

KINGDOM COME



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To my wife Jenny

*...for her unending love, support and partnership in this exciting
and challenging life that God has called us to.*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After leaving promising careers in horticultural science and early childhood education, David Wraight and his wife, Jenny, commenced their ministry life in their early twenties serving in an Aboriginal community in Western Australia and caring for neglected and abused Aboriginal children. Following their time in Western Australia, David served as a pastor and youth counsellor at a church in Melbourne, Australia, developing an extensive youth ministry, including an innovative youth accommodation and counselling program. In 1990 David joined Youth for Christ (YFC), initially serving as Executive Director of YFC Melbourne and then as National Director of YFC Australia. For five years he served as the YFC Asia Pacific Area Director until being appointed to his current role of International President/CEO.

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When the Kingdom Comes . . .

PEOPLE WILL KNOW JESUS

*Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.
(1 John 2:6)*

Paul had finally arrived in India. After developing a very successful medical practice in Australia, Paul and his wife Rebecca had become more and more convinced that God was calling them to “take Jesus” to the lost and needy people of India. Obediently pursuing their call, Paul and Rebecca sold their medical practice, rented out their house, sold or gave away most of their possessions, packed up their family and made the move.

The first year in India was not easy. Paul and Rebecca faced many emotionally draining challenges: adjusting to the local culture and living conditions, settling their children into school, establishing new friendships, practicing medicine with antiquated medical equipment and limited testing facilities, and connecting with indigenous and expatriate staff at the hospital. But, by far the hardest thing to cope with was the response of the patients at the hospital to Paul’s efforts to tell them about Jesus.

Being a “missionary doctor,” Paul had determined that he needed to tell everyone he came in contact with about

Jesus and their need to be “saved.” He didn’t want anyone to miss out on knowing the Jesus he loved and served. But as he shared the message of salvation with each patient, his efforts were either met with a wall of silence, rejection or—even more disturbing—a willingness to immediately accept Jesus as another god to be added to the pantheon of gods already worshiped in the context of the Hindu religion.

To those who would listen, Paul did his best to explain that Jesus was the only way, the only truth and the only source of eternal life; that to follow Jesus you needed to relinquish all other gods and serve and worship him alone. However, after a year of evangelical fervor, Paul had to admit that he had seen no genuine conversions to Christianity. He was bitterly disappointed and started to question his calling to ministry. He had developed a genuine and deep compassion for the people he was serving, which made him even more despondent that he was unable to convince them of their need for Jesus. Paul decided that he would no longer “tell” these people about Jesus, but simply provide medical services to them and do his best to alleviate their physical suffering. He and Rebecca started making plans to move back to Australia.

One day, while Paul was treating one of his long-term patients, the man asked him why he had given up his lucrative and comfortable life in Australia to come and live in such a poor area of the world to care for people no one else cared about. Without thinking Paul simply shared about his relationship with Jesus and his desire to serve Jesus by serving others. The man continued to question Paul about this “Jesus” he kept referring to, and Paul continued to answer his questions explaining what he believed about the identity

of Jesus and what it was like to have a relationship with him. After chatting for several hours, the man finally stated, “I don’t know this Jesus you are talking about, but if he is anything like you, I want to get to know him.”

This man eventually gave his life to Jesus, and as the people of his community saw and experienced the transformational power of the Kingdom in his life, they too wanted to know this Jesus that he now represented.

Paul and Rebecca continued for many more years in their ministry in India, simply “living” Jesus rather than “telling about” Jesus. Many others came to faith and were discipled within the context of an active and authentic community of indigenous followers of Jesus.⁸

Telling Versus Living

When Jesus walked this earth he connected with people relationally. He met with them, conversed with them, taught them, debated with them, loved them, cared for them—shared his life with them. They knew him personally. When people meet representatives of Jesus, they should not simply “know about” Jesus, they should “know” Jesus. Wherever the Kingdom comes in this world people should meet Jesus.

Unfortunately, much of the “evangelical” activity of the church is predicated on a paradigm of “telling people about Jesus” rather than “living Jesus” in the context of interpersonal relationship. We are told we need to witness to others, to make a good defense for the faith, to campaign for Christ, to stand up and be counted.

Paul and Rebecca commenced their ministry in India with a model of evangelism that compelled them to “make a

case” for Jesus. The problem with this approach is that it ends up being more about us and our worldview than about the person of Jesus. It is an “adversarial approach” that compels us to present our faith and understanding of the world as superior to the belief system of those we are trying to reach. The focus is on us and what we believe, and the image of Jesus is often blurred by our ardent advocacy.

Journalist Max Harris captured well the way many followers of Jesus are received when they take this adversarial approach. He observed: “Christians are a dim, ego-tripping minority which is dead set on telling everybody why they ought to become Christians, instead of finding out why they’re not.” Harris was reacting to what he perceived to be the arrogance of Christians, which is ironic considering how strongly we are compelled in Philippians to model the humility of Jesus.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!⁹

Tragically, it would appear that at the time Max Harris wrote this acerbic comment he hadn't met Jesus in any of the encounters he had with Christians. Instead of being won over by the humility of Jesus, Harris was repelled by the superior and conceited attitude of those who claimed to be his followers. Rather than conveying the person of Jesus, it appears that the Christians Harris had met had supplanted the spirit of Jesus in their life with their own "personalized" version of who he should be. Harris wasn't able to even get a glimpse of the real Jesus.

Fullness of Christ

The advancement of God's Kingdom is intrinsically tied to how much we allow Jesus to live in and through us, to how "full" we are of Jesus. This state of "fullness of Christ" is described in Ephesians:

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:16)

And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness

of him who fills everything in every way.
(Ephesians 1:22)

“Fullness” should be the ultimate objective of all followers of Jesus—both individually and collectively. But how do we achieve this fullness; this level of relationship with Jesus that enables us to authentically represent him to others? So much can get in the way: deeply ingrained personal and societal values; desires inconsistent with the values of the Kingdom that can be difficult to identify and even more difficult to overcome; misguided zeal—often driven by a genuine desire to share Jesus—that usually ends up with us forcing ourselves on others, devaluing their individual life journey and representing ourselves as the ones who have all the answers.

We are human beings, sinners saved by grace but still struggling with the sin that pulls us in all kinds of directions that are contrary to what and who Jesus wants us to be. Yet we have been given the commission and responsibility to share Jesus with the world. When people meet us, or when they encounter a community of believers, how clear is the image of Jesus? What does fullness in Christ really look like and how do we achieve this?

Behavior Modification

Even a genuine desire to authentically represent Jesus can drive us in all kinds of directions. Unfortunately, the starting point for many in their walk with Christ is to work hard at adhering to a prescribed code of behavior.

Repentance—turning from our old way of living to a new way of living—is a key tenet of the Christian faith. Working out what needs to change in our life, defining a set of behaviors

consistent with the teachings of the Bible and then living by these new standards, would seem to be a logical approach to “being” a Christian.

But “behavior modification,” rather than enhancing the quality of our relationship with Jesus, works against the spontaneity and sensitivity that is so intrinsic to healthy relationships. When we approach our relationship with Jesus behaviorally, the emphasis is more on our capacity to live up to a catalogue of self-imposed standards than it is about getting to know Jesus and allowing him to speak into and through our life.

The apostle Paul explains in detail how frustrating and inadequate this approach to living for Jesus can be:

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me.

I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.

Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: When I want

to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members.

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?¹⁰

Behavior modification didn't work for Paul and I see no reason why we would believe that it could or should work for us. Yet, behavior modification seems to be the default for many followers of Jesus and local church communities. Driven by a desire to live like Jesus, we set ourselves the task of behaving in a way that we believe aligns with who Jesus wants us to be. We identify things we should and shouldn't do, and then we set out to live according to the behavioral code we have defined. Often it starts off well, we diligently apply the "new rules," we behave better than we did before; we feel pretty good about the changes we have made. But it is not long before our guard slips. Our discipline falters and we fail one or more of the behavioral tests we have set ourselves. Yet, perseverance is one of the virtues upheld in the Bible; so we pick ourselves up and renew our efforts to comply with our new set of behaviors, enthusiastically pursuing the pathway to authenticity. But we slip up again and again. The failures stack up and eventually we regress back into who we were before we applied the new rules. Ultimately, we fail to live up to our self-imposed expectations of Jesus-like behavior; we become discouraged and often self-condemning.

Inevitably, the failure of behavioral modification drives many down one of two pathways—*complacency* or *legalism*—both of which can take us further from our objective to be more like Jesus.

Complacency

The pathway to complacency usually begins with an adjustment of our expectations to a more moderate and “do-able” set of behaviors. But unfortunately, because the whole behavior modification system is fatally flawed, any version of it is going to ultimately fail. When our new “lower” standard doesn’t work, we are once again faced with our inability to live up to our self-imposed, though modified, standards. Permanent change seems to be an elusive goal, unattainable by sheer willpower and self-discipline. To compound our sense of inadequacy, as we analyze our serial failure we realize that even during the times when we actually managed to comply with our behavioral code, it didn’t seem to result in us being more effective at characterizing Jesus.

Eventually, we give up. We settle for mediocrity. Our complacency defines who we are and we tend to just go through the motions of “being a Christian,” having little or no impact on those around us. The people in our circle of influence may know that we go to church, that we are “Christians,” but they never really get to meet or know Jesus. Far from being radical followers of Jesus, we are largely indistinguishable from the general population outside the Kingdom, exhibiting the same values, lifestyle, passions and inhibitions. The only difference is that we have the label “Christian.”

The Bible describes this state of complacency as being

“lukewarm,” and God says that when he encounters someone like this it makes him want to “vomit.”¹¹ His desire is that people be either “hot or cold.”¹² Instead of going through the motions of being a Christian and misrepresenting him, God would rather we not even identify ourselves as followers of Jesus.

When we become followers of Jesus we hand our life over to him—we give him total control. A relationship with Jesus is an “all or nothing” relationship. Jesus won’t have it any other way! In Matthew 16:24 Jesus says, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.”

Jesus died for us and he asks us to die for him. For new life to occur—to be “born again”—we need to die to our self. If we won’t totally give up the control of our life, Jesus can’t live through us. By engaging in behavioral modification we are still trying to control our life, and Jesus will not be free to recreate us in his image.

Legalism

The second pathway people may be driven down, after failing to live up to their own behavioral expectations, is one of a more rigorous application of rules and regulations. It is the pathway of “legalism,” the very thing that Jesus went out of his way to condemn in his encounters with the religious leaders of his time.¹³ These legalists were so afraid of breaking God’s law that they built strict codes of behavior based on their interpretation of revealed law in the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) and applied them rigorously to themselves and to those in their religious communities.

Legalism is generally defined as “a strict conformity to the letter of the law rather than its spirit.”¹⁴ This describes well the problem Jesus had with the Pharisees and teachers of the law:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.¹⁵

It is generally in the context of a well-organized religious or political community that legalism thrives. It is rare to find an individualized legalism that begins and ends with one person. Legalism needs community to work; it requires controlling leaders who define and enforce behavioral codes, and a compliant community of followers who conform to and reinforce the control of the leadership through monitoring and reporting mechanisms.

The systematized rule-driven form of faith espoused by the Pharisees was an anathema to Jesus. It replaced a personal relationship with God with a performance-based religious system that was unrelentingly administered by self-appointed arbitrators who assumed a role of absolute power and control. Jesus said of these religious leaders and their legalistic systems of control:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven

in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.¹⁶

Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation."¹⁷

So why would people who seek to follow Jesus and advance his Kingdom gravitate to faith communities that employ religious systems that Jesus himself identified as unacceptable? I believe it is because these communities offer a clearly defined way for people to achieve a standard they perceive as necessary for them to be acceptable to God. They realize they can't achieve this standard on their own—and they struggle to even work out the non-negotiable behaviors and compliances of "being a Christian"—so they join with others who can define for them what is required to be "right with God."

In a legalistic religious system, formulas are applied to all aspects of life and faith. There is a sense of security in knowing that by adhering to a particular set of behaviors you are "in." It also makes it easy to define who is "out," and to communicate to those who are "out" what they need to do to get "in." In contrast to trying to live up to a self-imposed

behavioral code—which we have seen almost always ends in failure and frustration—community-imposed legalism is far easier to comply with. Living as a “Christian” by having others tell you how to live, as well as keeping you accountable to the prescribed standards of behavior, is eminently possible. However, Jesus doesn’t leave the legalism option open to us, for he rejects and condemns adherence to a set of rules as the way of faith and service in his Kingdom.

In Romans Paul goes to great lengths to explain how we are no longer under law but under grace.¹⁸ In Corinthians and Galatians he contrasts a life of legalism with the Spirit-led life, stating that strict adherence to a set of laws “kills,” whereas the Spirit gives life.¹⁹ Cluttering our life with rules, regulations and behavioral compliances leaves little room for Jesus. If we are in control, then God isn’t, and Jesus is not free to fully operate in and through us.

Grace

Aside from being condemned by Jesus, legalism has no place in God’s Kingdom because it kills grace. The grace that is offered to us through Jesus is the very distinctive of the Kingdom that sets it apart from all other faiths and religions. In his book *What’s So Amazing About Grace*, Philip Yancey relates a story about C. S. Lewis that highlights the uniqueness of grace:

During a British conference on comparative religions, experts from around the world debated what, if any, belief was unique to the Christian faith. They began eliminating possibilities. Incarnation? Other religions had

different versions of gods appearing in human form. Resurrection? Again, other religions had accounts of return from death. The debate went on for some time until C. S. Lewis wandered into the room. “What’s all the rumpus about?” he asked, and heard in reply that his colleagues were discussing Christianity’s unique contribution among world religions. Lewis responded, “Oh, that’s easy. It’s grace.”

After some discussion, the conferees had to agree. The notion of God’s love coming to us free of charge, no strings attached, seems to go against every instinct of humanity. The Buddhist eight-fold path, the Hindu doctrine of *karma*, the Jewish covenant, and Muslim code of law—each of these offers a way to earn approval. Only Christianity dares to make God’s love unconditional.²⁰

Grace is “unmerited favor to the ill-deserving.” The theme runs through the whole Bible. It is founded on the premise that there is nothing we can do to put things right with God or to live up to the standard that God requires for citizenship in his Kingdom. Only by an act of grace can things be made right between us and God.

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all

have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.²¹

When we understand grace it becomes abundantly clear why following a set of laws or behaviors will not enable us to become more like Jesus or enhance our capacity to advance his Kingdom. Citizenship in the Kingdom is solely based upon our relationship with Jesus, and therefore Jesus must be the touch-point for those we are endeavoring to invite into the Kingdom. Presenting a set of cultural norms or a codex of prescribed behaviors as the means by which someone enters the Kingdom of God doesn't align with the foundations of the Christian faith—grace, faith and unconditional love.

Intimacy with Jesus

Allowing Jesus to live through us is the only way for us to accurately represent the Kingdom. When those outside the Kingdom encounter people of the Kingdom they should meet Jesus, they should experience his unconditional acceptance, they should be overwhelmed by his grace, and they should be captivated by his love.

By simply loving and caring for those they were called to reach in India, Paul and Rebecca allowed Jesus to live through them. The people who encountered Paul in the hospital were no longer confronted with someone who was trying to convince them of the fallacy of their worldview. Instead they experienced Jesus in person and were drawn to his love,

compassion, acceptance and humility. They encountered Jesus in their relationship with Paul.

So how do we achieve the “fullness in Christ” that is described in Ephesians 4? What is the secret to having Jesus so fill us that he controls our relational interactions, our emotional responses, our values and our very character? The biblical imperative to “walk as Jesus did”²² is obviously a huge challenge to all who would follow Jesus. If the legalistic approach doesn’t work, then what does? Surely there has to be some form of dedication to a systematic way of living that will allow Jesus to take control and shine through our life?

In the end it is not rules or systems that determine our capacity to convey Jesus to others; it is the quality of our relationship with Jesus—our closeness to him. It is all about intimacy with Christ. The old saying “more of him and less of me” is the key to effectively sharing Jesus with the world.

If we are people of the Kingdom, Jesus should define who we are. This is what Paul was driving at when he said in Philippians 2:13, “For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” Immersing ourselves in Jesus is the key to representing him authentically.

This level of closeness to Jesus can only be achieved by making our relationship with Jesus an absolute priority. We need to be disciplined in our prayer life, spending exclusive and substantial time with Jesus, talking things over with him and listening to his voice. We need to make spending time with Jesus more important than doing things for Jesus. We need to be immersed in his Word, studying the life of Jesus and applying the truth of the Bible to our life. And we need to be accountable for the time we spend with Jesus, making deliberate changes and setting up accountability structures that ensure that we have “exclusive” time with Jesus every day.

As we spend more and more time with Jesus he will identify the areas that we are holding back from him, and he will take over more and more of our life. The secret to living as Jesus would is to live in a state of constant awareness of Jesus' presence. Only then will we be able to instinctively respond as Jesus would to every situation.

Spiritual Formation

The state of our heart

The Bible consistently talks about spiritual fruit and the character of Christ coming from a changed heart. For instance, "The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks."²³ In 1 Timothy 1:5 Paul states that love "comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." The heart is the inner core of a person's being, and unless the heart is transformed, it will be enormously difficult to respond to life situations with the values and character of Christ. The fruit of the Spirit and the grace of God will flow naturally from a heart that has been transformed by God, yet it is only through the transformational work of the Holy Spirit that the heart can be changed. If we are to love others with the love of Jesus, then we have to pay attention to our heart.

In 1 Samuel 16:7 we are told, "The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." The main problem with behavior modification and legalism is that they focus upon

what we should do or not do, rather than *who* we are. As we have seen in his interaction with the Pharisees and teachers of the law, Jesus is much more concerned about character—about the intrinsic values that drive our life—than he is about observation of a catalogue of “do’s” and “don’ts.”

In Matthew Jesus tells us that it is by our “fruit” that others will know whether or not we are followers of him.²⁴ In Galatians we are given a list of spiritual fruit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”²⁵ Our spiritual fruitfulness is the ultimate test of our authenticity.

The only way we are going to be able to exhibit this fruit in our life is to live by the Spirit. It is not going to come naturally, nor are we going to be able to force these attributes into our life. In Ephesians 5:18 we read, “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.” When you are drunk you lose control of yourself and the effect of the alcohol takes over. Paul likens being filled with the Spirit to being drunk. We need to be “drunk” on the Spirit, to be filled to such a degree that it is not us directing our actions and thoughts but the Spirit. The more we open ourselves up to Jesus by spending time with him, the more we allow his Spirit to fill us, and the more we will be like him.

The Spiritual Formation movement

Over the past decade increasing attention has been given to the subject of “spiritual formation.” Books have been written, spiritual formation conferences organized, Bible studies developed and processes implemented—all directed at encouraging and enabling people in the Church to better

represent Jesus by who they are and how they live. This movement has been driven by a deepening concern that the religious structures and institutions of Christianity are no longer producing authentic followers of Jesus, but are rather churning out a population of shallow, self-serving, judgmental, culturally superior individuals who are misrepresenting Jesus and his Church to a watching world. It is a rejection of the “religiosity” of Christianity and the accompanying loss of intimacy with Jesus that is driving people to pursue a new experience of Jesus and his transformational power in their lives.

We can learn much from the spiritual formation movement and I would encourage you to investigate further its concepts and precepts. However, the point I want to make about this movement is that this quest for a new intimacy with God has identified the “transformation of the heart” as the key element in the spiritual formation of a person into the image of Jesus.

Dallas Willard, one of the leading lights in the spiritual formation movement, states:

Spiritual formation in the tradition of Jesus Christ is the process of transformation of the inmost dimension of the human being, the heart, which is the same as the spirit or will. It is being formed (really, transformed) in such a way that its natural expression comes to be the deeds of Christ done in the power of Christ.²⁶

Willard goes on to point out that there is both “a passive element and an active element” to spiritual formation. He observes:

We know, as Jesus says, “Without me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5) . . . It is the initiative of God and the presence of God without which all of our efforts are in vain—whether it is in justification or sanctification or in the realm of the exercise of power, all our efforts will be in vain if God does not act. But we had better believe that the back side of that verse reads: “If you do nothing it will be without me.” And this is the part we have the hardest time hearing.

Referring to Proverbs 23:19 Willard says:

“Keep your heart.” Well, that’s something for me to do. I have the keeping of my heart. I am responsible for it. Do I do it alone? No. If I do it alone, I’ll just make bad matters worse. But I have to do it nonetheless. I am the one who has to “give all diligence to add to my faith moral excellence and add to my moral excellence knowledge”—I’m the one. Again: Do I do it alone? No. But if I do nothing, it will not be done.

Willard is pointing out that it is God who transforms the heart, but that we need to allow him to transform it and be involved in the transformational process.

The spiritual formation movement is characterized by a number of disciplines: contemplative prayer, life-impacting worship, immersion in God’s Word, self-denial and sacrificial service. This is not pseudo behaviorism; it is the application of God’s truth through discipline and diligence. It is not forcing behavioral change, but it is dedication to a set of practices and

activities that provide opportunity for greater intimacy with Jesus and deep heart renovation by the Holy Spirit. It requires us to do something to place ourselves in a position where God can transform us.

Paul talks about spiritually forming discipline in 1 Corinthians 9:24–27:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. 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.

Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

Spiritual disciplines and activities that place us in an environment where the Holy Spirit can work on our hearts and renew our minds²⁷ are the key to us developing our capacity to characterize Jesus.

Pray Continually²⁸

In 1 Thessalonians 5:17 we are instructed to “pray continually.” What does Paul mean by this? Obviously he did more than pray all day. Yet what he conveys in this directive seems to suggest that we should be constantly in prayer.

The *Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary* provides a helpful

explanation of this verse. “Continually’ does not mean nonstop praying. Rather, it implies constantly recurring prayer, growing out of a settled attitude of dependence on God. Whether words are uttered or not, lifting the heart to God while one is occupied with miscellaneous duties is the vital thing. Verbalized prayer will be spontaneous and will punctuate one’s daily schedule, as it did Paul’s writings.”²⁹

The *Asbury Bible Commentary* provides further insight, “Prayer is the constant attitude of the believer. To ‘pray continually’ means that every activity must be carried on with a sense of God’s presence.”³⁰

What this verse is about is intimacy with Jesus, living in an attitude of prayer that provides a continuous connection with our God and Saviour. Constantly spending time with Jesus deepens our relationship with him and allows intimacy to develop.

Listening to Jesus

When I was starting out in my ministry with Youth for Christ I was concerned that I was not spending enough time in prayer. I wanted to get closer to Jesus and to develop a deeper understanding of his plan for my life. At the same time I realized I needed to improve my fitness. So I decided to start walking for an hour every morning.

Trying to fit in a prayer time as well as an hour walk in the morning was a real struggle, and I just didn’t seem to have enough time for both. Then it dawned on me, why couldn’t I pray while I was walking? So that’s what I did. I would spend an hour in the morning praying and walking. I also had a daily Bible reading schedule, so often I had verses that I was mulling over in my head as I walked.

The first few weeks of this regime, I would spend my whole walking hour talking to Jesus about issues, problems, needs and ministry plans. However, one morning I got a very strong sense from Jesus to just “shut up and listen.” And so that’s what I did. I started my walk by saying, “Okay Lord, I’m listening, please speak to me.” I just walked and waited, and Jesus started to direct my thoughts to him and his character. I thought about his provision in my life and his grace and patience, and about his faithfulness and blessing, and as I walked and meditated on Jesus I was suddenly overwhelmed by a sense of his presence and love for me. At this moment Jesus directed my thoughts to a big problem I was having at Youth for Christ, and it was as if a light had been turned on. Jesus interwove his wisdom with my problem and provided an amazingly simple but brilliant solution that honored him and reflected his character. Up until this time I had been so busy telling Jesus about my problems that he couldn’t get a word in. He just wanted me to listen. And when I did, he was able to provide the answer in the context of his character and faithfulness.

As I spent more time with Jesus, studying and meditating on his Word, and listening to him, I started to sense his presence with me throughout the day. I often found myself chatting to him about things as I encountered them in my ministry and family life. In my conversations with others I would sometimes say something and realize that what I said was not consistent with how I would have normally responded, but it was a far better response that resulted in a far better outcome. The closer we get to Jesus, the more he can live through us, directing our every thought, word and action.

Quality means quantity

Authentic Christian faith is expressed in our relationships—our relationship with Jesus, our relationship with fellow Christians, our relationship with our spouse and children, our relationship with others outside of God’s family—and it is how we conduct these relationships that determines our capacity to represent Jesus and to live like him.

I am sure that you have heard the term “quality time.” Spending quality time with our spouse or children is often presented as a relational panacea, as the “cure-all” for healthy relationships. But from my experience, the quality of the time we spend with family members is directly related to the quantity of time we spend with them. Availability is also a key factor in family relationships, because the amount of time we are prepared to devote to being available in a relationship conveys the priority we place upon that relationship.

Let me explain by using the example of the modern family. People’s lives today are replete with activities and commitments. In fact, if you ask people how they are doing in life, they will often answer with one word—“busy.” By the time children are in their teenage years, the parents, particularly fathers, are usually so busy in their careers and other activities that they have very little time available for their children.

In the context of this time-gobbling lifestyle, parents often grab hold of the notion that spending quality time with their children will make up for the little time they are available in the home. So they plan an activity to do with their teenage son or daughter that they believe will provide some “bonding” time with their child.

Let’s say a father allocates some time in his busy schedule

to go to a movie with his teenage son, thinking this will enable them to have some quality time together. Unfortunately, the most likely response will be a dismissive rejection of the whole idea; and the reason given will probably be that his son already has other plans—or will be making plans—to do something with his friends.

The fact that the father has planned some “cool” activity with his son means very little to his child, because the activity is not offered in the context of a meaningful relationship with his father. What the son is looking for is a relationship where he knows he is a priority, where he matters to his father more than work or friends or other commitments. He is looking for a father who will be available when he needs him, who won’t just brush him off saying he is too busy when the son needs help with a problem, or a ride to his friend’s house, or a chat about something that happened at school. The quality of the relationship is directly proportional to the quantity of time the father is available and willing to spend with his son. Quality equals quantity and availability.

The same principles that apply to our relationships with other human beings apply to our relationship with Jesus. The quality of relationship with Jesus depends upon the quantity of time we spend with him. We need to be spending as much time as possible with Jesus, striving to be as close to him as we can so that he will be reflected in our lives. Busyness doesn’t only prevent us from having healthy relationships with our family and friends; it also prevents us from having an intimate and life-changing relationship with Jesus. Prioritizing our life around Jesus is the key to being a true representation of him to the world.

You can't allocate times and dates in your calendar to accommodate a crisis with your son or daughter, or schedule the times that your children will need your advice because they are facing a major challenge. It simply won't work for you to say to your daughter, "Honey, I have an opening on Thursday evening between dinner and my leadership meeting at the church. Can we schedule for you to have a crisis in your relationship with your friend between 7 and 7:30 p.m. on Thursday?" Crises in your family generally come at the most inconvenient times. If you are going to faithfully serve your family, then your spouse and children need to have a place of priority in your life and take precedence over the other items in your weekly schedule.

In the same way, if you are going to faithfully represent and serve Jesus, spending time with him must take priority in your life. You can't just allocate a free slot in your schedule for Jesus and expect that this is going to provide all the relational connection you need to reach a level of spiritual maturity where people will see only Jesus and not you. Jesus is not going to be able to do much in your life if you tell him, "Well, this week I have an opening on Saturday at 7:30 a.m. when I can spend ten minutes with you." Our relationship with Jesus should be pervasive; it should permeate all areas of our life, not just a five- or ten-minute slot every so often.

Worshipping Daily

What is worship? We are told in Romans, "Offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing

of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."³¹

In Micah we are given similar instructions:

With what shall I come before the LORD
and bow down before the exalted God?

Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?

Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousand rivers of oil?
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

He has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.³²

Worshipping God as he requires is far more than meeting for a short time once a week to sing choruses and hymns; it is daily reflecting God in our lives and bringing glory to him through doing his will on this earth. It involves obedience and self-sacrifice. Worship is walking humbly through each day with Jesus in such a close and intimate relationship that it transforms and renews our thinking, allowing us to know the will of God and to bring him honor and glory daily by the way we live.

God's Word

Studying God's Word in and of itself will not result in transformation. Throughout history there have been many scholars of God's Word who have not exhibited the character of Christ or lived by the principles and values of the Scripture they were studying. The Pharisees and Teachers of the Law knew God's Word extensively, yet Jesus was quick to point out that they failed to let the Scripture change their lives.

In James 1:22–25 we are told:

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.

The study of God's Word must be seen as a spiritual activity, rather than a purely intellectual pursuit—the objective of our study is to meet Jesus and allow him to apply God's Word to our heart and mind. Jesus is identified in the Bible as the “Word of God”;³³ he is the means by which God communicates his character and truth to us. Any encounter with the Bible should be an encounter with Jesus.

Reading God's Word with an open heart and mind, seeking the character of Christ and letting the Holy Spirit

apply the Word to our life is a challenging proposition. It is so easy to slip into an analytical approach to God's Word, where we gather facts and information without seeing any real change in our life. Knowing the Bible is important, but knowing the author of the Bible is so much more important and is the key to transformation. Seeing the Bible as a means to deepen our relationship with Jesus will motivate us to look for Jesus in the words we are reading and studying. As we meet Jesus in the pages of the Bible our lives will be transformed.

Meditating on the Word

We should read the Bible expecting Jesus to speak to us. I have found that when I meditate on passages from the Bible my heart and mind are opened to Jesus and I have a greater sense of his direction and purpose for my life. Reflecting on what we read in the Bible—rather than simply reading a passage and moving on with the rest of our daily schedule—allows room for Jesus to apply the Word to our lives.

Journaling has helped me enormously in reflecting on the Word. This involves reading a passage of the Bible and then, in an attitude of prayer and listening, writing down what I think God is saying to me through the passage. Journaling helps me to get clarity and to work through the things that I have been confronted with in the Bible. On many occasions it has been transformational as I have gained a new understanding of Jesus and his purpose for my life.

I first started journaling when I attended a three-day prayer retreat with some other youth ministry leaders. I was actually reluctant to participate as I had never been on a prayer retreat before and I was wondering how I was going

to cope with praying for three days. However, on the first day, the leaders of the retreat gave us a passage of Scripture and sent us off on our own to meditate on the passage and write down what we believed God was saying to us. We were given an hour to work through the text. As I read, meditated and wrote down my conversation with God, I was surprised at how quickly the hour went by. I was reluctant to return to the group as I had so much more I wanted to write and share with God. As the retreat progressed, we were given more and more time to read, meditate and journal. In just three days, my relationship with God grew to a new level of intimacy I had no idea was possible. As God applied his Word to my life, I became increasingly aware of my need for his forgiveness and healing. Things that I had ignored and hidden because they were too painful to deal with were exposed. God used his Word to minister to me, freeing me from guilt, bitterness and self-reliance. It was a life-changing experience.

Life application

God's Word should be the reference point for our lives. It should be the place we go to as we confront the challenges and opportunities that life constantly throws at us.

Often, early in our journey as believers we "hunger and thirst" for God's Word. We devour God's Word as we explore what it means to be a follower of Jesus, seeking answers in the Bible as we encounter the many questions and dilemmas that arise as we work out our new-found faith. But as we journey on in life, we get better at "being a Christian" and we don't "need" to refer as much to God's Word for the answers. We become "experts" and often end up dispensing the truth to others without direct reference to God's Word.

How we view and treat God's Word is often revealed in the way we interact with other believers. In my leadership role in Youth for Christ I have many opportunities to provide support and counsel to young people and Youth for Christ staff. Unfortunately, I am a "serial advice-giver." When I am asked about issues of life, ministry, relationships, values or calling I have a tendency to provide immediate answers drawing on my own experience and wisdom, telling those seeking my counsel what I think—what my experience has taught me—and applying it to their life situation.

If we believe the Bible is the ultimate authority for all we do, surely the best way for us to respond when asked for advice, counsel and guidance, is to go directly to God's Word. Instead of giving our answers and advice, a better response would be to say, "Let's go and see what God's Word says about that," and together explore and discover what the Bible says about the issue.

When we view the Bible as static information rather than the living Word of God, we tend not to return to it to regularly to seek answers to life's questions. We become "experts," thinking we know enough to speak with authority and to give advice to others less experienced and knowledgeable than us without going to God's Word and seeking the input and wisdom of God himself. However, if we treat the Bible as a living, vibrant and dynamic means for God to communicate with us, we will continually revisit the Word—even the passages we know well—expecting God to speak, to reveal something new about himself and about us.

Reading the Gospels

Over the years I have journeyed with Jesus I have encountered a number of people whom I highly respect as authentic followers of Jesus. When I have asked these people what they do to keep on track with Jesus, many of them have told me that they have a practice of reading through the Gospels³⁴ continuously. The rationale they provide for doing this is that it helps them to keep close to Jesus as they are confronted daily with an account of Jesus' life and teaching.

Studying and learning from the life and teachings of Jesus should be a lifetime pursuit of every one of his followers. Every time I read the Gospels I am amazed at how much I discover. Even though I have read these passages of the Bible many times before, as I read them again I gain new perspective, a deeper understanding of Jesus, and often a different application of the teachings of Jesus to my life.

There is great value in being a "serial consumer" of the Gospels.

Immersion in God's Word

One of the approaches I have found helpful in reading God's Word is to treat it more as a "story" than a "textbook" of facts and information. When you read large slabs of the Bible at one time you get a far greater sense of the truth and continuity of the message of God's Word and a more comprehensive picture of the character of God.

Recently I have started listening to the Bible. I purchased the Bible on CD and now play these CDs in my car as I drive to and from the office. This has helped me to appreciate the Bible as a whole, rather than a compilation of separate parts.

It has kept me from losing the overall context and wonder of this amazing God-inspired book.

Honesty & Truth

Immersion in God's Word keeps us honest. As James points out, reading the Word is like looking in a mirror³⁵ in that it reflects back to us our true nature.

Hebrews likens the Word to a sword. Hebrews 4:12–13 states:

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

As we open ourselves up to the surgical knife of the Bible it exposes our true nature, cutting away the masks and protective lies we build around ourselves, revealing the hidden things in our life, reflecting back to us our true self.

Jesus described himself as “the way, the truth and the life.”³⁶ His very nature is truth, and if we are to represent him accurately we need to be people of the truth. We need to be people who, in the truth-exposing light of God's Word, are honest about ourselves; people who find such security in the love and acceptance of Jesus that we can achieve a level of self-acceptance that allows us to be true and honest in the way we represent ourselves to others. We should be people

who stand out because of our honesty—people who can be trusted to tell the truth and live by the truth.

Lies and deception are so much part of the fabric of our world that it is often hard to even recognize the truth, let alone live honest and truthful lives. Yet, although honesty is such a rare commodity, it seems people long for the truth; that there is such a voracious hunger for truth that when people encounter it they are captivated and crave more.

Dishonesty is one of the biggest impediments to us authentically communicating Jesus. If Jesus is “the truth” and we are not truthful, then how can we represent him to others?

Lying is a relational cancer, rapidly spreading tentacles of deceit that destroy trust and security—the vital elements of healthy relationships. One lie can lead to many other lies very quickly. For instance, let’s say a guy named Sam is running late to work because he slept in. He knows his boss really gets annoyed when people turn up late to work without a good reason, so Sam calls his boss and tells him that he is going to be late because he has a flat tire on his car. When Sam gets to work the boss asks him where he was when he got the flat tire. Another lie is needed to back up Sam’s first lie. Sam describes how he had to pull over on a busy road, adding details of the challenges of swapping the flat for the spare. The boss asks what caused the flat—once again Sam has to lie, telling his boss he found a screw in the tire. Sam’s colleagues at work then ask him why he was late—more lies are needed to support the first lie. The web of deceit rapidly expands and Sam ends up having to lie many more times—and to many more people—than he originally intended to.

Fear is the driving force behind deception. You lie to

others because you fear the outcome of not lying. More lies are needed because of the fear of being discovered, and as the web of deception expands, so do the consequences of the lie. Simply telling the truth can be so freeing. If Sam had called his boss and told him he was going to be late for work because he overslept, the consequences would have most likely been a simple reprimand by his boss. But Sam would have been free from fear, free from the pressure to continue to lie to cover up his original deception, free to prove to his boss that he could do better.

Honesty is foundational to meaningful relationship. If we know that we can rely upon someone to tell the truth it creates an environment of security and trust. If people are truly honest in their interactions with each other, they no longer have to live with the tension of being exposed, of the other person finding out who they really are and rejecting them. They can relax and truly be themselves, not having to rely on lies to impress or buy acceptance or to cover up their perceived inadequacies.

In 1 John 4:18 we read that “perfect love drives out fear.” The antithesis of love is fear; and fear is generated and reinforced by lies and deception.

In my relationship with Jenny, we try our best to be honest with each other. We have a security and deep trust in our marriage relationship that could not be possible if we were not committed to telling the truth. For example, if Jenny asks me if I like what she is wearing, she knows she will get an honest answer from me. I might not be very qualified to answer, because women’s fashion is definitely not my strong suit. But Jenny knows I will tell her if I think the dress she is

wearing doesn't look good on her. If I lied and said I thought it looked good when I didn't like it, why would she bother to ask me in the future? My opinion would have no value because Jenny could not trust me to give an honest answer. But Jenny—knowing that I love her and that the last thing I would want to do is to hurt her—can receive my answer, even if it is that I don't like the look of the dress. She is secure in the honesty and love of our marriage relationship.

The fact that Jenny can receive an honest opinion from me about the look of her clothing may seem like a simple issue, but if Jenny and I practice honesty in our day-to-day interactions—in the ordinary “stuff of life”—then this becomes the norm in our relationship. If honesty is intrinsic to our marriage relationship, then when the deeper issues of life arise, we are free to express the truth of what we are experiencing. Honesty provides the relational solidarity, acceptance and security we need to not only survive all that life throws at us, but to thrive in our life journey. We are free to be ourselves, knowing that we are accepted and loved for who we really are. True freedom comes by practicing the truth. Jesus declared in John 8:32, “The truth will set you free.”

The biblical perspective

Jesus said that he came to give life and to give it to the full.³⁷ Truth is a key element to this fullness of life that Jesus desires for us. The Bible clearly states that lies and deception are an anathema to God and an impediment to all that God desires for us.

In Proverbs 12:22 we read, “The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in men who are truthful.” In Proverbs 6:16–17 we are told there are seven things the Lord hates; two of the

seven are “a lying tongue” and “a false witness who pours out lies.”

Jesus identifies the gravity of lying in John 8:44. When addressing a group of Jewish leaders he says: “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”

Who are we representing when we deceive and lie? We are certainly not representing Jesus, and we are definitely not representing Kingdom values. The consequence of lying is that it disqualifies us from authentically representing Jesus and experiencing the fullness of life that he offers to all.

I have been greatly distressed over recent years as I have seen prominent Christian leaders discredited and failing because of serial lying and deception. The starting point of the demise of these leaders is generally associated with some form of moral indiscretion. Unfortunately, when challenged by a concerned spouse or fellow leaders who suspect something is amiss, they deny having a problem, usually fabricating a story to explain away the suspicion and concern. Without the accountability and loving intervention that comes with the truth, these flawed leaders continue down a pathway of self-perpetuating moral failure, ultimately requiring a web of lies so complex that it eventually collapses, exposing their duplicity and discrediting them and the one they claim to serve and follow.

Another disappointing phenomenon I am encountering of late is the perception that some Christian business leaders cannot be trusted. I have lost count of the number of times I have had someone say to me, “I am never going to do

business with a Christian again because they can't be trusted." Dishonesty, insincerity, lack of integrity and deception distort the image of Jesus to such a degree that he is virtually unrecognizable.

Shining lights of integrity

As followers of Jesus we should be known as people of impeccable integrity, as people of the truth. Throughout the gospels Jesus tells us to be shining lights in the darkness. I believe that one of the most effective ways to shine our light in this world is to be honest, to be purveyors of the truth.

I have a friend who owns two car dealerships. Car salespeople are often lampooned as the least trustworthy people in society. My friend is a man of godly character who loves Jesus and strives to live a life of integrity and truth. People travel for miles to buy a vehicle from my friend's dealerships—passing many other dealerships on the way—because they know they will receive honest service. He is open about his faith and he demands that his sales and administrative staff adhere to the values of the Kingdom. People are drawn to the light of Jesus expressed in the truth and integrity being practiced by this follower of Jesus in a business sector known for deception and lack of integrity.

When Jesus, the source of truth, reigns in us, his Kingdom comes and honesty and integrity will prevail.



Following Jesus—being citizens of the Kingdom of God—is more about who we are than what we do, because what we do is determined by who we are. It is more about character formation than behavior modification, because our

behaviors are derived from our character. It is more about compassion than obligation, because it is out of love for God that we are compelled to love others. And, it is more about relationship than it is about religion, because it is through a relationship with Jesus that we enter the Kingdom of God.

Jesus came to save us from ourselves. Following him involves dying to self so that we can be reborn into the Kingdom. In God's Kingdom, we are not citizens by immigration; we are citizens by rebirth. Jesus calls those who follow him "sons of the Kingdom"³⁸ and "sons of God."³⁹ In Galatians we are told "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus"⁴⁰ and that as heirs we have received the "the full rights of sons."⁴¹ When we follow Jesus we not only become citizens of the Kingdom of God, we become sons and daughters of the King. However, to take our place in the Kingdom we need to forfeit our life; we need to give everything to Jesus—money, possessions, career, family and life itself—so that Jesus can recreate us in his image. Handing ourselves over to Jesus provides him with the freedom to use us to shine the light of his love and character into the world.

May we be able to say with Paul, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."

We would see Jesus

In John 12 we read of some Greeks approaching one of Jesus' disciples and saying, "We would see Jesus."⁴² Many in the world today are searching for the truth, longing to find the way to fullness of life, and are requesting of those who claim to be people of the Kingdom: "We would see Jesus."

May we be the instruments by which people see Jesus. May people meet Jesus when they meet us.