship. . . . *Happy are they who know that discipleship simply means the life which springs from grace, and that grace simply means discipleship.* Happy are they who have become Christians in this sense of the word. For them the word of grace has proved a fount of mercy.

**A Few Key Questions**

*What makes something a discipline?*

*Discipline: Any activity I can do by direct effort that will help me do what I cannot now do by direct effort.*

People will sometimes speak of the “discipline of humility” or the “discipline of patience.” Strictly speaking, however, such things are not really disciplines; they are the objects of the disciplines, the things we want to acquire through the disciplines.

In the children’s book *Frog and Toad Together*, the two central characters discover the limits of mere trying when Frog bakes a batch of cookies. “We ought to stop eating,” they say, as they keep eating. “We must stop,” they resolve, as they eat some more. “We need willpower,” Frog finally says, grabbing another cookie.

“What is willpower?” asks Toad, swallowing another mouthful.

“Willpower is trying very hard not to do something you want to do very much,” Frog says.

Frog discusses a variety of ways to help with willpower—putting the cookies in a box, tying the box shut, putting it high up in a tree—but each time Toad points out (in between bites) that they could climb the tree and untie the box. In desperation, Frog finally

**Spiritual discipline: Any activity that can help me gain power to live life as Jesus taught and modeled it.**

'dumps the remaining cookies outside on the ground: "Hey, birds!" he calls. "Here's cookies!"

"Now we have no more cookies," says Toad sadly.

"Yes," says Frog, "but we have lots and lots of willpower."

"You may keep it all," Toad replies. "I'm going home to bake a cake."

Disciplines are valuable simply because they allow us to do what we cannot do by willpower alone. This insight lies at the heart of Alcoholics Anonymous. The first of the Twelve Steps is to acknowledge that I cannot stop drinking by *willpower* alone ("trying really hard to stop drinking"). Then I must arrange my life around certain disciplines or practices—such as taking a ruthless moral inventory and confessing my faults—that will enable me to do what willpower can't. I must enter a life of *training* for sobriety.

#### *What makes something a spiritual discipline?*

Disciplines that are *spiritual* are simply those that help me live in the fruit of the Spirit.

*Spiritual discipline: Any activity that can help me gain power to live life as Jesus taught and modeled it.*

How many spiritual disciplines are there? As many as we can think of. Certain practices are basic, such as solitude, servanthood, confession, and meditation on Scripture. We will look at all these in the remaining chapters of this book. But we can turn almost any activity into a "training exercise" for spiritual life.

#### *How do we know what spiritual disciplines to practice?*

In a sense, the answer comes from thinking backward:

First, we must understand clearly what it means to live in the kingdom of God. Jesus spent much of his time helping people see what true spirituality looks like.

Second, we must learn what particular barriers keep us from living this kind of life.

Third, we must discover what particular practices, experiences, or relationships can help us overcome these barriers.

For instance, we know that we are called to be loving. One thing I discovered when I spent a day trying to live in a loving fashion is that love requires an enormous amount of energy. And I was just too tired to give it. So I realized that—as unspiritual as it sounds—if I was serious about becoming a more loving person, I was going to have to get more sleep.

I have discovered I have a very hard time thinking and feeling and acting like Jesus when I lack sleep. An article in *Time* magazine suggested that America has a sleep deficit that is worse than the national budget deficit, and it results in everything from increased irritability to fatal car accidents.

I was surprised to find that the Bible has much to say about what John Ballie called the theology of sleep. Sleep is a gift from God:

I will both lie down and sleep in peace;  
for you alone, O LORD, make me lie down in safety.

It is an act of trust: I am reminded when I go to sleep that the world is in God's hands, not mine. The world will get along very well even though I am not awake to try to control things. At the appropriate time, my eyes will open and I will receive the gift of wakefulness once again.

I lie down and sleep;  
I wake again, for the LORD sustains me.

Have you ever tried to pray when you are lacking sleep? Before Elijah was to spend a prolonged time in solitude and prayer at Mount Horeb, the angel of the Lord had him take not one, but two long naps. Contrast this with the disciples at Gethsemane, who could not pray because they kept falling asleep. Sleep is a gift from God.

It is in vain that you rise up early  
and go late to rest,  
eating the bread of anxious toil;  
for he gives sleep to his beloved.

For some of you reading this book, perhaps the single most spiritual thing you could do right now is to put it down and take a nap.

### *What is a disciplined person?*

The link between *disciple* and *discipline* is obvious. But getting the definitions right is very important, lest discipleship become rigid and mechanical.

*A disciplined person is someone who can do the right thing at the right time in the right way with the right spirit.*

Notice what a disciplined person is *not*. A disciplined person is not simply someone who exercises many disciplines. A disciplined person is not a highly systematic, rigidly scheduled, chart-making, gold-star-loving early riser. The Pharisees were rigid and organized, but they were not *disciplined persons* in the sense required by true discipleship.

Disciplined people can do what is called for at any given moment. They can do the right thing at the right time in the right way for the right reason.

This definition applies to artists and athletes and astronauts as well as to followers of Jesus. A disciplined follower of Jesus—a “disciple”—is not someone who has “mastered the disciplines” and never misses a daily regimen of spiritual exercises. *A disciplined follower of Jesus is someone who discerns when laughter, gentleness, silence, healing words, or prophetic indignation is called for, and offers it promptly, effectively, and lovingly.*

### **Signs of Wise Spiritual Training**

*Wise training respects the freedom of the Spirit.*

At this point you may be wondering, *What about God's role in spiritual growth?* After all, the Bible speaks of transformation as the work of God. It's always a miracle when it happens. To speak of spiritual growth only as the product of training could make it sound like something *we* can engineer. Anytime a frog is turned into a prince—or even just a gentler, kinder frog—there is always some-

thing mysterious and awesome at work. In spiritual growth that “something mysterious” is the work of the Spirit. So another analogy from Scripture is helpful. “The wind blows where it chooses,” Jesus said, “and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Consider the difference between piloting a motorboat or a sailboat. We can run a motorboat all by ourselves. We can fill the tank and start the engine. We are in control. But a sailboat is a different story. We can hoist the sails and steer the rudder, but we are utterly dependent on the wind. The wind does the work. If the wind doesn't blow—and sometimes it doesn't—we sit still in the water no matter how frantic we act. Our task is to do whatever enables us to catch the wind.

Spiritual transformation is that way. We may be aggressively pursuing it, but we cannot turn it on and off. We can open ourselves to transformation through certain practices, but we cannot engineer it. We can take no credit for it.

It is profitable to see this. This truth saves us from pride and misdirected effort. Fist-clenching, teeth-gritting exertion is usually not productive. Indeed, feeling a constant sense of strain or burden probably indicates that we are off course. Jesus offered his yoke—his way of life—to tired people because he said his way of life involved ease and lightness and “rest for your souls.” This theme is echoed by many of his followers. Frank Laubach writes, “The sense of being led by an unseen hand which takes mine . . . grows upon me daily. I do not need to strain at all to find opportunity. . . . strain does not seem to do good.”

Another analogy from sailboating concerns the fact that wise sailors know that their main task is being able to “read” the wind—to practice discernment. An experienced sailor can simply look at a lake and tell where the wind is blowing strongest, or look at the

**Disciplined  
people can do  
the right thing at  
the right time in  
the right way for  
the right reason.**

sky and give a weather forecast. A wise sailor knows when to raise and lower which sails to catch the wind most effectively.

Spiritual growth requires discernment. We must learn to respond to the fresh wind of the Spirit. Moses didn't ask or arrange for the burning bush. But once it was there, he had to make a choice: whether to turn aside and pay attention to the work of God.

God's responsibility is to provide the burning bush. Our responsibility is to turn aside. Often I forget this.

Sometime ago I bought a devotional book and set a goal of finishing it by the end of the year. Several times as I read, it was clear that something was happening in my heart; I felt I should stop and study a certain passage for a while. But such delays would have kept me from my goal for finishing the book. So I kept going.

I should have realized that getting through the book "on time" was not, as I thought, the way to demonstrate my devotion. The purpose was to put myself in a place where transformation could happen. If God should speak to me through one passage—if I am being convicted or healed or challenged—then my role is to stay there until the wind dies down. Then it's time to move on. I was motorboating instead of sailing. I failed to turn aside.

Take another example. A friend of mine was at a retreat center recently where a group of people were spending a day in the practice of silence. One of them, not watching where she was walking, bumped into my friend and nearly knocked her over. But because the woman was engaged in silence, she didn't say a word, not even a simple "Excuse me." Yet, the whole purpose of practicing silence is not to see how long we can go without speaking; the goal is to make space for Jesus in our lives so we learn to live like him. Living like him in part involves responding with grace and civility when we bump into people.

Our primary task is not to calculate how many verses of Scripture we read or how many minutes we spend in prayer. Our task is to use these activities to create opportunities for God to work. Then what happens is up to him. We just put up sails: "The wind blows where it chooses. . . ."

*Wise training respects our unique temperament and gifts.*

There is good news here: Whatever your natural temperament may be, it is not a barrier to your spiritual growth.

Do you tend to be spontaneous, or are you a well-organized-plan-ahead type of person? Often people who are highly spontaneous think they are at a disadvantage for spiritual growth because living according to a predictable routine is difficult for them. (If you are still trying to decide which type you are, you can pretty much eliminate spontaneous.) In many ways, however, people with a gift for spontaneity have a great advantage in being able to give a good response promptly.

The particular combination of practices, relationships, and experiences needed for growth will be different for everyone. The life of Abraham Lincoln is by most accounts an amazing study in character formation. Yet he was notoriously disorganized; he even had a file in his law office labeled "If you can't find it anywhere else, try looking here."

We need the freedom to discover how God wants us to grow, for his design will not look quite the same for everyone. Perhaps God speaks to us in special ways through nature. Perhaps he made us to be formed by music. We may have an above-average capacity for silence and prayer. Or we might respond most strongly to images, symbols, and the fine arts. C. S. Lewis once surmised that each person is created to see a different facet of God's beauty—something no one else can see in quite the same way—and then to bless all worshippers through all eternity with an aspect of God they could not otherwise see.

*Wise training will take into account our season of life.*

There is more good news in that our season of life is not a barrier to spiritual growth.

A mother in our small group suggested that it was easier for her to "work on her spiritual life" before she became a mom. As we

**Whatever your natural temperament may be, it is not a barrier to your spiritual growth.**

talked, it became clear what she meant. To her, reading the Bible and praying were the only two activities that counted spiritually. As a mother she felt that "time alone" was an oxymoron.

In this the church had failed her. She had never been taught to see that caring for two young children, offered daily with expressions of gratitude and prayers for help and patient acceptance of trials, might become a kind of school for transformation into powerful servanthood beyond anything she had ever known. Somehow having a "quiet time" counted toward spiritual devotion, and caring for two children did not.

It took creative effort for this mother to carve out time for solitude and stillness, and even then she could not free up the amount of time she had in college. But as a mother she had new opportunities for growth she did not have back then.

*Our season of life—whatever it is—is no barrier to having Christ formed in us. Not in the least.*

Whatever our season of life, it offers its own opportunities and challenges for spiritual growth. Instead of wishing we were in another season, we ought to find out what this one offers.

*Life counts—all of it.* Every moment is potentially an opportunity to be guided by God into his way of living. Every moment is a chance to learn from Jesus how to live in the kingdom of God.

*Wise training respects the inevitability of troughs and peaks.*

One of the most basic laws of life is rhythm. Night follows day, winter follows summer, we wake and we sleep.

In spiritual life, the traditional language for this is rhythm. There will be times of consolation and times of desolation. In times of consolation we like to pray because God seems close, the Bible seems alive, sin looks bad, and stoplights all seem green. Times of desolation are just the opposite: The Bible seems dry, prayer grows hard, and God is far away.

C. S. Lewis noted that at times God will send us a strong sense of his presence, a desire to be with him, the ability to withstand temptations with ease.

But He never allows this state of affairs to last long. Sooner or later He withdraws, if not in fact, at least from their conscious experience, all those supports and incentives. He leaves the creature to stand up on its own legs—to carry out from the will alone duties which have lost all relish. It is during such trough periods, much more than during the peak periods, that it is growing into the sort of creature He wants it to be.

When we forget the law of rhythm, we assume that whatever phase is current will last forever. In times of consolation I mistakenly think that I now have spiritual life mastered. In times of desolation I assume I must have done something wrong, or perhaps God is punishing me. In truth, both seasons are inevitable, and both seasons can bring unique growth.

Several years ago I was in a group devoted to learning how to pray. We all agreed we would pray for a long time (at least it was long to me) each day. We learned how to use Scripture when we prayed. We agreed to wake up at times to pray in the middle of the night, just to experience the stillness. We agreed to spend time reflecting on our prayers to learn how to recognize when God was speaking to us.

After the group disbanded, I was chagrined to realize that I was praying much less than I had when we were together. I really thought I had the prayer thing pretty much figured out. Then a wise friend explained that after you get stretched pretty hard, you generally have to rest for a while in order to "catch up." Sure enough—after a time of "resting," I found I had a new hunger for prayer.

This law of nature means it is probably a mistake to assume that one "spiritual routine" is adequate to cover us for the rest of our lives. We will have times of great growth, spending enormous amounts of time in prayer or service. We will have times of desolation when prayer comes hard. Perhaps during these latter times we will need more rest.

*Wise training begins with a clear decision.*

When I came to understand the idea of training to be like Jesus, I was faced with a choice. People do not just drift into a life of training.

Every year a few human beings approach their full physical potential of strength and conditioning; they show us what the body can become in body-builder competitions. They have devoted themselves to developing their bodies. Their habits of life—eating, exercise, rest, and so on—are arranged around a single task so that people can look at them and say, “So that’s what a human body can be. I had no idea!”

This kind of conditioning does not come about by accident. Sometime ago my wife and I were watching a movie featuring a con-

**It is probably a mistake to assume that one “spiritual routine” is adequate to cover us for the rest of our lives.**

temporary action star famous for his chiseled physique. For some reason, the poor guy had a terrible time keeping his shirt on, even though the story took place on a snowy mountain and everyone else was wearing parkas. At one point, as his rippling torso again filled the screen, Nancy looked at him, then took a long look at me—I was six-foot-one and 130 pounds as a freshman in high school, and what weight I’ve put on

since then is mostly in the wrong places—looked back at him, then back at me, and finally said, “You know, I’m just not attracted to well-built men.”

I turned this comment over and over in my mind, looking for the compliment that I was certain lurked somewhere beneath the surface of what she said, but apparently it lurked too deep, for I could never find it. I wouldn’t mind looking like the guy in the movie, but it is not likely to happen: I have never decided to order my life around that goal.

A newspaper in Los Angeles quoted a physical trainer and former Mr. Missouri contestant: “The guys you see on TV and in magazines that have that look—that look is what they do for a living. *The maintenance of that look is what their entire lives are based on—it’s a lifestyle. It’s 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.* We’re such a now society. Guys come in thinking that in three months or by swimsuit

season they can be looking all ripped and hard. And that’s, um, pretty unrealistic.”

Whether “looking all ripped and hard” is worth devoting your life to is, of course, another question. But it doesn’t happen in a day. It is “what their entire lives are based on.”

Jesus confronted people directly about the choice to become a follower. He came with the gracious announcement that it is now possible to live in the presence and under the reign of God—that was his Good News. It is possible to live in such a way that when people see us, they will say to themselves, “Wow! I didn’t know that a life could look like that.” It indeed happens. It has happened for many who have followed Christ, and it really is possible for us. This is the “pearl of great value” of which Jesus spoke, for which any sensible person would sell everything. This is the race for which we were born. But we will not drift into such a life. We must decide.

### Final Preparations

Each of the remaining chapters in this book deals with a spiritual discipline. But before we turn to them, I want to say a word about how you can learn which practices might be most helpful in your own life. After all, offering people sound advice about their souls has often been compared to the wisdom a doctor gives a patient, and what a doctor prescribes will depend a great deal on the diagnosis.

On the diagnostic side, sin can be divided into two general categories: sins of omission and sins of commission. Sins of omission involve not doing those things we ought to do; sins of commission consist of things we do that we ought to avoid.

Similarly, Dallas Willard notes that spiritual disciplines can be placed in two categories—disciplines of engagement and disciplines of abstinence. Disciplines of engagement involve my intentionally *doing*

**If my problem is that I am *doing* something I ought not to do, I need to practice a discipline that strengthens my *not-doing* muscles.**

certain things. Worship, study, fellowship, and giving are all disciplines of engagement. By contrast, disciplines of abstinence involve my intentionally *refraining* from doing things. These include practices such as fasting, solitude, and silence.

Here's the connection: If I struggle with a sin of *commission*, I will generally be helped by practicing a discipline of *abstinence*. In other words, if my problem is that I am *doing* something I ought not to do, I need to practice a discipline that strengthens my *not-doing* muscles. So if you have a problem with boasting (a sin of *commission*), what disciplines are likely to help? If you said silence or secrecy (both disciplines of abstinence), you're right—but don't tell anybody!

If I struggle with a sin of *omission*, I will usually be most helped by a discipline of *engagement*. That is, if my sin involves a failure to love or encourage or serve, I need practices that will help my *doing* muscles. If, for example, you ever wrestle with joylessness, you will want to immerse yourself in my favorite discipline of all—the discipline of celebration. So read on. The next chapter is just for you.

## A "DEE DAH DAY"

### The Practice of Celebration

Joy is the serious business of heaven.

C. S. LEWIS

Sometime ago I was giving a bath to our three children. I had a custom of bathing them together, more to save time than anything else. I knew that eventually I would have to stop the group bathing, but for the time being it seemed efficient.

Johnny was still in the tub, Laura was out and safely in her pajamas, and I was trying to get Mallory dried off. Mallory was out of the water, but was doing what has come to be known in our family as the Dee Dah Day dance. This consists of her running around and around in circles, singing over and over again, "Dee dah day, dee dah day." It is a relatively simple dance expressing great joy. When she is too happy to hold it in any longer, when words are inadequate to give voice to her euphoria, she has to dance to release her joy. So she does the Dee Dah Day.

On this particular occasion, I was irritated. "Mallory, hurry!" I prodded. So she did—she began running in circles faster and faster and chanting "dee dah day" more rapidly. "No, Mallory, that's not what I mean! Stop with the dee dah day stuff, and get over here so I can dry you off. Hurry!"

Then she asked a profound question: "Why?"

I had no answer. I had nowhere to go, nothing to do, no meetings to attend, no sermons to write. I was just so used to hurrying, so preoccupied with my own little agenda, so trapped in this rut of moving from one task to another, that here was life, here was joy, here was an invitation to the dance right in front of me—and I was missing it.

So I got up, and Mallory and I did the Dee Dah Day dance together. She said I was pretty good at it, too, for a man my age.

**Most of life is  
spent in transit:  
trying to get  
somewhere,  
waiting to begin,  
standing in line. . . .**

Reflecting on this afterward, I realized that I tend to divide my minutes into two categories: living, and waiting to live. Most of my life is spent in transit: trying to get somewhere, waiting to begin, driving someplace, standing in line, waiting for a meeting to end, trying to get a task completed, worrying about something bad that might happen, or being angry about something

that did happen. These are all moments when I am not likely to be fully present, not to be aware of the voice and purpose of God. I am impatient. I am, almost literally, killing time. And that is just another way of saying I am killing myself. Drying off the kids was just something I was trying to get through.

Ironically, often the thing that keeps me from experiencing joy is my preoccupation with *self*. The very selfishness that keeps me from pouring myself out for the joy of others also keeps me from noticing and delighting in the myriad small gifts God offers each day. This is why Walker Percy describes boredom as "the self stuffed with the self."

Life is not that way for Mallory. Her self is unstuffed. She just lives. While she's taking a bath, it's a dee dah day moment. And when it is time to get dried, that's another one. After she's dry, it will be time for another. Life is a series of dee dah day moments. Not every moment of life is happy, of course. There are still occasions that call for tears—skinned knees and cranky towel-bearers. But

each moment is pregnant with possibility. Mallory doesn't miss many of them. She is teaching me about joy.

And I need to learn. Joy is at the heart of God's plan for human beings. The reason for this is worth pondering awhile: Joy is at the heart of God himself. We will never understand the significance of joy in human life until we understand its importance to God. I suspect that most of us seriously underestimate God's capacity for joy.

### **Our Joyful God**

In respect to joy at least, G. K. Chesterton would insist that Mallory is a good deal more like God than I am. Chesterton's writings are filled with the centrality of joy in the character of God and his plans for humankind.

Jesus came as the Joy-bringer. The joy we see in the happiest child is but a fraction of the joy that resides in the heart of God. Chesterton speaks of this in a memorable passage:

Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, "Do it again"; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun; and every evening, "Do it again" to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; *for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.*

As an exercise in contrast, imagine for a moment how the opening sentences of the Bible might read if God were not a supremely joyful being. Imagine Genesis if God approached his work as we so often do:

In the beginning, it was nine o'clock, so God had to go to work. He filled out a requisition to separate light from darkness. He considered making stars to beautify the night, and planets to fill the skies, but thought it sounded like too much work; and besides, thought God, "That's not my job." So he decided to knock off early and call it a day. And he looked at what he had done and he said, "It'll have to do."

On the second day God separated the waters from the dry land. And he made all the dry land flat, plain, and functional, so that—behold—the whole earth looked like Idaho. He thought about making mountains and valleys and glaciers and jungles and forests, but he decided it wouldn't be worth the effort. And God looked at what he had done that day and said, "It'll have to do."

And God made a pigeon to fly in the air, and a carp to swim in the waters, and a cat to creep upon dry ground. And God thought about making millions of other species of all sizes and shapes and colors, but he couldn't drum up any enthusiasm for any other animals—in fact, he wasn't too crazy about the cat. Besides, it was almost time for the Late Show. So God looked at all he had done, and God said, "It'll have to do."

And at the end of the week, God was seriously burned out. So he breathed a big sigh of relief and said, "Thank Me, it's Friday."

Of course, Genesis looks nothing like that. Instead it throbs with the refrain "God said, . . . And it was so. . . and indeed, it was very good."

On the first day, "God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good." The first day was a Dee Dah Day. And God did a little dance. And the next day God said to the light, "Do it again." And the light did it again, and God danced once again. And so it has gone every day down to this one—down to the morning of the day you were born; down to the morning of this day in which you read these words.

So it is with God, but not with us. "For we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we."

We will not understand God until we understand this about him: "God is the happiest being in the universe." God also knows sorrow. Jesus is remembered, among other things, as "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." But the sorrow of God, like the anger of God, is his temporary response to a fallen world. That sorrow will be banished forever from his heart on the day the world is set right. Joy is God's basic character. Joy is his eternal destiny. God is the happiest being in the universe.

And God's intent was that his creation would mirror his joy. The psalmist speaks of the sun, "which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy." This is not merely picturesque language; this is creation expressing God's own unwearying joy at simply being, at existing and knowing existence to be good. As products of God's creation, creatures made in his image, we are to reflect God's fierce joy in life.

This is why the Bible speaks not just about our need for joy in general, but a particular kind of joy that characterizes God.

After teaching on the need for obedience, Jesus told his friends that his aim was that they should be filled with joy, but not just any kind of joy: "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."

The problem with people, according to Jesus, is not that we are too happy for God's taste, but that we are not happy enough.

Lewis Smedes puts it this way: "To miss out on joy is to miss out on the reason for your existence."

C. S. Lewis said, "Joy is the serious business of heaven."

The apostle Paul wrote, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice."

The Bible puts joy in the nonoptional category. Joy is a command. Joylessness is a serious sin, one that religious people are

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if God approached  
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so often do.**

particularly prone to indulge in. It may be the sin most readily tolerated by the church. It is rarely the object of church discipline. Televangelists don't get canceled for displaying too much of it.

But how much damage have joyless Christians done to the cause of Christ? James Joyce writes in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* of his hero's decision not to become a priest. Stephen Dedalus has a vision of what would happen to his face, how it would become like

**The problem with people . . . is not that we are too happy for God's taste, but that we are not happy enough.**

the faces of other religious people he knew: "a mirthless mask reflecting a sunken day . . . sourfavored and devout, shot with pink tinges of suffocated anger." How often have people misunderstood God because they attributed to him the grim, judgmental, defensive, soul-wearying spirit of many who claim to be his followers?

There is a being in this universe who wants you to live in sorrow, but it is not God. Francis de Sales wrote, "The evil one is pleased with sadness and melancholy because he himself is sad and melancholy, and will be so for all eternity. Hence he desires that everyone should be like himself."

### Joy and Gratitude

We are invited to rejoice in every moment of life because every moment of life is a gift. Every once in a while the veil is lifted, and we see this.

The first close friendship I ever had began when I was fifteen years old. Chuck and I went through high school and college together; we double-dated together (and got rejected together); we were confidants and counselors and chums through every important event of life.

Several years ago Chuck called to tell me he had cancer. The initial prognosis was very good, although he did have to undergo difficult treatment. In typical fashion Chuck shaved his head before the chemotherapy began, covered it with glue, sprinkled it with

gold glitter, and walked around the house in his underwear, calling himself "Chemo-Man."

Chuck and I lived more than two thousand miles apart at this time, but we talked every Saturday morning during the time he was undergoing treatment. The chemotherapy destroyed his appetite; he was unable to keep food down; he became so gaunt and emaciated that he was almost unrecognizable even to his children. At one point an infection set in, and his condition was briefly touch-and-go because the chemotherapy had so weakened his immune system. But Chuck pulled through, and eventually he completed treatment. Chemo-Man had prevailed.

A month later, Chuck had his first posttreatment checkup. He called me that night: The cancer was back, the doctor told him, at levels as high as they had been before treatment. Being a doctor himself, he knew that the return of the cancer this strongly, this quickly, meant that he was going to die. It was a death sentence.

I was numb. When I went to bed that night, I couldn't even pray. "It's some mistake," I protested. "They'll find out it's okay." I marveled at how quickly denial sets in.

At 6:30 the next morning, Chuck called again. "You won't believe this," he said. Someone in the lab had mistakenly switched his results with those of another patient, who had not yet even been through treatment. It turned out that Chuck's cancer was gone—and has not reappeared, these many years later.

"I'm going to live," my friend said. "I'm going to see my kids grow up. I'm going to grow old with my wife. I'm going to live."

For a few moments we just wept on the phone like a couple of characters out of a Hallmark commercial. Chuck told me he was filled with a gratitude he had never known. He couldn't stop touching his kids or hugging his wife. Things that had bothered him before faded into utter insignificance. He was going to live—and suddenly he did not just know intellectually but actually experienced the truth that life is a gift. We don't earn it, can't control it, can't take a moment of it for granted. Every tick of the clock is a gift from God. Every day is a Dee Dah Day.

### The Necessity of Joy for Spiritual Life

We have greatly underestimated the necessity of joy. Nehemiah said to his grieving congregation, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep. . . . Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for *the joy of the LORD is your strength.*"

Joy is strength. Its absence will create weakness. Or, in the words of Dallas Willard,

failure to attain a deeply satisfying life always has the effect of making sinful actions seem good. Here lies the strength of temptation. . . . Normally, our success in overcoming temptation will be easier if we are basically happy in our lives. To cut off the joys and pleasures associated with our bodily lives and social existence as "unspiritual," then, can actually have the effect of *weakening* us in our efforts to do what is right.

Here is a key task for spiritual vitality: *We must arrange life so that sin no longer looks good to us.* One gets the sense that when Mother Teresa drove in congested traffic, she didn't have a hard time keeping herself from making rude gestures or calling other drivers bad names. Why? Such actions no longer looked appealing to her. She found a better way to live. The joy of the Lord brought strength.

I think the time has come, strange as it sounds, for us to take joy seriously.

You can become a joyful person. With God's help, it really is possible. The biblical writers would not command it if it were not so. But joyfulness is a learned skill. You must take responsibility for your joy. Not your friend, not your parent, not your spouse, not your kids, not your boss—your joy is your responsibility. For some of us, this does not come easily. You may be joy-impaired. You will have to fight for it. But it can be done.

### Strategic Celebration

People who want to pursue joy especially need to practice the discipline of celebration. This is a primary reason that we see much emphasis placed on feast days in the Old Testament. Times of feasting were to be transforming experiences—just as times of meditating or fasting were. Celebration generally involves activities that bring pleasure—gathering with people we love, eating and drinking, singing and dancing. Spiritual celebration means doing them while reflecting on the wonderful God who has given us such wonderful gifts.

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good to us.**

The words of Nehemiah express this spirit of celebration. Our word *holiday* comes from the practice of "holy days." We often think of "discipline" as abstinence from pleasurable things, but Nehemiah commanded the people to set aside a time to revel in them *as a discipline for personal transformation.* "Eating the fat"—in other translations called "choice food"—can be every bit as much a discipline as fasting. We expect a prophet to tell us to eat locusts and brussel sprouts, or maybe nothing at all, but here we see Nehemiah handing out the equivalent of Twinkies and Fritos.

True celebration is the inverse of hedonism. Hedonism is the demand for more and more pleasure for personal gratification. It always follows the law of diminishing returns, so that what produced joy in us yesterday no longer does today. Our capacity for joy diminishes. Celebration is not like that. When we celebrate, we exercise our ability to see and feel goodness in the simplest gifts of God. We are able to take delight today in something we wouldn't have even noticed yesterday. Our capacity for joy increases.

So how do we pursue joy?

### Begin Now

The first step for pursuing joy is simply to begin now. The psalmist says, "This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice

and be glad in it." He doesn't say, "Yesterday was God's day—how happy I was then." Nor does he say, "Tomorrow will be the great day—I'll just endure until then." This day, with all its shortcomings, is the great Dee Dah Day.

We all live with the illusion that joy will come someday when conditions change. We go to school and think we will be happy when we graduate. We are single and are convinced we will be happy when we get married. We get married and decide we will be happy someday when we have children. We have children and decide we will be happy when they grow up and leave the nest—then they do, and we think we were happier when they were still at home.

"This is God's day," the psalmist says. It is the day God made, a day that Christ's death has redeemed. If we are going to know joy, it must be in this day—today.

But this raises a question. How can I embrace joy amid all the pain and suffering in the world? Is it right to be joyful in a world of hunger and violence and injustice?

It is precisely here that we make one of the most surprising discoveries: Often it is the people closest to suffering who have the

**Often it is the people closest to suffering who have the most powerful joy.**

most powerful joy. Friends of Mother Teresa say that instead of being overwhelmed by the suffering around her, she fairly glowed with joy as she went about her ministry of mercy. One of the English officers imprisoned at Flossenburg with Dietrich Bonhoeffer said of him, "Bonhoeffer always seemed to me to spread an atmosphere of happiness

and joy over the least incident and profound gratitude for the mere fact that he was alive."

True joy, as it turns out, comes only to those who have devoted their lives to something greater than personal happiness. This is most visible in extraordinary lives, in saints and martyrs. But it is no less true for ordinary people like us.

One test of authentic joy is its compatibility with pain. Joy in this world is always joy "in spite of" something. Joy is, as Karl Barth

put it, a "defiant nevertheless" set at a full stop against bitterness and resentment.

If we don't rejoice today, we will not rejoice at all. If we wait until conditions are perfect, we will still be waiting when we die. If we are going to rejoice, it must be in *this* day. This is the day that the Lord has made. This is the Dee Dah Day.

### *Find a "Joy Mentor"*

Each of us knows a few people who are joy-carriers. When we are around them, they breathe life into us. Prize them. Thank them. Above all, get intentional about being with them. That is important, because there are other people in our lives also—people who have rejected joy, who have decided to be victims. They don't want us to be joyful either. They are like the black holes of outer space: If we allow it, they will suck the joy right out of us.

A farmer had a neighbor, a constant complainer, a wet blanket in the linen closet of life. The farmer decided to impress this man for once in his existence, so he bought the world's greatest hunting dog, trained it thoroughly, and invited his joyless friend to go hunting. He showed the neighbor how his dog could stand motionless for an hour and pick up a scent a mile away. No response. From the blind the farmer shot a duck, which landed in the middle of the pond. Upon command, the dog trotted out, *walked on the surface of the water*, retrieved the bird, and dropped him at the feet of his master. "What do you think of that?" the farmer challenged his neighbor. To which his friend responded, "Your dog can't swim, can he?"

We all know people like that. We all have to endure a few joy-destroying people in life. We need to love them as best we can, but we also have to be very careful not to let them shape us. We may need to limit the time we spend with them. We certainly need to restrain their ability to sway our hearts.

Perhaps the least surprising statement in Scripture is found in Proverbs: "Smiling faces make us feel happy." We need to identify a few people who play this role in our lives—especially if we tend to be joy-challenged. Make a joy appointment to spend some time with

such a person this week. We need to spend regular and significant amounts of time around life-enhancing, joy-producing people.

We could take this one step further and ask someone to be our "joy mentor." Find a person who demonstrates this joy and tell her or him that you are trying to break out of your joy-impaired condition. Begin to pray together that the Spirit will produce this fruit in your life in greater abundance.

### *Set Aside a Day a Week*

If joy does not come easily for us, we may have to designate one day a week to be our personal Dee Dah Day, filled with pleasant things. These include things that appear to be trivial: Bonhoeffer wrote that his meals in prison made an opportunity to exercise the discipline of joy.

God cannot endure that un festive, mirthless attitude of ours in which we eat our bread in sorrow, with pretentious, busy haste, or even with shame. Through our daily meals He is calling us to rejoice, to keep holiday in the midst of our working day.

Devote a specific day to acts of celebration so that eventually joy will infuse your entire life. One day a week eat foods you love to

**In general, I believe we have underestimated the importance of pleasure in spiritual formation.**

eat, listen to music that moves your soul, play a sport that stretches and challenges you, read books that refresh your spirit, wear clothes that make you happy, surround yourself with beauty—and as you do these things, give thanks to God for his wonderful goodness. Reflect on what a gracious God he is to have thought of these gifts. Take the time to experience and savor joy,

then direct your heart toward God so that you come to *know* he is the giver of "every good and perfect gift." Nothing is too small if it produces true joy in us and causes us to turn toward God in gratitude and delight.

In general, I believe we have underestimated the importance of pleasure in spiritual formation. In his fictional classic *Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis has a senior demon giving advice to a nephew demon on how to tempt humans. Uncle Screwtape writes,

Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form we are, in a sense, on the Enemy's ground. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures; all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy has produced, at times, or ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden. . . . An ever-increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure is the formula. . . . To get the man's soul and give him *nothing* in return—that is what really gladdens our Father's heart.

### *Unplug for a Week*

The Scriptures record many instances of people fasting from food, Jesus among them. I suspect that were he bodily with us today, Jesus might also talk about fasting of a different sort. Instead of an empty refrigerator, this fast would involve an unplugged home entertainment center.

The statistics are common knowledge: Nielsen reports that television sets in the United States are turned on an average of six hours a day. More than a decade ago, a Detroit newspaper offered 120 families five hundred dollars apiece to endure a month without watching TV; 93 families turned the offer down. (The other 27 families reported their lives significantly improved during the month without television, but then they promptly returned to their former viewing habits.)

One irony in this is that many people watch television because they are tired and want rest for the mind and body. But how often do we hear someone at work say something like this: "I watched TV from the evening news to late-night talk shows, and I am feeling

rejuvenated, renewed, revitalized, and refreshed! What a tremendous, memorable evening that was! I'm so grateful for the gift of television in my life."

The worst thing about TV is not what it puts into our mind so much as what it prevents us from doing. Watching television kills intimacy and conversation and disrupts sustained thought. Therapist Dolores Curren asked a family to write

**Depression is generally as prevalent inside the church as outside.**

down the phrases most heard around the house over a two-week period. The two chart-toppers stunned the family: "What's on?" and "Move."

So try something radical. Engage in the spiritual discipline of unplugging for a week.

Commit to a one-week, cold-turkey, television fast: no *Oprah*, *Dave*, *Guiding Light*, *American Gladiators*, or Disease Movie of the Week.

Literally remove the plug from the socket and leave it out for one week. Ask for God's help in declaring a "Week of Jubilee." Use the freed-up time to do things you have needed or have been planning to do. Get more sleep. Read something. Have a really good conversation.

We live in an age of melancholy. Depression has replaced anxiety as "the common cold of emotional life." Suicide has skyrocketed as a cause of death particularly among young people.

More sobering is the fact that depression is generally as prevalent inside the church as outside. There is at least one notable exception: Janice Egeland has done research among the Amish in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, since the 1970s. Her findings show that the Amish have a significantly lower rate of depression than the general population in America. (The exception is manic-depression, which seems to be genetically influenced in great measure.)

How ironic it is that in a day when we rely so heavily on the entertainment industry to give us relief from both the demands and boredom of everyday life, the least-depressed group in our society is the one that disdains electronics of any kind. In fact, even diagnosing the manic phase of manic-depression was difficult because

of the Amish lifestyle. Typical examples were "racing one's horse and carriage too hard, excessive use of a public telephone, and planning vacations during the wrong seasons."

Here is the great challenge: Is it possible for the church to help people become thoroughly transformed while remaining engaged in what Robert Hughes has called a "Culture of Complaint"? Can we be truly in the world but not of it, as Christ admonished us? The reality of conditions such as depression suggest it may be far harder than we think.

#### *Discipline Your Mind to View Life from a Biblical Perspective*

To a large extent, joy flows from a certain kind of thinking. Cognitive psychologists remind us that always between the events that happen to us and our responses to them lie our *beliefs* or *interpretations* of those events. This thought helps us to understand the irrepressible theme of joy in the New Testament. The New Testament writers were engaged not so much in some form of positive thinking as in what might be called "eschatological thinking." That is, they viewed all events in light of the Resurrection and the ultimate triumph of the risen Christ.

It takes a certain kind of heroism to continue to celebrate what deserves to be celebrated even when all the details go disastrously wrong. A favorite story of mine expressing this kind of spirit is told by Robert Fulghum, about a wedding that was produced on an epic scale by an unhinged character known only as the Mother of the Bride (MOTB). The logistics—from an eighteen-piece brass-and-wind ensemble to gift registries spreading across most of the continental United States to twenty-four bridesmaids, groomsmen, flower-petal-throwers, and ringbearers—were of a scale usually seen only during the military invasion of a sizable country. But the plans were all working—until the climactic moment of the processional:

Ah, the bride. She had been dressed for hours if not days. No adrenaline was left in her body. Left alone with her father in the reception hall of the church while the march of the maidens went on and on, she had walked along the tables

laden with gourmet goodies and absentmindedly sampled first the little pink and yellow and green mints. Then she picked through the silver bowls of mixed nuts and ate the pecans. Followed by a cheeseball or two, some black olives, a handful of glazed almonds, a little sausage with a frilly toothpick stuck in it, a couple of shrimps blanketed in bacon, and a cracker piled with liver pate. To wash this down—a glass of pink champagne. Her father gave it to her. To calm her nerves.

What you noticed as the bride stood in the doorway was not her dress, but her face. White. For what was coming down the aisle was a living grenade with the pin pulled out.

The bride threw up.

Just as she walked by her mother.

And by "threw up," I don't mean a polite little ladylike *urp* into her handkerchief. She puked. There's just no nice word for it. I mean, she hosed the front of the chancel—hitting two bridesmaids, the groom, a ringbearer, and me. . . .

Only two people were seen smiling. One was the mother of the groom. And the other was the father of the bride.

Fulghum explains how they pulled themselves together for a much quieter, gentler ceremony in the reception hall. And how "everybody cried, as people are supposed to do at weddings, mostly because the groom held the bride in his arms through the whole ceremony. And no groom ever kissed a bride more tenderly than he."

But the best part of the story is that, ten years later, everybody was invited back for another party to celebrate this disaster. They watched the whole thing on three TV sets—the MOTB had had three video cameras going at once during the wedding. And this party was thrown by the Mother of the Bride herself.

How could all these people rejoice when everything had gone wrong? Because, in spite of all the mess, the bride still got the groom. At the end of the day, that was all that mattered. The bride got the groom. It was a Dee Dah Day.

How is it possible to become a joyful person in a pain-filled world? Look at the promise that comes right near the very end of the Bible:

Let us rejoice and exult  
and give him the glory,  
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,  
and his bride has made herself ready.

Heaven's groom gets the bride.

The joy that is in store for God's people is so great that the only image that can do it justice is the joy between a lover and his beloved. Then we will see the wedding of which the greatest weddings on this earth have only been a dim foreshadowing.

Then God will dance with his people. Then joy will reign undiminished and uninterrupted. Then will be fulfilled the words of the prophet, who was trying to express the inexpressible:

You shall go out in joy  
and be led back in peace;  
the mountains and the hills before you  
shall burst into song,  
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

The apostle John tried to say them, too.

He will dwell with them as their God;  
they will be his peoples,  
and God himself will be with them;  
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more;  
mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

Then will dawn that great Dee Dah Day that will never end.

# AN UNHURRIED LIFE

## The Practice of "Slowing"

People nowadays take time  
far more seriously than eternity.

THOMAS KELLY

Not long after moving to Chicago, I called a wise friend to ask for some spiritual direction. I described the pace at which things tend to move in my current setting. I told him about the rhythms of our family life and about the present condition of my heart, as best I could discern it. What did I need to do, I asked him, to be spiritually healthy?

Long pause.

"You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life," he said at last. Another long pause.

"Okay, I've written that one down," I told him, a little impatiently. "That's a good one. Now what else is there?" I had many things to do, and this was a long-distance conversation, so I was anxious to cram as many units of spiritual wisdom into the least amount of time possible.

Another long pause.

"There is nothing else," he said.

He is the wisest spiritual mentor I have known. And while he doesn't know every detail about every grain of sin in my life, he knows quite a bit. And from an immense quiver of spiritual sagacity, he drew only one arrow. "There is nothing else," he said. "You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life."

Imagine for a moment that someone gave you this prescription, with the warning that your life depends on it. Consider the possibility that perhaps your life *does* depend on it. Hurry is the great enemy of spiritual life in our day. Hurry can destroy our souls. Hurry can keep us from living well. As Carl Jung wrote, "Hurry is not of the devil; hurry is the devil."

Again and again, as we pursue spiritual life, we must do battle with hurry. For many of us the great danger is not that we will renounce our faith. It is that we will become so distracted and rushed and preoccupied that we will settle for a mediocre version of it. We will just skim our lives instead of actually living them.

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### The Disease: Hurry Sickness

We suffer from what has come to be known as "hurry sickness." One of the great illusions of our day is that hurrying will buy us more time. I pulled into a service station recently where the advertising slogan read, "We help you move faster." But what if my primary need is not moving faster?

*Time* magazine noted that back in the 1960s, expert testimony was given to a subcommittee of the Senate on time management. The essence of it was that because of advances in technology, within twenty years or so people would have to radically cut back on how many hours a week they worked, or how many weeks a year they worked, or else they would have to start retiring sooner. The great challenge, they said, was what people would do with all their free time. Yet thirty years later, not many of us would say that our primary challenge in regard to time is what to do with all the excess.

We will buy anything that promises to help us hurry. The best-selling shampoo in America rose to the top because it combines shampoo and conditioner in one step, eliminating the need for all the time-consuming rinsing people used to have to do. Domino's became the No. 1 name in pizza because the company promised to deliver in thirty minutes or less. ("We don't sell pizza," said their CEO, "We sell delivery.") *USA Today* reports, "Taking a cue from Domino's Pizza, a Detroit hospital guarantees that emergency-room patients will be seen within 20 minutes—or treatment is free." The paper notes that since the offer was made, business has been up 30 percent at the hospital.

We worship at the shrine of the Golden Arches, not because they sell "good food," or even "cheap food," but because it is "fast food." Even after fast food was introduced, people still had to park their cars, go inside, order, and take their food to a table, all of which took time. So we invented the Drive-Thru Lane to enable families to eat in vans, as nature intended.

Our world has become the world of the Red Queen in *Alice in Wonderland*: "Now here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!"

Ironically, all our efforts have not produced what we're after: a sense of what we might call "timefulness," a sense of having enough time. We often experience the opposite. Robert Banks notes that while American society is rich in goods, it is extremely time-poor. Many societies in the two-thirds world, by contrast, are poor in material possessions, by our standards, but they are rich in time. They are not driven or hurried. They live with a sense that there is adequate time to do what needs to be done each day.

Meyer Friedman defines hurry sickness as "above all, a continuous struggle and unremitting attempt to accomplish or achieve more and more things or participate in more and more events in less and less time, frequently in the face of opposition, real or imagined, from other persons." Hurry will keep us consumed by "the cares and riches

and pleasures of life," as Jesus put it, and prevent his way from taking root in our hearts.

Jesus was quite aware of this kind of problem in his day. As we will see, he repeatedly withdrew from crowds and activities. He taught his followers to do likewise. When the disciples returned, their adrenaline pumping, from a busy time of ministry, Jesus told them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." Mark explains that "many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat." That could be the motto for some people today. Some people imagine this to be a good thing that perhaps God will reward one day: "What a life you had! You were even too busy to eat. Well done!"

But Mark did not mean this statement as a commendation. Jesus urged his disciples to take time out. Following Jesus cannot be done at a sprint. If we want to follow someone, we can't go faster than the one who is leading.

We must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from our lives. This does not mean we will never be busy. Jesus often had much to do, but he never did it in a way that severed the life-giving connection between him and his Father. He never did it in a way that interfered with his ability to give love when love was called for. He observed a regular practice of withdrawing from activity for the sake of solitude and prayer. Jesus was often busy, but never hurried.

Hurry is not just a disordered schedule. Hurry is a disordered heart.

Let's do a brief diagnostic exercise. How do we know if we are suffering from this hurry sickness? Here are some symptoms.

#### *Constantly Speeding Up Daily Activities*

If we have hurry sickness, we are haunted by the fear that there are just not enough hours in the day to do what needs to be done. We will read faster, talk faster, and when listening, nod faster to encourage the talker to accelerate. We will find ourselves chafing whenever we have to wait. At a stoplight, if there are two lanes and each contains one car, we will find ourselves guessing—based on

the year, make, and model of each car—which one will pull away the fastest.

At a grocery store, if we have a choice between two check-out lines, we find ourselves counting how many people are in each line, multiplying this number by the number of items per cart. If we have a really bad case of hurry sickness, then even after we get in line we keep track of the person who *would have been me in the other line*. If we get through and the person who would have been me is still waiting, we are elated. We've won. But if the alter-me is walking out of the store and we're still in line, we feel depressed. We have hurry sickness.

### "Multiple-Tasking"

Despite all this rushing around, the hurry-sick person is still not satisfied. So out of the desperate need to hurry, we find ourselves doing or thinking more than one thing at a time. Psychologists speak of this as polyphasic activity; the more hopeful euphemism is multiple-tasking. (It could be called "doing more than one thing at a time," but that takes too long to say.) The car is a favorite place for this. Hurry-sick people may drive, eat, drink coffee, monitor the radio, shave or apply make-up, talk on the car phone, and make gestures—all at the same time. Or they may try to watch television, read, eat dinner, and carry on a conversation simultaneously.

### Clutter

The lives of the hurry-sick lack simplicity. These people often carry around a time organizer the size of Montana. They keep acquiring stacks of books and magazines and then feel guilty for not reading them. They buy time-saving gadgets and don't have the time or patience to read the instructions and figure out how to use them.

Paul Pearsall writes that many of these types cannot seem to get rid of their "stuff." He advises,

You may require a "closet exorcist" experienced in dealing with the demons of closet clutter. . . . A trusted friend can also prevent the "restuffing phenomenon." Restuffing

happens when, in the process of cleaning out closets and drawers, we somehow are stimulated to acquire new stuff.

There are other, less material forms of clutter. Life is cluttered when we are weighed down by the burden of all the things we have failed to say no to. Then comes the clutter of forgetting important dates, of missing appointments, of not following through.

### Superficiality

"Superficiality is the curse of our age," writes Richard Foster. If Superficiality is our curse, then Hurry pronounces the spell. Depth always comes slowly.

This is simply a truth about human formation. Perhaps one reason that Abraham Lincoln achieved the depth of thought he did is that he grew up with so *little* to read. David Donald notes in his biography that Lincoln grew up with access to very few books: the Bible, Aesop's Fables (which he virtually memorized), and a few others. "He must understand everything—even to the smallest thing—minutely and exactly," his step-mother remembered. "He would then repeat it over to himself again and again . . . and when it was fixed in his mind to suit him he never lost that fact or the understanding of it."

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Lincoln himself often spoke of how slowly his mind worked, how even as an adult he read laboriously and out loud. His law partner and biographer William Herndon claimed that "Lincoln read less and thought more than any man in his sphere in America."

But today we have largely traded wisdom for information. We have exchanged depth for breadth. We want to microwave maturity.

### An Inability to Love

The most serious sign of hurry sickness is a diminished capacity to love. Love and hurry are fundamentally incompatible. Love always takes time, and time is one thing hurried people don't have.

A pilot once told me his favorite airline story. An elderly couple were flying first class, sitting behind a businessman who was enormously frustrated with them. They had been just ahead of him in line at the gate, and again boarding the plane, and they moved slowly, but he was in a hurry. When the meal was served, they delayed the businessman again by having to get some pills from the overhead storage, inadvertently dropping a battered duffel bag. "What's the matter with you people?" he exploded, loudly enough for the whole cabin to hear. "I'm amazed you ever get anywhere. Why can't you just stay home?"

To register his anger, the man sat down and reclined his seat back as hard as he could—so hard that the elderly husband's tray of food spilled all over him and his wife. The flight attendant apologized to the couple profusely: "Is there anything we can do?" she asked. The husband explained it was their fiftieth wedding anniversary and they were flying for the first time. "Let me at least bring you a bottle of wine," the flight attendant offered.

She did so. When it was uncorked, the old husband stood up, proposed a toast—and poured the bottle over the head of the impatient businessman sitting in front of them.

And, the pilot told me, everybody in the cabin cheered.

### *Sunset Fatigue*

Hurried people cannot love. Lewis Grant suggests we are afflicted with what he calls "sunset fatigue." When we come home at the end of a day's work, those who need our love the most, those to whom we are most committed, end up getting the leftovers. Sunset fatigue is when we are just too tired, or too drained, or too preoccupied, to love the people to whom we have made the deepest promises. Sunset fatigue has set in, Grant says, when

- you find yourself rushing even when there's no reason to;
- there is an underlying tension that causes sharp words or sibling quarrels;
- you set up mock races ("OK, kids, let's see who can take a bath fastest") that are really about your own need to get through it;

- you sense a loss of gratitude and wonder;
- you indulge in self-destructive escapes from fatigue: abusing alcohol, watching too much TV, listening to country-western music [okay, the last one is mine, not Grant's].

It is because it kills love that hurry is the great enemy of spiritual life. Hurry lies behind much of the anger and frustration of modern life. Hurry prevents us from receiving love from the Father or giving it to his children. That's why Jesus never hurried. If we are to follow Jesus, we must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from our lives—because, by definition, we can't move faster than the one we are following.

We can do this: We can become unhurried people. We can become patient people.

### **Curing the Hurry Sickness**

But we will not become unhurried on our own. We cannot achieve this alone. We will have to enter a life of training. So let's look at practices for the hurry-sick.

#### *"Slowing"*

The first practice is one we might call "slowing." This involves cultivating patience by deliberately choosing to place ourselves in positions where we simply have to wait. (This practice has a definite "gamelike" quality, although we may not like it much, at least at first.)

Over the next month deliberately drive in the slow lane on the expressway. It may be that not swerving from lane to lane will cause you to arrive five minutes or so later than you usually would. But you will find that you don't get nearly so angry at other drivers. Instead of trying to pass them, say a little prayer as they go by, asking God to bless them.

Declare a fast from honking. Put your horn under a vow of silence.

For a week, eat your food slowly. Force yourself to chew at least fifteen times before each swallow.

For the next month, when you are at the grocery store, look carefully to see which check-out line is the longest. Get in it. Let one person go ahead of you.

Go through one day without wearing a watch.

The list could go on, but you get the idea. We must find ways to deliberately choose waiting, ways that make hurry impossible. As we practice them, we should tell God we are trusting him to enable us to accomplish all we need to get done.

Often people worry that if they don't rush, they will accomplish less. In fact, researchers have found that there is simply no correlation between hurry or Type-A behavior and productivity.

We will discover we can survive without hurry. If we practice these ways diligently enough, we will become unhurried people.

### *The Need for Solitude*

A more traditional practice is solitude. Jesus engaged in it frequently. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus went to the wilderness for an extended period of fasting and prayer. He also went into solitude when he heard of the death of John the Baptist, when he was going to choose his disciples, after he had been involved in healing a leper, and after his followers had engaged in ministry. This pattern continued into the final days of his life, when again he withdrew into the solitude of the garden of Gethsemane to pray. He ended his ministry, as he began it, with the practice of solitude.

Jesus taught his followers to do the same. And as he said to them, "Come away to a deserted place," he says to us still. Wise followers of Christ's way have always understood the necessity and benefit of solitude. It is, to quote an old phrase, the "furnace of transformation."

What makes solitude so important? *Solitude is the one place where we can gain freedom from the forces of society that will otherwise relentlessly mold us.*

According to a much-traveled analogy, if we put a frog in a pot of boiling water, it will immediately hop out. But put the frog in water that's at room temperature and heat it slowly, and the creature will stay there until it boils to death. Put him in a lethal environment suddenly, and he will escape. But introduce the danger gradually, and he will never notice.

The truth is that the dangers to which we are most vulnerable are generally not the sudden, dramatic, obvious ones. They are the

ones that creep up on us, that are so much a part of our environment that we don't even notice them.

The deeper truth is that we live in a lethal environment. American society is filled with ideas and values and pressures and temptations about success and security and comfort and happiness that we will not even notice unless we withdraw on occasion. Thomas Merton wrote that the early church fathers placed such a premium on solitude because they considered society to be a shipwreck from which any sane person must swim for his life. These people believed that to let oneself drift along, passively accepting the tenets and values of what they knew as society, was purely and simply a disaster. The apostle Paul put it this way: "Don't let the world around squeeze you into its own mold."

One writer notes an experiment done with mice a few years ago. A researcher found that it takes a high dose of amphetamines to kill a mouse living in solitude. But a group of mice will start hopping around and hyping each other up so much that a dosage *twenty times smaller* will be lethal—so great is the effect of "the world" on mice. In fact, a mouse that had been given no amphetamines at all, placed in a group on the drug, will get so hopped up that in ten minutes or so it will be dead. "In groups they go off like popcorn or firecrackers," the writer observed.

We might guess that only a mouse would be so foolish as to hang out with a bunch of other mice that were so hopped up, going at such a frantic pace in such mindless activity for no discernible purpose, that they would put their own well-being and even lives at risk. It would be wrong to think so. The messages come at us in a continual stream:

"We'll help you move faster. . . . Act now, don't delay! . . . You can buy it now if you'll just stretch—no money down, easy monthly payments. . . . You can earn it if you run a little faster, stay a little longer, work a little harder. . . . It's okay to get old as long as you don't get wrinkled or gray or liver spots or bald—as long as you don't *look* old. . . . It's okay to be frantic and stressed and empty and exhausted—that's the way *everybody* is. . . . We'll help you move faster."

"The press of busyness is like a charm," Kierkegaard wrote. "Its power swells. . . . it reaches out seeking always to lay hold of ever-younger victims so that childhood or youth are scarcely allowed the quiet and the retirement in which the Eternal may unfold a divine growth." The truth is, as much as we complain about it, we are drawn to hurry. It makes us feel important. It keeps the adrenaline pumping. It means we don't have to look too closely at the heart or life. It keeps us from feeling our loneliness.

Solitude is the remedy for the busyness that charms. But what exactly is solitude? What do we *do* when we practice solitude? What should we bring along to that quiet place?

The primary answer, of course, is "nothing." A man recently told me about preparing for his first extended period of solitude. He took books, message tapes, CDs, and a VCR—some of the very things we would think of trying to get away from.

At its heart, solitude is primarily about *not* doing something. Just as fasting means to refrain from eating, so solitude means to refrain from society. When we go into solitude, we withdraw from conversation, from the presence of others, from noise, from the constant barrage of stimulation.

At its heart,  
solitude is primarily  
about not doing  
something.

"In solitude," Henri Nouwen wrote, "I get rid of my scaffolding." Scaffolding is all the stuff we use to keep ourselves propped up, to convince ourselves that we are important or okay. In solitude we have no friends to talk

with, no phone calls or meetings, no television sets, no music or books or newspapers to occupy and distract the mind. Each of us would be, in the words of the old hymn, "just as I am." Neither accomplishments nor résumés nor possessions nor networks would define me—just me and my sinfulness, my desire or lack of desire for God.

### *Practicing Solitude*

Solitude requires relentless perseverance. I find that unless I pull my calendar out and write down well in advance the times when I am committed to times of solitude, it won't happen.

I find it helpful to think about solitude in two categories. We need brief periods of solitude on a regular basis—preferably each day, even at intervals during the day. But we also need, at great intervals, extended periods of solitude—half a day, a day, or a few days.

We may want to begin a particular day by praying over the day's schedule—meetings to attend, tasks to perform, people we will be with—and placing it in God's hands. Through the day we could take five-minute breaks if that is possible, close the door to the office, and remind ourselves that one day the office and the building will be gone—but we will still belong to God.

At the end of the day it can be helpful to review the day with God: to go over the events that took place, to see what he might want to say to us through them, and to hand any anxieties or regrets over to him. The next page has a format that I find helpful.

For most, the best time to review a day is at bedtime, but if you are a confirmed morning person, you may want to do it when you first get up the next morning. A great benefit of this exercise is that we begin to *learn* from our days. When I was in athletics in school

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### **Reviewing the Day with God**

1. Be still for a moment and quiet your mind.
  2. Acknowledge that Jesus is present. Invite him to teach you.
  3. Go back in your mind to when you first woke up. Watch that scene, as if on video. This may lead you to pray for patience, greater love, courage, forgiveness, or other virtues.
  4. Continue through the day, going from scene to scene. As you reflect on them, some scenes may fill you with gratitude, others with regret. Speak directly to the Lord about this. You may also be led to pray for some of the people you were interacting with during the day.
  5. End with a prayer of thanksgiving for God's mercy and love. Ask him to refresh you as you sleep.
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we used to watch videotapes of our performance. Watching the tapes was sometimes painful, yet worth it to be spared our making the same mistakes over and over.

The same idea holds here. When I began to practice solitude with this exercise, I discovered I experienced much more anger than I would ever have thought. I began to be aware of the attitudes and responses that were guiding my life.

### *Extended Solitude*

I also need extended times alone. I try to withdraw for a day once a month or so, and sometime during the year I try to have a retreat for a couple of days. Retreat centers designed for such experiences are becoming more and more common, although any place where you can be undisturbed suffices.

Francis de Sales used the image of a clock to express his need for extended solitude.

There is no clock, no matter how good it may be, that doesn't need resetting and rewinding twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening. In addition, at least once a year it must be taken apart to remove the dirt clogging it, straighten out bent parts, and repair those worn out. In like manner, every morning and evening a man who really takes care of his heart must rewind it for God's service. . . . Moreover, he must often reflect on his condition in order to reform and improve it. Finally, at least once a year he must take it apart and examine every piece in detail, that is every affection and passion, in order to repair whatever defects there may be.

One of the great obstacles to extended solitude is that frequently it may feel like a waste of time. This may happen partly because we are conditioned to feel that our existence is justified only when we are *doing* something. But I believe this feeling comes also because our minds tend to wander. I used to think that if I devoted a large block of time to praying, I should be able to engage

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### **Extended Solitude**

1. Find a place where you can be uninterrupted and alone, such as a park or a retreat center.
2. Spend a brief time the night before to get ready, to ask God to bless the day, and to tell him you want to devote the day to him. This day is your gift to God, but even more, it is a gift God wants to give you. What do you need from the Lord: a sense of healing and forgiveness? Conviction for an apathetic heart? Compassion? A renewed sense of mission? Ask him for this.
3. Arrange the day around listening to God. The following format is adapted from Glandion Carney's book *The Spiritual Formation Toolkit*.

8:00-9:00	Prepare your mind and heart, take a walk, or do whatever will help you set aside concerns over tasks and responsibilities. Try to arrange your morning so you can remain in silence from the time you awaken.
9:00-11:00	Read and meditate on Scripture, taking time to stop to reflect when God seems to be speaking to you through the text.
11:00-12:00	Write down responses to what you have read. Speak to God about them.
12:00-1:00	Eat lunch and take a walk, reflecting on the morning.
1:00-2:00	Take a nap.
2:00-3:00	Set goals that emerge from the day's reflection.
3:00-4:00	Write down these goals and other thoughts in a journal. You may want to do this in the form of a letter to God. Prepare to reenter society.

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in solid, uninterrupted, focused prayer. But I can't. The first time I tried extended solitude, my mind wandered like a tourist with a Eurail pass. I would start praying, and the next thing I knew, I was immersed in an anger fantasy. In this fantasy someone who had hurt me was being deeply wounded by the wrong they had done me as I was righteously vindicated. Another time, after beginning to pray, I found myself the object of a success fantasy so grandiose that it would make Narcissus blush with modesty.

What I have come to realize, over time, is that brief times of focused prayer interspersed with these wanderings is all my mind is capable of at this point. One day I hope to do better. But for now, I find consolation in the words of Brother Lawrence: "For many years I was bothered by the thought that I was a failure at prayer. Then one day I realized I would always be a failure at prayer; and I've gotten along much better ever since."

You may be ready to try spending an extended period of time alone with God—perhaps a day. The first attempt at extended solitude can feel intimidating so some structure such as that described on the previous page may help.

### **Defeating Hurry Sickness**

# INTERRUPTING HEAVEN

## **The Practice of Prayer**

Prayer unites the soul to God.

JULIAN OF NORWICH

There is only one play I can think of in football with an overtly religious name. I saw it recently at a Chicago Bears game. The Bears were a touchdown behind, the clock was ticking off the final few

Why is only that one play named after prayer? There are no "hail Mary kick-off returns" to start games or, to use a more common evangelical prayer, no "Lord, I just want to ask you . . ." draw plays in the first quarter.

I believe Mary is brought in for the last play of the game because prayer is something we generally associate with desperation. The idea behind this terminology is that for the majority of the game I can rely on my own resources. I will depend on my game plan and my personnel. However, at a moment of crisis and desperation when I've run out of time and opportunity, when human cleverness and mortal strength have failed me, and when all other options are gone, that's the time to throw up a prayer. "Hail Mary . . ."

Desperate people pray. They pray without thinking about it; they pray even if they are not sure who they're praying to or if anyone out there is listening at all. People in foxholes pray. So do people who go through divorce, have children that run away, or hear from a doctor that the lab results say the growth is malignant. When we reach the limit of our resources, we pray instinctively, reflexively—like the way a man lacking oxygen gasps for breath and the way a man who is falling reaches out for something to grab.

It is not bad to pray in a time of crisis. One of God's most amazing attributes is that he is humble enough to accept people when they turn to him in sheer desperation, even when they have been ignoring him for years.

Desperation prayers have been the beginning of spiritual life for many people. But by themselves such prayers are not sufficient to sustain spiritual life. Many of us fall into a pattern where the only times we pray are the times when we are prompted by crisis or pain; the rest of the time we rely on our own strength and cleverness.

This pattern points to what we really believe regarding prayer. In most ordinary moments we are not convinced that prayer *really* changes things. Many people believe that their prayers won't change God's actions, so they ask themselves what the point is of praying. As Dallas Willard puts it, "The idea that everything would happen exactly as it does regardless of whether we pray or not is a

specter that haunts the minds of many who sincerely profess belief in God. It makes prayer psychologically impossible, replacing it with dead ritual at best."

### Prayers to Heaven

Let's look at how seriously the writers of Scripture viewed prayer. In the eighth chapter of the book of Revelation, John describes a scene in heaven after the seals have been broken on the scrolls that tell the story of human sin and violence and God's judgment.

Then a remarkable thing happens. John writes that "there was silence in heaven for about half an hour." During this time an angel with a golden censer comes to the altar and offers much incense, which is a representation of prayers arising from earth: "The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand." Following this come great acts of judgment on the earth—pictured by rumbles of thunder, flashes of lightning, and great earthquakes. But what is most striking is that these acts come *in response to the prayers of the saints*.

**All of heaven stops  
so the prayers of  
the saints can rise  
before God.**

Usually we think of events on earth being interrupted because of actions taken in heaven. However, here it is the other way around. All of heaven comes to a standstill. The endless songs and praises of heavenly hosts suddenly stop. Why? Because someone is praying. All of heaven stops so the prayers of the saints—your prayers and mine, every one of them—can rise before God. They are heard. They matter. Prayers of real human beings—like you and me—interrupt heaven.

And what happens next on earth happens because people pray.

Walter Wink says that this is the message of John's text: "History belongs to the intercessors—those who believe and pray the future into being."

History does not belong to the powerful, or the wealthy, or the rulers, or the armies, or the corporations, or the global media

empires. What they do on their own, apart from God, may look impressive for a time. But the day will come when all merely human actions will be tossed, forgotten, on the ash heap of the dead past.

History belongs to the intercessors—to those who believe and pray the future into being. Interceding is what Jesus is doing now: “It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.” His teaching ministry lasted three years. His intercessory ministry has been going on for two thousand.

### The Power of Prayer

The Bible’s teaching on prayer leads overwhelmingly to one conclusion: Prayer changes things. The first extended prayer recorded in Scripture takes place when Abraham finds out Yahweh is about to destroy the town of Sodom. What is striking about the conversation is the care with which Abraham marshals his argument and states his case—clearly he feels he is talking to a person whose course of action really can be affected by what he says: “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? . . . Far be that from you! Shall not the judge of the earth do what is right?”

God says okay, he will spare the city for the sake of fifty righteous people. You can almost hear the wheels turning in Abraham’s head: *Do I dare keep going?*

He dares. “Let me take it on myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Could I negotiate you down to forty-five?”

God agrees to that request too. Abraham keeps whittling the number down—forty, thirty, twenty; then one last shot: “Oh, do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there.”

God nods his head once more and says yes. And in the end he spares Lot and his family, even though there are only four of them and Lot is an immigrant to boot. The moral of the story, according

to Walter Wink, is that it pays to haggle with God. “The fawning etiquette of unctuous prayer is utterly foreign to the Bible. Biblical prayer is impertinent, persistent, shameless, indecorous. It is more like haggling in an oriental bazaar than the polite monologues of the churches.”

Prayer changes things. Thomas Merton, then a young man pursuing great success in a career in literature, felt drawn for reasons he did not understand to spend some time in a religious community with men who devoted much of their days to prayer. He wrote that when he left he was struck by the haste and anxiety of “normal” life: “My heart sank within me. I thought: ‘What am I getting into? Is this the sort of thing I myself have been living in all these years?’” The thought occurred to him that in some real way these few men devoted to prayer “are doing for their land what no army, no congress, no president could ever do as such: they are winning for it the grace and the protection and the friendship of God.”

You don’t know how many people have been strengthened because you asked God to encourage them; how many people have been healed because you prayed for their bodies; how many spiritual runaways have come home because you prayed for their souls. None of us may ever know the true effects of our prayers this side of death. But we do know this: History belongs to the intercessors.

However, prayer does not happen automatically. My hunch is that of all spiritual disciplines, prayer is the one that people feel most guilty about. Somehow it seems that if we really love God prayer should flow out of us without effort or discipline. In fact, this was not the case even with Jesus’ first followers.

They had a front row seat to watch the greatest pray-er who ever prayed. And they noticed that things happened when he prayed.

Once, he took Peter, James, and John with him and went up a mountain to pray. “As he was praying, the appearance of his face

**We may never know  
the true effects of  
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know this: History  
belongs to the  
intercessors.**

changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning." Does that ever happen to you when you pray?

Jesus' followers wanted to know God like that. So one day one of them had an idea. What if Jesus would show them how to do it? Could they pray like that?

Finally he got his courage up and made the request: "Lord, teach us to pray."

This is a startling request because as Jews the disciples would have known all about prayers. They would have grown up with prayers offered through the day, before meals, at the beginning of Sabbath, and when they went to synagogue. They weren't just asking what words to say.

***Prayer is learned behavior. Nobody is born an expert at it. No one ever masters prayer.***

The disciples noticed Jesus looked forward to prayer and actually hungered for it. They saw that somehow prayer fed Jesus' soul the way food fed their stomachs. They observed a richly interactive life between

Jesus and his Father. They noticed that at crisis points—when Jesus was grieving over the death of John the Baptist, when he experienced need, when he was tired from ministry—his consistent response was to pray. They wanted to be nourished by prayer the way that Jesus was. So they asked him to teach them.

Here's the lesson: *Prayer is learned behavior.* Nobody is born an expert at it. No one ever *masters* prayer. As Thomas Merton put it in his book *Contemplative Prayer*: "We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners all our life!"

So let's roll up our sleeves. How do we learn to pray?

### **Prayer Patterns**

Let's start at the very beginning. To learn how to pray we need two things: a time and a place. Linette Martin writes about the single most important rule when it comes to establishing a regular time of prayer:

The way to begin is slowly. I advise five minutes a day. This may feel impossibly short, but it is better to get a short time established than to begin with a longer one that you give up later as being impractical. It should not be longer on one day because it feels nice and shorter on another as the mood takes you. Even if you feel great enthusiasm and want to go longer on one day, please restrict yourself to only five minutes. Set aside the same small block of time day after day. It can be done.

So choose one time each day to have a focused time of prayer. Make it the same time each day. We are busy people, and I know for many it may seem impossible. But if you allow the time to vary, it has a way of evaporating altogether.

Many people get stuck on a kind of prayer treadmill. They go too long without praying, then they feel guilty so they resolve to change their prayer habits. They decide they will pray for vast stretches of time and try to go far longer than they are capable. When they can't sustain it any longer, they give up until the next time they feel guilty. So break the cycle. Keep it to five minutes every day. We want to become masters of prayer overnight, but it doesn't usually work that way.

After some days or weeks—assuming you're human—you will be tempted to quit. You may get discouraged or bored. When this happens, don't play games with your pattern. Don't say, "I'll skip today and do ten minutes tomorrow"—or there's a good chance you'll end up on the weekend needing to pray thirty-five minutes. And if you do miss a day, don't waste time feeling guilty. Go back to five minutes the next day.

Also, it helps to pay some attention to the *setting* where you're going to pray. The Gospels tell us that Jesus did this: "Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place where he prayed." And he taught this to his followers as well: "'Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.' So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place."

Jesus took care to find places that would be free of distractions. The first chapter of Mark's gospel describes Peter looking for Jesus when he was praying. When he finally found Jesus, Peter said, "Everyone is looking for you." There seems to be a slight criticism behind his words: *You have no pager, no cell phone, left us no fax number—what were you thinking?* It apparently did not occur to Peter (at least then) that being inaccessible was precisely Jesus' goal. When I'm praying I can get distracted by noises that normally are inaudible to the human ear, so finding a quiet setting is important to me.

It is interesting that the Gospels record Jesus mostly praying outdoors in places of beauty—up in the mountainside, for instance, or at the sea of Galilee. Contemporary writers sometimes speak of people having different spiritual pathways to God. Jesus apparently had the nature pathway, which is not surprising since he created nature.

Somehow I grew up with the idea that you ought to have a "prayer closet," and a closet is not often a setting of great beauty. So I have learned over the years the importance of finding a place that supports my attempts at prayer. At home, I have a window that I will sit in front of because of the view it offers. I will sometimes draw up another chair to remind me that prayer is not simply me thinking thoughts on my own, that Jesus really is present. During times of longer prayer I will often try to go outside to a lake or (if I'm lucky) to the ocean. Sometimes I'll simply light a candle, which reminds me of the frequent teaching of Scripture that the light of God's presence and wisdom is available to guide me.

Over time, a space that is used again and again for prayer becomes sacred. Just as couples often have favorite restaurants or friends have one particular booth at a restaurant where they always gather, having one place where you have met God in prayer over the years becomes a gift to your soul. I know of a woman who has what she calls a "prayer chair" that has been bathed with tears over decades; another friend of mine has a corner of his office that contains "relics" like a crown of thorns and a shepherd's staff that he often holds while making requests. These places and objects help people enter deeply into prayer.

As for what time of day this should happen, the best idea is to pray when you are at your best. Some people have been taught that it *has* to be in the morning. After all, the passage in Mark I mentioned earlier said Jesus got up "very early in the morning, while it was still dark." "Give God the best time of the day," people will say.

But what if morning is your worst time of the day? You may be the kind of person even Jesus doesn't want to talk to in the morning. Give him *your* best time. God created all kinds of people. Not all of them are morning pray-ers. "God made many other birds beside the larks."

Like any other demanding activity, prayer requires a certain level of preparation. This is especially true in our day. I think it is more difficult for us to pray than for people in past centuries. The pace of our lives causes our minds to race at fast levels. Then our leisure often involves TV or movies, which use external stimulation and noise to keep us from becoming bored. And if we do get bored, we have the remote control ready. All day long we are flooded with noise. In addition most of us are so sleep-deprived that if we do get quiet and still for more than a few minutes, we fall to sleep. (Quite seriously, when I hold prayer retreats that last a half-day or day, the biggest single barrier to prayer people struggle with is their inability to stay awake.) So our ability to give sustained, focused, quiet attention is probably at an all-time low.

This means we need a little help to get started. Henri Nouwen once said that when we go to pray, thoughts jump around in our minds like monkeys jumping around on banana trees. So at the beginning of prayer it is important to take a few moments to allow the monkeys to settle down. You may want to do this simply by taking a few deep breaths and allowing your mind to slow down. You may want a physical object to focus your eyes on, like a flower or a lit candle. You may simply want to whisper "Heavenly Father" a few times, until your mind is composed enough to go further.

**Like any other demanding activity, prayer requires a certain level of preparation.**

## Simple Prayer

What should we pray about? Whole books have been written on that subject, but this chapter is for beginners, so I want to focus on what Richard Foster calls “simple prayer.”

The problem is that my mind has a steady stream of thoughts: will I get a year-end bonus, will the meeting I’m supposed to lead come off all right, what’s for dinner—but none of these things seem spiritual. So I force myself to pray for things that seem nobler—missionaries and world peace. But there is a gap between what I am supposed to pray for and what I am really thinking about.

Removing this gap is what simple prayer is about. In simple prayer, I pray about what is really on my heart, not what I wish was on my heart. As Foster put it, “We bring ourselves before God just as we are, warts and all. Like children before a loving father, we open our hearts and make our requests. We do not try to sort out the good from the bad. . . . We tell God, for example, how frustrated we are with the co-worker at the office or the neighbor down the street. We ask for food, favorable weather, and good health.”

You may wonder at offering God prayer that seems so trivial—even selfish. However, nothing kills prayer faster than when I pretend in prayer to be more noble than I really am. Dallas Willard sees this:

Prayer simply *dies* from efforts to pray about “good things” that honestly do not matter to us. The way to get to meaningful prayer for those good things is to start by praying for what we are truly interested in. The circles of our interests will inevitably grow in the largeness of God’s love. . . . Many people have found prayer impossible because they thought they should only pray for wonderful but remote needs they actually had little or no interest in or even knowledge of.

Simple prayer is the most common type of prayer in Scripture. Jesus himself teaches it when he tells us to pray for our daily bread. Sometimes it looks amazingly non-spiritual, as when Gideon asks God to give a few more reasons why he should trust him or when

Simple prayer is the most common type of prayer in Scripture.

Moses complains about his job description. (“Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,’ to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors?”) Or,

in a truly remarkable example, when Elijah prays to complain about a group of youths calling him “baldy” (take a look at 2 Kings 2:24). This doesn’t seem like the prayer of a spiritual giant.

Of course, I’d like to grow so that my concerns become increasingly less selfish. But prayer—like any other relationship—must begin in honesty if it is to grow. C. S. Lewis wrote that in prayer we must “lay before Him what is in us, not what ought to be in us.”

### *Learning to Be Fully Present*

It is time to be honest: Does your mind ever wander when you pray?

Mine does. I used to think the day would come when I would be capable of vast stretches of purely focused prayer, but so far it has not happened. Something about praying often seems to push my mind into a kind of Spiritual Attention Deficit Disorder.

For a long time I felt guilty about this. I thought it involved a kind of failure. And of course, sometimes it does indicate a need to pause and refocus my attention, as we discussed earlier. But over time I have learned that if my mind keeps returning to a particular topic during prayer, it is probably an indication that this is the topic that is of most concern to me and I need to talk to God about.

I remember one day sitting down to pray and noticing that I was in the middle of an anger fantasy involving a leader from a church I used to serve. In my anger fantasies I rarely lash out at someone overtly—that wouldn’t seem very pastoral. Instead, I made this person I was angry at realize how miserably he had behaved by heaping coals of reproach on his head.

It occurred to me that I might have some issues around resentment and forgiveness to deal with. And I understood that rather

than try to repress this thought and return to my original prayer agenda, I needed to stop and talk with God about my anger.

Sometimes I will be praying and notice that I am having a fantasy about achieving some grandiose accomplishment or doing something that requires great courage (I'm not going to give any examples—this is embarrassing enough already). At those times what I need to talk to God about is my need to feel important and inappropriate ways I feel that need. I may need to pause during prayer to be reminded by God that I am loved simply because he made me and has redeemed me.

**Talking to God directly about what is happening has made prayer become a much more lively experience.**

It may well be that when your mind wanders, it is wandering to what your heart most needs to speak with God about. A friend once told me that it may be far better to think of these wandering thoughts as stepping stones to prayer rather than as barriers.

This is a part of learning to be *fully present* when praying. We all know what it is like to have a conversation with someone when they are distracted or preoccupied and are with us in body only. The same thing can easily happen in prayer. So I have had to learn to become aware of and speak with God about what is actually happening within me during prayer.

I learned this through conversations with a spiritual director—someone I met with on a regular basis solely for the purpose of learning more about prayer. I would write down in a journal a review of what had taken place each time I prayed. Often in talking with my spiritual director afterward I would say something like: "I was quite tired while I prayed Monday." And she would ask me: "Did you speak to the Lord about this?"

—"No."

—"Do you think it would be a good idea to do that?"

—"Yes."

I was humbled by how long it took to learn this one lesson. To be aware of what is happening within me when I pray—whether I

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## A Review of Prayer

Sometimes people fail to learn more about prayer because they don't reflect on what actually happens when they pray. This is an exercise to help us learn to pray.

Think of this as what we might do after a visit with a good friend. We spend a few moments alone and think about our time together. We recall moments when we felt especially close, or perhaps moments when there was conflict or confusion. We remember saying something that feels unfinished or needs to be resolved. We are grateful for the time we were able to spend with that friend.

Here is how you might review your prayer:

- Take three or four minutes after you have finished praying to reflect on the prayer. This is not part of the prayer, but a separate exercise.
- How did the prayer get started? Were you aware of God's presence, or was there a sense that you were simply thinking by yourself?
- Did any parts of the prayer seem especially "alive" as you prayed? Did you have times of strong convictions or emotion, and if so, what were they? Did they seem to be moving you closer to God, or farther away?
- What difficulties did you encounter? Did you feel tired or bored or experience other barriers? Did you find your mind wandering, and if so, to what? What were you praying over when this happened? How did you respond?
- Did you have any sense of being called to respond or carry out some action? If so, what was it?
- What was the general "tone" of your prayer: warm and loving? difficult or painful? dark? reassuring? sobering? foggy?

Write down the results of this review, as that can help you learn from your prayers over time.

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am tired, or bored, or excited, or distracted—and then *talking to God directly about what is happening* has made prayer become a much more lively experience in my life.

### *Interceding for Others*

While simple prayer may be the type most commonly *practiced* in Scripture, intercession is perhaps the kind of prayer most commonly *commanded* in Scripture. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that “intercessory prayer is the purifying bath into which the individual and the fellowship must enter every day.” When I intercede for others, the circle of my concern becomes expanded a little beyond myself. More than that, when I intercede for others, God is at work in ways I do not understand.

One of my favorite stories about intercessory prayer comes from Tony Campolo. A prayer meeting was held for him just before he spoke at a Pentecostal college chapel service. Eight men took Tony to a back room of the chapel, had him kneel, laid their hands on his head, and began to pray. That’s a good thing, Tony wrote, except that they prayed a long time, and the longer they prayed, the more tired they got, and the more tired they got, the more they leaned on his head. “I want to tell you that when eight guys are leaning on your head, it doesn’t feel so good.”

To make matters worse, one of the men was not even praying for Tony. He went on and on praying for somebody named Charlie Stoltzfus: “Dear Lord, you know Charlie Stoltzfus. He lives in that silver trailer down the road a mile. You know the trailer, Lord, just down the road on the right-hand side.” (Tony said he wanted to inform the pray-er that it was not necessary to furnish God with directional material.) “Lord, Charlie told me this morning he’s going to leave his wife and three kids. Step in and do something, God. Bring that family back together.”

Tony writes that he finally got the Pentecostal preachers off his head, delivered his message, and got in his car to drive home. As he drove onto the Pennsylvania Turnpike, he noticed a hitchhiker. I’ll let him tell it from there:

We drove a few minutes and I said: “Hi, my name’s Tony Campolo. What’s yours?” He said, “My name is Charlie Stoltzfus.” I couldn’t believe it!

I got off the turnpike at the next exit and headed back. He got a bit uneasy with that and after a few minutes he said, “Hey mister, where are you taking me?” I said, “I’m taking you home.” He narrowed his eyes and asked, “Why?”

I said, “Because you just left your wife and three kids, right?” That blew him away. “Yeah! Yeah, that’s right.” With shock written all over his face, he plastered himself against the car door and never took his eyes off me.

Then I really did him in as I drove right to his silver trailer. When I pulled up, his eyes seemed to bulge as he asked, “How did you know that I lived here?” I said, “God told me.” (I believe God did tell me.) . . .

When he opened the trailer door his wife exclaimed, “You’re back! You’re back!” He whispered in her ear and the more he talked, the bigger her eyes got.

Then I said with real authority, “The two of you sit down. I’m going to talk and you two are going to listen!” Man, did they listen! . . . That afternoon I led those two young people to Jesus Christ.

Of course, it is not often (at least in my experience) to have prayers answered in such a dramatic fashion. But that is not the point. Jesus often taught about intercessory prayer, and if his teachings could be summarized by a single word it would probably be “persistence.” He told parables about people who would not stop requesting—stubborn widows who had no power except the power to nag a corrupt judge, needy neighbors who wouldn’t stop banging on the door to get some food, small children who were quite adamant that their father would answer their requests. All these stories pointed in the same direction—if persistence pays off even on the human level where we have to overcome resistance and apathy on the part of those we approach, how much more should

we continue to persist when we approach a heavenly Father whose love and wisdom exceed our wildest imaginings.

### Prayer As Relationship

Prayer, perhaps more than any other activity, is the concrete expression of the fact that we are invited into a relationship with God. Prayer is "talking with God about what we are doing together," as Dallas Willard puts it. In addition to all the other work that gets done through prayer, perhaps the greatest work of all is the knitting of the human heart together with the heart of God. I have sat by the bedside of many people who have reached the end of their lives, and have heard them express regrets about many activities—years wasted in obsessions over work, time thrown away in pursuit of more money. I have never yet heard a person at the end of their life regret time they had spent in prayer. For where there is much prayer there is much love.

Richard Foster writes of a friend walking through a shopping mall with his two-year-old son. The boy was cranky and out of sorts, and nothing the father did would settle him down.

When nothing else works the father finally picks his son up, holds him in his arms, and begins to sing to him a song that he makes up as he goes along: "I love you. I love the way you laugh. I'm glad I get to be your dad."

Suddenly this song does what nothing else could. His son's eyes get wide, his mouth closes and grins, he nestles into his father's chest and listens all the way out to the car.

When his father puts him into the car seat and buckles him in, his son throws out his arms and says, "Sing it to me again, Daddy. Sing it again."

Prayer is like that. With simplicity of heart we allow ourselves to be gathered up into the arms of the Father and let him sing his love song over us.

Sing it again.

# "APPROPRIATE SMALLNESS"

## The Practice of Servanthood

We are all worms. But I do believe  
that I am a glowworm.

WINSTON CHURCHILL

Leon, Joseph, and Clyde all suffered from a messiah complex. It was not just a touch of narcissism or a dash of grandiosity. They were three chronic psychiatric patients at a hospital in Ypsilanti, Michigan, all diagnosed with psychotic delusional disorder, grandiose type. Each one maintained he was the reincarnation of Jesus Christ. Each one believed he was the central figure around whom the world revolved: the three little messiahs.

Psychologist Milton Rokeach wrote *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti* about his attempts to help these men come to grips with the truth about themselves and learn to be just Leon, Joseph, and Clyde.

Rokeach spent two years working with the men, but change came hard. It was as if they were not sure they could bear to live if they weren't who they thought they were. They could be very rational in other aspects of life but, as Rokeach put it, they would hold onto messianic delusions "even though they are grotesque, ego-defensive distortions of reality."

With little to lose, Rokeach decided to try an experiment. He put the three men into one small group. For two years the three delusional messiahs were assigned adjacent beds, ate every meal together, worked together at the same job, and met daily for group discussions. Rokeach wanted to see if rubbing up against other would-be messiahs might diminish their delusion—a kind of messianic twelve-step recovery group.

The experiment led to some interesting conversations. One of the men would claim, "I'm the messiah, the Son of God. I am on a mission. I was sent here to save the earth."

"How do you know?" Rokeach would ask.

"God told me."

And one of the other patients would counter, "I never told you any such thing."

Aim for the Three Messiahs and you end up playing the Three Stooges—Larry, Moe, and Curly arguing over their place in the Trinity. As we read about this, we don't know whether to laugh or cry.

The bitter irony is, the very delusion to which they clung so tenaciously is what cut them off from life. To stop being the messiah sounded terrifying. But it would have been their salvation, if they could only have tried. If Leon and Joseph and Clyde could have stopped competing to see who gets to be the messiah, they could have become Leon and Joseph and Clyde. ("Now, with God's help, I shall become myself.")

Every once in a while, one of the men would get a glimmer of reality. Leon eventually decided that he wasn't actually married to the Virgin Mary after all—she was his sister-in-law. What little progress they made resulted from their togetherness. But that change was only a glimmer, and the light of reality never shone very bright or lasted very long.

To maintain the illusion that you are the messiah, you must shut out any evidence to the contrary. If you want to be your own god, you have to settle for living in a tiny universe where there is room for only one person. Your world could grow infinitely bigger if you

were only willing to become, in the words of a friend of mine, "appropriately small."

### The Oldest Sin

I have my own share of a messiah complex. It is not the kind that would get me sent to Ypsilanti. But in its own way, it is just as serious and irrational as the dilemma of Leon, Joseph, and Clyde.

You have a share as well. In fact, the sin of pride is the oldest one in the Book. The writer of Genesis states that it was through pride that the serpent tempted Eve to eat the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden: "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and *you will be like God.*" And we have all, in our own way, been trying to take God's

**We have all, in our own way, been trying to take God's place ever since Eden.**

place ever since. We have all been inmates in the same asylum.

How do we recognize pride in ourselves? Let us look at its features, starting with the milder forms.

### Vanity

Vanity involves a preoccupation with my appearance or image. If we exercise in spandex—ever—there's a good chance we have this problem. If we work out at a gym where there are mirrors on the wall and we watch, that's a strong sign also. If, when we get new photographs developed, we pretend we are looking at the other people in the picture while secretly looking only at ourselves, we might very well have this problem. If you wear makeup, there's a good chance you're married to someone with this problem.

Vanity is perhaps the most common form of pride. It can be irritating and silly, but it is fortunately not the most dangerous.

### Stubbornness

"One who is often reprov'd, yet remains stubborn, will suddenly be broken beyond healing," says the writer of Proverbs. Stubbornness is the pride that causes us to shun correction. It renders us

unable to stop defending ourselves. When someone points out an error or flaw, we evade or deny or blame someone else. (This is difficult to penetrate. Defensive people rarely thank us for pointing out their defensiveness.)

**Exclusion**

At the deepest level, pride is the choice to exclude both God and other people from their rightful place in our hearts. Jesus said that the essence of spiritual life is to love God and to love people. *Pride destroys our capacity to love.* The greedy and the gluttonous may still be capable of at least a certain kind of love, but pride is a form of antilove. Pride moves us to exclude instead of to embrace. Pride moves us to bow down before a mirror rather than before God.

**At the deepest level, pride is the choice to exclude both God and other people from their rightful place in our hearts.**

Pride moves us to judge rather than to serve. Pride means not only that we want to be smart and wealthy, but also that we will not be satisfied until we are smarter and wealthier than those around us. Pride is essentially comparative in nature.

Jesus himself made this connection when he told a story about two men at prayer. The sins of the tax collector were obvious to all: greed, dishonesty, corruption. The Pharisee thanked God that he was in a

different category: "I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." (The Pharisee appeared to be seeking "extra credit"—fasting was commanded for only one day a year.) The Pharisee was right about two categories, but he was mistaken about which one was okay. He was noxious in the sight of God because he failed at the first command to love and didn't even recognize his need for God's help. He did not embrace sinners. He did not recognize that his own sin was greater than the tax collector's. He didn't realize that he was the biggest sinner in the room. Luke says Jesus told this story to some "who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else." Pride and lovelessness always go together.

**That Confusing Thing Called Humility**

Where once pride was recognized as a fatal flaw, in our day it comes close to being celebrated. We live in what Christopher Lasch has called "the Culture of Narcissism." Muhammad Ali's signature line expressed the quest of the rest of us: "I am the greatest." Boxing promoter Don King was quoted in the *Los Angeles Times* as saying, "I never cease to amaze my own self"—and then added, "I say that humbly." How would that come out if he were to say it with pride?

In place of pride, Jesus invites us to a life of humility: "All who humble themselves will be exalted." But we have become badly confused about humility. We know we ought to become humble, but we're not sure it is all that desirable. We're not even sure what a humble person is like.

What does it mean to "humble yourself" in everyday life? Let's say we take this seriously. Someone compliments us on the way we look. We are trying to live in God's kingdom and respond as Jesus would if he were in our place. What do we do?

- Look down at the ground, shuffle our feet, and say, "I'm not really attractive. It's just that the light in here is pretty dim."
- Boldly speak the truth by saying, "I'm terribly interested in what you say. Tell me more, and let us celebrate this good news together."
- Quote Proverbs 11:22 in order to correct the other person's superficial focus on physical appearance: "Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without good sense." (This will pretty much remove any problem of receiving too many compliments.)
- Be direct and to the point: "You are giving me a swelled head. Get behind me, Satan."
- Smile, say "thank-you," then be quiet.

Humility is not about convincing ourselves—or others—that we are unattractive or incompetent. It is not about "beating

ourselves up" or trying to make ourselves nothing. If God wanted to make us nothing, he could have done it.

Humility has to do with submitted willingness. It involves a healthy self-forgetfulness. We will know we have begun to make progress in humility when we find that we get so enabled by the Holy Spirit to live in the moment that we cease to be preoccupied with ourselves, one way or the other. When we are with others, we are truly

**Humility involves a Copernican revolution of the soul, the realization that the universe does not revolve around us.**

with them, not wondering how they can be of benefit to us.

Indeed, humility involves a Copernican revolution of the soul, the realization that the universe does not revolve around us. Humility always brings a kind of relief.

A friend named Gwen Bird was teaching a Sunday school class and decided to have the children "reenact" the Creation. This required children to portray animals

and plant life. One six-year-old, whom we will call Jonathan, was assigned to stand on a ladder and shine a flashlight on the whole proceedings. He was supposed to represent God. Just about the time the creeping things were starting to creep over to where the swimming things were supposed to swim, Gwen felt a tug on her skirt. It was "God." He wanted out. "I'm just feeling too crazy to be God today," said Jonathan. "Could you get somebody else?"

Humility, if ever we could grow into it, would not be a burden. It would be an immense gift. Humility is the freedom to stop trying to be what we're not, or pretending to be what we're not, and accepting our "appropriate smallness." In Luther's words, humility is the decision to "let God be God."

### **The Elusive Pursuit**

But right here we meet a difficulty. How on earth can we pursue humility? Pride is a persistent problem for people who strive for spiritual growth.

Once in a while I go on a diet. At those times, if I am in a restaurant, watching people eat, I find certain thoughts involun-

arily running through my mind. *How can people eat this stuff? How can they treat their bodies this way? Don't they know this junk is lethal? Have they no discipline, no self-restraint? Are these the ones, then, of whom St. Paul wrote, "Their end is destruction; their god is the belly"?*

I get these thoughts even though—or perhaps more precisely, because—these people are eating the same things I ate yesterday before my diet began and will be eating again next week after I have given it up.

Here is the problem: When I try to do something good, I am intensely aware of it. And I tend to be aware of other people who aren't putting forth the same effort. Then I tend to think they should: I start to compare my effort with their sloth. The result is pride, comparison, judgmentalism, and a lack of love. (Ironically, these people may be more virtuous than I in a thousand other ways; they may have received much less support and encouragement and teaching than I—but these thoughts are less likely to occur to me.)

One of the hardest things in the world is to stop being the prodigal son without turning into the elder brother. So how can humility be pursued?

### **Following Jesus in the Practice of Servanthood**

Richard Foster writes,

More than any other single way the grace of humility is worked into our lives through the Discipline of service. . . . Nothing *disciplines* the inordinate desires of the flesh like service, and nothing *transforms* the desires of the flesh like serving in hiddenness. The flesh whines against service but screams against hidden service. It strains and pulls for honor and recognition.

Here, as elsewhere in regard to spiritual life, our teacher is Jesus. The Lord said that he had come "not to be served but to serve." Many people think of this as a temporary interruption of Jesus' normal experience, which would be to *receive* service. In fact, serving is God's business.

The idea of divine servanthood is beautifully expressed in Gerald Hawthorne's translation of the great tribute to Christ expressed in Philippians 2:6-11. Many biblical scholars believe this passage existed originally as a hymn—one of the oldest confessions of the early church. The text says we should have the same attitude, or mindset, as Christ, who "being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God to be grounds for grasping, but poured himself out, taking the very nature of a servant."

The participle *being* is known in Greek as a circumstantial participle. How we are to translate such a participle depends on the context—the "circumstances" surrounding it. Circumstantial participles may be used to express purpose, result, duration, or several other qualities. Consider a couple of examples:

*Being* Chicago Bulls fans, we predict our team will win the title.

In this sentence we observe that *being* expresses cause, and therefore we might translate it this way: "*Because we are* Chicago Bulls fans, we predict our team will win the title."

*Being* Chicago Cubs fans, we predict our team will win the title.

The Cubs can't quite equal the Bulls' record in recent years, not having won the World Series since 1908. Therefore we would probably consider this instance of *being* concessive and might translate the sentence thus: "*Despite the fact that we are* Cubs fans, we predict our team will win the title."

With all this in mind, how are we to understand the meaning of Paul's hymn to the servanthood of Christ?

It is possible to translate *being* as a concessive. In that case Paul would be saying we should have a mindset like Christ

who, *although or in spite of the fact that he was in nature God*, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but poured himself out, taking on the very nature of a servant.

From a human standpoint, this makes perfect sense. This is just the sort of way we would think about the statement. Jesus became a servant *in spite of the fact* that he was God. Several Bible translations take it just this way.

But Hawthorne writes that this is to miss the essential point Paul is making about Christ. The correct way to understand Paul's thinking, Hawthorne says, is to take that little verb as the *cause* of Christ's action. In other words:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, who—*precisely because he was in very nature God*—did not consider equality with God to be grounds for grasping, but poured himself out, taking the very nature of a servant.

We perceive here the sheer goodness of God.

In an ancient Greek myth, Zeus and Hermes came down to earth for a brief time disguised as poor slaves. They did this to fool human beings, to get a reading on the level of homage people pay to the gods. When Zeus and Hermes found out what they wanted to know, they threw off their rags and revealed themselves in all their Olympian splendor. It was Clark Kent and Superman all over again. They took on the outward form of a servant, but that was just a disguise.

**When Jesus came  
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vealing who God is.**

Jesus did not take on the "outward form" of a servant. Paul uses the same term to describe both Jesus' servanthood and his Godhood. (It is the word *morphe*—our little morphing word again.) When Jesus came in the form of a servant, he was not *disguising* who God is. He was *revealing* who God is.

I remember hearing a Christian speaker say once that pride is forbidden to human beings, but is okay in God because, after all, he is God. This is wrong. God is the Infinite Servant. God is the most humble being in all the universe. Jesus did not come as a servant *in spite of the fact* that he is God; he came *precisely because of the fact* that he is God.

*Jesus' Plan for His Followers*

Jesus knew that his own followers would wrestle with the messiah complex, so he decided to put them in a small group together. For two years they ate meals together, met together daily for group discussions, went everywhere together. And sure enough, one day they "argued with one another who was the greatest." It will happen in any gathering of human beings: Hang out with a group of people long enough, and the messiah complex will rear its ugly head.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it like this:

We know who it is that sows this thought in the Christian community. But perhaps we do not bear in mind enough that no Christian community ever comes together without this thought immediately emerging as a seed of discord. Thus at the very beginning of Christian fellowship there is engendered an invisible, often unconscious, life-and-death contest. "There arose a reasoning among them"; this is enough to destroy a fellowship.

So Jesus took a little child, and had his Leons and Clydes and Josephs gather around. He told them their job was to welcome, to receive, to serve this little child. They needed to do this, not just for the child's sake, but for their own. It is through servanthood that they will come to see the truth about themselves.

*I'm Not Superman*

Growing up, I loved Superman because he was so strong. Clark Kent fooled people sometimes, but his vulnerability was just an act. Underneath was the man of steel. Superman came to help people who were weak and needy; but he himself was never afraid, never confused. Superman never joined a twelve-step recovery group, even though he had lost both his biological parents and the planet he had called home. He never joined a lonely hearts club, although he was always alone. He never got into therapy, even though he wore blue tights and a cape beneath his regular clothes.

I wanted to be Superman. I wanted his X-ray vision, wanted to bend steel with my bare hands, and most of all wanted his chest, with that giant red S on it. I never had the kind of chest that could accommodate a red S—a less curvy letter, perhaps, a lowercase l or i.

Sometimes we adults try to be Superman. We try to look smarter or more successful or more spiritual than we are. We try to answer questions we don't understand. But it is a heavy burden, trying to be Superman when we're grown up.

There is another way to help people out instead of trying to be the Superpeople we aren't. The primary reason Jesus calls us to servanthood is not just because other people need our service. It is because of what happens to us when we serve.

This has to do with the nature of the relationship between authentic helping and healing. We discover this difference in Ernest Kurtz's excellent book *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous*.

Not long after he found sobriety, Bill Wilson—known in AA lore as "Bill W"—realized he was about to get drunk. In desperation, he sought and found the name of another alcoholic, Dr. Bob, to whom he could tell his story. Ultimately, Dr. Bob also became sober and with Bill W became the cofounder of Alcoholics Anonymous. But Bill W understood that the main reason for telling his story was not to save Dr. Bob; rather, if he didn't give away what he had, he would get drunk again.

Bill W knew that it was not because he was strong and Dr. Bob was weak that he was able to help Dr. Bob. Bill W could help because he was weak, and in helping, he received strength.

This truth went deep. As AA became known, Bill W began giving interviews and became known as the "founder" of the organization. Gradually he grew too busy and began to neglect his family, but he told himself that all those alcoholics needed him. Friends pulled him aside and spoke truth to him: "You are on a road to death. You are thinking of yourself as unique; exceptional—and this is typical alcoholic thinking."

Like Bill W, we have to realize that we are not Superpeople or messiahs. We must embrace limitations. That is whence strength

comes. God is not chewing his fingernails over whether or not we can save alcoholics.

We must minister out of weakness. The reason we help others is not because we are strong and they need us; it is because if we don't help them, we will end up a hopeless relic.

Why does AA insist on anonymity? The purpose is not only that people can attend AA meetings without being exposed to the outside world as alcoholics; there is the added reason that no one is allowed to use AA as a vehicle to fame. The founders realized the fatal lure of celebrity. The only way to life was to remain a fellowship of drunks helping each other.

That is the kind of servanthood Jesus calls us to—a society of sinners helping each other.

## A Life of Servanthood

How do we enter a life of servanthood?

### 1. The Ministry of the Mundane

Jesus took a little child in his arms and said, in effect, "Here's your ministry. Give yourselves to those who can bring you no status or clout. Just help people. You need this little child. You need to help this little child, not just for her sake, but more for your sake. For if you don't, your whole life will be thrown away on an idiotic contest to see who is the greatest. But if you serve her—often and well and cheerfully and out of the limelight—then the day may come when you do it without thinking, 'What a wonderful thing I've done.' Then you will begin serving naturally, effortlessly, for the joy of it. Then you will begin to understand how life in the kingdom works."

This might be called "the ministry of the mundane." The opportunity is offered to us countless times a day. A colleague asks for help with a project at work. Someone's car stalls by the side of the road.

This ministry can happen at home, in the middle of the night when one of the children cries. I could fake being asleep and then, as my wife is leaving the room, say a few words very groggily, as if I would have tended the child but I'm just a heavier sleeper so it's too

late now. This way I get both the credit for wanting to help and the luxury of staying in bed.

But here's what can happen. I could get up and take care of her. Instead of being resentful, I could be thankful she's alive. During the day, instead of focusing on all the "ministry tasks" she is keeping me from, I could just focus on being there to help her. If I do this, I become a little less addicted to having to have my own way. I become freer to serve someone else without thinking, "Wow, what a wonderful husband and father I am!"

This kind of servanthood can even be fun. In fact, it is almost impossible to serve without creating a greater sense of intimacy and community. I remember that in the early days of parenthood, Nancy would tell me that few things created within her a greater feeling of closeness to me than when I did acts of service. She said that my vacuuming the carpet felt like an act of valuing her. When I cleaned the garage, she felt a strong sense of oneness and connectedness between us. She said that when she saw me bathing our kids, she felt a physical attraction toward me.

Families can be wonderful places to pursue the practice of servanthood. This is the theme of Ernest Boyer's book *A Way in the World*. The idea for the book came to him while he was at a seminar on spiritual life that looked at the importance of the desert—for spending vast amounts of time in isolation—in the history of spirituality. When he contrasted this with his life, he was moved to ask, "Is there child care in the desert?"

Of course, child care is not something we have to be excused from to pursue spiritual formation. Caring for children in and of itself—when it is bathed in prayer and offered with as much grace and energy as we can muster—is one of the most powerful tools for transformation available to us.

Let me issue one note of caution: It is generally easier to hear about serving than to actually *serve*. I know of a woman who, when she was facing an important operation, asked her husband to look after the children over the weekend. He said no, he was going to attend a huge rally for men that would teach them how to live as

Christian husbands and fathers. He refused to serve his wife on the grounds that he had to attend a conference where he would be taught and inspired to serve his wife!

Authentic community is characterized perhaps more than anything else by mutual servanthood and submission. When Jesus said the last shall be first, and the least shall be great, and the slave the greatest of all, he wasn't giving orders. He was simply describing the truth about God's kind of community and how different it looks from the way things generally work in our world.

## 2. *The Ministry of Being Interrupted*

Another form of service might be called the ministry of availability. In the Russian church certain people called *poustinikki* would devote themselves to a life of prayer. They would withdraw to the desert (*poustinia*) and live in solitude, but not in isolation. (The Russian word for solitude means "being with everybody.") By custom, "the latch was always off the door" as a sign of availability, according to Tilden Edwards. "The *poustinik's* priority at any time was his neighbor's need (which might stretch beyond prayer and counsel to physical labor, as at harvest time)."

Sometimes in our work we must be interruptible for tasks that are not on our agenda. Sometimes we must live with the "latch off the door." Sometimes we need to be available to talk or pray with troubled people—people whom we will not be able to "cure" and who can't contribute to our career success.

So that I can practice this, occasionally I will set aside a day off at home to be a "day of secret service," when I am simply available to my family and have no agenda of projects or tasks of my own. The idea is that when my only task is to be available, it is impossible to be interrupted. The goal of the day is simply to serve. But it is always humbling to see how quickly my need to create my own personal agenda arises.

Sometimes service involves delays and interruptions that come from following the rules everybody else follows. Muhammad ("the Greatest") Ali once allegedly refused to fasten his seat belt on an air-

plane. After repeated requests by the flight attendant to buckle up, Ali finally said, "Superman don't need no seat belt." To which the attendant is said to have replied, "Superman don't need no airplane."

We are all of us would-be Supermen. If we can't fly on our own, we would at least like to think we're special enough to be exempt from the rules. When we patiently wait our turn in a traffic jam when we're tempted to swerve from lane to lane and go faster at someone else's expense, it can be a tiny reminder that contrary to the bumper sticker, the road doesn't belong to us. The other people on it are just as important.

Sometimes service means doing routine tasks even if we could have someone else do them. There is a story about Abraham Lincoln—possibly apocryphal but certainly in character—that a cabinet member once saw him shining his shoes. The cabinet member expressed surprise that the president of the United States was blacking his own boots. Lincoln responded, "Whose boots do you expect me to black?"

Service does not mean we do nothing but mundane tasks. Nor does it mean our day should be filled with nothing but interruptions. Knowing when to be available for "the ministry of the mundane" takes discernment and wisdom. Generally speaking, the higher our grandiosity quotient, the greater our need for this ministry.

The ministry of the mundane will, it is hoped, be helpful to others, but it is also a ministry to us ourselves—a grandiosity buster. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote of this as the ministry of "active helpfulness." This means, initially, simple assistance in trifling, external matters. We can find a multitude of such things wherever people live together. Nobody is too good to perform the lowliest task. People who worry about the loss of time that such petty, outward acts of helpfulness might entail are probably taking themselves and their careers too seriously. Considering the fact that Bonhoeffer himself

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on our own, we  
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from the rules.**

was a brilliant theologian, author, teacher, pastor, seminary president, and leader in the anti-Nazi underground movement who would ultimately be martyred for his witness, this is a sobering thought.

### 3. Embracing Our Weaknesses and Limitations

Sometime ago, I had a run of too much travel, too many meetings, and too many talks, and I was fatigued. I had a standing commitment to a friend who was also involved in church work, and weekly we would talk about ministry and spiritual life. I was complaining to him about my schedule, looking for some sympathy, when he surprised me by asking *why* I chose to live like this. I was not used to thinking about my schedule as a choice. It was more tempting to think of my level of busyness simply as a given, like living with air pollution or being a Cubs fan—which no one would choose, of course, but which if that were your lot in life you would simply cope with as best you could.

"Why do you choose to be so busy?" he persisted, which made me uncomfortable because then I had to think about it. The only honest answer was that, more than anything else, I was running on grandiosity. I was afraid that if I declined opportunities, they would stop coming, and if opportunities stopped coming I would be less important, and if I were less important, that would be terrible. Obviously, then I could cover my schedule over with a veneer of spirituality; I could try to convince myself that it was all about service—but it was grandiosity all the same. I didn't want to have to admit I have severe limitations. I didn't want to acknowledge my need for things like rest. I didn't want to admit I wasn't Superman.

As a result of this encounter I developed a small "personal schedule group," with a covenant that we would not take on any added commitments in life without discussing them with each other and with our families first. The covenant also gave us full permission to talk not only about our schedules but also the motives behind our activities.

It is dangerous to live without this kind of accountability. The father of one of my friends has been involved in evangelical min-

istry for nearly fifty years. His dad recently told him, "Well, son, we'll have to get together soon, as soon as I can get my schedule under control." His son's comment to me: "For all thirty-nine years of my life my dad has talked about what we're going to do as soon as he gets his schedule 'under control.' He actually seems to believe that someday his schedule will somehow come under control. What is worse, he refuses to talk about or even acknowledge to himself the *real reason why* his schedule is out of control."

### 4. The Ministry of "Holding Your Tongue"

Perhaps the least-practiced form of servanthood today is what Bonhoeffer called "the ministry of holding one's tongue."

Often we combat our evil thoughts most effectively if we absolutely refuse to allow them to be expressed in words. . . . It must be a decisive rule of every Christian fellowship that each individual is prohibited from saying much that occurs to him.

This behavior flies in the face of the conventional wisdom today, when saying "everything that occurs to you" is taken as an essential component of mental health. But sometimes this "ministry of the closed mouth" is a victory for the kingdom.

Victory may come about this way: We are in a meeting at work. As the conversation unfolds, we become aware of a subtext: "Here is a chance to let everybody discover how much I know. This is a chance to tell a story in a way that subtly underscores my importance around here. I have a chance to correct someone and show my competence."

Recently some staff were discussing a relatively minor decision, and I found myself sitting on the edge of my seat, gesturing animatedly, while a voice that sounded suspiciously like mine kept rising higher and higher. I realized that I wasn't all that concerned about this decision; instead, I had locked myself into a contest to see whose decision was going to prevail.

Sometimes this ministry involves our holding our tongues about the spiritual progress we think we are making. Francis de Sales writes,

We often say that we are nothing, that we are misery itself and the refuse of the world, but we would be very sorry if anyone took us at our word or told others that we are really such as we say. . . . We pretend to want to be last in the company and to be seated at the foot of the table, but it is with a view to moving more easily to the upper end. True humility does not make a show of itself and hardly speaks in a humble way. It not only wants to conceal all other virtues but most of all it wants to conceal itself.

This ministry can also mean holding loosely the tasks in our care. Lewis Smedes tells a wonderful story about Pope John XXIII. A member of the curia was continually nagging him to fix this or that problem; this official lived as though he alone saw the severity of the problems facing the church and the world, and as if without his warnings everything would collapse. Finally the pope had had enough, so he took his hyperconscientious advisor aside and confessed that he, too, was sometimes tempted to live as though the fate of the world rested on him. He was helped, he said, by an angel who would sometimes appear by the side of his bed and say, "Hey there, Johnny boy, don't take yourself so seriously." We need angels to remind us that we are not the messiah. We're not even the pope.

### 5. The Ministry of "Bearing"

We are called to bear each other's burdens. Sometimes this may involve praying for another's need, or trying to comfort someone in pain. But at times it may feel as if an entire relationship is burdensome. I may need to "bear with" people until I learn to love them.

I was in a prayer group of about ten people, most of them involved in church ministry. The stated goal of our meetings was to report on and learn from our experiences in prayer during the past week. The leader of the group gave some thoughtful advice. She said we should set aside any tendency we might have to evaluate the people and their comments and simply let God speak through them.

I realized that I tend to approach things the other way. As a reflex I had started sizing up the group from our first meeting. Here

a troubled, whining, recovery junkie type, I thought as one person spoke. And here is a traditional, hyperrational, old-school character who will not discover or reveal his heart. And here is a wise, high-functioning person whom I can really learn from. On I went, putting people on a kind of maturity continuum, ready to listen to and try to connect with those who seemed advanced and to endure those who seemed to lag behind.

The leader's directive—to let go of evaluations and allow God to speak—was, unknown to her, a gentle indictment of my whole way of listening. I realized that my evaluations, while perhaps not totally off-base, had more to do with me than with the people I was evaluating. More important, they kept me from listening to what God might want to say to me through people. They kept me from seeing the truth that all of us are somewhere on a journey to God, and the gap between least and most advanced is infinitely smaller than the gap between the most advanced and God himself.

The ministry of bearing with one another is more than simply tolerating difficult people. It is also learning to hear God speak through them. It is learning to be "for" them. It is learning that the difficult person I have most to deal with is me.

This means that a part of the ministry to which I am called is to free people—repeatedly if necessary—from the little mental prisons to which I consign them. It may be a person who criticizes the way I teach, whether justly or unjustly, lovingly or spitefully. It may be the most difficult kind of person of all—one in whom I see the same struggles that rage inside me.

"Bearing with them" does not require becoming best friends, but means learning to wish them well, releasing our right to hurt them back, coming to experience our common standing before the Cross.

It turns out that the life we have always wanted—when our wants are purified and true—is a life of humility. We see this most clearly in Jesus himself.

The ministry of bearing with one another is learning to hear God speak through difficult people.

There was no grandiosity in Jesus at all. That is one reason that people had such a hard time recognizing him. The oldest Christological heresy—Docetism—arose because people could not absorb the notion that God himself might enter into vulnerability and suffering.

**Every human being who has ever lived has suffered from a messiah complex—except one.**

They believed that Jesus had only the appearance of humanness, not its reality. The apostle John said it is no less than the spirit of the antichrist that denies that Jesus came "in the flesh."

Jesus was no Superman. He did not defy his enemies with hands on his hips and bullets bouncing harmlessly off his chest. The whip of the Roman soldiers drew real blood,

the thorns pressed real flesh, the nails caused mind-numbing pain, the cross led to actual death. And through it all, he bore with them, forgave them, and loved them to the end.

God's great, holy joke about the messiah complex is this: Every human being who has ever lived has suffered from it—except one.

And he was the Messiah.

# LIFE BEYOND REGRET

## The Practice of Confession

Many Christians are unthinkable horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy. . . .

He who is alone with his sins is utterly alone.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

Some years ago we traded in my old Volkswagen Super Beetle for our first piece of new furniture: a mauve sofa. It was roughly the shade of Pepto-Bismol, but because it represented to us a substantial investment, we thought "mauve" sounded better.

The man at the furniture store warned us not to get it when he found out we had small children. "You don't want a mauve sofa," he advised. "Get something the color of dirt." But we had the naive optimism of young parenthood. "We know how to handle our children," we said. "Give us the mauve sofa."

From that moment on, we all knew clearly the number one rule in the house. Don't sit on the mauve sofa. Don't touch the mauve sofa. Don't play around the mauve sofa. Don't eat on, breathe on, look at, or think about the mauve sofa. Remember the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden? "On every other chair in the house you may

freely sit, but upon this sofa, the mauve sofa, you may not sit, for in the day you sit thereupon, you shall surely die."

Then came The Fall.

One day there appeared on the mauve sofa a stain. A red stain. A red jelly stain.

So my wife, who had chosen the mauve sofa and adored it, lined up our three children in front of it: Laura, age four, and Mallory, two and a half, and Johnny, six months.

"Do you see that, children?" she asked. "That's a stain. A red stain. A red jelly stain. The man at the sofa store says it is not coming out. Not forever. Do you know how long forever is, children? That's how long we're going to stand here until one of you tells me who put the stain on the mauve sofa."

Mallory was the first to break. With trembling lips and tear-filled eyes she said, "Laura did it." Laura passionately denied it. Then there was silence, for the longest time. No one said a word. I knew the children wouldn't, for they had never seen their mother so upset. I knew they wouldn't, because they knew that if they did, they would spend eternity in the time-out chair.

I knew they wouldn't, because I was the one who put the red jelly stain on the mauve sofa, and I knew I wasn't saying anything. I figured I would find a safe place to confess—such as in a book I was going to write, maybe.

### The Stain of Sin

The truth is, of course, that we have all stained the sofa. Some of the stains are small and barely noticeable. But some of them bleed through the entire fabric of our lives. They are the stains we regret in the wee, cold hours of the night as we lie in bed staring at the ceiling, wishing we could go back and relive some moments and get things right this time.

They may be the stains that, if we don't regret, we ought to—and we would if our hearts were working right. We are all, to mimic the title of Cornelius Plantinga's remarkable book, "not the way we're supposed to be."

People do not talk a great deal about sin anymore. As Plantinga puts it,

The awareness of sin used to be our shadow. Christians hated sin, feared it, fled from it, grieved over it. Some of our grandparents agonized over their sins. A man who lost his temper might wonder whether he could still go to Holy Communion.

A woman who for years envied her more attractive and intelligent sister might worry that this sin threatened her very salvation. . . . In today's group confessionals it is harder to tell. The newer language of Zion fudges: "Let us confess our problem with human relational adjustment dynamics, and especially our feebleness in networking." Or, "I'd just like to share that we just need to target holiness as a growth area." Where sin is concerned, people just mumble now.

Many of us struggle, not so much with understanding the message of forgiveness, but with living in the reality of it.

All of us will have to log some time in front of the sofa.

I believe that what many of us are searching for is not simply another message reassuring us that God forgives freely. As wonderful as it is, that information alone is not enough to enable people to grow in their *experience* of God's liberating forgiveness. Many of us struggle at this point—not so much with understanding the message of forgiveness, but with living in the reality of it.

### Confession: For Our Healing

This inability to accept the reality of forgiveness is the reason that God has given us the practice of confession. Sometimes people wonder, *If I'm a Christian and God has already forgiven me, why should I have to confess?* This is looking at confession the wrong way.

Confession is not primarily something God has us do because he needs it. God is not clutching tightly to his mercy, as if we have to pry it from his fingers like a child's last cookie. We need to confess in order to heal and be changed.

**Confession that helps us experience the power of forgiveness is a process, not a single act.**

Nor is confession simply an accounting procedure: "That sin was on the debit side of God's ledger; now I have confessed it, and it got erased." Confession is not mechanical. It is a practice that, done wisely, will help us become transformed.

When we practice confession well, two things happen. The first is that we are liberated from guilt. The second is that we will be at least a little less likely to sin in the same way in the future than if we had not confessed. Sin will look and feel less attractive.

So how do we practice confession in a way that begins to heal our souls? What hope is there for stained people like us? Confession that helps us experience the power of forgiveness is a process, not a single act. Let us think about confession as a six-step process for spiritual stain removal.

#### *Preparation*

The first step is preparation. We begin by placing ourselves into the care of the Spirit and asking for help. Apart from this, confession is dangerous. If left to ourselves, we are prone to self-condemnation for things we ought not to feel guilty about, or alternatively prone to glossing over the truly ugly stains that demand attention. We need help.

Clifton Fadiman tells a wonderful story about Charles Steinmetz, a genius of an electrical engineer for General Electric in the early part of the twentieth century. On one occasion after his retirement, when the other engineers around GE were baffled by the breakdown of a complex of machines, they finally asked Steinmetz to come back to see if he could pinpoint the problem. Steinmetz spent several minutes walking around the machines, then took a piece of chalk out of his pocket and made a cross mark on one particular piece of one particular machine.

To their amazement, when the engineers disassembled that part of that machine, it turned out to be the precise location of the breakdown.

A few days later, the engineers received a bill from Steinmetz for \$10,000—a staggering sum in those days. This seemed exorbitant, so they returned it to him with a request that he itemize it. After a few more days they received a second, itemized bill:

Making one cross mark: \$1.00

Knowing where to put it: \$9,999.00

The hard part of self-examination is knowing where to place the mark. "But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults," writes the psalmist. Confession always starts with our placing ourselves under the protection of God, asking him to put the cross mark on the right spot.

#### *Self-Examination*

The next step is self-examination. This entails taking time to reflect on our thoughts, words, and deeds and acknowledging that we have sinned. Historically this was known as the "prayer of examen," in which we examine the state of our conscience. This is so important that in many eras it could simply be taken for granted that followers of the Way knew how to pray the prayer of examen. Francis de Sales wrote, "As to the examination of conscience . . . everyone knows how it is to be performed."

A helpful approach to self-examination is to think through various categories of sin. Probably the list used most often is that of the seven deadly sins: pride, anger, lust, envy, greed, sloth, and gluttony. Where do we stand in regard to each of these? Martin Luther used the Ten Commandments as a form to help him examine his life.

Confession should be specific, concrete, and particular. One "I lied to my boss and said I was working when I wasn't because I wanted to avoid trouble" can bring about more honesty and change than twenty variations of "I haven't been truthful enough." It is this aspect of Christian confession that moved Bill W to speak of the fourth of the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous as a "fearless" or "ruthless" moral inventory.

At the heart of it, confession involves taking appropriate responsibility for what we have done. This is not easy to do. We try to slip out of it. What starts as a confession often ends up an excuse: "I didn't mean to yell at you; I was having a bad day."

To confess means to own up to the fact that our behavior wasn't just the result of bad parenting, poor genes, jealous siblings, or a chemical imbalance from too many Twinkies. Any or all of those factors may be involved. Human behavior is a complex thing. But confession means saying that somewhere in the mix was a choice, and the choice was made by us, and it does not need to be excused, explained, or even understood. The choice needs to be forgiven. The slate has to be wiped clean.

### *Perception*

We need a new way of looking at our sin; a new understanding of it. All sin involves denial. One of the worst things about sin is that it carries with it a certain moral myopia—nearsightedness. It distorts our ability to detect its presence.

A new perspective can be quite dramatic. Civil War historian James McPherson writes about a plantation-owner named James Hammond, who served as both congressman and governor. Besides being insatiably ambitious and an ardent defender of slavery, Hammond also indulged a voracious sexual appetite. In 1839 he purchased an eighteen-year-old slave named Sally and her infant daughter, Louisa. He made Sally his concubine and fathered several children by her; then when Louisa reached the age of twelve, he installed her in her mother's old role and fathered several more children. His political career was halted—but only temporarily—when his wealthy brother-in-law, Wade Hamilton, threatened to reveal publicly that Hammond had been sexually abusing Hamilton's four daughters, aged thirteen to eighteen.

Most remarkable, though, are the reflections Hammond made in his diary when his

**Sin carries with it a certain moral myopia. . . . It distorts our ability to detect its presence.**

life left him and when epidemics took the lives of many of his slaves and livestock (whom he lumped together in the same category):

It crushes me to the earth to see every thing of mine so blasted around me. Negroes, cattle, mules, hogs, every thing that has life around me seems to labour under some fated malediction. . . . Great God, what have I done. Never was a man so cursed. . . . what have I done or omitted to do to deserve this fate? . . . No one, *not one*, exercises the slight indulgence towards me. Nothing is overlooked, nothing forgiven.

We may not be monsters; we may not have enslaved or violated human beings as Hammond did. But in a smaller, quieter way, the same capacity for self-deception works within us. We can lie to avoid pain and hardly be aware we have done so. We can flatter or seek to manipulate almost without even being aware of it, as if functioning on autopilot. We can ignore injustice or human need for long stretches of time without any moral warning lights going on.

So in this step of confession, we ask for honest perception. We want to see our sins through a new lens. We begin to see them through the eyes of the person we sinned against. We struggle to see them through the eyes of God.

Jesus often spoke of the need for this different perspective. He warned religious leaders not to judge:

Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.

When we have a log in one eye—not a twig, but something the size of a canoe—our ability to perceive accurately is affected. This is what happened to Jesus' listeners. The people saw the sins of prostitutes and cheaters and had nothing to do with them. Jesus' listeners were proud of their spiritual superiority. But Jesus accused

them of being in denial. They needed to have a radial keratotomy performed on the eyes of their soul. Then they would perceive their behavior in a new light.

Taking his words to heart, Jesus' followers would say, "Now I see the truth about my actions. When I was aloof and distant and superior to prostitutes and cheats, I wasn't holding up the banner for righteousness. I was feeding my smugness and pride. I can't even love. These 'gross sinners' are more loving than I am. They are more righteous than I. God help me."

We have to see our sin through new eyes. We need to see them through the eyes of those against whom we have sinned.

### *Two Questions: Why and What Happened?*

Two questions in particular help us gain a new perception. The first one is, "Why did I do what I did?"

We may find that we lied so as to try to escape the consequences of what we have done: "I'm sorry, officer—the speedometer on my car must be broken. I am sure I was driving under the speed limit." We may discover that the reason we gossiped about someone is that we were feeling insignificant or jealous.

This question is critical because sin is usually tied to some need or another. Indeed, sin is often the attempt to meet a legitimate need in an illegitimate way. If we don't address that need in appropriate ways, we will go right on sinning. It may be that we need to learn to experience the love of God more fully so we can be liberated from petty jealousy that makes gossiping almost irresistible. Perhaps we simply need to decide we are willing to tolerate a higher level of emotional pain for the sake of speaking the truth when lying instead could get us out of a tight spot.

The second question is, "What happened as a result of my sin?"

Sometime ago I became painfully aware that I had lied to a good friend. This had several consequences: I walked around under a cloud of guilt; a silent breach opened up in our relationship because I had placed a barrier of untruth between us; I was a little more inclined to tell a lie the next time; I found myself avoiding God.

When I recognized all this, I knew I had to confess to my friend. Even then it took some time for me to face the embarrassment of identifying what I had done. However, when I had looked at the results of my actions as honestly as I could, a wonderful thing happened: I found myself not wanting to do that again.

Unraveling the knots of the motives and consequences of our sin requires a patient, quiet spirit. But what price wouldn't we pay to have a log taken out of our eye?

### *A New Feeling*

After understanding comes a new way of feeling. True confession is not just an exchange of information; it also involves entering into the pain of the person we have hurt and entering into God's pain over sin.

The epistle of James says, "Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection."

I used to consider this a depressing statement when, in fact, it speaks of a great gift. Many spiritual counselors have said that when we begin praying, we should ask God for what we want, even if, in confession, it means asking for the gift of tears. Contrition is as useful to the soul as pain is to the body.

Having said that, we must balance this with another statement: Confession is an act of grace.

Confession can safely be made only in the context of grace. Feelings of remorse are no guarantee of authentic repentance, and they can be highly destructive.

It helps to know what our tendencies are, whether we tend to beat ourselves up or let ourselves off the hook.

The apostle Paul made a distinction between two kinds of sorrow. There is what

**True confession involves entering into the pain of the person we have hurt and entering into God's pain over sin.**

he called "godly sorrow," which is a fitting emotional response to our wrongdoing. It leads us to seek restitution and reconciliation; it compels us to change and grow; it leads us to grace. It is nontoxic. The other kind of sorrow is what Paul calls "worldly sorrow." Instead of leading toward life, it produces death.

I was leaving for work after a tense morning at home. I had snapped at the kids, I was feeling pushed for time, and I was preoccupied.

**"Godly sorrow" is a fitting response to our wrongdoing. "Worldly sorrow" produces death.**

As I was going out the door, my son Johnny asked whether I was coming to visit his class that day for the hour when parents were invited. I started to snap "no" and then felt a discernible tug. Something—Someone—invited me to think things over. I felt a stab of pain at my impatience that morning, at the needless hurt I had impetuously caused those I love. That pain, I believe, was

part of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. So I apologized as best I could and told Johnny I would be at his school.

When I arrived at Johnny's class, I observed that all but two or three children had parents there. Johnny's face lit up. For the next half-hour he sat in my lap as we joined in the activities. We were each to draw a picture—not a task I enjoy, being unable to draw a straight line. What made it worse is that the dad next to me drew like Michelangelo. He sketched a hearthside scene, incorporating perspective, shading, and chiaroscuro.

"Use some blue, Daddy," his son said.

"No," said Michelangelo. "That would throw off my color scheme."

The teacher came by, looked at the man's drawing, then called the other parents just to observe it. She pointed out mine as a kind of study in contrast.

Now I felt another kind of guilt—the guilt of an inadequate artist. But that was the pain of creatureliness, not something that calls for repentance. I had to find another way to deal with my inad-

quacy. So I waited until the dad next to me wasn't looking, then marked on his picture with a blue crayon. Then I had something to confess.

I looked at Johnny's picture: clouds, snow, one tree, and what looked like Barney the dinosaur with a human face. Underneath my son had a caption: "I'm thankful for God, my dad, and snow." I felt pretty good about the sequence.

When it was time for the parents to leave, Johnny grabbed me and said, "I just can't let you go."

I left, but for a few moments I just stood in the doorway and looked at my son. It seemed like only a few years ago that I was a little boy in first grade. Now here he was. Now it was my son's day. That is his little world—his little turkey up on the chalkboard, his little desk, his slender little fingers determinedly gripping the pencil, his learning how to make letters. And in what will seem like only another few days, he will be the one standing in the doorway and it will be his little boy sitting at the desk.

"What if I hadn't come?" I mused. "What if he had sat here all alone while other kids were surrounded by their parents? How long will I carry in my heart that little picture that says, 'I'm thankful for God, my dad, and snow?'"

That little stab of pain that called me to think again, to decide differently, is spoken

of in the church as the convicting power of the Holy Spirit. We can all experience that. It is the still small voice that nudges us and says, "You have spoken bitter words that have hurt someone. You need to go back and make things right."

"You cheated on your taxes. You need to make restitution." (One financial expert who works with an evangelical clientele estimates that 50 percent of his clients cheat on their tax returns.)

"You spoke deceit. You need to go back and tell the truth."

This is hopeful pain, the sorrow of wounds that heal.

**Confession is not just naming what we have done in the past. It requires a kind of promise for the future.**

*A New Promise*

But confession is not just naming what we have done in the past. It involves our intentions about the future as well. It requires a kind of promise.

As God does his work in us through the process of confession we will feel a deep desire not to do this hurtful thing again. So we make a vow. We resolve that, with God's help, we will change. This will involve trying to set right what we did wrong, to the extent that such is possible.

This is what Zacchaeus determined to do. "I will repay anyone I've cheated four times over," he said, "and half of all my goods I will give to the poor."

The level of our promise helps us to know whether we are actually repenting or just attempting damage control. Is our desire to set things right, or merely to minimize painful consequences?

Lewis Smedes asks,

Why should you expect anyone to take your confession seriously unless you promise that you do not intend again to foul your relationship with still more of the same unfair pain? You can give no guarantee; the best of us go back on promises. But anyone who has been hurt should expect a sincere intention, at least.

*The Summit: Healing Grace*

The final step in confession—the top of the mountain—is grace. This is not just the idea of grace, but grace as a reality, being immersed in it, given life by it.

In the movie *The Mission*, Robert De Niro plays the role of Mendoza, a character so thoroughly vile, selfish, and brutal that there seems to be no hope for him. When he decides to repent, he is required, as an act of penance, to carry a heavy burden tied to his body everywhere he goes. Through this ordeal he begins to see life differently and discovers that everything he has built his life around

has really been a burden—both to him and to those he has hurt. He comes to see his own helplessness and dependence.

One day, on a desperate climb up a mountain, Mendoza realizes that he is not going to make it and is imperiling the lives of those climbing with him. Suddenly, one of the tribesmen takes out a knife. Mendoza fears he will be killed, but instead the knife slashes the rope that has bound him to his burden. He is free. He will live. The burden has done its work.

The giving of the burden was an act of grace. It caused pain and hardship, but it was grace all the same. The release from the burden was an even greater act of grace. So it is with confession.

# THE GUIDED LIFE

## Receiving Guidance from the Holy Spirit

There is a way of ordering our mental life on more than one level at once. On one level we may be thinking, discussing, seeing, calculating, meeting all the demands of external affairs. But deep within, behind the scenes, at a profounder level, we may also be in prayer and adoration, song and worship and a gentle receptiveness to divine breathings.

THOMAS KELLY

It is one thing to speak to God. It is another thing to listen. When we listen to God, we receive guidance from the Holy Spirit.

Sometime ago I woke up in the middle of the night. Dawn was hours away, but I could see quite clearly in our bedroom because moonlight was streaming through the window.

I looked at my wife, Nancy, sleeping beside me, and suddenly, instead of feeling groggy as one might expect, I was overwhelmed by the most intense sense of love. It was as if I saw our entire married life in one kaleidoscopic viewing. One scene after another replayed in my mind: the afternoon we met, our first private joke, the first time we ever laughed really hard together, secret nicknames and hidden traditions, the way she smiled at me when she walked

down the aisle at our wedding. I saw all those kinds of events—some momentous, some trivial but for some reason unforgettable—that anyone who has ever loved will carry to the grave.

I thought what my life would be like without Nancy. I thought not just how empty it would be, but how that who I am now is somehow wrapped up in this one sleeping beside me.

For the longest time I just watched my wife in wonder as she slept. I studied her face. It was one of the most tender moments I have ever known.

Then something else happened that I did not expect. Propped up on one elbow and watching Nancy sleep, I thought, *While I lie in bed sleeping, God is watching me.* As the psalmist expressed it, "He who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep."

And the thought came to me that God was saying something like this:

I love you like that. While you lay sleeping, no one can see you, but I watch you. My heart is full of love for you. What your heart is feeling right now as you watch your wife, what a parent feels watching a child, is a little picture for you, a gift, so you can know—every night when you go to sleep—that this is my heart for you. I want you to reflect on this at night before you close your eyes. I'm watching you, and I'm full of love.

It was an overwhelming moment. I had the sense that God himself was somehow speaking to me. These were not just thoughts *about* God, but thoughts *from* God. I felt that God wanted to speak of his love to me—*personally*.

### Learning to Listen to God

Was it the Holy Spirit speaking that night, or just a thought produced by my own mind? I do not know for sure. I certainly have no way to prove it was God speaking to me. A few friends have told me that early in life they were given a clear sense of when God was speaking to them. They learned to recognize certain movements of

If I am to have a relationship with God that is in any sense personal, I must be open to the possibility that sometimes God does speak directly to me.

I have come to believe that this suspicion is not altogether a good thing. I realize now that if I am to have a relationship with God that is in any sense personal, I must be open to the possibility that sometimes God does speak directly to me.

Therefore, in this chapter I look at the way we receive what might be called "leadings" or "promptings" from the Holy Spirit.

Through the centuries, Christians have given different names to this phenomenon. In his journal, George Fox wrote about the Lord's "opening" a truth to him—by which he meant that God had spoken directly, though not necessarily audibly, to his mind. John Calvin spoke of the "inner testimony" of the Holy Spirit. St. Ignatius talked of "movements" of the soul—thoughts, feelings, or desires that could in fact be gifts given directly to us by God to move us closer to him.

These promptings may come as conviction of sin, an assurance of God's love, or a call to action. But they are crucial to the Spirit-guided life. We must learn to listen for the still, small voice.

(I was so overwhelmed by my experience that I woke up Nancy from a deep sleep to tell her about it. This may not have been a leading.)

### A Nonoptional Part of Transformation

Prayer involves an odd paradox in our day. Almost everyone talks to God. *Newsweek* magazine noted that in a recent survey more

heart and mind as being the voice of God the way children learn to recognize the voice of their mother. This was such a natural part of life that my friends did not reflect much about it.

But that is not my experience. I have never heard an audible voice from God, and I did not grow up with an intuitive discernment as to when God was communicating with me. In fact, I have always tended to be suspicious of people who speak easily of such things.

Americans said they pray in a given week more than work, exercise, or have sexual relations. Of the 13 percent of Americans who claim to be atheist or agnostic, one in five prays daily.

So why are we so often ambivalent about the notion of God talking to us? One recalls Lily Tomlin's line in the play *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*: "Why is it that when we speak to God we are said to be praying, but when God speaks to us we are said to be schizophrenic?" Why should God's end of the line be equipped with a receiver but no mouthpiece?

In fact, being open and receptive to the leadings of the Holy Spirit is a nonoptional part of transformation. Richard Foster makes this point:

In our day heaven and earth are on tiptoe waiting for the emerging of a Spirit-led, Spirit-intoxicated, Spirit-empowered people. All of creation watches expectantly for the springing up of a disciplined, freely gathered, martyr people who know in this life the life and power of the kingdom of God. It has happened before. It can happen again. . . .

Such a people will not emerge until there is among us a deeper, more profound experience of an Emmanuel of the Spirit—God with us, a knowledge that in the power of the Spirit Jesus has come to guide His people Himself, an experience of His leading that is as definite and as immediate as the cloud by day and fire by night.

I believe that the Holy Spirit really does offer to lead or guide or give direction to human beings—ordinary people. He wants to do this for all of us.

We can all learn how to be open to the promptings of the Spirit. They are not reserved for the elite or for leaders only or for "important people." They are not reserved for people who work as pastors

Being open and receptive to the leadings of the Holy Spirit is a nonoptional part of transformation.

or missionaries. They are not reserved for people who are "more spiritual" than you. The Holy Spirit can and will give direction to us if we desire it.

You may be right on the verge of experiencing this. Your adventure is about to begin.

### "Spiritual Mindlessness": Missing God's Presence

In George Bernard Shaw's play *St. Joan*, one of the characters asks Joan of Arc why the voice of God never speaks to him as she claims it speaks constantly to her. "The voice speaks to you all the time," she says. "You just fail to listen." I believe that one reason why we fail to hear God speak is that we are not attentive. We suffer from what might be called "spiritual mindlessness."

Psychologists define mindlessness as a tendency toward mental drift. It is a failure to be fully present, a lack of attending to the present moment. In such a state, we go on autopilot. For instance, suppose you are reading a passage in a book—I trust, not this one—and as you reach the bottom of a page, you suddenly realize that you have no idea what you have just read.

**One reason why we fail to hear God speak is that we are not attentive. We suffer from what might be called "spiritual mindlessness."**

I took a semester off from college to work full-time for a metal-fabricating company called W. A. Whitney. I was perhaps the most spectacularly incompetent person on the maintenance crew, so I was finally given the job of making deliveries, on the

theory that I could do minimal damage to the company in that position. But even in making deliveries I found that my mind tended to wander and lack focus.

One morning I completed my last delivery, to Johnson Electrical Supply and was driving back to the plant in a white, nondescript pickup truck. I noticed some unusual things on my way. The gearshift indicator, which had been broken, had somehow been

repaired. The radio buttons were programmed to different stations than they were before. *This is odd*, I thought astutely.

I parked the truck at the plant, went in for lunch, then went out again to make a mail run to the post office. Then, as I emerged from the post office and looked around the parking lot, I realized that the Whitney truck was gone. "Someone has stolen our truck," I said to myself. Then I saw an amazing coincidence: There in the parking lot was a white, nondescript pickup truck from Johnson Electrical Supply.

Came the dawn.

I had stolen a truck.

And I hadn't even noticed.

Someone at Johnson's had left the keys in the ignition. When I came out of their shop, I got in the wrong truck without ever noticing such incidentals as the words JOHNSON ELECTRICAL SUPPLY written in very large blue letters on the side. I had stolen a truck.

I prayed, on the way back to Whitney's, that no one would have noticed yet. No such luck. Someone from Johnson's had called just about the time I had left for the post office.

That mistake occurred twenty years ago. To this day, I still can't show my face at Whitney's.

To quote Don King again: "I never cease to amaze my own self. I say that humbly." My capacity for mindlessness is staggering. Such a trait can be embarrassing in a job. But my capacity for spiritual mindlessness is much more serious: It can cripple my spiritual life.

Sometimes when I have problems, I don't even think to pray about them for long stretches at a time. I worry, I obsess or sweat a little, but I don't pray.

At a church service not long ago, I became dimly aware that I was not fully engaging in worship. I knew there was a matter of sin in a corner of my life that I wasn't quite ready to deal with. So I simply went through the motions of worship. I was not present to the Spirit. I was not listening.

I was feeling a little bit as Jacob must have felt at Bethel: "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it."

Jacob had never listened to God—or to anybody else, for that matter. He was what today we would call a “con man,” guided only by his own guile. The name *Jacob* itself means “schemer.”

One night while Jacob was sleeping, God spoke to him. Jacob saw a ladder, with angels ascending and descending—a vision of the kingdom of God. In that moment God himself promised to be present with Jacob, to guide him and protect him.

Jacob was shaken. “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” Jacob was staggered by his spiritual mindlessness. God was right there, speaking, and Jacob had not even known it. Jacob named the place Bethel, the “house of God.” He took the stone he had used as a pillow and set it up as a pillar, an altar, to help him remember how close God was and how much he needed to listen.

“Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” Those words can describe us. But we want to grow more sensitive

**God can directly  
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to God’s presence. We want to be able to say in more and more moments of life: “This is the house of God! This is the gateway to heaven!”

So we, too, need to be altar-builders. We need our own pillars to remind us to listen. Sometimes I will write the word *listen* on a piece of paper and tape it to the dashboard of

the car or carry it around in my pocket, to remind me to be attentive. In my office I keep a few objects that, because of the profound experiences attached to them, serve as physical reminders of God’s presence with me. I am so prone to spiritual mindlessness that I desperately need these altars to remind me that this very moment can be “the gateway to heaven.”

### How God Speaks to Us

To “speak” to someone is simply to direct their thoughts toward something. Because you are reading these words, you are thinking

series of thoughts that you would not be thinking otherwise. Your thoughts are being led by another person.

Because I am a finite human being, I have to use indirect means to guide your thoughts. I must express ideas in words so you can hear them or read them. I need to give them some physical form in order to communicate with you.

But God does not. *God can directly guide my thoughts without the aid of intervening sounds or images.*

C. S. Lewis was getting at this idea when he wrote,

If your thoughts and passions were *directly present* to me, like my own, without any mark of externality or otherness, how should I distinguish them from mine? . . . You may reply, as a Christian, that God (and Satan) do, in fact, affect my consciousness in this direct way without signs of “externality.” Yes: and the result is that most people remain ignorant of the existence of both.

Here is the vital point: God may be speaking to you—“affecting your consciousness,” to use Lewis’s words—while you “remain ignorant” of the fact that this very thought is coming from God.

So it is possible that God may speak to us and our thoughts may be guided by him without our knowing that it is God’s guidance. This happened to Samuel when he was a boy. God spoke to him directly one night, but Samuel did not realize that it was God speaking. Samuel needed the help of Eli the priest to learn to recognize the voice of God.

Before we consider how to pursue guidance, let us clear up some misconceptions about it.

### What Guidance Is Not

#### *Guidance Is Not “Insider Information”*

An old television show, *Let’s Make a Deal*, reached its climax each week in what was called the Big Deal of the Day. Two contestants were given a choice: “You can have what’s behind Door No. 1, Door No. 2, or Door No. 3.” The contestants could give up what they had

won so far for the chance at Really Big Money. But they might end up with nothing at all.

This choice was often an agonizing experience for the contestants. Behind one door might lie riches, and behind another, the show's announcer dressed as a toddler sitting in a giant rocking chair. What the contestants desperately wanted was inside information—some hint as to which door would lead to money and happiness.

**How often do I seek God's guidance when I'm not facing trouble or a difficult decision?**

Many people give little thought to spiritual guidance until they face a major decision: whom to marry, which house to buy, where to go to school, what job to accept? What these people really want is not guidance, in any Christian sense of the term. They want "inside information" so they will know which door to choose. They want to know beforehand which choice will lead to money, happiness, and success.

A key test to know whether we really want God's guidance is to ask, How often do I seek God's guidance when I'm not facing trouble or a difficult decision?

A helpful way to learn to see guidance is at first to avoid seeking guidance for external decisions like taking a job or whom to marry. Start by seeking guidance for the growth of your soul.

What that means is to ask questions like these:

- How do I become a more truthful person?
- Whom do I know who can teach me to pray in a way that will nourish my soul?
- What practices will enable me to live in joy continually?

#### ***Guidance Is Not a Badge of Spirituality or Importance***

Hearing God speak to us is no indication that we are unusually spiritual or mature or important. God is able to communicate with whomever he chooses.

The book of Numbers expresses this kind of communication almost at the level of comedy in the story of a prophet named

Balaam. Balaam was being enticed by Balak, king of Moab, to curse the people of Israel. God was naturally displeased about this and, as Balaam was traveling to Moab, sent an angel to block Balaam's way. Oddly enough, the angel was invisible to Balaam, but clearly perceived by his donkey. Three times the donkey turned aside when blocked by the angel, and each time the beast was beaten by the unperceiving Balaam. Finally "the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and it said to Balaam, 'What have I done to you . . .?'" The donkey told Balaam about the unseen visitor. At last Balaam's eyes were opened and he saw the angel, who told him that if indeed the donkey had not had the good sense to turn aside, the angel would have slain Balaam and saved the beast.

Now imagine that the donkey had responded to that event as many of us might be tempted to. Suppose the donkey had returned to its stable all puffed up because of its superior spiritual insight: "I was able to discern the angelic presence when even the prophet himself was ignorant!" What if the donkey had put on airs and considered itself in an exalted spiritual class above the other quadrupeds? It would have made an ass of itself.

#### ***"Seeking Guidance" Is Not the Same Thing as Being Passive***

People will wonder whether they should pursue a new job. One man told me he decided not to seek a job he was interested in, on the grounds that it would be a sign of God's will if he got the job without trying.

The problem with this line of reasoning is that it assumes that whatever happens as a result of our passivity is God's will. This is obviously not true. Try going out and sitting in the middle of an expressway, saying, "I'm not going to move. I'll just sit right here, and if I don't get run over by a car, then I will know it is God's doing and not me acting in the flesh."

We would consider such action stupid.

Broadly speaking, God did not create people in his own image for passivity. He is not a passive God. When we face important decisions, we must pray, seek guidance, and exercise judgment, wisdom, initiative, choice, and responsibility.

***Guidance Is Not a Way to Avoid Taking Risks***

Sometimes we don't really want guidance so much as we want to avoid taking chances. Decision making can be lonely. Even small decisions can create anxiety. Watch an indecisive person with a large menu and an impatient waiter, and you'll see the tension that comes with choice and risk.

**God's purpose in guidance is not to get us to perform the right actions. His purpose is to help us become the right kind of people.**

God does not intend that guidance be a shortcut to escape making decisions and taking risks. Indeed, God wants us to develop good judgment, and there is no way to develop it apart from a process that involves choices and risks. If we are parents, we want to raise our children to become mature, healthy, responsible, and decisive adults.

How can that happen if, the whole time they are growing up, they never make a decision on their own and they are instructed precisely what to do in every situation—what to wear, what to eat, what classes to take, whom to date. *God's purpose in guidance is not to get us to perform the right actions. His purpose is to help us become the right kind of people.*

Personhood is formed through making decisions. We learn to think and weigh options, we discover what we truly value, we take responsibility for our choices. God wants us to be people, not robots, and that means we must make decisions.

**Pursuing the Guidance of the Spirit**

If all those things are what guidance is not, how do we, then, pursue the guidance of the Spirit?

***Listen for the Spirit Continually***

Thomas Kelly wrote,

*There is a way of ordering our mental life on more than one level at once. On one level we may be thinking, discussing, see-*

ing, calculating, meeting all the demands of external affairs. But deep within, behind the scenes, at a profounder level, we may also be in prayer and adoration, song and worship and a gentle receptiveness to divine breathings.

This gentle receptiveness, this ordering our minds on more than one level at once, is a skill that can be learned. For instance, if we have a significant decision to make tomorrow, we can stop and ask for wisdom. If we have some discretionary time unexpectedly open up, we can pause and ask God, "Do you have anything for me to do?" Then we can "listen" for a moment, and if no prompting comes, we simply do what seems wisest. Each time we greet someone tomorrow, we can inwardly ask the Spirit, "How can I respond to this person? Do you want to speak or work through me?"

We can really do this. The church I serve has a large food court. One of my friends on the staff there was practicing this "ordering of the mind" as he talked to a person who had volunteered there a few times. On this particular night this volunteer had attended a church service and then was to help serve pizza afterward. But when the service was over, my friend on the food staff had a sense that he should ask this volunteer about her life with God.

"Let's sit down and talk about the service," he invited.

"Don't we have to go back and work in the food court?" she asked.

"Nah—let them get their own food," my friend replied.

He explained the gospel to this volunteer and told her what it means to be a Christ-follower.

"Does that make sense to you?" he asked.

"It's very helpful," she replied. "I understand much better now. Thanks very much."

My friend explained further that understanding isn't all there is to it, that it is possible to place her life in God's hands in that moment, commit her life to him. And she did.

Was it the guidance of the Holy Spirit that caused my friend to talk with this volunteer? That was certainly his impression. "To not talk to her would have been a sin of omission," is how my friend put it.

This kind of listening has been vital to Christ-followers throughout the centuries. So let us try an experiment. This week as you are interacting with people, listen for the prompting of the Spirit. As you listen to people, listen also for what the Spirit is saying. The Holy Spirit will lead you to be with people as Jesus would be with them if he were in your place.

### *Be Relentlessly Responsive*

Guidance only makes sense for people who are resolved to respond. Responding begins, of course, with obedience to God's clear guidance from Scripture. One of my college friends had been sexually involved with his girlfriend for two years. As we neared graduation, he wondered about marriage. "Is it God's will for me to marry this girl?" he asked.

My friend didn't really want guidance. He already had clear scriptural guidance about sexual behavior that he wasn't the least bit interested in. He just wanted to know if this girl was the Big Deal of the Day or if he should wait to see what's behind Door No. 2.

*It only makes sense to ask God for guidance in the context of a life committed to "seeking first the kingdom."* The only kind of guidance God gives is for living as Jesus would in our place. We may have a great map of Cleveland, but before we consult it, we had better decide whether Cleveland is where we want to go.

This truth makes us realize what is so sad about people seeking information from psychic hotlines and horoscopes. They are trying to locate the Big Deal of the Day apart from any concern for moral guidance. Rarely, for example, will a "psychic friend" tell a caller, "You need to repent of your racism and apathy toward those who live in the inner city."

Frank Laubach made his life an experiment in listening for the guiding voice of God. He played what he called "games with minutes" to see whether he could continually turn his mind back to the Spirit. He wrote about the connection between surrender and guidance:

As for me, I never lived, I was half dead, I was a rotting tree, until I reached the place where I wholly, with utter honesty,

resolved and then re-resolved that I would find God's will, and I would do that will though every fiber in me said no, and I would win the battle in my thoughts. It was as though some deep artesian well had been struck in my soul. . . . Money, praise, poverty, opposition—these make no difference, for they will all alike be forgotten in a thousand years, but this spirit which comes to a mind set upon continuous surrender, this spirit is timeless life.

Sometimes we quench or stifle God's voice. A while ago I had what I think was a leading to help someone financially, and I did nothing. Not only did someone not receive help, but I diminished the likelihood of my hearing God in the future.

We should be determined that as best we can, we will be responsive to God's leadings. If we feel a prompting to write a note or make a call, we must follow through. If we have a sense that God wants us to encourage someone, we must say the word.

### *Listen for the Spirit's Voice in the Words of Others*

God speaks not only to us, but *through* us. Scripture is full of accounts of God's message being pronounced through human agency. At times the speaker was even unaware of it. From Moses to Paul, God often said, "I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak." Jesus promised his followers that in times of persecution they could trust that "the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say." Paul also said we are to speak to each other in Spirit-guided wisdom.

**God speaks not  
only to us,  
but through us.**

God spoke to me one time, I believe, in most unusual circumstances through a friend named Lorraine.

Lorraine was well into her sixties when I met her, although her hair was the same auburn-shade it had been when she was a bride. Her great passion was learning. Her house was mostly a place to store her books, just as her body was mostly a place to store her

mind. As much as she loved learning, she loved teaching even more, and she taught Bible classes that attracted several hundred people. Lorraine was the sort of teacher who was convinced she had unlocked the key to Revelation by studying an obscure commentary written by Isaac Newton in his later years.

This friend was one of the first people to insist to me that my true calling was to preach. "Now, honey," Lorraine would say—"honey" being her address of choice for just about everyone except her husband—"you mustn't let someone talk you into doing something else. God made you to preach, and you won't be happy doing anything else."

It took a while, but I gradually decided Lorraine was right. I eventually moved away to become a full-time preacher, and we drifted out of touch.

Some years later, my family and I came back to visit the church. Lorraine was not attending; she had suffered a stroke and was confined to her bed. Her husband, Don, had been devoted to her his whole life, and now, sadly, her life was slowly slipping away.

Our visit to Lorraine's home was a bittersweet thing. She lay in a hospital bed in the front room, Don seated next to her. The mind that had been the source of pleasure to so many people no longer responded properly to the will of its owner. The books sat on the shelves, useless except as ornaments. Nancy and I both tried to talk with her.

We could see Lorraine trying to bring forth memories that had become inaccessible, but she couldn't. She wasn't quite able to place who this couple were. She spoke only in the language of vague murmurs and uncertain nods. After talking as best we could, we got up to leave.

Nancy was already out the door and I was on the threshold when I heard Lorraine's voice—only *this* time it was *her* voice. It sounded like the Lorraine we used to know.

"John Ortberg," she called. "Are you happy?"

"Yes," I said, too surprised to do anything but answer the question. "Yes, I really am."

"Good," she said. "Because God made you to preach. You should be full of joy when you do it, honey." And then Lorraine sank back to the pillow, exhausted, and she was gone again.

Lorraine did not know that we were facing a major decision at that time, and her comments about joy became enormously helpful. It became clear that one option would lead to a much greater sense of joy, even though in some ways it was the more difficult choice. God was, as best as I can discern it, speaking to us through a friend who could hardly speak at all.

In the early church, believers would gather together and ask God to guide them in their choices—a practice that continues widely among Christians today. Members of the Church of the Saviour in Washington, D.C., speak of "sounding the call"—calling a group of believers together to pray together for guidance when someone is facing an important decision. We can "sound the call" with those in our community of believers when we need wisdom for finances, relationships, or jobs.

#### *Practice Listening in Small Matters*

Much of the adventure of Christian living involves responsiveness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This guidance is not restricted to momentous decisions. It is learned mainly as we practice it on a continuing basis. This means that sometimes it may involve God's gracious attention to small details.

One day I was driving on the freeway when I realized I had lost my Day-Timer. Then I remembered I had put it on the roof of my car while I was putting away some packages, then I had driven off without retrieving the notebook. Since I rely heavily on the Day-Timer, I turned around and retraced my route to search for it. I found one little part of it—a part that contained a few addresses—by the side of the road about a mile from where I had parked my car. The rest of the notebook was gone.

As I stood there, feeling desperate, a car swerved over, the driver honking her horn and waving my Day-Timer. She rolled down the window, placed the Day-Timer in my eager hands, and said, "I

found this here. I got a few blocks away, and I got this impression that I should drive back here and look for the owner. This may sound strange, but I'm a Christian, and I believe that thought came from God, from the Holy Spirit. Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?

"Believe in him? Lady, I work for him!" I said.

Did the Holy Spirit really instruct her to do this? I don't know. Many people get very nervous when ordinary human beings speak about being spoken to by God. I get nervous about the idea myself. It has often been abused. When I was in college, it was not too unusual for a guy to tell a girl who had not been too receptive to his overtures: "I think it is the Lord's will that we should date each other." Pastors will sometimes use the ploy as a preemptive strike to discourage criticism of a career change or to encourage participation in a church building program. A tremendous temptation can exist to use the authority of "Thus saith the Lord" as a way to manipulate people in settings where such authority is unlikely to be questioned. That is a good reason to be cautious about claiming God's direct guidance too casually.

However, we cannot be transformed if we close ourselves off to the guiding power of the Holy Spirit. We must come to believe—mind-stretching as it sounds—that God really can and does personally attend to us. As long as we are going to pray to the God who spoke the creation into being, who communicated to prophets and priests and kings—and ordinary people, who wrote a thousand page book we know as the Bible—and who refers to his Son as "the Word made flesh," then surely we accept the possibility that sometimes he may want to get in a word or two with us.

# A LIFE OF FREEDOM

## The Practice of Secrecy

When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret.

MATTHEW 6:3-4 NIV

In general, the soul makes greater progress when it least thinks so . . . most frequently when it imagines that it is losing.

ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

Mayor Richard J. Daley was as celebrated in Chicago for his malapropisms as for his ability to get votes from the unlikeliest sources. Whole books have been devoted to chronicling these statements, including this classic from the 1968 riots: "The police are not here to *create* disorder. The police are here to *preserve* disorder."

Every once in a while, one of these statements carried so much truth—even if unintentionally—that one had to stop and contemplate. One such statement was the occasion when Daley said about his opponents, "They have vilified me, they have crucified me, yes, they have even criticized me." As if to say, "Vilification and crucifixion I can put up with, but criticism—that's hitting below the belt." Another time Hizzoner expressed the same sentiment in an

unforgettable question: "Anybody can make allegations—but who are the alligators?" Mayor Daley did not like to have alligators.

He's not the only one.

Why is it we often respond so strongly to criticism? I believe it reveals a serious addiction in many of us. This addiction has nothing to do with chemical dependency or substance abuse. There are no twelve-step groups to help people fight it, nor any Betty Ford treatment centers in which to detoxify.

I refer to what might be called "approval addiction." Some people live in bondage to what others think of them. The addiction takes many forms. If we find ourselves often getting hurt by what others say about us, by people expressing other than glowing opinions about us, we probably have it. If we habitually compare ourselves with other people, if we find ourselves getting competitive in the most ordinary situations, we probably have it. If we live with a nagging sense that we aren't important enough or special enough, or we get envious of another's success, we probably have it. If we keep trying to impress important people, we probably have it. If we are worried that someone might think ill of us should he or she find out we are an approval addict, we probably are.

Like other addicts, we will go to great lengths to get a "fix" when we feel desperate. Yet, like other addicts, we find that no fix lasts forever, so we keep coming back for more.

Henri Nouwen puts this problem in perspective:

At issue here is the question: "To whom do I belong? To God or to the world?" Many of my daily preoccupations suggest that I belong more to the world than to God. A little criticism makes me angry, and a little rejection makes me depressed. A little praise raises my spirits, and a little success excites me. . . . Often I am like a small boat on the ocean, completely at the mercy of its waves.

### **The Alternative: "Living Freely with Our Critics"**

The alternative to this addiction—the life you've always wanted—is a life of freedom. Lewis Smedes writes,

One of the fine arts of gracious living is the art of living freely with our critics. When we have the grace to be free in the presence of those who judge our lives and evaluate our actions, we have Christian freedom.

This is the kind of freedom the apostle Paul described to some of his critics: "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. . . . It is the Lord who judges me."

Paul considered it "a very small thing" in asking the Corinthians to back off. He did not say, "It is nothing." It still mattered to Paul what they thought of him—but it didn't matter too much. Criticism could no longer rock his boat. His balance and his sense of well-being rested on acceptance from a higher court: "It is the Lord who judges me." Paul was not overly concerned about the alligators.

Imagine receiving criticism or judgment as "a very small thing." Imagine being liberated from the need to impress anyone. Imagine our sense of esteem no longer resting on whether someone notices how smart, or attractive, or successful we are. Imagine being able to actually feel love toward someone who expresses disapproval of us.

As approval addicts we are always at the mercy of others' opinions. Hence the old preacher's story: "I was leaving my last church, and a woman at the farewell reception was weeping. 'Don't be sad,' I said, 'I'm sure the next pastor will be better than me.' 'That's what they said last time,' she cried, 'but they keep getting worse.'"

This addiction has been around since Cain felt out-sacrificed by Abel. Cain killed his brother over who was doing best at being acceptable to God. (Thus we see that this disease can strike at the core of our efforts at spiritual living.) The primary symptom is the tendency to confuse our performance in some aspect of life with our worth as a person. The result is that we seek a kind of approval from people that can satisfy only when it comes from God.

**One of the fine arts of gracious living is the art of living freely with our critics.**  
—Lewis Smedes

**When Jesus spoke, he was free from the need to create an impression. He was free to speak the truth in love.**

Paul rails against this addiction when he writes to the church at Galatia: "Am I not seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ."

Even more disturbing are the words of the apostle John. Religious leaders were coming to believe Jesus because they thought his message made sense, but they would not "confess their faith." That is, they would not commit themselves to becoming Jesus' disciples. The reason is that "they loved praise from men more than praise from God."

I know what this drug tastes like, and I know how it feels when it gets withheld.

When I stand before the congregation to preach, the people hear my voice, but I hear another, more confusing voice in my head. It is also my voice. Sometimes it proclaims, "Thus saith the Lord." But at other times—more often than I like to admit—the voice is less prophetic.

"What will they think of me?" the voice wonders.

Sometimes I feel less like the prophet Amos and more like Sally Field at the Academy Awards. I find myself wanting to be able to say, as she did after winning her second Oscar: "You like me! You really like me!"

I do not like this Sally Field voice. I wish I had more of a Rhett Butler voice and could greet evaluations after the service with "Frankly, my dear . . ."

When Jesus spoke, he was free from the need to create an impression. He was free to speak the truth in love. He was free with the freedom of the Beloved of God. But the voice within us is not free. It is driven by ego and pride. It is ugly to us, and we would turn it off if we could, but turning it off proves not to be so simple. Where does this voice come from?

## Our "Generalized Other"

Sociologist George Herbert Mead wrote about what he called the "generalized other," the mental representation we carry inside ourselves of that group of people in whose judgment we measure our success or failure. Our sense of esteem and worth is largely wrapped up in their appraisal of our worth.

Our "generalized other" is a composite of all the Siskels and Roberts in our life whose thumbs up or thumbs down signal carries emotional weight with us.

Think of the problem as a kind of mental jury box containing all the people who rate us like so many judges evaluating an Olympic skater. Almost certainly our parents are in that box. Probably some school teachers are there, too, and some significant members of our peer group, not to mention our boss, co-workers, neighbors, and perhaps other members of our profession. It gets pretty crowded, that jury box.

Of course, we never really know for sure the totality of what any other person is actually thinking about us. Part of the irony of the generalized other is that it is not really other at all—it's what we think others are thinking.

When you're in your twenties, someone once wrote, you live to please other people. When you're in your thirties, you get tired of trying to please others, so you get miffed with them for making you worry about it. When you're in your forties, you realize nobody was thinking about you anyway.

Unfortunately, even though we can tell ourselves others aren't thinking about us, that information alone does not bring true inner freedom. When our identity is wrapped up in whether or not we are perceived as successful, we are set up for the approval addiction. Our sense of self is on the line.

"Who am I?" Henri Nouwen asks. "I am the one who is liked, praised, admired, disliked, hated, or despised. Whether I am a pianist, a businessman, or a minister, what matters is how I am perceived by my world." If being busy is important to others, then I must be busy. If having money is a sign of real freedom, then I must

claim my money. If knowing many people proves my importance, I will have to make the necessary contacts.

One Sunday morning as I was greeting people after church, a visitor handed me his card. "I usually attend Hollywood Presbyterian," he said, "but we're visiting here today. Give me a call sometime."

I looked at his card: SPEECH INSTRUCTOR.

The senior pastor at Hollywood Presbyterian Church at that time was Lloyd Ogilvie, who is now chaplain of the United States Senate. I feel that as a preacher, he comes about as close to perfection as a human being can come. His hair is perfect, his robe is perfect, his smile is perfect, but above all, his voice is perfect. Deep as the ocean, rich and resonant, Lloyd Ogilvie sounds like what I expect God will sound like on a good day.

Next to Ogilvie's voice, mine sounds as if I were trapped in perpetual adolescence. It is difficult to feel prophetic when you hear yourself chirping like Mickey Mouse: "Okay, now, let's repent."

When I catch myself comparing myself with others or thinking *I could be happy if only I had what they have*, then I know I need to withdraw for a while and listen for another voice. Away from the winds, the earthquakes, and the fires of human recognition, I can hear again the still, small voice, posing the question it always asks of self-absorbed children: "What are you doing here?"

Too often I reply to the voice by whining about some of my own Ahab's and Jezebels. And the voice gently reminds me, as it has reminded thousands of Elijahs before me, that I am only a small part of a much larger movement and that at the end of the day there is only one King whose approval will matter: "It is the Lord who judges me."

The voice also whispers, *Do not despise your place, your gifts, or your voice, for you cannot have another's, and it would not fulfill you if you could.*

### Approval Addiction and Our Beliefs

Psychiatrist David Burns notes that it is not another person's compliment or approval that makes us feel good; rather, it is *our belief* that there is validity to the compliment.

Suppose you were to visit the psychiatric ward of a hospital, Burns suggests, and a patient approaches you with this greeting: "You are wonderful. I had a vision from God. He told me the thirteenth person to walk through the door would be the special messenger. You are the thirteenth, so I know you are the chosen one, the holy one, the bringer of peace to the world; let me kiss your shoe."

Most likely your sense of self-esteem would not rise. Why not? When I was studying psychology in college, I spent a summer internship at a place called the Spiro Agnew Mental Health Center in Dorchester County, Maryland. One woman there used to tell me regularly that she wanted to marry me because she could not stop thinking about my body. She was heavily medicated, had lived in the facility for twenty years, and would say the same thing to every other member of the staff. On her less lucid days she would say the same thing to plants and inanimate objects. It was an outrageous compliment that she "could not stop thinking about my body," but it did nothing to enhance my sense of value as a person.

For good reason. In between other people's opinions of us and our pleasure in them is our assessment of the validity of their approval.

We are not the passive victim of others' opinions. Their opinions are powerless until we validate them. No one's approval will affect us unless we grant it credibility and status. The same holds true for disapproval.

This explains why people can accomplish extraordinary things and still feel like a failure. Consider this life assessment:

I have done nothing. I have no ability to do any thing that will live in the memory of mankind. My life has been spent in vain and idle aspirations, and in ceaseless rejected prayers that something should be the result of my existence beneficial to my own species.

**We are not the passive victim of others' opinions. Their opinions are powerless until we validate them.**

These words were written, toward the end of his life, by John Quincy Adams—a former United States president, secretary of state, ambassador, and congressman.

### Taking Thoughts Captive

The apostle Paul states that in our spiritual battle with the forces of darkness we must assess our thoughts and beliefs and reckon whether they are moving us closer to conformity to Christ or farther away from it. “We take every thought captive to obey Christ.” This means, in part, refusing to allow other people’s approval or disapproval to dominate our lives.

Of course, being addicted to approval is not the same as having a healthy appreciation for praise. Affirmation and encouragement are good things. C. S. Lewis wrote,

The child who is patted on the back for doing a lesson well, the woman whose beauty is praised by her lover, the saved soul to whom Christ says, “Well done,” are pleased and ought to be. For here the pleasure lies . . . in the fact that you have pleased someone you wanted (and rightly wanted) to please.

What a sad world it would be if artists were never applauded, if home runs were never cheered, if children received no expressions of wonder and amazement at their first steps, if authors received no encouraging notes or (worse yet) no royalties.

I walked through a preschool playground recently, where thirty or so children were playing tag, kicking red rubber balls, and swinging as high as they could. When they saw an adult walking around, they all began shouting the same thing: “Look at me.” They wanted their achievement to register with someone, to be held and valued, so they would ask it over and over as a single word: “Lookit me. Lookit.” (I remember reading of one person barraged with this request who finally replied in frustration, “I’m lookit-ing as fast as I can.”)

One step removed from the innocence of this pastime, though still relatively benign, is what might be described as “showing off.”

Mark Twain has a wonderful passage about the universality of this behavior. Tom Sawyer’s Sunday school is visited by a

prodigious personage—no less a one than the county judge—altogether the most august creation these children had ever looked upon. . . . Mr. Walters [the Sunday school superintendent] fell to “showing off,” with all sorts of official bustlings and activities. . . . the librarian “showed off”—running hither and thither, with his arms full of books, and making a deal of the splutter and fuss that insect authority delights in. The young lady teachers “showed off”—bending sweetly over pupils that were lately being boxed, lifting pretty warning fingers at bad little boys, and patting good ones lovingly. The young gentlemen teachers “showed off” with small scoldings and other little displays of authority and fine attention to discipline. . . . The little girls “showed off” in various ways, and the little boys “showed off” with such diligence that the air was thick with paper wads and the murmur of scufflings. And above it all the great man sat and beamed a majestic judicious smile upon all the house, and warmed himself in the sun of his own grandeur—for he was “showing off,” too.

Vast amounts of human behavior, though painstakingly disguised, are simply attempts at showing off. We want to impress other people without letting on that we’re trying to impress them. Approval addiction is the full-blown disease of which showing off may be just one minor symptom. Approval addiction involves not just trying to attract attention for what we do well, but also avoiding saying what we truly think if we believe speaking up could draw disapproval.

The central character in Jerzy Kosinski’s novel *Being There* is a variation on this theme. His very name—“Chance, the gardener”

**Vast amounts of human behavior, though painstakingly disguised, are simply attempts at showing off.**

—reflects the random nature of his existence. He has no opinions, no convictions. He is a man without a self. But he becomes a beloved public figure, advisor to presidents and interviewed on television, celebrated for his wisdom and charm, because he simply allows others to project on him whatever opinions or qualities they want to see. Even though they can't even get his name right, calling him "Chauncy Gardiner," he usually does not bother to correct

**Receiving praise gracefully, without becoming an addict, requires a well-ordered heart.**

the mistake. Indeed, he seems largely unaware that they do not even know his real name. His whole life—though wildly successful by external standards—is a failure in personhood, in "being there."

Receiving praise gracefully, without becoming an addict, requires a well-ordered heart. It means loving the right thing in the right way to the right degree with the right kind of love. It is not always possible to know when we have crossed the line to addiction, but there are some indicators.

### *Comparison*

Approval addicts find themselves measuring their accomplishments against those of other people. A businessman told me that when he reads success stories of corporate leaders or entrepreneurs, the accounts always include their age. "When I was younger," my friend said, "I could always tell myself that if someone had been more successful than I it was because they were older, and when I reached that age I'd exceed them. But now the ages in those stories are starting to be younger than mine, and I find it's getting harder to read them."

Ironically, this friend is probably more successful in financial terms than the vast majority of businesspeople. But that's the nature of comparison. It is a form of spiritual bulimia—always craving more, but never satisfied.

### *Deception*

If we are approval addicts, our concern for what others think about us inevitably leads us to shade the truth.

One day I was late for an appointment with an officeholder in our town. I began to search for credible reasons that might excuse my tardiness, when the truth was I had simply not allowed enough time to make the trip to his office. Because I happened to be writing about approval addiction at the time, I realized what I was doing, swallowed hard, and decided I would simply apologize for being late without offering some lame excuse.

Believe it or not, the official was even later than I. And he spent the first five minutes running through precisely the same set of excuses I had been manufacturing in my mind and, under different circumstances, would have offered myself.

This sort of thing happens so often that psychologists say many of us suffer from a syndrome sometimes called the "imposter phenomenon." We know that the truth about ourselves and the image we project are incongruent, and many people go through life with a lurking fear that one day the truth will come out.

### *Resentment*

Oddly enough, when we crave approval too strongly, we inevitably come to resent the very person whose approval we seek. We don't want our sense of well-being to rest in their hands. So even as we long to receive approval, we also resent our need for it.

### **The Practice of Secrecy**

There is an enormously helpful practice for gaining freedom from this addiction. It doesn't generally get much attention as a spiritual discipline, but it is one and is, in fact, recommended by Jesus himself. It is what might be called the practice of secrecy. Jesus spoke of doing good deeds and making sure no one finds out about them. His examples involved fasting, praying, and giving money. "When you give money, don't hire the University of Southern California Marching Band to make sure everybody notices." Of course, not many people actually hire trumpet players to accompany their offering. This command is absurdly easy to observe in the literal sense.

But Jesus' point is that we are prone to try to impress others on our very nature. We don't hire marching bands, because we wouldn't think such a move effective. But we blow our own horns all the time. Sometimes a strategically raised eyebrow can be the trick.

**True spiritual maturity means that we don't feel the need to congratulate ourselves because we've gotten something right.**

Jesus said, "When you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." The command is not quite so easy to dismiss as hiring a marching band. Jesus' point is that true spiritual maturity means that we don't feel the need to congratulate ourselves because we've gotten something right. We come to see that it *really* is better to give than to receive. Giving no longer looks *extraordinary* to us now; it just looks sane. It seems like the natural thing to do.

When Jesus said to do these things in secret, he was not making a law binding for all times and places. He often gave himself to prayer in front of his friends. Also, King David gave explicit details about how much he gave for the building of the temple, and one result was that his subjects were motivated to give generously as well. Rather, Jesus was giving advice to people who had a problem that could hinder their pursuit of spiritual life.

Jesus prefaced his instructions by announcing who would benefit most from them: "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them." The practice of secrecy exists to liberate those who are trapped by the desire "to be seen," to impress others. "Lookit me!" these pious people say to all who pass by their religious playgrounds. The practice of secrecy is Jesus' gift to approval addicts.

Here is this practice in a nutshell: Every once in a while do something good and try to make sure no one finds out about it. Join the club for recovering approval addicts that might be called "Righteous Anonymous."

We can give up trying to control what other people think of us. We can give up the whole business of trying to convince them that our motives are pure, that our accomplishments are impressive, or that our life is in better shape than it seems.

### *Design from Impression Management*

The technical term for this habit is "impression management." If we take notice, we will see that a vast amount of what we say generally includes a great deal of impression management. For instance, if we tell someone about a television program, we may preface our report with a disclaimer: "I don't watch much TV, but the other night ..."

Why do we do this? How much television we watch has nothing to do with what we are about to say, so why do we throw in that information? This is merely an exercise in impression management. We do it because if we don't, the listener might think we just sit around eating bonbons and watching sitcoms. And of course, it's unbearable that someone might think that about us. So we reel off the disclaimer to make sure the other person is thinking rightly about us—or, to put it more accurately, to make sure the other person is thinking about us the way we want to be thought about. Practicing secrecy means that we simply describe what we saw on TV without commenting on our viewing habits.

College students play the same game. The most common comment before a test—or after it has been graded and returned—is "I hardly even studied for it." Why do students say that? They want to make sure others know that a potential bad grade on the test is no reflection of their intelligence. That is, if they had studied as expected, they would have done better.

If we begin listening for these kinds of comments, we will discover that attempting to control the way others think of us is one of the primary uses we put words to in contemporary society. Human conversation is largely an endless attempt to convince others that we are more assertive or clever or gentle or successful than they might think if we did not carefully educate them.

*The Secret Practice of Good Deeds*

The opportunities for practicing secrecy are all around. Pick someone in your life and immerse that person in prayer—and don't tell anyone. Make a lavish donation to an organization, or send a sacrificial gift to a person in need—and keep it anonymous. Live so deeply with a portion of Scripture that it becomes etched on your mind and heart—and don't tell anyone you have memorized it. Mow your neighbor's lawn. Follow the bumper sticker that says, "Commit random acts of kindness and senseless beauty."

*The Great Rewards of Secrecy*

One way, mentioned earlier, that I have tried to practice secrecy is to take a day off and make it a "secret service" day around the house. The purpose is to have no agenda of my own, but simply to be home and available to my children and my wife to do what needs to be done, to play what they would like to play, but not to tell them that it's part of a "project."

I am always humbled by how quickly I begin to construct my own little agenda even when I am trying to devote the day to others. One time I did voluntary lawn service, and it was all I could do to resist the temptation to tell somebody—anybody—what a marvelous act of servanthood I had performed.

Jesus said there is a reward that we forfeit when we neglect the practice of secrecy: "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven."

Of course, exactly what Jesus had in mind with that reward we can only guess. Surely part of it consists of our one day hearing that heavenly "Well done, good and faithful servant" that the best praise on earth only dimly foreshadows.

But I believe there also is a present aspect of God's reward, which is lost when we do good deeds to impress others. Acts of servanthood done to impress others lose *their intrinsic power to help us enter the life of the kingdom*. Think back to the distinction between training and trying. Activities such as prayer, fasting, and giving can be training

exercises. If we give away some money, for example, we become less enslaved by it and can experience freedom and joy. If we do it secretly, we learn it is possible to survive without saying, "Lookit me!" If we do it enough, we may gradually be freed from the *inner need* to let people know. We may one day find that we can do good simply because it really is the most liberating, joyful way to live.

But if we choose to impress people by making sure they know of our generosity, the nature of our action changes. We settle for the narcotic of approval. Instead of becoming a little more free, we become a little more enslaved. *Acts done to impress cease to have value as training for life in the kingdom.*

Sometimes when we pray, we may have an intimate experience of being held by God, or a particularly vivid sense of his speaking to us. It may be a very good thing to keep this to ourselves—between God and us. To talk about such things too much changes the nature of the experience. Instead of being a gift from God, it becomes one more weapon in our arsenal for impressing people.

The Desert Fathers had a saying for the connection between secrecy and a heart that is warm toward God. If you want to keep the fire hot, they said, you must not open the door of the furnace too often.

There may be certain occasions when it is especially important for us to practice secrecy, or certain persons with whom we want to exercise it. I was talking about this with a friend, and we both noticed that when we were at a certain gathering, with people we considered important (our "generalized others"), we were most apt to talk about important things we had accomplished, in the hopes of impressing them. My friend and I agreed that we would attempt to practice secrecy at this meeting. That is, we would decide ahead of time that throughout the meeting we would say nothing about accomplishments or good things we had done.

**Acts of servanthood done to impress others lose their intrinsic power to help us enter the life of the kingdom.**

One of the wonderful gifts of this practice is to begin to see how silly the whole enterprise of impression management is. Winston Churchill once described his political rival, Clement Attlee, as "a modest little man, with much to be modest about." I already have the second half of that description down. The practice of secrecy offers the hope that one day the first half might be attainable as well.

# AN UNDIVIDED LIFE

## The Practice of Reflection on Scripture

Woe to those weak and timid souls who are divided between God and their world! They want and they do not want. They are torn by desire and remorse at the same time. . . . They have a horror of evil and a shame of good. They have the pains of virtue without tasting its sweet consolations. O how wretched they are.

FRANÇOIS FÉNELON

Purity of heart is to will one thing.

SØREN KIERKEGAARD

Purity is a wonderful thing. When something is pure, it exists in its essential nature—undefiled, unblemished, uncontaminated.

We are serious about some forms of purity in American society. A whole department of the federal government, the Food and Drug Administration, is charged with monitoring and protecting the purity of what we eat. But our standards of purity are not always what we might hope. Here are the federal guidelines of purity for a few familiar products:

**Apple butter:** If the mold count is 12 percent or more, if it averages 4 rodent hairs per 100 grams or more, if it averages 5 or more whole insects (not counting mites, aphids, or scale insects) per 100