WEEK 1
BOOK EXCERPT

Book Title:

Liturgy of the Ordinary

Author: Tish Harrison Warren

Ch. 1: Waking

1

waking

baptism and learning to be beloved

I wake slowly. Even when the day demands I rally quickly—when my kids leap on top of me with sharp elbows or my alarm blares—I lie still for the first few seconds of the day, stunned, orienting, thoughts dulled. Then comes, slowly, the dawning of plans to make and goals for the day. But in those first delicate seconds, the bleary-eyed pause of waking, before the tasks begin, before I get on my game, I'm greeted again with the truth of who I am in my most basic self.

Whether we're children or heads of state, we sit in our pajamas for a moment, yawning, with messy hair and bad breath, unproductive, groping toward the day. Soon we'll get buttoned up into our identities: mothers, business people, students, friends, citizens. We'll spend our day conservative or liberal, rich or poor, earnest or cynical, fun-loving or serious. But as we first emerge from sleep, we are nothing but human, unimpressive, vulnerable,

newly born into the day, blinking as our pupils adjust to light and our brains emerge into consciousness.

I always try to stay in bed longer. My body is greedy for sleep—"Just a few more minutes!"

But it's not just sleep I'm greedy for—it's that in-between place, liminal consciousness, where I'm cozy, not quite alert to the demands that await me. I don't want to face the warring, big and small, that lies ahead of me today. I don't want to don an identity yet. I want to stay in the womb of my covers a little longer.

It's remarkable that when the Father declares at Jesus' baptism, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," Jesus hasn't yet done much of anything that many would find impressive. He hasn't yet healed anyone or resisted Satan in the wilderness. He hasn't yet been crucified or resurrected. It would make more sense if the Father's proud announcement came after something grand and glorious—the triumphant moment after feeding a multitude or the big reveal after Lazarus is raised.

But after hearing about Jesus' birth and a brief story about his boyhood, we find him again as a grown man at the banks of the Jordan. He's one in a crowd, squinting in the sun, sand gritty between his toes.

The one who is worthy of worship, glory, and fanfare spent decades in obscurity and ordinariness. As if the incarnation itself is not mind-bending enough, the incarnate God spent his days quietly, a man who went to work, got sleepy, and lived a pedestrian life among average people.

Jesus emerges from water a commoner, wet and messy haired. And suddenly the Spirit of God shows up and the deep mystery of

the universe reverberates through the air: this is the Son of God, the Son the Father loves, in whom he is pleased.

Jesus is sent first to the desert and then into his public ministry. But he is sent out with a declaration of the Father's love.

Jesus is eternally beloved by the Father. His every activity unfurls from his identity as the Beloved. He loved others, healed others, preached, taught, rebuked, and redeemed not in order to gain the Father's approval, but out of his rooted certainty in the Father's love.

Baptism is the first word of grace spoken over us by the church.

In my tradition, Anglicanism, we baptize infants. Before they cognitively understand the story of Christ, before they can affirm a creed, before they can sit up, use the bathroom, or contribute significantly to the work of the church, grace is spoken over them and they are accepted as part of us. They are counted as God's people before they have anything to show for themselves.

When my daughters were baptized, we had a big celebration with cupcakes and champagne. Together with our community we sang "Jesus Loves Me" over the newly baptized. It was a proclamation: before you know it, before you doubt it, before you confess it, before you can sing it yourself, you are beloved by God, not by your effort but because of what Christ has done on your behalf. We are weak, but he is strong.

In many liturgical churches baptismal fonts are situated at the back of the sanctuary. As people walk into church to worship, they pass by it. This symbolizes how baptism is the entrance into the people of God. It reminds us that before we begin to worship—before we even sit down in church—we are marked as people who

belong to Jesus by grace alone, swept up into good news, which we received as a gift from God and from believers who went before us.

As worshipers enter the sanctuary and pass the font, they dip their fingers in it and make the sign of the cross. They do this as an act of recollection—remembering their own baptism and recalling that they are loved and approved of because of Jesus' work. When my eldest daughter was very young, barely able to walk, I'd lift her up to the baptismal font at the entrance of our sanctuary and let her touch the water. I'd whisper, "Remember your baptism." She didn't yet know the words of the liturgy or the theology of sacraments but this visceral experience—the hard basin of the font, the cool water on her fingers—was her entrance into worship.

According to Lutheran theologian Martin Marty, Lutherans are taught to begin each day, first thing, by making the sign of the cross as a token of their baptism.[1] Dorothy Bass explains this practice: "For all Christians, baptism embodies release from yesterday's sin and receipt of tomorrow's promise: going under the water, the old self is buried in the death of Christ; rising from the water the self is new, joined to the resurrected Christ." Martin Luther charged each member of his community to regard baptism "as the daily garment which he is to wear all the time."[2]

We enter each new day as we enter the sanctuary, by remembering our baptism. Each morning Marty crosses himself—what he calls his "non-verbal prayer." He remembers again that he is forgiven for all that has come before and that there will be grace enough for all that lies ahead.[3]

I was baptized in a little Baptist church in a small town in Texas when I was about six years old. I don't remember much about it. I

remember—at least I think I remember—the odd feeling of my long robe billowing in warm water; I remember enjoying all the hugging and attention from grownups afterward, and being thrilled that I could now drink grape juice in church; and I remember the photographs I've seen in an old album of a tiny me with wet hair and a squinty smile in front of a short brick building with a steeple.

We are marked from our first waking moment by an identity that is given to us by grace: an identity that is deeper and more real than any other identity we will don that day.

But by "remembering our baptism," I do not mean that we must literally recall historic details of an event in our life, which I personally can barely remember. Instead, I recall that one Sunday morning, as I was plunged under water "in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," I was marked. In the Anglican baptismal liturgy, we tell the newly baptized that they are "sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever." Galatians tells us that we are clothed in Christ in baptism (Gal 3:27), clothed in the Beloved Son in whom the Father is well pleased. To use Paul's more chilling image, on that day as a six-year-old, I died and was buried, and then, reversing the whole order of the universe, newly born with Christ (Rom 6:3-5).

As Christians, we wake each morning as those who are baptized. We are united with Christ and the approval of the Father is spoken over us. We are marked from our first waking moment by an identity that is given to us by grace: an identity that is deeper and more real than any other identity we will don that day.

My wet fingers dipped in the baptismal font remind me that everything I do in the liturgy—all the confessing and singing, kneeling and peace passing, distraction, boredom, ecstasy, devotion—is a response to God's work and God's initiation. And before we begin the liturgies of our day—the cooking, sitting in traffic, emailing, accomplishing, working, resting—we begin beloved. My works and worship don't earn a thing. Instead, they flow from God's love, gift, and work on my behalf. I am not primarily defined by my abilities or marital status or how I vote or my successes or failures or fame or obscurity, but as one who is sealed in the Holy Spirit, hidden in Christ, and beloved by the Father. My naked self is one who is baptized.

This reality seeps out of my soul quickly. Days can pass in a bluster of busyness, impatience, and distraction. I work to build my own blessedness, to strive for a self-made belovedness. But each morning in those first tender moments—in simply being God's smelly, sleepy beloved—I again receive grace, life, and faith as a gift. Grace is a mystery and the joyful scandal of the universe.

In this book we look at practices—how we spend our days, how we worship together. But before we begin we must note that though these rituals and habits may form us as an alternative people marked by the love and new life of Jesus, they are not what make us beloved. The reality underlying every practice in our life is the triune God and his story, mercy, abundance, generosity, initiative, and pleasure.

This morning I wake (slowly) on an ordinary day, a cool morning in mid-March. I do not know what lies ahead, but I wake in a bed I know, a house I live in, a routine, a particular life, in medias res.

The psalmist declares, "This is the day that the Lord has made." This one. We wake not to a vague or general mercy from a far-off God. God, in delight and wisdom, has made, named, and blessed this average day. What I in my weakness see as another monotonous day in a string of days, God has given as a singular gift.

When Jesus died for his people, he knew me by name in the particularity of this day. Christ didn't redeem my life theoretically or abstractly—the life I dreamed of living or the life I think I ideally should be living. He knew I'd be in today as it is, in my home where it stands, in my relationships with their specific beauty and brokenness, in my particular sins and struggles.

God is forming us into a new people.
And the place of that formation is
in the small moments of today.

In *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard reminds us that where "transformation is actually carried out is in our real life, where we dwell with God and our neighbors. . . . First, we must accept the circumstances we constantly find ourselves in as the place of God's kingdom and blessing. God has yet to bless anyone except where they actually are."[4]

The new life into which we are baptized is lived out in days, hours, and minutes. God is forming us into a new people. And the place of that formation is in the small moments of today.

Alfred Hitchcock said movies are "life with the dull bits cut out."[5] Car chases and first kisses, interesting plot lines and good conversations. We don't want to watch our lead character going on

a walk, stuck in traffic, or brushing his teeth—at least not for long, and not without a good soundtrack.

We tend to want a Christian life with the dull bits cut out.

Yet God made us to spend our days in rest, work, and play, taking care of our bodies, our families, our neighborhoods, our homes. What if all these boring parts matter to God? What if days passed in ways that feel small and insignificant to us are weighty with meaning and part of the abundant life that God has for us?

Christ's ordinary years are part of our redemption story. Because of the incarnation and those long, unrecorded years of Jesus' life, our small, normal lives matter. If Christ was a carpenter, all of us who are in Christ find that our work is sanctified and made holy. If Christ spent time in obscurity, then there is infinite worth found in obscurity. If Christ spent most of his life in quotidian ways, then all of life is brought under his lordship. There is no task too small or too routine to reflect God's glory and worth.

I have a friend who was a missionary in Calcutta among the poorest of the poor. He told me that what struck him was how mundane life was even in such a foreign and challenging place. His decision to go overseas felt daring and bold, but he was surprised to find that wherever he was on earth, much of his day was spent sitting with people, taking care of business and chores, taking care of his own body, knowing his neighbors, seeking to love people—sometimes succeeding, sometimes failing. Whether you're Mother Teresa or a stay-at-home mom, whether you're a revolutionary, a student, or a tax attorney, life is lived in twenty-four-hour days. We have bodies; we lag in energy; we learn slowly; we wake daily and don't know what lies ahead.

In these pages we look at life in one day. We look at faith in small moments, spiritual formation in its molecular form—not because this is all that matters, but because the only life any of us live is in daily, pedestrian humanity.

I like big ideas. I can get drunk on talk of justification, ecclesiology, pneumatology, Christology, and eschatology. But these big ideas are borne out—lived, believed, and enfleshed—in the small moments of our day, in the places, seasons, homes, and communities that compose our lives. Annie Dillard famously writes, "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives."[6] I came across Dillard's words a couple years before I went to seminary, and throughout those years of heady theological study I kept them in my back pocket. They remind me that today is the proving ground of what I believe and of whom I worship.

And every new day, this is the turn my heart must make: I'm living this life, the life right in front of me. This one where marriages struggle. This one where we aren't living as we thought we might or as we hoped we would. This one where we are weary, where we want to make a difference but aren't sure where to start, where we have to get dinner on the table or the kids' teeth brushed, where we have back pain and boring weeks, where our lives look small, where we doubt, where we wrestle with meaninglessness, where we worry about those we love, where we struggle to meet our neighbors and love those closest to us, where we grieve, where we wait.

And on this particular day, Jesus knows me and declares me his own. On this day he is redeeming the world, advancing his kingdom, calling us to repent and grow, teaching his church to worship, drawing near to us, and making a people all his own.

If I am to spend my whole life being transformed by the good news of Jesus, I must learn how grand, sweeping truths—doctrine, theology, ecclesiology, Christology—rub against the texture of an average day. How I spend this ordinary day in Christ is how I will spend my Christian life.

WEEK 2
PAPER

Title:

The Centrality of the Gospel

Author: Timothy Keller

Part 1 & 2

THE CENTRALITY OF THE GOSPEL

PART I: IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS *By Timothy Keller*

PRINCIPLE

In Galatians 2:14, Paul lays down a powerful principle. He deals with Peter's racial pride and cowardice by declaring that he was not living "in line with the truth of the gospel." From this we see that the Christian life is a process of renewing *every* dimension of our life—spiritual, psychological, corporate, social—by thinking, hoping, and living out the "lines" or ramifications of the gospel. The gospel is to be applied to every area of thinking, feeling, relating, working, and behaving. The implications and applications of Galatians 2:14 are vast.

IMPLICATION 1

The power of the gospel. First, Paul is showing us that bringing the gospel truth to bear on every area of life is the way to be changed by the power of God. The gospel is described in the Bible in the most astounding terms. Angels long to look into it all the time (1 Peter 1:12). It does not simply bring us power, but it is *the power of God* itself, for Paul says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation" (Rom.1:16). It is also the blessing of God with benefits that accrue to anyone who comes near (1 Cor. 9:23). It is even called the very light of the glory of God itself: "they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ. . . . For God ... [has] made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:4, 6).

After the gospel has regenerated us and we are converted, it is the instrument of all continual growth and spiritual progress: "All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth" (Col. 1:6). Here we learn several things: (1) The gospel is a living thing (cf. Rom 1:16), like a seed or a tree that brings more and more new life—*bearing fruit and growing*. (2) The gospel is "planted" in us so as to bear fruit only as we understand its greatness and implications deeply—*understood God's grace in all its truth*. (3) The gospel continues to grow in us and renew us throughout our lives—*as it has been doing since the day you heard it.* This text helps us avoid either an exclusively rationalistic or mystical approach to renewal. On the one hand, the gospel has a content—it is profound doctrine. It is *truth*, and specifically, it is the truth about God's grace. But on the other hand, this truth is a living power that continually expands its influence in our lives, just as a crop or a tree would grow and spread and increasingly dominate an area with roots and fruit.

IMPLICATION 2

The sufficiency of the gospel. Second, Paul is showing that in our Christian life we never "get beyond the gospel" to something more advanced. The gospel is not the first step in a stairway of truths; rather, it is more like the hub in a wheel of truth. The gospel is not just the ABCs but the A to Z of Christianity. The gospel is not the minimum required doctrine necessary to enter the kingdom but the way we make all progress in the kingdom.

We are not justified by the gospel and then sanctified by obedience; rather the gospel is *the* way we grow (Gal. 3:1–3) and are renewed (Col. 1:6). It is the solution to each problem, the key to each closed door, the power to take us through every barrier (Rom. 1:16–17). It is very common in the church to think as follows: "The gospel is for non-Christians. One needs it to be saved. But once saved, you grow through hard work and obedience." But Colossians 1:6 shows that this is a mistake. Both confession and "hard work" that is not arising from and in line with the gospel will not sanctify you—they will strangle you. All our problems come from a failure to apply the gospel. Thus when Paul left the Ephesians he committed them "to the word of his grace, which can build you up" (Acts 20:32).

The main problem in the Christian life, then, is that we have not thought out the deep implications of the gospel; we have not "used" the gospel in and on all parts of our life. Richard Lovelace says that most people's problems are just a failure to be oriented to the gospel—a failure to grasp and believe it through and through. Luther says, "The truth of the Gospel is the principle article of all Christian doctrine... Most necessary is it that we know this article well, teach it to others, and beat it into their heads continually" (on Gal. 2:14–15). The gospel is not easily comprehended. Paul says that the gospel does its renewing work in

us only as we understand it *in all its truth*. All of us to some degree live around the truth of the gospel but do not "get it." So the key to continual and deeper spiritual renewal and revival is *continual rediscovery of the gospel*. The discovery of a new implication or application of the gospel—seeing more of its truth—is an important stage of any renewal. This is true for either an individual or a church.

APPLICATIONS

The two "thieves" of the gospel. Since Paul uses the metaphor of being "in line" with the gospel, we can consider that gospel renewal occurs when we keep from walking "off line" either to the right or to the left. A key for thinking out the implications of the gospel is to consider the gospel a *third* way between two mistaken opposites. However, we must realize that the gospel is not a halfway compromise between these two poles—it produces not something in the middle but something different from both.

Tertullian, a Christian writer in the second and third centuries, said, "Just as Christ was crucified between two thieves, so this doctrine of justification is ever crucified between two opposite errors." He meant that there were two basic false ways of thinking, each of which "steals" the power and the distinctiveness of the gospel from us by pulling us to one side or the other of the "gospel line." These two errors are very powerful, because they represent the natural tendency of the human heart and mind. (The gospel is "revealed" by God [Rom. 1:17]—the unaided human mind cannot conceive it.) The "thieves" can be called *moralism* or *legalism* on the one hand and *hedonism* or *relativism* on the other hand. Another way to put it is: the gospel opposes both religion *and* irreligion (see Matt. 21:31; 22:10). On the one hand, moralism/religion stresses truth without grace, for it says that we must obey the truth in order to be saved. On the other hand, relativism/irreligion stresses grace without truth, for it says that we are all accepted by God (if there is a God) and we have to decide what is true *for us*. But "truth" without grace is not really truth, and "grace" without truth is not really grace. Jesus was "full of grace *and* truth" (John 1:14). Any religion or philosophy of life that deemphasizes or loses one or the other of these truths falls into legalism or license, and either way, the joy and power and release of the gospel are stolen.

The moralism-religion thief. How does moralism/religion steal joy and power?

Moralism is the view that you are acceptable (to God, the world, others, yourself) through your attainments. Moralists do not have to be religious but often are. When they are, their religion is pretty conservative and filled with rules. Sometimes moralists have a view of God as very holy and just. This view will lead either to (a) self-hatred (because they can't live up to the standards) or (b) self-inflation (because they think they have lived up to the standards). It is ironic that inferiority *and* superiority complexes have the very same root. Whether the moralist ends up smug and superior or crushed and guilty just depends on how high the standards are and on his or her natural advantages such as family, intelligence, looks, willpower. Moralistic people can be deeply religious—but there is no transforming joy or power.

The relativism-irreligion thief. How does relativism steal joy and power?

Relativists are usually irreligious, or else they prefer what is called "liberal" religion. On the surface, they are more happy and tolerant than moralistic/religious people. Although they may be highly idealistic in some areas (such as politics), they believe that everyone needs to determine what is right and wrong for themselves. They are not convinced that God is just and must punish sinners. Their beliefs in God will tend to picture him as loving or as an impersonal force. They may talk a great deal about God's love, but since they do not think of themselves as sinners, *God's love for humankind costs him nothing*. If God accepts us, it is because he is so welcoming or because we are not so bad. The gospel's concept of God's love is far richer and deeper and more electrifying.

What do both religious and irreligious people have in common? They seem so different, but from the viewpoint of the gospel, they are really the same.

1. They are both ways to avoid Jesus as Savior and keep control of their lives.
Irreligious people seek to be their own saviors and lords through "worldly" pride. ("No one tells *me* how to live or what to do; I determine what is right and wrong for me!") But moral and religious people seek to be their own saviors and lords through "religious" pride. ("I am more moral and spiritual than other people, so God owes it to me to listen to my prayers and take me to heaven. God cannot let just anything happen to me—he owes me a happy life. I've earned it!") The irreligious person rejects Jesus entirely; the religious person uses Jesus as an example and helper and teacher—but not as a Savior. In her novel *Wise Blood*,

Flannery O'Connor's main character Hazel thinks "that the way to avoid Jesus [is] to avoid sin." These are two different ways to do the same thing—control one's own life. (Note: Ironically, moralists, despite all the emphasis on traditional standards, are in the end self-centered and *individualistic*, because they have set themselves up as their own savior. Relativists, despite all their emphasis on freedom and acceptance, are in the end *moralistic*, because they still have to live up to [their own] standards or become desperate. And often they take great pride in their own open-mindedness and judge others who are not.)

2. They are both based on distorted views of the real God.
The irreligious person loses sight of the law and holiness of God, and the religious person loses sight of the love and grace of God; in the end they both lose the gospel entirely. For the gospel is that on the cross Jesus fulfilled the law of God out of love for us. Without a full understanding of the work of Christ, the reality of God's holiness will make his grace unreal, or the reality of God's love will make his holiness unreal. Only the gospel—that we are so sinful that we need to be saved utterly by grace—allows us to see God as he really is. The gospel shows us a God far more holy than the legalist can bear (he *had* to die because we could not satisfy his holy demands), and yet far more merciful than a humanist can conceive (he had to *die* because he loved us).

3. They both deny our sin—and therefore lose the joy and power of grace.
It is obvious that relativistic, irreligious people deny the depth of sin, and thus the message "God loves you" has no power for them. But although religious persons may be extremely penitent and sorry for their sins, they see sins as simply a failure to live up to standards by which they are saving themselves. They do not see sin as the deeper self-righteousness and self-centeredness through which they are trying to live lives independent of God. So when they go to Jesus for forgiveness, they go only as a way to cover over the gaps in their project of self-salvation. And when people say, "I know God is forgiving, but I cannot forgive myself," they mean that they reject God's grace and insist that they be worthy of his favor. So even religious people with "low self-esteem" are actually in their state because they will not see the depth of sin. They see it only as rule-breaking, not as rebellion and self-salvation.

A whole new way of seeing God. Christians have adopted a whole new system of approach to God. They may have gone through both religious and irreligious phases in the past, but they have come to see that the reasons for both their irreligion and their religion were essentially the same, and essentially wrong! Christians come to see that both their sins *and* their best deeds have all been ways of avoiding Jesus as Savior. They come to see that Christianity is not fundamentally an invitation to become more religious. A Christian comes to say, "Though I have often failed to obey the moral law, the deeper problem was *why* I was trying to obey it. Even my efforts to obey it have been just ways of seeking to be my own savior. In that mindset, even if I obey or ask for forgiveness, I am really resisting the gospel and setting myself up as savior." To "get" the gospel is to turn from self-justification and rely on Jesus' record for a relationship with God. The irreligious don't repent at all, and the religious repent only of sins; Christians also repent *of their righteousness*. That is the distinction between the three groups—Christians, moralists (religious), and pragmatists (irreligious).

SUMMARY

Without a knowledge of our extreme sin, the payment of the cross seems trivial and does not electrify or transform us. But without a knowledge of Christ's completely satisfying life and death, the knowledge of sin would crush us or move us to deny and repress it. Take away either the knowledge of sin or the knowledge of grace and people's lives are not changed. They will either be crushed by the moral law or run from it in anger. So the gospel is not that we go from being irreligious to being religious but that we realize that our reasons for *both* our religiosity and our irreligiosity were essentially the same and essentially wrong. We were seeking to be our own savior and thereby keep control of our own life. When we trust in Christ as our Redeemer, we turn from trusting either self-determination or self-denial, either hedonism or moralism, for our salvation.

A whole new way of seeing life. Paul shows us, then, that we must not simply ask in every area of life, "What is the moral way to act?" but "What is the way that is *in line with the gospel*?" The gospel must be continually thought out to keep us from moving into our habitual moralistic or individualistic directions. We must bring *everything* in line with the gospel.

The example of racism. Since Paul applied the gospel to racism, let's use it as an example:

The moralistic approach to race. Moralists tend to be very proud of their culture. They easily fall into cultural imperialism and try to attach spiritual significance to their cultural norms, to make themselves feel morally superior to other peoples. This happens because moralistic people are very insecure, since they take the eternal law quite seriously and know deep down that they cannot keep it. Therefore they use cultural differences to buttress their sense of righteousness.

The relativistic approach to race. The opposite error from cultural imperialism is cultural *relativism*. This approach says, "Yes, traditional people were racists because they believed in absolute truth. But truth is relative. Every culture is beautiful in itself. Every culture must be accepted on its own terms."

The gospel approach to race. Christians know that intolerance does not stem so much from a belief in *truth* as from a lack of belief in *grace*. The gospel leads us (a) to be somewhat critical of *all* cultures, including our own (since there *is* truth), but (b) to realize that we can feel morally superior to no one; after all, we are saved by grace alone, and therefore a non-Christian neighbor may be more moral and wise than I. This gives the Christian a radically different posture from that of either moralists or relativists.

Note: Relativists (as noted above) are ultimately moralistic, and therefore they can be respectful only of other people who believe everything is relative! But Christians cannot feel morally superior to relativists.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE GOSPEL

PART II: THE KEY TO EVERYTHING *By Timothy Keller*

The gospel is the way that *anything* is renewed and transformed by Christ—whether a heart, a relationship, a church, or a community. It is the key to all doctrine and to our view of our lives in this world. Therefore, all our problems come from a lack of orientation to the gospel. Put positively, the gospel transforms our hearts and thinking and approaches to absolutely everything.

THE GOSPEL AND THE INDIVIDUAL

1. *Approach to discouragement.* When a person is depressed, the moralist says, "You are breaking the rules—repent." On the other hand, the relativist says, "You just need to love and accept yourself." Without the gospel, superficialities will be addressed instead of the heart. The moralist will work on behavior and the relativist will work on the emotions themselves. But (assuming there is no physiological basis for the depression) the gospel leads us to examine ourselves and say, "Something in my life has become more important than God, a pseudo-savior, a form of works-righteousness." The gospel leads us to repentance, not to merely setting our will against superficial issues.

2. *Approach to the physical world.* Some moralists are indifferent to the physical world and see it as "unimportant." Other moralists are downright afraid of physical pleasure, and since they are seeking to earn their salvation, they prefer to focus on sins of a physical nature like a failure to discipline sex and the other appetites. These are easier to avoid than sins of the spirit like pride. Therefore, moralists prefer to see sins of the body as worse than other kinds. The legalism that results usually leads to a distaste of pleasure. On the other hand, the relativist is often a hedonist, someone who is controlled by pleasure and makes it an idol. The gospel leads us to see that God has created both body and soul and so will redeem both body and soul, although under sin both body and soul are broken. Thus the gospel leads us to enjoy the physical (and to fight against physical brokenness, such as sickness and poverty) yet to be moderate in our use of material things.

3. *Approach to love and relationships.* Moralism often makes relationships into a "blame game." This is because a moralist is traumatized by criticism that is too severe and maintains a self-image as a good person by blaming others. On the other hand, moralism can use the procuring of love as *the* way to "earn our salvation" and convince ourselves we are worthy persons. That often creates what is called "codependency"—a form of self-salvation through needing people or needing people to need you (that is, saving yourself by saving others). On the other hand, much relativism reduces love to a negotiated partnership for mutual benefit. You relate only as long as it is not costing you anything. So the choice without the gospel is to selfishly use others or to selfishly let yourself be used by others. But the gospel leads us to do neither. We *do* sacrifice and commit ourselves, but not out of a need to convince ourselves or others that we are acceptable. We can love the person enough to confront when that's needed, yet stay with the person even when it does not benefit us.

4. *Approach to suffering.* Moralism takes the "Job's friends" approach, laying guilt on yourself. You simply assume, "I must be bad to be suffering." Under the guilt, though, there is always anger toward God. Why? Because moralists believe that God owes them. The whole point of moralism is to put God in your debt. Because you have been so moral, you feel you don't really deserve suffering. Moralism tears you up, for at one level you think, "What did I do to deserve this?" but on another level you think, "I probably did everything to deserve this!" When the moralist suffers, then, he or she must feel either mad at God (because I have been performing well) or mad at self (because I have not been performing well) or both. On the other hand, the relativist/pragmatist feels justified in avoiding suffering at all costs—lying, cheating, and broken promises are okay. But when suffering does come, the pragmatist lays the fault at God's doorstep, claiming that he must be either unjust or impotent. The cross shows us, however, that God redeemed us *through* suffering. God suffered not that we might not suffer but that in our suffering we could become like him. Since both the moralist and the pragmatist ignore the cross, they will both be confused and devastated by suffering.

5. *Approach to sexuality.* The relativist sees sex as merely biological and physical appetite. The moralist tends to see sex as dirty or at least a dangerous impulse that leads constantly to sin. But the gospel shows us that sexuality is to reflect the self-giving of Christ. He gave himself completely without conditions, so we are not to seek intimacy while holding on to control of our life. If we give ourselves sexually, we are to give ourselves legally, socially, personally—utterly. Sex is to happen only within a totally committed, permanent relationship of marriage.

6. *Approach to one's family.* Moralism can make you a slave to parental expectations, while relativism sees no need for family loyalty or the keeping of promises and covenants if they do not "meet my needs." The gospel frees you from making parental approval an absolute or psychological salvation, for it points to how God becomes the ultimate Father. Then you will neither be too dependent on nor too hostile toward your parents.

7. *Approach to self-control.* Moralists tell us to control our passions for fear of punishment. This is a volition-based approach. Relativism tells us to express ourselves and find out what is right for us. This is an emotion-based approach. The gospel tells us that the free, unconditional grace of God "teaches" us to "say no" to our passions (Titus 2:12) if we listen to it. This is a whole-person approach, starting with the truth descending into the heart.

8. *Approach to witness.* The pragmatist would deny the legitimacy of evangelism altogether. The moralist person does believe in proselytizing, because "we are right and they are wrong." Such proselytizing is almost always offensive. But the gospel produces a different constellation of traits in us: (a) First, we are compelled to share the gospel out of generosity and love, not guilt. (b) Second, we are freed from fear of being ridiculed or hurt by others, since we already have God's favor by grace. (c) Third, we learn humility in our dealings with others, because we know we are saved by grace alone, not because of our superior insight or character. (d) Fourth, we are hopeful about everyone, even the "hard cases," because we ourselves were saved only because of grace, not because we were likely people to be Christians. (e) Fifth, we are courteous and careful with people. We don't have to push or coerce them, for it is only God's grace that opens hearts, not our eloquence or persistence or even their openness. All these traits create not only a winsome evangelist but an excellent neighbor in a multicultural society.

9. *Approach to human authority.* Moralists will tend to obey human authorities (family, tribe, government, cultural customs) too much, since they rely so heavily on their self-image of being moral and decent. Relativists will obey human authority either too much (since they have no higher authority by which they can judge their culture) or else too little (they may obey only when they know they won't get caught). That means either authoritarianism or anarchy. But the gospel gives you both a standard by which to oppose human authority—if it contradicts the gospel—and an incentive to obey the civil authorities from the heart, even when you could get away with disobedience.

10. *Approach to human dignity.* Moralists often have a pretty low view of human nature—they mainly see human sin and depravity. Relativists, on the other hand, have no good basis for treating people with dignity. Usually they have no religious beliefs about what human beings are. (If people are just chance products of evolution, how do we know they are more valuable than a rock?) But the gospel shows us that every human being is infinitely fallen (lost in sin) and infinitely exalted (in the image of God). So we treat every human being as precious, yet dangerous!

11. *Approach to guilt.* When you say, "I can't forgive myself," it means there is some standard or condition or person that is more central to your identity than the grace of God. If you cannot forgive yourself, it is because you have failed your real god, your real righteousness, and it is holding you captive. The moralist's false god is usually a god of their imagination that is holy and demanding but not gracious. The relativist's false god is usually some achievement or relationship. God is the only God who forgives—no other "god" will.

12. *Approach to self-image.* Without the gospel, your self-image is based upon living up to some standards—whether yours or someone else's imposed upon you. If you live up to those standards, you will be confident but not humble. If you don't live up to them, you will be humble but not confident. Only in the gospel can you be both enormously bold and utterly sensitive and humble. For you are both perfect and a sinner!

13. *Approach to joy and humor.* Moralism eats away at joy and humor—because the system of legalism forces you to take yourself (your image, your appearance, your reputation) *very* seriously. Relativism, on the other hand, will tend toward cynicism as life goes on. This cynicism grows from a lack of hope for the world: in the end evil will triumph—there is no judgment or divine justice. But if we are saved by grace alone, then the very fact of being Christian is a constant source of amazed delight for us. There is nothing matter-of-fact about our lives, no "of course" to our lives. It is a miracle that we are Christians, and we have hope. So the gospel that creates bold humility should give us a deep sense of humor. We don't have to take ourselves seriously, and we are full of hope for the world.

14. *Approach to "right living."* Jonathan Edwards points out that "true virtue" is possible only for those who have experienced the grace of the gospel. Any person who is trying to earn their salvation does "the right thing" in order to get into heaven, or in order to better their self-esteem, or for another essentially self-interested reason. But persons who know they are totally accepted already do the right thing out of sheer delight in righteousness for its own sake. Only in the gospel do you obey God for God's sake and not for what God will give you. Only in the gospel do you love people for their sake (not yours), do good for its own sake (not yours), and obey God for his sake (not yours). Only the gospel makes doing the right thing a joy and delight, not a burden or a means to an end.

THE GOSPEL AND THE CHURCH

1. *Approach to ministry in the world.* Moralism tends to place all the emphasis on the individual human soul. Moralistic religionists will insist on converting others to their faith and church but will ignore the social needs of the broader community. On the other hand, "liberalism" will tend to emphasize only amelioration of social conditions and minimize the need for repentance and conversion. The gospel leads to *love*, which in turn moves us to give our neighbor whatever is needed—conversion *or* a cup of cold water, evangelism *and* social concern.

2. *Approach to worship.* Moralism leads to a dour and somber kind of worship that may be long on dignity but is short on joy. A shallow understanding of "acceptance" without a sense of God's holiness, on the other hand, can lead to frothy or casual worship. (Meanwhile, a sense of *neither* God's love *nor* his holiness leads to a worship service that feels like a committee meeting!) But the gospel leads us to see that God is both transcendent and immanent. His immanence makes his transcendence comforting, while his transcendence makes his immanence amazing. The gospel leads to both awe *and* intimacy in worship, for the Holy One is now our Father.

3. *Approach to the poor.* The pragmatist tends to scorn the faith of the poor and see them as helpless victims needing expertise. This is born out of a disbelief in God's common grace to all. Ironically, the secular mindset also dismisses the reality of sin, and thus anyone who is poor must be oppressed, a helpless victim. Moralists, on the other hand, tend to scorn the poor as failures and weaklings. They see them as somehow to blame for their situation. But the gospel leads us to be (a) humble, without moral superiority, knowing that we were spiritually bankrupt but have been saved by Christ's free generosity; (b) gracious, not worried too much about "deservingness," since we didn't deserve Christ's grace; and (c) respectful of believing poor Christians as brothers and sisters from whom we can learn. It is only the gospel that can bring people into a humble respect for and solidarity with the poor.

4. *Approach to doctrinal distinctives.* The "already" of the New Testament makes us bold in our proclamation. We can most definitely be sure of the central doctrines that support the gospel. But the "not yet" requires charity and humility in nonessential beliefs. That is, we must be moderate about what we teach except when it comes to the cross, grace, and sin. In our views, especially our opinions on issues that Christians cannot agree on, we must be less unbending and triumphalistic (believing we have arrived intellectually). It also means that our discernment of God's call and will for us and others must not be propagated with overweening assurance that our insight cannot be wrong. (Unlike pragmatists, we must be willing to die for our belief in the gospel; unlike moralists, we must keep in mind that not *every* one of our beliefs is worth fighting to the death for.)

5. *Approach to holiness.* The gospel's "already" means we should not tolerate sin. With the presence of the kingdom, we are made "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). The gospel brings us the confidence that anyone can be changed, any enslaving habit can be overcome. But the gospel's "not yet" means that our sin remains in us and will never be eliminated until the fullness of the kingdom comes. So we must

avoid pat answers, and we must not expect quick fixes. Unlike moralists, we must be patient with slow growth or lapses and be aware of the complexity of change and growth in grace. Unlike pragmatists and cynics, we must insist that miraculous change is possible.

6. *Approach to miracles.* The "already" of the kingdom means that power for miracles and healing is available. Jesus demonstrated the kingdom by healing the sick and raising the dead. But the gospel's "not yet" means that nature (including us) is still subject to decay (Rom. 8:22–23) and thus sickness and death remain inevitable until the final consummation. We cannot expect miracles and freedom from suffering to be such normal parts of the Christian life that we will glide through our days with no pain. Unlike moralists, we know that God can heal and do miracles; unlike pragmatists, we do not aim to press God into eliminating suffering.

7. *Approach to church health.* The "already" of the kingdom means that the church is *now* the community of kingdom power. It is therefore capable of mightily transforming its community. Evangelism that adds "to their number daily those who [are] being saved" (Acts 2:47) is possible! Loving fellowship that destroys "the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph. 2:14) between different races and classes is possible! But the "not yet" of the kingdom means Jesus has not yet presented his bride, the church, "as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish" (Eph. 5:27). We must not then be harshly critical of imperfect congregations nor jump impatiently from church to church over perceived blemishes. Error will never be completely eradicated from the church. The kingdom's "not yet" also means to avoid an overly severe imposition of church discipline and other means to seek to bring about a perfect church today.

8. *Approach to social change.* We must not forget that Christ is even now ruling in a sense over history (Eph. 1:22–23). The "already" of grace means that Christians can expect to use God's power to change social conditions and communities. But the "not yet" of sin means there will be "wars and rumors of wars." Selfishness, cruelty, terrorism, and oppression will continue. Christians harbor no illusions about politics nor expect utopian conditions. The "not yet" means that Christians will not trust any political or social agenda to bring about righteousness here on earth. So the gospel keeps us from the overpessimism of fundamentalism (moralism) about social change and also from the overoptimism of liberalism (pragmatism).

SUMMARY

All problems, personal or social, come from a failure to apply the gospel in a radical way, a failure to get "in line with the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:14). All pathologies in the church and all its ineffectiveness come from a failure to let the gospel be expressed in a radical way. If the gospel is expounded and applied in its fullness in any church, that church will begin to look very unique. People will find in it both moral conviction yet compassion and flexibility.

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WEEK 3
BOOK EXCERPT

Title:

The Spirit of the Disciplines

Author: Dallas Willard

Ch. 1: The Secret of the Easy Yoke

1. The Secret of the Easy Yoke

> Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and you shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.
>
> MATTHEW 11:29–30

> His commands are not burdensome.
>
> 1 JOHN 5:3, NIV

> A more reasonable estimate of human costs and values will lead us to think that no labour is better expended than that which explores the way to the treasure-houses of the spirit, and shows mankind where to find those goods which are increased by being shared, and which none can take from us.
>
> WILLIAM RALPH INGE

"Christianity has not so much been tried and found wanting, as it has been found difficult and left untried." So said that insightful and clever Christian, G. K. Chesterton. Whether or not he was totally serious, there is almost universal belief in the immense difficulty of being a *real* Christian. The vast, grim "cost of discipleship" is something we hear constantly emphasized. Chesterton's observation can at least be taken as reflecting the attitude of many serious people toward The Way of Christ.

But it must not be left to stand as the whole truth. We would do far better to lay a clear, constant emphasis upon the cost of *non*-discipleship as well. As Søren Kierkegaard reminds us, "It costs a man just as much or even more to go to hell than to come to heaven. Narrow, exceedingly narrow is the way to perdition!"[1]

Proverbs 13:15 tells us that it is the way of the transgressor that is hard. We can also learn this by candid observation of life. Actually, a large part of the Old Testament book of Proverbs merely records the results of such observation. The whole book is a song

of praise for the path of the righteous over that of the wicked, leaving no doubt in which life, joy and strength are to be found.

To depart from righteousness is to choose a life of crushing burdens, failures, and disappointments, a life caught in the toils of endless problems that are never resolved. Here is the source of that unending soap opera, that sometimes horror show known as normal human life. The "cost of discipleship," though it may take all we have, is small when compared to the lot of those who don't accept Christ's invitation to be a part of his company in The Way of life.

The words of Jesus quoted above from Matthew 11:29–30 present an alternative to the desolation of life lived apart from God. Yet, in all honesty, most Christians probably find both Jesus' statement and its reiteration by the author of 1 John (5:3) to be more an expression of a hope or even a mere *wish* than a statement about the substance of their lives. To many, Jesus' words are frankly bewildering. We hear them often quoted, because the idea they express is obviously one that attracts and delights, but there seems to be something about the way we approach them, something about what we think it means to walk with Christ and obey him, that prevents most of us from entering into the reality which they express. The ease, lightness, and power of his Way we rarely enjoy, much less see, as the pervasive and enduring quality of our street-level human existence.

So we do not have the strength we should have, and Jesus' commandments become overwhelmingly burdensome to us. In fact, many Christians cannot even believe he actually intended for us to carry them out. So what is the result? His teachings are treated as a mere ideal, one that we may better ourselves by aiming for but know we are bound to fall glaringly short of.

It's a familiar story. "We're only human," we say, and "to err is human." Such pronouncements may be for another age or "dispensation," we may think—or possibly they're for when we are in heaven. But they cannot be for us now. Not really. Jesus could not have imposed anything that *hard* upon us. And beside, we're in a

period of grace—we are saved by grace, not by anything we do—so obedience to Christ is actually not necessary. And it is so hard, anyway; it cannot be expected of us, much less enjoyed by us.

And so we reason. All of our reasonings cannot, however, remove the thought that Jesus calls us to follow him—to follow him now, not after death.

No one denies that we would be far better off and our world an immeasurably better place, if we were to conform in deed and spirit to who he is and what he taught. And all of our lack of understanding doesn't cancel his offer of an easy yoke and a light burden, in which our souls can find rest. That offer, like his call to follow him, is clearly made to us here and now, in the midst of this life where we labor and bear impossible burdens and cry out for rest. It's true. It's real. We have only to grasp the secret of entering into that easy yoke.

What then is the secret? There is a simple answer to this all-important question. It is one that can be introduced and even made completely clear, by comparing some facts with which we are all familiar

Think of certain young people who idolize an outstanding baseball player. They want nothing so much as to pitch or run or hit as well as their idol. So what do they do? *When they are playing in a baseball game*, they all try to behave exactly as their favorite baseball star does. The star is well known for sliding head first into bases, so the teenagers do too. The star holds his bat above his head, so the teenagers do too. These young people try anything and everything their idol does, hoping to be like him—they buy the type shoes the star wears, the same glove he uses, the same bat.

Will they succeed in performing like the star, though? We all know the answer quite well. We know that they won't succeed if all they do is try to be like him in the game—no matter how gifted they may be in their own way. And we all understand why. The star performer himself didn't achieve his excellence by trying to behave in a certain way *only during the game*. Instead, he chose an overall life of preparation of mind and body, pouring all his ener-

gies into that total preparation, to provide a foundation in the body's automatic responses and strength for his conscious efforts during the game.

Those exquisite responses we see, the amazing timing and strength such an athlete displays, aren't produced and maintained by the short hours of the game itself. They are available to the athlete for those short and all-important hours because of a daily regimen no one sees. For example, the proper diet and rest and the exercises for specific muscles are not a part of the game itself, but without them the athlete certainly would not perform outstandingly. Some of these daily habits may even seem silly to us, but the successful athlete knows that his disciplines must be undertaken, and undertaken rightly, or all his natural talents and best efforts will go down in defeat to others who *have* disciplined themselves in preparation for game time.

What we find here is true of any human endeavor capable of giving significance to our lives. We are touching upon a general principle of human life. It's true for the public speaker or the musician, the teacher or the surgeon. A successful performance at a moment of crisis rests largely and essentially upon the depths of a self wisely and rigorously prepared in the totality of its being—mind and body.

And what is true of specific activities is, of course, also true of life as a whole. As Plato long ago saw, there is an art of living, and the living is excellent only when the self is prepared in all the depths and dimensions of its being.

Further, this is not a truth to be set aside when we come to our relationship with God. We are saved by grace, of course, and by it alone, and not because we deserve it. That is the basis of God's acceptance of us. But grace does *not* mean that sufficient strength and insight will be automatically "infused" into our being in the moment of need. Abundant evidence for this claim is available precisely in the experience of any Christian. We only have to look at the facts. A baseball player who expects to excel in the game without adequate exercise of his body is no more ridiculous than the Christian who hopes to be able to act in the manner of Christ

when put to the test without the appropriate exercise in godly living.

As is obvious from the record of his own life, Jesus understood this fact well and lived accordingly. Because of the contemporary bias with which we read the Gospels—a bias we'll be discussing later—we have great difficulty seeing the main emphases in his life We forget that being the unique Son of God clearly did not relieve him of the necessity of a life of preparation that was mainly spent out of the public eye. In spite of the auspicious events surrounding his birth, he grew up in the seclusion of a simple family in lowly Nazareth. At the age of twelve, as Luke 2:45 tells us, he exhibited astonishing understanding "in the midst of the doctors" in Jerusalem. Yet he returned to his home with his parents and for the next eighteen years was subject to the demands of his family.

Then, after receiving baptism at the hands of his cousin, John the Baptist, Jesus was in solitude and fasted for a month and a half. Afterward, as his ministry proceeded, he was alone much of the time, often spending the entire night in solitude and prayer before serving the needs of his disciples and hearers the following day.

Out of such preparation, Jesus was able to lead a public life of service through teaching and healing. He was able to love his closest companions to the end—even though they often disappointed him greatly and seemed incapable of entering into his faith and works. And then he was able to die a death unsurpassed for its intrinsic beauty and historical effect.

And in this truth lies the secret of the easy yoke: the secret involves living as he lived in the entirety of his life—adopting his overall lifestyle. Following "in his steps" cannot be equated with behaving as he did when he was "on the spot." To live as Christ lived is to live as he did *all* his life.

Our mistake is to think that following Jesus consists in loving our enemies, going the "second mile," turning the other cheek, suffering patiently and hopefully—while living the rest of our lives just as everyone around us does. This is like the aspiring young baseball players mentioned earlier. It's a strategy bound to fail and to make the way of Christ "difficult and left untried." In truth *it is*

not the way of Christ anymore than striving to act in a certain manner in the heat of a game is the way of the champion athlete.

Whatever may have guided us into this false approach, it is simply a mistake. And it will certainly cause us to find Jesus' commands about our actions during specific situations impossibly burdensome—"grievous" as the King James Version of the New Testament puts it. Instead of an easy yoke, all we'll experience is frustration.

But this false approach to following Christ has counterparts throughout human life. It is part of the misguided and whimsical condition of humankind that we so devoutly believe in the power of effort-at-the-moment-of-action alone to accomplish what we want and completely ignore the need for character change in our lives as a whole. The general human failing is to want what is right and important, but at the same time not to commit to the kind of life that will produce the action we know to be right and the condition we want to enjoy. This is the feature of human character that explains why the road to hell is paved with good intentions. We intend what is right, but we avoid the life that would make it reality.

For example, some people would genuinely like to pay their bills and be financially responsible, but they are unwilling to lead the total life that would make that possible. Others would like to have friends and an interesting social life, but they will not adapt themselves so that they become the kind of people for whom such things "come naturally."

The same concept applies on a larger scale. Many people lament the problem of today's tragic sexual behaviors, yet are content to let the role of sex in business, art, journalism, and recreation remain at the depraved level from which such tragedy naturally comes. And others say they would like to get rid of the weapons of warfare, but at the same time they maintain the attitudes and values toward people and nations that make warfare inevitable. We prefer no social unrest or revolution—as long as *our* style of life is preserved.

In his recent book *The Road Less Traveled*, psychiatrist M. Scott Peck observes:

There are many people I know who possess a vision of [personal] evolution yet seem to lack the will for it. They want, and believe it is possible, to skip over the discipline, to find an easy shortcut to sainthood. Often they attempt to attain it by simply imitating the superficialities of saints, retiring to the desert or taking up carpentry. Some even believe that by such imitation they have really become saints and prophets, and are unable to acknowledge that they are still children and face the painful fact that they must start at the beginning and go through the middle.[2]

So, ironically, in our efforts to avoid the necessary pains of discipline we miss the easy yoke and light burden. We then fall into the rending frustration of trying to do and be the Christian we know we ought to be without the necessary insight and strength that only discipline can provide. We become unbalanced and are unable to handle our lives. Dr. Peck reminds us of Carl Jung's penetrating diagnosis: "Neurosis is always a substitute for legitimate suffering."[3]

So, those who say we cannot truly follow Christ turn out to be correct in a sense. We cannot behave "on the spot" as he did and taught if in the rest of our time we live as everybody else does. The "on the spot" episodes are not the place where we can, even by the grace of God, redirect unchristlike but ingrained tendencies of action toward sudden Christlikeness. Our efforts to take control *at that moment* will fail so uniformly and so ingloriously that the whole project of following Christ will appear ridiculous to the watching world. We've all seen this happen.

So, we should be perfectly clear about one thing: Jesus never expected us simply to turn the other cheek, go the second mile, bless those who persecute us, give unto them that ask, and so forth. These responses, generally and rightly understood to be characteristic of Christlikeness, were set forth by him as illustrative of what might be expected of a new kind of person—one who intelligently and steadfastly seeks, above all else, to live within the

rule of God and be possessed by the kind of righteousness that God himself has, as Matthew 6:33 portrays.

Instead, Jesus did invite people to follow him into that sort of life from which behavior such as loving one's enemies will seem like the only sensible and happy thing to do. For a person living that life, the hard thing to do would be to hate the enemy, to turn the supplicant away, or to curse the curser, just as it was for Christ. True Christlikeness, true companionship with Christ, comes at the point where it is hard not to respond as he would.

Oswald Chambers observes: "The Sermon on the Mount is not a set of principles to be obeyed apart from identification with Jesus Christ. The Sermon on the Mount is a statement of the life we will live when the Holy Spirit is getting his way with us."[4] In other words, no one ever says, "If you want to be a great athlete, go vault eighteen feet, run the mile under four minutes," or "If you want to be a great musician, play the Beethoven violin concerto." Instead, we advise the young artist or athlete to enter a certain kind of overall life, one involving deep associations with qualified people as well as rigorously scheduled time, diet, and activity for the mind and body.

But what would we tell someone who aspired to live well in general? If we are wise, we would tell them to approach life with this same general strategy. So, if we wish to follow Christ—and to walk in the easy yoke with him—we will have to accept his overall way of life as our way of life *totally*. Then, and only then, we may reasonably expect to know by experience how easy is the yoke and how light the burden.

Some decades ago there appeared a very successful Christian novel called *In His Steps*. The plot tells of a chain of tragic events that brings the minister of a prosperous church to realize how unlike Christ's life his own life had become. The minister then leads his congregation in a vow not to do anything without first asking themselves the question, "What would Jesus do in this case?" As the content of the book makes clear, the author took this vow to be the same thing as intending to follow Jesus—to walk precisely "in his steps." It is, of course, a novel, but even in real

life we would count on significant changes in the lives of earnest Christians who took such a vow—just as it happens in that book.

But there is a flaw in this thinking. The book is entirely focused upon trying to do what Jesus supposedly would do in response to *specific choices*. In the book, there's no suggestion that he ever did anything but make right choices from moment to moment. And more interestingly, there is no suggestion that his power to choose rightly was rooted in the kind of overall life he had adopted in order to maintain his inner balance and his connection with his Father. The book does not state that to follow in his steps is to adopt the total manner of life he did. So the idea conveyed is an absolutely fatal one—that to follow him simply means to try to behave as he did when he was "on the spot," under pressure or persecution or in the spotlight. There is no realization that what he did in such cases was, in a large and essential measure, the natural outflow of the life he lived when not on the spot.

Asking ourselves "What would Jesus do?" when suddenly in the face of an important situation simply is not an adequate discipline or preparation to enable one to live as he lived. It no doubt will do some good and is certainly better than nothing at all, but that act alone is not sufficient to see us boldly and confidently through a crisis, and we could easily find ourselves driven to despair over the powerless tension it will put us through.

The secret of the easy yoke, then, is to learn from Christ how to live our total lives, how to invest all our time and our energies of mind and body as he did. We must learn how to follow his preparations, the disciplines for life in God's rule that enabled him to receive his Father's constant and effective support while doing his will. We have to discover how to enter into his disciplines from where we stand today—and no doubt, how to extend and amplify them to suit our needy cases.

This attitude, this action is our necessary preparation for taking the yoke of Christ and is the subject of the rest of this book. We shall be discussing how to actually follow Christ—to live as he lived. This book is intended for those who would be a disciple of Jesus in *deed*.

Do you believe that such a life is possible? I do. Emphatically. I am writing about what it *means* to follow him and about *how* following him fits into the Christian's salvation. I want to explain, with some precision and detailed fullness, how activities such as solitude, silence, fasting, prayer, service, celebration—disciplines for life in the spiritual kingdom of God and activities in which Jesus deeply immersed himself—are essential to the deliverance of human beings from the concrete power of sin and how they can make the experience of the easy yoke a reality in life. By focusing on the whole of Christ's life and the lives of many who have best succeeded in following him, I will outline a *psychologically and theologically sound, testable way* to meet grace and fully conform to him.

The secret of the easy yoke is simple, actually. It is the intelligent, informed, unyielding resolve to live as Jesus lived in all aspects of his life, not just in the moment of specific choice or action. *The secret described in these pages has been placed within your reach*. In the following pages, you will see both why and how that kind of resolve leads to a life with Jesus, as we begin to form a theology of the disciplines for the spiritual life.

NOTES

Epigraph. W. R. Inge, *Personal Religion and the Life of Devotion* (London: Longmans, Green, 1924), 18.

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination: Recommended for the Times*, trans. Edna and Howard Hong (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1940), 76–77.
2. M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 77.
3. *Ibid*., 17.
4. Oswald Chambers, *The Psychology of Redemption*. (London: Simpkin Marshall LTD, 1947) 34.

WEEK 5
BOOK EXCERPT

Book Title:

Ekklesia

Author: Tom Nelson

Ch. 3: A Place Where We Belong

3

A PLACE WHERE WE BELONG

You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 2:5

In the movie *Castaway* Fed Ex executive Chuck Noland, played by actor Tom Hanks, finds himself on a deserted island, the lone survivor of a plane crash. Washed up on shore along with him is a volleyball that soon takes on the name "Wilson." As the days drag on and the loneliness closes in, Wilson is invited to join in on some badly needed conversation. The eventual good news, of course, is that Chuck Noland leaves the island, taking Wilson along with him.

What I find most compelling about *Castaway* is that it reminds us we were not meant to live a solitary existence, and Chuck Noland's anguish when Wilson drifts out to the open sea lost forever highlights this — The seventeenth century English poet John Donne observed, "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent." Across the sands of time, Donne's poetic verse whispers

a profound and enduring truth regarding the human experience. We were not only created to be, but also to belong. Not just to exist, but to exist with others. Made in the image of the Triune God, we the crown of creation were created with belonging in mind (Gen 1:27-28). In our self-absorbed age, how easy it is to forget that once, long ago in a pristine and perfect garden, God said, "It is not good for man to be alone" (Gen 2:18).

Blown by the gale force winds of individualism,[1] bandwagon Christians seem eager to ride the current wave of a privatized spirituality severed from local church life. It is a wave that I fear will carry many to a place of spiritual shipwreck and an isolated castaway faith. Even Christians whose faith is tethered to the biblical text seem all too eager to disconnect from local church life. What is so tragic about a privatized spirituality is not only its loss of place, but also its loss of belonging. It truly is a castaway faith. A biblical faith, on the other hand, not only leads us to a Person to believe in, but also a people to belong to. The biblical description of the local church as "God's household" means we have a place we fondly call home, and a place where we belong.

What Does Belonging Mean?

What does belonging mean? *The New World Dictionary* defines the word "belong" this way: "To have a proper or suitable place, to be part of; to be related or connected." Inherent in this idea of belonging are the symbiotic categories of places and persons, the individual as well as the collective. With this in mind, how then should we see the local church? We should see it not merely as a place we attend now and then, but as a place where we belong.

The Local Church as God's Household –A Place to Belong

The New Testament often speaks of the church with building imagery. Jesus said, "I will build my church" (Matt 16:18). The Apostle Paul said, "For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building" (1 Cor 3:9). The Apostle Peter declared, "You also, like living

stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood..." (1 Pet 2:5). Even a cursory reading of the New Testament causes us to wonder what the big deal is with the building imagery. Metaphors are not just nice sounding words. Metaphorical language, though figurative, makes a statement about reality, a compelling reality behind the imagery. So what do the building metaphors convey about the local church?

- The local church has an intelligent design
- The local church has an enduring stability
- The local church has an aesthetic beauty
- The local church has a functional purpose
- The local church is a place to belong

Ah, but there is so much more in this building metaphor we dare not miss! So let's probe a bit deeper. As we look closer, what we see is that, as God's household, the local church is designed to be a place where being and belonging meet.

A Place Where Being and Belonging Meet

The Apostle Peter pens these inspired words:

> *And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For this is contained in Scripture: "Behold, I Lay in Zion a choice stone, a precious cornerstone, and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed. 1 Pet 2:4-6*

In these verses, the Apostle Peter utilizes building imagery to describe Christ's called-out ones. Peter is portraying the church as a spiritual house. Foremost in Peter's mind is that Jesus is the focus and foundation of the church. Jesus Himself is the cornerstone, the foundational reality upon which the rest of the building is constructed (Eph 2:20). Without Jesus as the cornerstone, there is no true church.

Though Peter focuses on the cornerstone, we must not overlook the fact that the metaphorical imagery of the church as a building also focuses on us. Peter says, "You also, as living stones, are being built up

as a spiritual house" (1 Pet 2:5). Stones are not living things, yet here Peter metaphorically asserts their living status. And yes, Peter's focus is clearly on the whole, the collective group, the called-out ones. Of course, we should not in any way diminish the importance of each individual part. The truth that each of us is a living stone is important in its own right.

As a called-out one, each of us has a particular and unique individuality, as well as a calling that contributes to the whole. In our unique giftedness, we add colors and textures to the beauty and functionality of the local church to which we are called. Yet our unique individuality is not to be seen in isolation, but rather as a distinct and essential part of the whole. We were created not only as human beings, but also as human belongings.

The phrase "sweet spot" is often associated with athletics. A tennis player, for example, pays close attention to that particularly leveraged part of her racket that maximizes the power and accuracy of her serve. Sweet spots are places of great importance. For Peter, the church is God's specially designed sweet spot, that place of transformation where being and belonging meet.

Made in the image of the Trinitarian God, we reflect in our intrinsic nature both the essences of being and belonging.[2] This is why solitary confinement is such a torturous and maddening experience. Solitary confinement slowly erodes away the building blocks of our humanity.

One of the most riveting and disturbing books I have ever read was by an Alabama Senator and former American POW. It is aptly entitled *When Hell Was In Session*. In it, Jeremiah Denton describes his seven-and-one-half-year experience in a North Vietnamese prison camp. Besides the brutal physical torture, his most hellish experience was suffering through four endless years of solitary confinement.[3]

Solitary confinement in any setting is clearly not a recipe for human flourishing. But are we not promoting a kind of self-imposed spiritual solitary confinement when we advocate—either by bold proclamation or cynical default—an individual faith severed from local church life? In light of our creation design, isn't this drift perilous? We were created

to belong not only to Christ, but also to one another, in both spiritual and geographic proximity.

One of Jesus' most riveting stories in the New Testament describes two individuals with two contrasting eternal destinies. After death, a man by the name of Lazarus goes to a place of intimate belonging—Abraham's bosom. In our cultural context, we most likely would describe that place as heaven. The other man, whose name is not given, is simply described by Jesus as a very rich man. The rich man dies and goes to a place Jesus refers to as Hades (Luke 16:19-31). Hades is portrayed as a place of torment and agony, but it is not the physical imagery of torment that chills us to the soul. It is the picture of alienation, disconnection, a kind of eternal solitary confinement. We can't fully grasp the meaning of hell, but we do comprehend that it is eternal separation from God and others. At its dreadful core, hell is a reality where belonging is severed from being.

When the topic of eternal destiny comes up, people who reject Christ's offer of eternal life will sometimes flippantly say, "I might end up in hell, but at least that's where my friends will be." I try to be respectful in my response, but often I answer, "I don't know what hell will be like, but from what I read in Holy Scripture, I wouldn't count on being with your friends." Eternal separation from God might well mean eternal separation from others—the ultimate solitary confinement. I shudder to think of the possibility.

Here in 1 Peter 2, we are powerfully reminded of a vastly different reality than eternal separation from God and others. As followers of Jesus, we are a part of God's household, members of God's family—a place of intimacy and security. God's household of faith is where we belong now and for all eternity. What an awesome truth!

It is not incidental that the two foundational ordinances of the church, baptism and Holy Communion, join the concepts of *redeemed being* and *redeemed belonging* into an integral whole. Baptism and Holy Communion both are celebrations of new being and new belonging made possible in Christ, centered in local church life. The two ordinances bridge our new creation individual being and our new creation corporate belonging. Both ordinances remind us of our

reconciliation with God and our calling to be agents of reconciliation with others (2 Cor 5:17-21). The local church is that unique redemptive place where being and belonging intersect. Nothing can surpass it! Nothing can replace it! A rich and enduring theological truth is that each of us has a church home. How tragic when we settle for rootlessness. How myopic when we embrace a misguided and self-imposed spiritual solitary confinement. The local church is designed to be a place where being and belonging meet and where redemption and reconciliation matter.

A Place Where Redemption and Reconciliation Matter

In Paul's brilliant and inspired letter to the local church at Ephesus, both redemption and reconciliation are main themes. In chapter two, Paul describes the glorious news of the redemption available to each of us who embrace Messiah Jesus by faith (Eph 2:1-10). Paul's good news boldly declares the availability of deliverance from sin, death, and despair. What is stunning in this historical context is that new creation life is available even to those outside the covenant community of Israel. Messiah Jesus' death on the cross makes it possible for us to experience new kingdom life. At the foot of the cross of Jesus, paradise once lost is now regained.

As wonderful as this good news is, we must not miss what Paul says later in chapter two. This good news of the gospel encompasses both our upward reconciliation with God and our outward reconciliation with others (Eph 2:11-18).

In Christ, both Jew and Gentile find new creation life. The "already but not fully yet" Kingdom of God is now available to all. Jew and Gentile, once alienated from God and each other, are now brought together in the *ekklesia*, the local church, where redemption and reconciliation meet. The Apostle Paul says this is the stunning mystery that has been hidden from time past and is now revealed. Regardless of our ethnicity or gender or economic status, we are invited to be a part of God's family. We find equal footing at the foot of the cross.

Paul declares to the Galatians, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female,

for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). Rabbi Paul is in no way diminishing original creation design or in any way blurring creation differences or role distinctions; rather, he is affirming that both redemption and reconciliation are at the very heart of the gospel message. Human differences that often divide people and make some outsiders—ethnicity, economic status, and gender—are not to be barriers of fellowship any longer. The true gospel, the gospel of redemption and reconciliation, welcomes all ethnicities, both genders, and all economic classes to God's family, to his *ekklesia*, the church.

A fellow pastor of mine who works in the urban core regularly reminds me that the most racially segregated time in America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning. How sad but true this is in many of our communities and cities. It is my prayerful hope that we will see significant changes in the future as we seek to be a church that truly reflects both the heart of God and the diversity of our communities.[4]

While a privatized spirituality may embrace a gospel of personal redemption with God, it cannot fully embrace reconciliation with others. Is it not then a faulty, non-integral gospel?

Instead of seeking reconciliation with others who are different than us or who we have hurt in some way or whom may have hurt us, we often just punt church altogether— or change churches to avoid having to do the humbling and hard work that the ministry of reconciliation requires.

I am reminded of another story of a man marooned on a desert island. After a couple of years, the man was rescued. When the search party arrived on the island, they noticed that this man had built three makeshift huts. They asked him, "Do you mind telling us why the three buildings?" He said, "Oh, that one is my house and the one over there is my church." Then they asked him, "So what's the third one?" Without blinking an eye, he replied, "That's simple. That's the church I used to go to!" This apocryphal story hits all too close to home for many of us.

Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God embraced both redemption and reconciliation. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declared:

Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. (Mt 5:23-24)

As God's household, the local church is designed to be a plac where being and belonging meet, where redemption and reconciliatio matter, and where individual and corporate spirituality mature.

A Place Where Individual and Corporate Spirituality Mature

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul emphasizes this very thing:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit. Eph 2:19-22

Paul's line of thought here begins with a strong statement of logic conclusion. The opening words "so then" beg the question "so the what?" What's the point we dare not miss? If the gospel embraces bot personal redemption and interpersonal reconciliation with those wh had been viewed as outside the scope of God's covenantal communit then God's family is open to all who embrace Jesus Christ as their Lor and Savior. As Paul says in Galatians: both Jew and Gentile, male an female, slave and free. In fact, all are invited to be a part of God's ne redeemed family, God's household—God's building. Like the Triun Godhead, in whose image the church is created, we as a local churc are to exude unity in diversity within community.

Jesus is the cornerstone of that building. The foundation is cor doctrinal truth, taught by Jesus' apostles and transferred to the loc church at Ephesus. Ephesians 2:21-22 are overflowing with buildin imagery. Here we encounter a building that is not yet completed, bu one that continues to grow and expand. This growth and expansio occurs because of Jesus, the wise and masterful builder, who promise

He would build his church. Look with me a bit closer at verse 21. Speaking of Jesus, Paul notes, "In whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord." Notice this little phrase "being fitted together." Paul's choice of passive grammar drives the point home, since proper fitting is not our own doing. It is Jesus who calls us to a local church and it is Jesus who fits us in to that church. The idea of our own self-selection of a church based on an individual consumer notion or on sociological comfort levels is foreign to the New Testament. Yet self-selection and extensive church shopping is the norm in our day.

Like Jesus calls us to Himself, He also calls us to a local church family. He fits us in, based upon His design and desire for us and for that local church. We are not only called to Jesus, we are called to a local church. A biblical understanding of local church calling dramatically changes our perspective of "finding the right church" or "finding the right fit."

Notice also the parallel phrase "being built together" found in verse 22. The language suggests that we are not the cause of growth, but God is. And notice how Paul finishes his thought on local church spiritual growth with an emphasis on the Spirit. The local church as God designed it is a greenhouse for spiritual growth. Nothing can surpass it! Nothing can match it! Nothing can replace it!

We also must not miss the strong Trinitarian emphasis here, the kind of greenhouse effect that promotes rich and vibrant local church spiritual growth. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all contribute and make full the richness of both personal and congregational spiritual growth. Not only are our individual bodies temples of the Holy Spirit where God dwells, but our congregational gathering is also a temple, a place where God dwells (1 Cor 6:10-20). The local *ekklesia* is a temple of the Holy Spirit, a collective of many mini-temples fitted together—living stones in a beautiful building!

So when advocates of an individual spirituality put distance between being and belonging by asserting that we are not called to join a church but to be the church, are they offering timeless wisdom or short-sighted gibberish?

Coming Home to a Place Where We Truly Belong

The success story of Starbucks is truly remarkable. What is driving its meteoric growth around the globe? Is it merely driven by good coffee or something else? On the television show *60 Minutes*, CEO Howard Schultz, interviewed by Scott Pelley, emphasized that Starbucks is much more than coffee. Howard Schultz reminded us that Starbucks, "...wasn't in the business of filling stomachs, but rather filling souls... We're about being the third place... bridging home and work."[5]

As enjoyable as this new third place is, what does this tell us about our culture's insatiable longing for belonging? And will this third place satisfactorily answer the desperate cry for connection with others?

Sociologist Robert Putnam has done a lot of thinking about being and belonging in our contemporary culture, particularly emphasizing the demise of belonging. One example he cites to support the loss of true community in our culture is the empirical evidence of the decrease of bowling leagues around the country.[6] In calling us back together, to a deeper sense of community and connectivity, Robert Putnam makes this concluding point:

> ...reweaving social webs will depend in part on the efforts of dedicated local leaders who choose to pursue their goals through the sometimes slow, frequently fractious, and profoundly transformative route of social-capital building. But it will also depend on our ability to create new spaces for reconnection, conversation and debate.[7]

When I read Putnam's words, I want to go out on the street corner and cry out, "Hey, Church of Jesus Christ, wake up!" When our culture is crying out for deeper connection, why are some of us, in the name of revolutionary Christianity, advocating a disconnected spirituality? From my perspective, this approach is sheer madness! Will our culture's new third place—whether it is a coffee shop, a book store, or a health club—actually deliver a flourishing humanity? I don't think so. Like the family, the local church was designed to be and to do what it alone can be and do in the world. It's time for us to wise up and once again see the local church as vitally important and irreplaceable. The local church is a place where we truly belong!

Recently, I received a written note from one of our newer local church members whose family had relocated from Boston to the Kansas City area. It is the kind of note that puts a shout in a pastor's soul. In her warm and affirming letter, this follower of Jesus describes the sense of belonging and care they found in our local congregation. She writes:

> I wanted to write this note to share with you how much I appreciate the family of believers at Christ Community Church... We moved here from Boston, leaving family and friends... Christ Community has been one of the best things about our move.... Just one year ago, my very fit and healthy mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Throughout her illness and now after her death, I have experienced God's love and care expressed through the body of Christ Community.

The local church is designed to give us a deep sense of belonging.

Three Strong Strands of Belonging

The writer of Ecclesiastes dispenses timeless as well as timely wisdom. "A cord of three strands is not easily broken" (Eccl 4:12b). With this imagery in mind, I like to think of the local church as a place where people get really tight, a place where lives intersect and are knit together in love and mission. The local church has three strong strands of belonging that are important to each of us who long to experience true community.

Our Relational Belonging – Whom Do We Truly Know?

The local church is designed to be a place of strong relational belonging. It's to be like a womb where family and life-long friends are formed, who stick with us through thick and thin.

In a heart-stopping *Wall Street Journal* article, journalist Peggy Noonan penned a moving piece appropriately entitled, "The Sounds That Still Echo From 9/11." Peggy describes the final phone calls of those on the hijacked planes on September 11, 2001. Shortly before United flight 93 crashed, attendant Ceecee Lyles pulled out her cell phone and left on her home answering machine a final message to

her husband. "Please tell my children that I love them very much. I'm sorry, baby. I wish I could see your face again."[8]

Facing the pain of death itself is not as fearful as the prospect of being separated from loved ones, the severing of belonging. If you knew you were facing death today or tomorrow, who are a handful of people you would call to say goodbye? Would any of those people be a part of your local church family? Who would attend your memorial service?

As a pastor who participates in many memorial services, I've found that the evidence of a deep belonging with others in spiritual community cannot be hidden. A memorial service takes on a whole different texture and beauty when the deceased is deeply loved and known by a caring local church community. Both joy and grief are shared in the celebration of a life well lived—a life deeply connected spiritually with others in close geographic proximity.

Colleen was a vital part of our congregation for many years, serving in many capacities. Colleen loved the Holy Scriptures and was a competent and passionate Bible teacher. A woman of strong faith in Christ, Colleen battled cancer for several years. I always loved being with Colleen. She taught me much about life and walking with God. In all her years of battling cancer, I never heard Colleen complain. Though her body struggled to the very end, Colleen's faith remained rock solid, her soul buoyant with hope.

Colleen's memorial service was one of the most memorable I have ever experienced. Our sanctuary was filled with a myriad of Colleen's friends, plus much joy and hope. People spoke of Colleen's love for them and for Christ's church. The number of people whose lives had been deeply touched by Colleen was truly staggering. I left the memorial service contemplating the truth that a life well lived is not lived alone; it is lived out in the context of a local church.

The local church was designed to be a place of close relational belonging. Our sense of belonging is anchored in relational connection and in deeply shared theological truth. True belonging is cemented both in Whom we know and in what we believe. Shared belief and belonging go hand in hand.

Our Theological Belonging – What Do We Really Believe?

German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer offered us clarity in his classic work *Life Together* when he distinguished mere human sociological community with true spiritual community. While human community is knit together by desire or relational sentiment, Bonhoeffer says, "The basis of the community of the Spirit is truth."[9]

In the broader church circles I frequent, I find that Christian doctrine seems to matter less and less. Yet doctrinal truth ought to matter a whole lot. Our theological belonging is at the very heart of our true local church community. At our local church, we have a doctrinal statement that anchors us and reflects a strong evangelical tradition. When God call us to a local church, He calls us within that truth tradition, a tradition that needs to be enthusiastically supported and affirmed. Our specific Christian truth tradition is a vital component of our true belonging.

Our Missional Belonging –What Are We Actually All About?

In local church community, we belong relationally, theologically, and also missionally. Our missional belonging is the third strand of local church belonging. Missional belonging is what we are actually about, what we are doing together to accomplish God's redemptive mission in our fallen and needy world. The local church I am privileged to be a part of has a mission statement. It is included in our printed literature, posted on our website, articulated on Sunday mornings when we gather for corporate worship, and woven into our day-to-day conversations. The mission statement of our local church is both memorable and meaningful: "We desire to be a caring family of multiplying disciples influencing our community and world for Jesus Christ." This is what the local church is designed to be: A missional enterprise with a deep sense of human connection and cooperation. Are we mere Sunday morning spectators or have we moved onto the playing field? Do we clearly understand the mission of the local church to which we are called? Are we thoughtfully, prayerfully, passionately embracing this mission? Are our time, talents, and treasures aligned with that mission? God's beautiful local church design invites us to be a part of a team.

The local church is about belonging, about accomplishing something beautiful and enduring together.

The Navy's Blue Angels regularly come to our city, but observing these skilled pilots maneuver so close together always takes my breath away. Though each one of these top gun pilots could choose to fly alone, they fly as a team. Training together, these pilots embrace a common mission and become a family. Together they accomplish what none could do alone. Every time the Blue Angels fly, they draw thousands and thousands of people to watch in awe and wonder.

When I think of the local church as God designed it to be, I think of the Blue Angels. At the end of the day, it's not about individuals doing their own thing; it's about a group of individuals doing God's thing. And when this beautiful symmetry and synergy mesh, people watch in awe and wonder.

To their peril, proponents of a privatized spirituality seem to miss this very important connection. Oh, the shipwrecking of faith that inevitably occurs when *being* is severed from *belonging*—when faith is divorced from local church life. In his book, *Revolution Within*, Dwight Edwards tells a moving story that occurred at the Seattle Special Olympics. Edwards writes:

> The hundred-yard dash had nine entrants. The gun sounded and the runners started out as fast as they were able. Then one little boy tripped, fell on the track and began to sob. The other eight heard his cry and all stopped to turn and look. Seeing him on the ground, they walked back to him—everyone of them. One little girl with Down syndrome bent down, kissed his leg, and said, "This will make it better." Then all nine put their arms around one another and walked together to the finish line. Everyone in the stadium stood and their cheers continued for several minutes.

Edwards then asks, "What is it about this story that touches something deep within me, something that brought an entire stadium to their feet? Maybe it awakens our intuitive sense that there's something of greater importance in life than individual success. It reminds us that

we were created to be interdependent, and that life was never intended to be lived solo."[10]

What's the big deal about the local church? It's a place where we truly belong.

A Heartfelt Prayer

Heavenly Father, for many of us, our experience with the local church has been less than we hoped. Sometimes, we have felt a lingering disappointment or a stinging hurt. Grant us the grace to embrace your creation design once again. May we discover that deep sense of belonging that flows from our immersion in God's redeemed local fellowship. Amen.

WEEK 6
BOOK EXCERPT

Book Title:

The Economics of Neighborly Love

Author: Tom Nelson

Ch. 8: Wise Generosity

8

WISE GENEROSITY

How do modern Christians and churches avoid the seductive power of material possessions? How can wealth remain a "good" for their enjoyment rather than leading them further away from God and the priorities of his kingdom? The recurring answer of both Testaments is through generous giving to others.

CRAIG BLOMBERG

Honor the LORD with your wealth
and with the firstfruits of all your produce;
then your barns will be filled with plenty,
and your vats will be bursting with wine.

PROVERBS 3:9-10

Hardly a day goes by when we are not presented with an opportunity for financial generosity. Whether we meet a homeless person on the street, receive an emotional appeal to help feed malnourished children in our inbox, learn of an opportunity to meet prenatal care needs in Haiti, open an invitation to attend a fundraiser

for a local parachurch organization, or contemplate a pledge to our local church's capital funding initiative, opportunities for generosity abound. Facing this myriad of giving opportunities brought to us by a host of sophisticated fundraising strategies from experts in the nonprofit sector, we are confronted with a complex challenge. We are called to love our neighbors with a generous love characterized by Christian compassion and economic capacity, but how should we wisely navigate the challenging terrain of local and global philanthropy?

A GENEROSITY REVOLUTION

When it comes to generosity in our contemporary culture there is some good news and some not so good news. First, the good news: We live in a time when a greater awareness and emphasis is being placed on generosity. Billionaires Bill and Melinda Gates along with Warren Buffet have led the way in encouraging the world's wealthiest to sign the Giving Pledge, a public commitment designed to hold its signatories accountable to donating the majority of their wealth to efforts and initiatives focused on increasing human flourishing.[1] This is remarkably encouraging.

Even as the widening wealth gap is a growing concern for many—with $7.7 trillion being controlled by the world's billionaires—it is important to recognize that though the number of billionaires is growing, billionaires only control 3.9 percent of the world's wealth.[2] While we ought to be grateful for a growing sense of responsibility among the wealthiest of the world to promote the common good, we must also own the truth that each of us need to take seriously our own responsibility to be generous, no matter our financial position.

Echoes of a generosity revolution are also being heard with increasing frequency and passion in many Christian faith communities.[3] Of course, this is good news and must be applauded by

thoughtful followers of Jesus. Every one of us is called to be generous with our financial resources. After all, Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). The not-so-good news is that while we are hearing more calls to live generously, less emphasis is being placed on how we are to be generous.

It is increasingly common for me to be approached by individuals wrestling with decisions regarding their financial giving. I'm often asked, "What principles ought to guide me in making a wise generosity decision?" "Where should I give to and why?" "Should I give now or invest with the intent of hopefully having more to give later?" "What about giving to individuals versus to institutions?"

Thoughtful followers of Jesus wrestle with where to give their financial resources because wise stewardship is important. Biblical generosity is not just about giving a particular amount or giving with a particular attitude, but also about giving according to particular wisdom. Generosity without wisdom is a very real challenge we all face. Our generous giving must not only flow from a generous heart but also be guided by a thoughtful mind.

In the city where I live there is an annual celebration of generosity. A large banquet highlights the good work that several Christian organizations do in our community. Each award recipient walks the red carpet to well-deserved applause and receives a sizeable check to further their not-for-profit endeavors. While I affirm the goodness of celebrating generosity, I often feel a tug of war in my heart. On the one hand, I am thrilled by the refreshing demonstration of generosity, but on the other, I inevitably feel some inescapable dissonance. Was this demonstration of generosity directed in such a way that it would be deemed as wise stewardship? Did the generosity celebrated have a short-term or a long-term view in mind? Why were local churches not featured or considered for awards? Why have local churches been virtually

absent at the celebration of generosity in our city? What would Jesus think about this banquet?

Jesus cared not only about generosity but also about wise financial stewardship. In one of Jesus' most sobering parables, three individuals were entrusted with varying degrees of financial resources and only two of them were deemed wise stewards and received the coveted accolade of "good and faithful servant' (Mt 25:14-30).

WISELY STEWARDED GENEROSITY

Each one of us must reflectively and prayerfully ask, Is my generosity being stewarded wisely?[4] We must not only grow in generosity, we must also grow in the wise stewardship of our generosity. In our quest for greater generosity, are we missing the mark of wise stewardship? Are we investing God's financial resources wisely? What considerations ought to guide us in pursuing wise stewardship? As we discover *that* God designed us to be generous, are we also discovering *how* God has designed us to be generous?

If we begin to more firmly grasp God's design on how we should direct our generosity, the revolution of generosity we are graciously experiencing in our time will have profound and lasting impact for the gospel and the common good. But if we are unwise with how our generosity is directed, we will miss the wide-open door of opportunity before us in this strategic moment in redemptive history.

DESIGN-BASED GIVING

If we are going to be wise stewards, and if we are going to foster a God-honoring culture of wise generosity, we will need to embrace a giving approach based on God's design. This giving approach is what I like to refer to as "design-based giving." Design-based giving challenges us to reconsider our generosity paradigm, reorder our heart loves, and reprioritize our giving. Before we press further

into a design-based giving approach, perhaps a bit more definition of what I mean by this term would be helpful.

As followers of Christ, we believe God has a design for how we are to live. We believe this design is revealed to us in Scripture. Made in the image of a generous, outpouring God, we were designed to be generous with our time, talents, and treasures. Design-based giving not only recognizes we are to be generous but also understands that God has given us a design template for how we are to give. At the heart of this design is a gracious generosity that looks through the lens of Scripture and sees the local church as the primary focus of our financial giving.

Scripture presents to us a design for true human flourishing and the collective common good. As image bearers of the triune God, we were created to be generous by one whose very nature is generous outpouring.[5] Harold Best insightfully makes the point, "Because God is the Continuous Outpourer, we bear his image as continuous outpourers. Being made in the image of God means that we were created to act as God acts, having been given a nature within which such behavior is natural."[6] Each one of us has been created by a generous God to be generous. We were created not with a closed fist but with open hands. An unwillingness to be generous or a decision to embrace a selfish greed goes against the grain of our original creation nature and design. In this sense, nothing is more unnatural than a person lacking generosity. Jesus' words "it is more blessed to give than to receive" affirm this bedrock theological truth anchored in Creation design.

Though sin entered God's good world, marring the divine image we were created to reflect, our generous God sent his Son Jesus to this sin-scarred earth to shed his atoning blood on a cruel Roman cross. The apostle Paul describes the generous outpouring of our salvation:

> When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior. (Titus 3:4-6)

When we in faith and repentance embrace the gospel, we are not only forgiven of our sin, we become new creations in Christ. As new-creation individuals originally created to be generous, we are recreated to be generous. We are called into a new-creation community, the local church, where generosity finds its full and collective expression. Though it is beyond my scope to highlight the many biblical texts that speak of being generous and good stewards of our financial treasure, I would like to erect a theologically informed, paradigmatic scaffolding for giving based upon three bedrock ideas: (1) God owns it all; (2) we give God our best; and (3) the local church is plan A for the world.

God owns it all. At its very heart, design-based giving embraces the bedrock truth that as Creator, God owns it all. The psalmist declares that "the earth is the LORD's, and everything in it" (Ps 24:1 NIV). The writer of Chronicles echoes this foundational truth: "Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all" (1 Chron 29:11-12). Because God owns it all, we recognize that all our financial assets belong to him.

We are stewards of the time, talent, and treasure entrusted to us as Jesus' yoked apprentices. Randy Alcorn rightly places stewardship in its foundational place within the Christian faith.

> Stewardship is not a subcategory of the Christian life. Stewardship is the Christian life. For what is stewardship but that God has entrusted to us life, time, talents, money, possessions, family, his grace and even his Son? In each case he evaluates how we regard and what we do with that which he has entrusted to us. . . .
>
> It is living life with the acute awareness that we are managers, not owners, that we are caretakers of God's assets, which he has entrusted to us while we are on earth. How we handle our money and possessions will be determined by whom we really believe to be their true owner—and ours.[7]

We are stewards who will be held accountable for what we have done with what we have been given. The sobering reality is this: We are not owners but managers. This truth must stay in front of us and remind us that our wealth and economic capacity are not ours to do with as we please. Rather, we must do with them what the true Owner would desire.

Giving God our best. Design-based giving not only embraces the bedrock truth that God owns it all, it also affirms that we are called to give our very best. The writer of Proverbs reminds us that we honor God by giving God the first fruits of both our income and wealth. The first fruits of our economic activity and productivity are to be an offering to God.[8] In other words, the first check we write each pay period and the first consideration in our yearly financial plan, as well as in our long-term estate planning, should be focused on our God-honoring generosity.

Making financial giving our highest budgetary priority is most often not a matter of the head but of the heart. Jesus reminds us that if we get our economic treasure right, our heart will follow.[9] Perhaps no place in the New Testament is this truth more vividly expressed than in Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector.

Embracing Jesus as his Messiah, Zacchaeus immediately realizes the implication for his wealth. He says to Jesus, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold" (Lk 19:8). When Jesus sees that Zacchaeus is putting his treasure in the right place, he knows his heart is in the right place. John Schneider looks to the transformation of Zacchaeus: "In this story it is not that a man is saved from the economics of the world, but that the world is redeemed in and through the salvation and the new economics of the man."[10] The primacy of giving God our best both in proper motive and substance is also seen in the contrast in giving between Barnabas and Ananias and Sapphira. While Barnabas gives his very best, Ananias and Sapphira deceptively create the illusion they have given their best when they have not. The severity of the consequences resulting from their stewardship deception should make us shudder (see Acts 5:1-11).

When we give God our best, we start with the foundational baseline of tithing. Throughout the Old Testament, God's covenant people offered God their tithes and offerings in the context and place of their corporate worship. For example, the renewal of God's covenant people in the time of Nehemiah emphasized the generous giving of God's people as it was directed toward the house of God (see Neh 10). Sometimes, when we read the design for giving presented in the Old Testament, we push back against it, saying it is a form of legalism. In those private conversations of the soul, we persuade ourselves that things are vastly different in the New Testament. But if we take a closer look at the Scriptures, we see a great deal of continuity between the Old and the New Testaments.[11] Not only does the apostle Paul use the language of the "household of God" to describe the local church (1 Tim 3:15), the witness and history of the early church points toward regular giving that occurred above and beyond the baseline of tithing

(see Acts 2:44-45; 4:34-35). We also observe in the New Testament that the local church is the primary recipient of the Christ-follower's generous giving.

The local church as plan A. Design-based giving embraces the bedrock truth that the local church is "plan A" for God's purposes in the world. In Scripture, institutions matter. The institution of marriage and the church as an institution are central to God's creation mandate and redemptive mission. Just as God created the institution of marriage to carry forward his redemptive plan, he likewise created the local church as the central path through which humankind is to exercise dominion and fulfill God's kingdom purposes in the world. God did not design his redeemed world to be filled with isolated, redeemed individuals. Rather, he desires new creation communities, bound together in common purpose, to flourish in particular places and times.[12]

When we speak of institutions and the institutional nature of the local church, we affirm the necessity and wisdom of ongoing organizational structures that make possible a long-established, faithful church presence in a particular geographic setting. When the New Testament speaks of the church, its primary focus is the local church.[13] The apostles interpreted Jesus' words that he would build his church as a clear and compelling mandate for planting local churches throughout the world. The planting and multiplication of local churches throughout the book of Acts demonstrates that the apostles understood the local church to be uniquely designed and gifted by the Spirit to be God's plan A for fulfilling both the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

The local church, as Christ designed it and indwells it, is both a growing organism as well as an ongoing institution. Throughout the book of Acts we not only see the transformation of individuals as the gospel is proclaimed, we also see the intentional establishment of local church structures with institutional organization that

supports this organic growth. Local churches were planted, and embryonic leadership structures were quickly established that allowed these churches to eventually become more fully developed institutions, with increased numerical size and sociological complexity. Because of this institutional design, local churches are able to establish an ongoing faithful presence in a community that transcends any one individual.[14] This faithful presence allows for the continued fulfillment of the church's mandate to be salt and light in a particular cultural context, contributing to the common good and presenting an ongoing, incarnational apologetic for the gospel.

FOGGY THINKING ABOUT "GRACE GIVING"

While there is strong biblical support for design-based giving, there remains a good deal of foggy thinking around God-honoring generosity, particularly concerning what is often described as "grace giving." One reason for this all-too-prevalent distortion is a misunderstanding of Paul's teaching on matters of giving. While writing to the local church at Corinth, Paul says, "Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give; not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor 9:7 NIV). Is Paul saying our economic giving is to be guided solely by what feels right? Is individual subjective sentiment to be the guiding light when it comes to my giving decisions? I don't believe so.

Paul's inspired words must be seen in their proper context. Paul's letter to the local church in Corinth was written as he was traveling on his way back to Jerusalem. Along with a group of his companions, he was taking a special one-time collection from the local churches he had planted throughout Asia Minor. This collection was going to support the local church in Jerusalem, which was facing financial difficulty. Yet in spite of the clear context of Paul's financial appeal, this text is commonly used to promote the idea that we are free to give to whatever or whomever we desire.

That is simply not the case. Grace is an integral aspect of our Christian faith, but it can also be adulterated into unbiblical cheap grace of religious apathy and unfettered license. Randy Alcorn helps us see through the mirage of "grace giving": "To most people the term 'grace giving' simply means 'give what you feel like.' The problem is most Christians just don't feel like giving. And many of them never will because they are not being taught to give. As the Law was a tutor to lead us to Christ, so the tithe is a tutor that leads us on to giving."[15]

A careful reading of 2 Corinthians reveals that Paul is not speaking to the Corinthians about their baseline obedience to tithe or give first fruits. Rather, he is speaking of giving above and beyond the Corinthian believers' regular financial support of their local church. Paul is not exhorting those in the Corinthian church to give whatever they feel like. Rather, Paul is saying that when it comes to above-and-beyond sacrificial giving, individuals retain the freedom to decide if or how much to give as a matter of conscience. In truth, Paul is prodding the Corinthians toward a greater lifestyle of generosity.

In the early church, above-and-beyond giving was not to be dictated by anyone, but to be done voluntarily from the heart according to the Spirit's leading. The early church's redistribution of wealth and the giving of Barnabas, for example, reflect this kind of voluntary, above-and-beyond "grace giving" (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37). It is also important to observe that expressions of above-and-beyond giving were not given individual to individual but to and through the local church the giver belonged to.

When Paul's inspired words to the believers in the local church at Corinth are taken out of context and presented as the guiding template for giving in the New Testament, we perpetuate a biblical distortion and reinforce a broader cultural context that is highly individualistic, pragmatic, and anti-institutional. Because we

breathe this cultural air and swim each day in the fast-moving currents of individualism, pragmatism, and anti-institutionalism, our generosity paradigms can easily become distorted. In many cases we are blind to the unintended consequences of this reality. All too often the confusion between first-fruits giving and grace giving leads to creative rationalizations for not tithing to a local church.

I have heard many rationalizations for not faithfully supporting the local church, such as "my tithe goes to a missionary," "I give my tithe to parachurch organizations," "I am helping a family member get through college," or "I have a neighbor who is in need." The capacity for rationalization is endless. Like the good Samaritan, we are to be available and generous in helping someone in immediate need. This is the calling of every true follower of Jesus, but it doesn't relieve us of the privilege and responsibility to generously support our local church. Giving to a worthy parachurch organization is a good thing, but this is not a substitute for local-church giving. Giving in addition to our local church responsibility calls each of us to cultivate greater economic capacity and to embrace nonindulgent lifestyles where increased economic generosity is made possible. We are not to negate our responsibility for honoring God's design by tithing to the household of God, our local church. In the Old Testament the failure to do this was rightly labeled "robbing" God (Mal 3:8). It is hard to imagine that somehow the definition of robbing God changes in the New Testament. Robbery is robbery no matter how you look at it.

Properly understood, the biblical framework of design-based giving assists us in making wise stewardship decisions regarding the directional outflow of our generous giving. When we embrace design-based giving, we understand that God owns it all, that tithing to the local church is the baseline of God-honoring obedience, and that the local church is God's plan A for his redemptive purposes. The local church as both an organism and an institution

is designed to be an ongoing faithful presence in a community, and is irreplaceable in its effectiveness for gospel proclamation and gospel mission in the world.

SEEING THE LOCAL CHURCH DIFFERENTLY

I remember a conversation with a generous individual about embracing a design-based giving approach. He looked at me and said, "If I gave a large financial gift to my local church, they wouldn't know what to do with it." This is a common concern, but what is driving it? When we interacted more, it became obvious that what concerned this individual most was not so much what a local church might do with this amount of money, but rather what he imagined the local church to be. The same is true for many generous people today. We must begin to grasp both the amazing importance and the stunning breadth of the local church and its mission in the world. The local church, as God designed it, is the primary means through which Jesus' prayer "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt 6:10) is ultimately answered.[16]

As apprentices of Jesus, our own spiritual growth is tied to our immersive life within a local church community. We need the local church and the local church needs us. Philip Yancey speaks transparently yet insightfully about his own up and down pilgrimage with the local church: "Christianity is not a purely intellectual, internal faith. It can only be lived in community. Perhaps for this reason, I have never entirely given up on church. At a deep level I sense that church contains something I desperately need."[17] Our spiritual growth involves the transformation of our minds, which leads us to think differently about all of life, including the church and the ways it is inextricably linked to Christ-honoring generosity and wise financial stewardship. In writing to the local church at Rome, Paul highlights the renewal of our minds and calls for a

proper response of a worshipful life of submission and obedience to Christ.

> I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom 12:1-2)

If we are going to discern and do God's will when it comes to wise generosity, we need to think differently about the local church.

The work and mission of the local church is multifaceted, but one of its stewardships is the spiritual formation of a generous congregation. A vital part of spiritual formation is growing in economic understanding, financial management, work productivity, and generosity. In this sense the local church is a school of generosity. Along with the family, the local church is a primary teacher of economic well-being and human flourishing. The macroeconomic flourishing of a community or a city is often tied to the microeconomic flourishing of individual households and family financial health. Nurturing economic capacity and wise money management is a vital aspect of local church discipleship. R. Scott Rodin says it well: "The church should be the center for developing Christians' understanding of generosity and nurturing their heart transformation."[18] Pastor Ben Patterson gets to the heart of the matter: "There is no such thing as being right with God and wrong with money."[19]

REORDERING OUR HEART LOVES

Design-based giving not only requires a renewing of the mind, it also requires a change of heart. Biblical discipleship inevitably leads

us to reorder our heart loves. One of the places where this occurs is in Jesus' restoration of Peter, described for us in John's Gospel.

Peter had blown it big time. He had done the unthinkable in deserting and denying his Master, who had been crucified. But then he'd seen the empty tomb and met the living Christ. Even as the reality of Jesus' resurrection sets in, Peter remains disillusioned over the remarkable events that he had experienced. He tells his friends he's going fishing. After an entire night of catching nothing, Peter returns to the shoreline, where Jesus is waiting, making breakfast. Pulling Peter aside, Jesus asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" And three times, Jesus tells Peter, "Take care of my sheep." In restoring a very discouraged and disillusioned Peter, Jesus' primary focus is not on what Peter believes but on what Peter loves. Our Lord's response to Peter about taking care of his sheep shows that Jesus is not only interested in Peter loving Jesus himself—as important as that is—but also in Peter loving what Jesus loves.

What does Jesus love? We could answer this question in a myriad of ways. I remember singing as a kid in Sunday school, "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world." Certainly, the lyrics of this song find strong support in Scripture. However, we could also strongly affirm that God not only loves the children of the world but also the totality of his good creation, for he repeatedly declared it good. Our heavenly Father extends his common grace to his world, even though it is presently marred by sin. Jesus loves the poor, the vulnerable, and the marginalized of society. Yet in Jesus' restoration of Peter we see the affectionate heart of our Lord for his redeemed people, his called out ones, the church.

As Jesus restores Peter, not only does Peter gain soul-transforming forgiveness, he also gains greater appreciation for how much Jesus cherishes his redeemed people. We know Jesus' tender words got through to Peter's mind and heart, for the aging

apostle later used imagery of shepherds and flocks to speak of the affectionate stewardship of local church leadership. For the apostle Peter, loving what Jesus loved meant first and foremost taking care of Christ's sheep. Like King David, Peter grasped that redeemed people were unimaginably precious as God's own inheritance. Sometimes we hear explicitly or implicitly that people love Jesus but don't like the local church. Loving Jesus and not loving the local church would have been inconceivable for Peter. It is also inconceivable to Jesus.

LOVING JESUS' BRIDE

Though Scripture employs many metaphors to describe the beautiful design and importance of the church, the metaphor of a bride gives us a picture of how much Jesus cherishes the church. In Ephesians Paul emphasizes the reordering of our heart loves toward Christ's bride, the church. Indeed, human marriage is presented as a reflection of Christ's relationship to the church. Because Christ loves his bride, we are to cherish the church (Eph 5:25-32). The primary thrust of Paul's teaching in Ephesians is directed toward local church life. Here we see the amazing interweaving of God's complementary design for the two primary institutions he has established for his glory and the accomplishment of his redemptive purposes: the family and the local church.

Just as our Lord Jesus gently confronted Peter's improperly ordered loves, I believe he also wants to lovingly and gently confront us regarding what and how we love. Jesus calls us to love what he so deeply loves. As apprentices, we learn not only how to live like Jesus would if he were us, but over time and in the transforming power of the Holy Spirit we become increasingly like him. As we become more like Jesus we share the affections of his heart. In his easy yoke, our affections progressively change, and the primary

focus of our heart becomes Jesus himself and the local expression of his church, which we are providentially called to love and serve.

Jesus loves you and me, and he loves us, his bride. Jesus shed his blood for his bride. Why wouldn't we cherish, nourish, care for, and protect the local expression of the bride he has called us to? If we truly love Jesus, we will love his bride, the church. And if we are willing to be transparent, all too often we lack a growing affectionate love for the local church.

One aspect of loving Christ's bride—a vital one—is our generous first-fruit giving, as well as Spirit-led, conscience-informed above-and-beyond giving. Design-based giving requires loving what Jesus loves, and reflects a properly ordered heart.[20] Randy Alcorn reflects a right understanding of the local church and the importance of rightly ordered loves: "Do you want your heart to be in your church? Give money to your church. Your heart will never be where your money isn't. It will be where your money is."[21] If embraced wholeheartedly, design-based giving provides a local church with the economic resources necessary to empower its catalytic gospel mission for the good of others, to the glory of Christ.

WEEK 7
BOOK EXCERPT

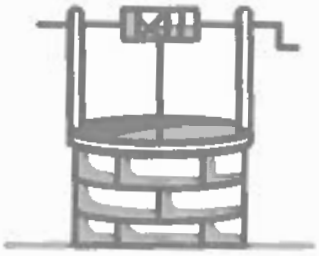
Book Title:

Gospel Fluency

Author: Jeff Vanderstelt

Ch. 13: Listen and Learn

13



LISTEN AND LEARN

I recently observed a conversation a few Christians were having with a man who has yet to come to faith in Jesus. It was amazing to me, and saddening, to watch the Christians missing the point of this man's struggle and questions. It seemed those speaking to him were more concerned about convincing him they were right than about listening to his heart. As a result, he walked away without any good news about Jesus, becoming even more convinced that this "religion" wasn't for him.

It's not for me either—at least, not what I saw in that conversation.

We can do better. We *must* do better. We're talking about people's souls!

And we're representing Jesus.

Helping people come to know the love of Jesus is the most important thing there is, and Jesus's love for us compels us to love people better. If we don't, the good news that people need gets muffled by our religious pride.

Proverbs 20:5 says, "The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out." We need to become people of understanding—people who seek to understand others before we expect them to understand us and what we believe. We need to learn how to ask more questions and draw out what is deep inside people's souls. We need to learn to slow down and listen closely to the longings of their hearts. We need to learn their stories. In short, we need to care more about winning people to Jesus than about winning arguments.

Gospel fluency isn't just about talking. It's about listening as well. This requires love, patience, and wisdom.

Drawing Out the Heart

Jesus was so good at this.

Whenever I consider how I can grow in being a person of understanding who listens well, I think of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well.[1]

It was high noon, when the sun was at its hottest. There was a reason this woman was getting her water at this time. She chose a time when no one else would be at the well. Nobody went there in the heat of the day. But she probably wanted to avoid running into one of the wives of the men with whom she had been sexually involved. She had had five husbands, and the man she was then involved with was not her husband.

However, Jesus didn't start with where she was wrong. He actually started in a humble posture of receiving from her.

1. This story is found in John 4.

He asked her for water, and she poured out her soul.

I've found that starting with a posture of humility, standing in a place of need and having a heart that is willing not only to give answers but also to receive insight, creates a welcoming place for people to open their hearts. The more open we are to listen and learn, the more likely people are to be open as well.

If you look at the story closely, you discover that Jesus continued to make very short, provocative statements that invited more conversation. He was drawing out, little by little, the longing of her soul.

He's a master at drawing out the heart.

You notice this if you read the Gospels. Jesus regularly said just enough to invite further probing or create intrigue. He also loved to ask questions so that the overflow of the heart (belief) would spill out of a person's mouth (words).

I'm amazed at how often well-intentioned Christians overwhelm people with a barrage of words. We go on and on about what we believe and what they should believe, assuming we know what others think, believe, or need. I often find that we are giving answers to questions people are not even asking or cramming information into hearts that are longing for love, not just facts.

We fail to listen. We fail to draw out the heart. And we miss opportunities to really love people and share the love of God with them. They also miss out on getting to hear what's going on in their own hearts. I have found that when people, including myself, are invited to say out loud what they believe, they come to realize something is wrong.

This is why counseling is a busy enterprise. People have no one to listen to them. They need to speak out loud what is going on in their hearts, and the only way some can do so is by paying a counselor to listen. I'm all for counseling, but I've spoken with many counselors, and most of them agree that if

God's people would slow down, close their mouths, open their ears, and listen, many people wouldn't need to see counselors.

Jesus slows down, draws out the heart, and listens.

As he did this at the well, the Samaritan woman's heart spilled out. And as it did, he guided her in a process of confession—not just of her behaviors, but also of her beliefs. She had been looking for love in all the wrong places and had clearly misunderstood God and how he interacts with humans. As Jesus engaged and listened, he was able to show her how he could provide what she most thirsted for. He could lead her to a well that would never run dry, providing an unending supply of soul water. *He* was the water that would deeply satisfy her soul.

The love she was looking for was standing right in front of her. And the God she should worship would go with her wherever she went. He wasn't on this mountain or that. He said he wants to come to human hearts like an unending stream of water that refreshes the soul.

She believed Jesus, and then went to tell her whole village about him. That's what you want to do with good news—share it with others. When people really grasp the good news of Jesus, satisfying the deep longings of their souls, it's hard for them to keep it to themselves.

Talk Less, Listen More

As we are changed by the gospel, we want to share how the gospel has changed us. It's a great thing to do so. In fact, one of the keys to growing in gospel fluency is to regularly share what Jesus has done or is doing in our lives with others. Our stories are powerful demonstrations of the gospel's power to save.

However, if we don't also listen, we tend to share the good news of Jesus in a way that applies primarily to our lives, the way it was good news to *us*, but fails to address the situations

others are facing. We can become proclaimers of the good news while remaining ignorant of the ways in which others need to hear it. This doesn't negate how good the news of Jesus is at all. However, if we read the rest of the story of Jesus's encounter with the Samaritan woman, we find that while her testimony created intrigue, the people in the village had to meet Jesus for themselves. It wasn't enough for her just to share her story. They had to get to Jesus as well.

So she brought them to him.

Our job is to testify to Jesus's work in our lives while also listening closely to others so we know how to bring the truths of Jesus to bear on the longings of their hearts. We need to bring them to Jesus so he can meet *their* unique needs and fulfill *their* personal longings.

In order to do this, we have to slow down, quiet our souls, ask good questions to draw out the hearts of others, and *listen*.

Francis Schaeffer said, "If I have only an hour with someone, I will spend the first fifty-five minutes asking them questions and finding out what is troubling their heart and mind, and then in the last five minutes I will share something of the truth."[2]

My regular counsel to Christians these days is to spend more time listening than talking if they want to be able to share the gospel of Jesus in a way that meaningfully speaks to the hearts of others.

We were created by God to find our greatest satisfaction and fulfillment in him. Every human is hungry for God. Everyone has eternity written on their hearts, producing a longing for something—someone—better, more significant, and eternal. This is a longing for God (Eccl. 3:11). The cry of every heart—the native tongue of our souls—is for better, not for worse; for

2. Cited in Jerram Barrs, introduction to Francis A. Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, 30th Anniversary Edition (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2001), xviii.

the eternal, not for the temporal; for healing, redemption, and restoration. And only Jesus can bring this about.

We all long for Jesus Christ. Everyone is seeking him, even if they don't know it.

They are looking for something to fulfill their longings and satisfy their thirst.

However, they are looking in the wrong places. They are going to the wrong wells to try to draw soul water. They need to look to Jesus. But they will not come to see how he can quench their thirst if we don't take the time to listen.

And as we listen, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can discern the longings of their hearts, the brokenness of their souls, and the emptiness of their spirits. And then, we must be prepared to show how Jesus can meet them at the well with soul-quenching water—himself.

Listening Up

Whenever I am engaging in a conversation with someone, I ask the Holy Spirit to help me. He is called "the Helper," after all (John 14:26).

"Help me slow down," I pray. "Help me to trust you are working here in the silence. Help me to listen well—to them and to you."

In some Bible versions, "Helper" is translated as "Counselor." So I ask the Spirit to give me the ability to hear the longings of the heart as I listen. I invite him to be the primary counselor in the midst of our time. I ask him to give me ears to hear what the real issues are, and then provide me with wisdom as to how to share the truths of Jesus in such a way that they will be good news to the other person.

Recently, on a plane, I happened to sit next to a woman who was very troubled. I didn't know this at first because she looked polished and seemed pleasant in her greeting. Often-

times when I travel, I ask God if the time on the plane is for me to be alone for my work or rest, or if he wants me to engage in a redemptive conversation. The answer is usually fairly obvious within minutes of takeoff. In this case, he wanted me to have a conversation.

I asked the woman, "So, are you leaving home or headed home?"

She replied: "Well, both, I guess. I live in Seattle, but I'm flying to the place that was supposed to be my new home. My husband and boys are there now. It's a little complicated."

"Help me, Spirit," I prayed. "Help me to listen well."

She continued: "We couldn't all move at the same time because I had to stay back to work for a while longer in Seattle. However, now we're getting a divorce, so I will be staying in Seattle. I'm just going to see my sons and sign divorce papers and head back home."

I asked what had happened and she continued to open up. I continued to pray and listen to both her and the Spirit (what I call listening *up*). The story just poured out of her mouth. The dam had been ready to burst for some time.

I have found that when you make space for others, and they really believe you care, they are eager to open up and pour out their hearts. I don't believe this is just a technique, by the way. I'm convinced more and more that God's Spirit is at work ahead of us, and as we depend on him, he produces the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control in our lives (Gal. 5:22–25). I'm increasingly convinced that people can sense something is different about us. So they are often more prone to share when they experience the Spirit's presence and his fruit in our lives.

The woman on the plane went on to describe how she had had an affair and how her husband, in his anger, had done everything he could to destroy her image on Facebook, turning all

their friends against her. He had succeeded in turning her sons against her as well. She was terribly embarrassed, broken, and demoralized. I listened for quite some time, and it became clear to me that she was sorry for what she had done and regretted the pain and shame it had brought on her and her family. Not only did she feel bad, but she was being crushed by the weight of it. The guilt and the shame were too much to bear. And she was deeply burdened by her husband's anger and her sons' pain.

Listen for the longing, listen for the pain, listen for the need for Jesus.

She wanted to make things right. She wanted forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation.

Jesus had good news for her.

At one point, she stopped and said: "You sure are nice. You've been listening to me go on and on about my life, and I've hardly asked you about yours. You're just so easy to talk to. Who are you?" She seemed surprised that a stranger would listen and show he cared.

I then explained to her who I was and, most importantly, who I knew. I let her know that I know and love Jesus, and that Jesus cared and was listening to her as well. She then shared how she had never been into religion, but recently she had been seeking and checking out some churches in our area. She knew she needed help and was reaching out.

As I said above, I am more and more convinced that the Holy Spirit goes ahead of us, preparing people for conversations like this. This growing confidence in God as the one who saves has freed me from the pressure to be the savior for people. Our job is to be present, filled with the Spirit, and ready to listen, then open to speak as the Spirit leads.

I shared with the woman that she was feeling shame and guilt because of her sin and her subsequent attempts to deal with it. I shared with her the story of Adam and Eve, and how

they tried to deal with their sin. I continued to show her how it led them to blame each other and brought destruction in their relationships.

"You and your husband both experientially know the pain of sin," I said. "And because sin is ultimately a violation against God, the giver of life, and his ways, which protect and promote life, you are both looking for someone to pay the penalty for that violation. The Bible calls this payment 'atonement.' We all know someone should pay for sin. So when we sin or are sinned against, we look for someone or something to atone for it. If we look to ourselves, we self-loathe and hate, which is shame and guilt having its way in us. If we look to blame others, we become bitter and we hate them, wanting them to pay. In either case, the sin never really is dealt with. It doesn't go away. Instead, it produces more destruction. In many cases, we try to earn our own atonement by trying to be better, work harder, or promise never to do it again. But that leads to other forms of destruction, such as perfectionism, workaholism, manipulation, and pride, or devastation and depression when we fail.

"What you need," I continued, "is one who can truly atone for your sin. You need someone who can handle the weight of sin, forgive you of your sin, and set you free from it, so that it no longer defines you. You need Jesus."

I then went on to describe how Jesus willingly went to the cross to take her sin on himself. I shared how he was willing to be publicly shamed for her so that she not only could be forgiven but also clothed in his righteousness and freed from guilt and shame.

"You will never be able to do enough to remove your guilt and cover your shame through your own efforts," I said. "Only Jesus can do that for you. And your husband hates you because he is also looking for atonement for your sin. That makes sense if he doesn't know Jesus. He doesn't have another place to go

to. Until he meets Jesus, he will continue to expect you to pay for what you've done. And if you don't go to Jesus for forgiveness, you will keep carrying both the weight of your sin and your husband's hatred of you for it. You can be forgiven by going to Jesus in faith and receiving his forgiveness. And every time you are reminded of your sin and your husband's rage, you can redirect that in your heart to Jesus. Let Jesus take the guilt, the shame. And ask him to carry the weight of your husband's hatred toward you. You can't handle it. But Jesus can and did at the cross. He died to remove it and to heal you of its scars."

We went on and on about how the gospel brings forgiveness, healing, hope, and even love for those we've hurt or been hurt by.

At the end, she said: "I feel like I got a free counseling session with God just now. I'm convinced he set up our seating arrangements for this flight."

I agreed. He does that kind of thing.

He wants to do that through you as well, if you will set aside your self, your assumptions, and your need to be heard or be right, and just listen. Listen to the people God has put into your life and listen to what the Spirit has to say. Then you will know how to speak the gospel to the deep longings of people's souls.

Many are going to other wells to find water.

Let's be willing to slow down in order to lovingly show them how Jesus is standing ready to uniquely satisfy their thirst.

Learn Their Stories

As you grow in listening to people's longings, also learn to listen for their overarching stories. In the last chapter, I described how we can share our stories, making Jesus the hero. If we are going to speak the gospel fluently to the hearts of others, we need to listen for the dominant storylines under which others live their lives. What are their gospel stories? Who's their hero?

Everyone has a gospel story he or she believes. It may not be the gospel of the kingdom of God—the good news of Jesus Christ—but it is a gospel narrative nonetheless. The gospel narrative everyone believes includes the storyline of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and New Creation. Oh, they wouldn't necessarily use those words, but since eternity is written on their hearts, they are wired by God with this storyline.

If you pay attention, you will see that this is the storyline of every great novel, play, and movie. It spills out of our songs and poems. It jumps out of our television screens in sitcoms, dramas, and even commercials. Gospel-fluent ears learn to listen to where the storylines of our friends and our culture agree and disagree with the true story of God.

So how does this work?

Let's look at the fundamental questions or longings in each movement of the story in light of people God has put in our lives. Get familiar with them, and then, as you listen to people, listen for their answers to the questions:

Creation: In what do they find their *identity* or sense of purpose and significance?

Fall: Whom or what is the fundamental *problem* they blame for the things that are broken in their lives?

Redemption: Whom or what are they looking to as their *savior* to rescue or deliver them?

New Creation: What does transformation look like and what is their ultimate *hope* for the future?

One day, a friend called and told me he had lost his job. He was not a believer in Jesus, but he was open to talking about the things of the heart. He asked if we could get together for lunch to talk about how he was doing.

So there we were at one of our favorite Mexican restaurants in Tacoma. I asked him how he was doing.

"Not well," he responded.

I started to reply, "I can understand why, what with losing your job and worrying about bills and all that." But I felt prompted by the Spirit: "Ask why. Don't assume. Listen."

"Why are you not doing well?" I asked.

"Well, you would think it was because I lost my job and was worried about paying the bills, feeding the family."

"Well, yes," I thought, "that's what I would think."

"That's not it, though," he said. "The reason I'm not doing well is because I'm not really sure who I am anymore."

I felt as if the Spirit prompted me again: "Ask another question."

So I asked, "What do you mean?"

"Well," he continued, "I'm beginning to see that my job was my identity. And without it, I'm not sure who I am anymore."

"I can see that," I shared. "I went through a similar crisis a few years back. I had been looking to my job or my job performance to find my sense of identity and significance. I think we all do that in different ways with different things in life."

"Yeah, I think you're right. The thing that's got me a bit is that even though I know I could get another job, I could lose it just like this one. There's no guarantee. I think that's what's shaking me up the most. None of this is stable or dependable."

"I can understand that," I said. I let some time pass, then I said: "I know you grew up on a ranch in Montana. But I don't know if I've ever heard much about what it was like for you growing up there. Would you mind sharing with me more about what your life was like growing up?"

"Sure," he said. "My dad was a rancher, so I didn't really see him much. In fact, I hardly spent time with him. He did eat dinner with us when he wasn't driving cattle. I knew that when I turned eighteen I would start working with him on the ranch, but he died when I was sixteen."

I'll never forget that moment. It was as if the Holy Spirit was yelling in my ear: "Did you hear that? He lost his dad. He was planning on working for his dad to get to him through work, and then, through his work, feel the approval and love of a father. But his dad died before that could happen. Now he is looking to his work to get approval, and he's lost that too."

What was his creation narrative? "My identity is in my job because I'm looking for approval and love from my dad."

What was his fall narrative? "My dad died and I lost my job. And even though I could get another job, I could lose it as well. Nothing is dependable. Nothing lasts. We lose dads and jobs."

What was his redemption narrative? "I need a dad who will love me and a job well done."

What was his new creation narrative? "I want a dad who won't die and will be proud of my work."

Do you see how the gospel has great news for my friend? With the Spirit's help, I did. So I gave it to him.

"You want a good thing. You want the love of a father who will never leave you. And you want to do good work for him so that he will be pleased with you. I want to let you know that there is a Father who wants to be a perfect Dad for you. That's God. He loves you and will never die. In fact, he sent his Son, Jesus, to come and work on your behalf. He did a perfect job living the human life so that he could give you his perfection in exchange for your failures—your sin. Jesus died on the cross to forgive you and to make you perfectly acceptable and loved by God the Father. Through faith in Jesus, you are forgiven and loved by God, who is a perfect Dad for you. And Jesus rose again on the third day so that death wouldn't have the final say. Death is defeated, and the job was done perfectly so that you can have the love and acceptance of God your Father forever. Through faith in Jesus, you get a loving Father who will never die and a work that will never fail for you."

"I've never heard anything like that before," he said. "I grew up Lutheran, but never heard about Jesus that way before."

He needed the good news of Jesus shared as good news for his pain and longing.

My friend has yet to come to faith in Jesus, but he has a new view of God as Father and a job well done because of Jesus. I pray he believes someday.

Remember, we don't save people. God does. We listen and learn, and then we love and share Jesus.

WEEK 8
BOOK EXCERPT

Book Title:

Kingdom Calling

Author: Amy Sherman

Ch. 10: Bloom Where You're Planted

10

Pathway 1

BLOOM WHERE YOU'RE PLANTED

The church exists for the mission, for the sake of the world.
Yet it is organized to build itself up as an institution.
It blesses the work its members do within the
institution but pays no attention to the
work they do "outside" the church.

REV. DAVIDA CRABTREE

In 1985, Tom Hill's company, Kimray, was experiencing hard times. The Oklahoma City firm, which produces sophisticated control gauges and thermostats for oil and gas companies, was in a bust cycle. This was not unusual in that industry. In fact, several years earlier, Kimray had gone through an even worse time. Hill remembered that recession all too well. Back then, he had allowed the firm to grow too large during a boom cycle, not placing funds in reserve. When the market tanked, the subsequent layoffs he was forced to make were gut wrenching.

This was an experience Hill never wanted to repeat. He vowed then and there to God that he would operate Kimray debt-free in the future. "We put back reserves in good times to carry us over during the lean times," Hill says. "That commitment alone enables us to operate successfully under varied economic climates."[1] When the bust of 1985 arrived, Hill found himself with a financial reserve but more employees than he had work for. His response was that of a *tsaddiq*.

Out of his strong commitment to his city and his employees, Hill contacted Oklahoma City Mayor Ron Norrick to ask if Kimray could put its employees to work for Oklahoma City. Hill recalls,

> It took us about two and a half months to make that arrangement, but [we] did, and we also put employees to work in other companies. We had employees who worked for Macklanberg-Duncan and for several non-profits, some where [*sic*] they could be paid, some at minimum wage, some in jobs with no pay, and we would make up the difference in their wages. It resulted in 92 employees working for somebody else for a period of 18 months, and we paid the difference in their salary or paid all of their salary.

By 1987, Kimray's business had picked back up, and Hill brought all ninety-two employees back to work at the plant.

Kimray's unusual response to the 1985 recession has not been forgotten. In an interview years later, Hill said, "Many of the employees we have now were here then. They remember that [time], and they appreciate it." For his part, Hill says he's just thankful that Kimray was able to demonstrate "our commitment to our employees and our community. . . . Our goal is not just to sell products. Our goal is to provide jobs to the community, to be part of the community, and to have an impact on the community."

Christian marketplace professionals like Hill are not born; they are made. The Word and the Spirit of God form them into people who look out for the common good, rather than focus exclusively on themselves. The nurture of believers like Hill, whose faith shapes their daily work in profound and creative ways, is a primary task of the church.

In this chapter we'll examine what church leaders around the country are doing to disciple these kinds of workers. Without a vision, the Scriptures tell us, the people perish. The stories here about church leaders and church members can help fuel a vision for raising up *tsaddiqim* who advance the kingdom in and through their daily work.

Nurturing *Tsaddiqim* Who Bloom

Three key commitments mark congregational leaders who are effective in encouraging their members to steward their vocations for the common good: affirmation, education and support (see table 10.1). A variety of churches around the country offer insights for engaging in these three activities.

Table 10.1. How to Nurture Congregants Who Bloom

Affirmation	Education	Support
• Preach the missional value of daily work • Use workplace illustrations in sermons • Visit members at their workplace • Use "vocational" prayers • Commission laypeople for work in society	• Offer work-related short courses • Hold gifts discovery retreats • Host book groups • Host special faith/work conferences	• Sponsor career counseling • Partner with WorkLife, Inc. • Organize vocational groups • Provide tools

Affirmation. Nurturing the *tsaddiqim* to bloom at their job begins with solid preaching based on the theological convictions examined in previous chapters. At The Falls Church, a large Anglican congregation just outside the Washington, D.C., Beltway, Rector John Yates recognizes the vital importance of affirming parishioners in their daily ministry on the job. Yates believes that the church in America today resides in Babylon and that the prophetic word to "seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile" (Jer 29:7) is the relevant paradigm for ministry. In such a context, affirming and encouraging the marketplace vocations of the laity is more important than ever. As Yates advised a group of seminary graduates in a commencement address in 2008,

> God has called us to Babylon. This is our home for now, and this is where we are called to build disciples and build churches. God will give you people to shepherd and serve, and they may actually be more effective for Christ's kingdom, and influential in our culture as laymen, than you or I. Encourage them, believe in them, pray for them. Be patient with them. Don't attempt to insulate them from Babylon, but tell them they are Christ's seeds, sent out to produce fruit, and they will.[2]

Congregational leaders at churches from a variety of denominations share this perspective and this commitment to pulpit leadership that affirms members' work in the world. At San Diego's Harbor Presbyterian Church, leaders say simply, "We believe people can—and must—live out the Gospel in and through their work."[3] At Grace DC, a Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., former associate pastor Duke

Kwon, who oversaw the congregation's vocational stewardship initiative, explains that,

> theologically, we've always maintained what some refer to as a Kuyperian worldview, teaching the Lordship of Christ in all spheres of life, rejecting the secular/sacred divide. . . . That commitment in terms of ministry philosophy was in place from the beginning, and it [is] communicated through our classroom and pulpit ministries.[4]

In addition to preaching, other activities during the Sunday worship service also help affirm congregants in their daily labor. At The Falls Church, for example, in the congregational prayer every Sunday, four or five church members are specifically prayed for by name and vocation. At Colchester United Church of Christ in Colchester, Connecticut, Rev. Davida Crabtree took this notion of vocational prayers one step further. With help from selected parishioners, she composed a special prayer for each Sunday that focused on a different occupation. She placed a symbolic object from that career on the altar (such as a hair dryer for beauticians or various tools of the trade for carpenters or plumbers) and then offered a prayer for church members from that occupational field.[5]

Church leaders can also affirm their marketplace professionals by formally commissioning them during worship services. Many churches currently commission missionaries or laypeople who teach Sunday school. That's not a bad thing, but in the absence of similar kinds of commissioning of laity in the marketplace, it reinforces the message that only "spiritual" or "church" work is truly missional. So, at The Falls Church, Rev. Yates commissions various laypeople in all their diverse callings in the marketplace.[6] Meanwhile, inside the D.C. Beltway, Church of the Savior has developed special liturgies for ordaining church members for their work in society.[7]

Pastor Tom Nelson from Christ Community Church in Leawood, Kansas, has been preaching on faith/work integration for a decade. To affirm his congregants, he deliberately uses workplace illustrations in sermons and invites testimonies from marketplace members. He and his staff also visit church members at their work sites. "We want to understand their world," he explains.[8]

Nelson's intentional affirmation and frequent preaching on vocational themes has helped businessman Dave Kiersznowski and his wife, Demi,

think more creatively and intentionally about how they can advance foretastes of the kingdom through their business, DEMDACO. Dave reports that Nelson challenged them to think about what their business would look like if they were "viewing all of life through a biblical lens."[9]

So, when the Kiersznowskis were planning the design of their new company headquarters, they began to think deeply about that physical space where their employees spent so much time. They determined that the new office should be "a place that's beautiful, creative, pleasing, and full of light."[10] They also wanted a family-friendly workspace. So the new DEMDACO headquarters included a room dedicated to nursing moms and a room filled with games, videos and arts-and-crafts supplies. The latter is intended to encourage parents who work for the company to have their kids visit them at lunchtime.

Nelson's strong preaching on vocational stewardship also led Dave Kiersznowski to reexamine his company's health insurance policy. He realized that it was "generous to those who wanted to start a family through natural birth," but didn't have benefits for those who wanted to adopt. So DEMDACO "instituted an adoption aid program as a way of meeting the needs of widows and orphans."[11]

Education. In addition to affirming their members' daily work, church leaders can promote "blooming" by offering adult education opportunities devoted to faith/work integration topics. Harbor Presbyterian, Grace DC and Christ Community Church have all hosted special weekend conferences and retreats, and two have sponsored multiweek adult education classes on the topic. These have ranged from the general, such as teaching on the biblical theology of work, to the specific, such as Harbor Church's mid-week course "StrengthsFinder for Job Seekers."

Under Crabtree's leadership, Colchester UCC sponsored gifts-discovery retreats, using formal assessment tools to help people better think about matching their personality and passions with job choices. The congregation also hosted a weekend conference titled Beyond Sunday Christianity, featuring well-known faith/work integration guru William Diehl.

At Grace DC, Pastor Kwon brought in Steve Garber, author of *The Fabric of Faithfulness*, to teach on vocation at a retreat. Afterward, Garber returned to the church to lead a five-session adult-education class for young professionals on Sunday mornings. As a follow-up, Kwon recruited

a lay member to host a discussion group on the book *Engaging God's World* by Cornelius Plantinga. "It is a wonderful book on the issue of vocation," Kwon explains, "and it's also just a wonderful review of the gospel story."

In Atlanta, Peachtree Presbyterian Church organizes its educational efforts to promote vocational stewardship under its WorkLife ministry. The church's website describes the philosophy animating the WorkLife initiative in this way:

> For followers of Jesus, who we are is a person created in the image of God. Your work—whether you are in banking, or a homemaker, or a teacher, or in medicine, or retired, or whatever you do, is important to God. Your work, your life, is vitally important to God, and He invites you to partner with Him in that, just as he invites you to worship Him.[12]

In 2007, the WorkLife ministry launched its My95 initiative. "No matter if you sign up for everything that moves here at Peachtree," Senior Pastor Victor Pentz explained to congregants, "at most you will spend about 5 percent of your waking hours here on these premises. Ninety-five percent of your life you spend in the world. Now this 5 percent is critical in giving us a navigation system to help orient us in the Christian life. But the scorecard is about the 95 percent we live out there in the world."[13]

The My95 initiative has included direct teaching through sermons on the missional life and faith/work integration. My95 small-group gatherings on Sunday nights with facilitated discussion segments allow congregants to analyze their spiritual gifts, discern their calling and identify the purposes for which God has gifted them. Additionally, video testimonies of individual congregants talking about how they serve God through their work help cast vision and build excitement.

Peachtree members like Bonnie Wurzbacher, senior vice president for Global Customer and Channel Leadership at The Coca-Cola Company, deeply appreciate Peachtree's My95 program and the deliberate efforts that Pentz has taken to help marketplace leaders think theologically about their daily work. Raised in a Christian family—a preacher's kid and a granddaughter of overseas missionaries—Bonnie explains that she "grew up thinking that the way to best serve God is in 'full time Christian service' or by supporting your church."[14] It took her years to overcome this sacred/secular dichotomy in her thinking.

Today Bonnie has a deep theology of how to serve God through busi-

ness, honed over years of personal study and rich conversations at Peachtree. "God has an important purpose for every institution," she says. "His purpose for business is to advance the economic well-being of communities throughout the world. And as the sole source of wealth creation, business enables every other institution to exist—schools, colleges, missions, churches, government, everything." This means that when a business fails, everything is impacted. Business "is very important, noble work throughout the world," she says.

Bonnie has been at Coke for twenty-six years now. This mega-corporation is active in two hundred countries, and the majority of the firm's profits remain in the local economies, through its franchised business model. Bonnie reports that economic impact studies show that "on average, for every one job we create directly, another twelve are created indirectly." She says enthusiastically, "I believe that I am helping to bring God's kingdom here on earth when I participate in a successful, ethical, effective business that helps communities improve their economic well-being and enables everyone associated with it to contribute to the larger good in the world."

Support. Some churches have found that gathering members into vocationally based small groups is a good strategy for helping believers deepen their understanding of and commitment to faith/work integration. Redeemer Presbyterian Church, a megachurch of more than four thousand attendees in New York City, leads the oldest initiative of this sort that I found in my research. Its Center for Faith and Work, launched in January 2003, seeks to "equip, connect, and mobilize our church community in their professional and industry spheres toward gospel-centered transformation for the common good."[15] Founder Katherine Leary Alsdorf says the center's work is based on the "practical theory of cultural renewal [that] most [believers] will have our biggest impact through our work." Having a clear vision for that, as well as the perseverance required for being salt and light in secular work environments, requires support. "We wanted to create community," Katherine says. "People need to build relationships and help challenge one another."[16]

Today the center boasts fifteen vocationally based fellowships in which everyone from advertising executives to fashion designers to engineers to dancers can gather with peers for prayer, discussion and mutual support.

The newest group is for professionals working in international diplomacy.

The groups bring in older Christians with many years of experience wedding their faith to their work. They host dialogues, book studies, prayer groups and social events. Some seek to serve nonprofits through their specific vocational skills. All the groups aim at encouraging kingdom-oriented vocational stewardship for the common good. As the website for the Fashion Industry Group proclaims,

> As Christians involved in the fashion industry, we hope to discover the bursts and inflections of God's restoring work through our creative and vocational endeavors. As we are being restored to His image by the Holy Spirit, both individually and in community, so He also desires to break forth His glory in new creative concepts, designs, partnerships and business models which will produce a foretaste of the coming Renewal of all things.[17]

It has been important to Katherine since the beginning that the groups not only talk about issues, but actually "do something." The most mature expression of that is seen in one of the oldest vocation groups, the Entrepreneurship Initiative, which sponsors an annual business-plan competition. Through it, entrepreneurs present their vision and implementation strategy for a venture, for-profit or non-profit, that has a high potential for "gospel-centered social impact" and growth and sustainability.[18] Since the first competition in 2007, Redeemer has awarded twelve winners grants from five thousand to twenty-five thousand dollars.[19]

Churches much smaller than Redeemer have also implemented vocationally based groups. At Church of the Good Shepherd in Durham, North Carolina, Associate Pastor Sean Radke taught an adult education class on rejoicing the city over several weeks. Out of this grew interest in establishing vocational groups. Today church members in the legal field gather in the Justice Matters fellowship. Already this group has launched a free legal clinic in the city. A group for medical professionals and one for businesspeople are in formation.

In Washington, D.C., at Grace DC, vocational fellowships began organically when Kwon simply sent out a church-wide email asking if members had interest in meeting with peers in a similar vocational field. He says church leaders expected that perhaps they'd be able to launch two or three small groups as a pilot program. "But," he reports, "120 people ended up signing up for it!"[20]

Churches can also support their marketplace professionals by partnering with parachurch organizations that focus on faith/work issues. In Atlanta, Peachtree Presbyterian pays for membership in the Crossroads Career Network. This allows parishioners who are seeking new jobs or desiring to explore alternative careers free access to Crossroads's training seminars, workbooks, and online resources and tools. Peachtree also partners with WorkLife, Inc., which offers an online coaching tool called Maestro WorkLife. Maestro provides marketplace professionals biblically based resources that address a variety of topics related to daily life on the job.

Wendy Clark from Durham has developed her understanding of business as mission by reading all the books she can get her hands on, attending weekend retreats and conferences, and dialoging with other marketplace Christians and thoughtful preachers like Sean Radke.

In 1994, at age twenty, Wendy launched a business called Carpe Diem Cleaning. Initially, she says, her sense of what it meant to be a Christian businessperson was that her firm could generate profits—and then she could give generously to missions. Only years later were her eyes opened to see that her business *itself* was a means of ministry.[21]

Today Wendy advances the kingdom value of compassion at Carpe Diem through her attentive care for her employees, mostly Latina moms. She has changed Carpe Diem's hours to accommodate their schedules "so that they aren't stressed out trying to get their kids to school, running late to work and getting home on time." Additionally, instead of holding training sessions in Durham, she takes the women—and their kids—to a family camp in the country. That way, the families get a vacation they probably wouldn't have had otherwise. Wendy says business "is not just about profits. It's about investing in the people who are working with us."

Blooming and the Great Commission

Every church leader is familiar with the Great Commission of Matthew 28. Pastors typically preach this as the missionary call to go "to the ends of the earth" to spread the gospel. In his book *To Change the World*, James Davison Hunter offers a different spin on the Great Commission. He argues that it can also "be interpreted in terms of social structure." In

other words, the call to go is not only geographical but also sociological. He writes,

> The church is to go into all realms of social life: in volunteer and paid labor—skilled and unskilled labor, the crafts, engineering, commerce, art, law, architecture, teaching, health, and service. Indeed, the church should be *sending people out* in these realms—not only discipling those in these fields by providing the theological resources to form them well, but in fact mentoring and providing financial support for young adults who are gifted and called into these vocations. When the church does not send people to these realms and when it does not provide the theologies that make sense of work and engagement in these realms, the church fails to fulfill the charge to "go into all the world."[22]

For church leaders who want their members to bloom, this is a vital perspective. It properly expands our understanding of the mission in the world that we are calling members to. That call is to go into every sector of society and there bring shalom.

To help their people catch and live that vision, congregational leaders should tell stories—lots of them. It's imperative to make the call three-dimensional. I was once teaching third-graders about missions, and asked them if they knew what a missionary was. Their responses showed how their imaginations had been captured by missionary biographies, missions conference slide shows and the film *The End of the Spear*. "A missionary," one little girl told me soberly, "is like a superhero." We need to get to the point in our churches where even children can describe what "vocational stewardship" is. They will be able to do so if we regularly tell the stories of what it looks like in every sector of society.

Toward that end, below are some short stories to start with.

Academia: A Historian Promotes Racial Reconciliation

Historian Anne C. Bailey from SUNY-Binghamton focuses her research on what Christians in earlier ages did to combat the injustices and prejudices of their day, in the hope of learning lessons for today. Her research into European missionaries who sought freedom for individual slaves uncovered the uncomfortable truth that these Christians did not always leverage their power and privilege to the extent they could have to oppose the

slave trade. Bailey says, "It made me think in which ways I had other opportunities, other things that I can do, right here in the place that I stand, in order to effect change for the places that I care about."[23]

One thing Bailey cares a great deal about is racial reconciliation. "Coming to the Lord helped me to look at racial reconciliation issues in a different and [deeper] light," she told an interviewer in 2008. "And frankly with much more hope."[24] That hope has been bolstered further as she has learned of the tenacious and often generous faith of slaves. A believer in the concept of "living history"—that events of the past are connected to contemporary issues—Bailey chose as her research specialty African American history and African Diaspora studies.

In studies that led to her book *African Voices of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Beyond the Silence and Shame* (Beacon Press, 2005), Bailey found that "a number of the slaves were deeply committed Christians." Among some, love for Christ led them to a remarkable place: intercession for their masters. "So you have many ex-slaves talking about their masters, worrying about their nominal Christianity and wishing that they had a heart for a relationship with Jesus," she reports. "They would pray for themselves, and they would also pray for their masters."[25] Telling of their exemplary faith through her writings affords Bailey the opportunity to promote racial reconciliation among Christians today.

Art: A Dancer Promotes Social Justice

Jeannine Lacquement has been dancing all her life. She did ballet as a little girl and jazz and modern dance in high school.[26] She then majored in dance at Goucher College in Maryland. For her, dance has always been about serving others. When working in a nursing home, Jeannine launched a therapeutic dance class. Later, as the live-in director of a residential facility for the handicapped, she involved several disabled kids in a dance troupe she formed.

Today, as head of the nonprofit youth development organization Children of the Light Dancers, Jeannine takes her troupe of teen dancers out to perform at nursing homes and inner-city Vacation Bible School programs. In 2007 and 2008, the troupe composed and danced a special "Seek Justice" performance to highlight the tragedy of international human trafficking and raise funds for International Justice Mission, a leading Chris-

tian human-rights organization. Two teens from the troupe, Megan Parker and Alys McAlpine, have also choreographed dances to dramatize the plight of terrorized children in Northern Uganda, who nightly flee to hide from forced recruitment into the Lord's Resistance Army.

Business: An Entrepreneur Creates Economic Opportunity

Milt Kuyers from Milwaukee has stewarded his vocational power to create economic opportunity for African Americans from a distressed inner-city neighborhood. Years ago he became president of Star Sprinkler, a struggling manufacturer of fire protection equipment. Milt already had more than two decades of business experience and was ready for the new challenge of turning a company around. Shortly after, a friend invited him to a conference on microenterprise. There, with several other Christian businesspeople, Milt dialogued late into the night about how God could use them to fight poverty at home and abroad. The conference put a fire in his heart. "For the first time he recognized that his position and skills as a businessperson were gifts from God, entrusted to him for a significant function in God's kingdom."[27]

Milt decided to find an urban ministry partner with whom he could work to provide job opportunities for the unemployed. Several ministries turned him down, suspecting this white "do-gooder." Milt persevered. He met one day with Pastor James Carrington of Light House Gospel Chapel, a small congregation in one of the more dangerous neighborhoods of Milwaukee. He told Carrington of his dream to provide jobs to unemployed church members, who would then be supported and kept accountable by the rest of the congregation. After turning Milt down twice, Carrington finally said yes.

Carrington invited his parishioners to hear Milt out; nineteen showed up for the meeting, wanting jobs. It was "overwhelming," Milt remembers, but he dutifully took down everyone's name. And then God performed a miracle: he sent a huge surge in orders to Star Sprinkler. Milt was able to hire every person on his list. Light House Church rallied behind the newly employed, providing transportation and, later, childcare services. Over time, Carrington and Milt became friends, with the pastor contacting Milt whenever one of the church-member employees was having unusual

difficulties. Eventually, more than one hundred members of the church benefited from this unique partnership.[28] They weren't the only beneficiaries, Milt reports. "I've had more joy in that part of my life than any other time in my work life."[29]

Entertainment: A Comedian Promotes Truth

Professional comedian Carlos Oscar is a salty presence in the entertainment industry. He integrates his faith into his work first by being a clean comic. He doesn't use profanity, and his humor isn't prurient and sexualized. "I think it makes me a more creative person because I don't have to go that route," he says.[30]

Carlos's dream is to land a contract with a television studio for the production of a sitcom starring an Hispanic family, a sort of Latino version of the *The Cosby Show*. He wants to be able to portray family life in a healthy way, where the dad is "silly but not stupid" and where the kids are respectful. "Today," Carlos says, "television tends to show that the kids are in charge, to show the dumb father. . . . Kids look at these shows and they see grownups as just 'in the way' instead of being there to help them get to the next level in life." He wants to push against that trend by offering a truer, more godly version of parent-child relationships. "I believe God wants all of us to go into different areas of the world and to hopefully show some of the values, the Christian values, that we hold dear, because the entertainment industry is a very influential industry."

Government: A Senator Advocates for the Vulnerable

Pia Cayetano, the youngest member of the Philippines Senate and one of only three women in that body, expresses her faith by being an advocate for the vulnerable.[31] Trained as a lawyer, Cayetano first ran for political office in 2004. While in the senate, she has been a consistent voice for the underdog, particularly women, children and senior citizens. She has worked to pass legislation facilitating access by the poor to cheaper prescription medicines, to establish a Food and Drug Administration to promote food safety, and to bar the detention of indigent patients on account of unsettled medical bills.

Cayetano has been a vocal advocate for the protection of women and

children in war-torn areas, particularly against the problem of sexual abuse by peacekeeping forces. As she said in a 2005 interview with the Inter-Parliamentary Union, "There are specific sex crimes that happen to women and children which a lot of people either do not recognize, or just turn a blind eye to. In a lot of areas the situation arises where such crimes are almost tolerated, because men are occupying the field and men have needs. It has to be made known that it is absolutely not acceptable."[32]

Fashion: A Designer Promotes Creation Care

Fashion designer Bora Aksu, a Briton from a Turkish background, made headlines when graduating in 2002 from the prestigious Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design. At its annual fashion show highlighting the work of its MA graduates, Aksu's designs garnered the loudest acclaim. This led to contracts with high-fashion companies like Dolce & Gabbana.[33]

Today the successful designer promotes the kingdom value of creation care through his work. In 2007, Aksu joined People Tree, a leading voice internationally for eco-friendly fashion, as one of their signature designers.[34] From the beginning of his design career, he has made a point of using only natural fabrics—100-percent wool or silk—in his designs. Work with People Tree has enabled Aksu to branch into some new materials. "I was really excited about using People's Tree's handwoven and hand dyed fabrics," he says.[35] Now he will also be designing creations using recycled materials.

Agriculture: A Farmer Promotes Safety in His Industry

Chicken hatchery owner Jacob A. Schenk, a Pennsylvania Mennonite, launched his business at age thirty-two.[36] In multiple ways he worked for institutional transformation in his field. His business practices with vendors and suppliers, for example, were remarkable. Schenk paid above-market prices for the eggs and chickens he bought in order to get the highest-quality products and to ensure good relationships with his suppliers. He even had a policy of profit sharing with his suppliers, giving them bonuses according to how profitable his hatchery had been that year.

Schenk's unconventional practices gained him significant financial

success and great respect from those in his field. He then leveraged his platform to lead his industry in consumer and product safety. Well aware of the devastation that could be caused to farmers by contagious diseases among the livestock, he instituted annual flock-owners meetings, which drew chicken farmers from a wide region. Schenk would bring in special speakers to talk about innovations in ways of preventing disease and controlling its spread when chickens get sick.

Beyond Wearing a WWJD Bracelet

The professionals profiled throughout this chapter demonstrate that it is possible for Christians in the marketplace to go far beyond the traditional ways of connecting faith and work (that is, practicing personal morality and studying the Bible with others in the workplace). Their stories point to several additional arenas where kingdom values can be advanced, such as how employees are selected, treated and managed; how a firm's profits are used; how an organization practices environmental stewardship; how its products are designed; how it relates to others in its industry; and how it contributes to its community. As church leaders encourage their members to wed their faith and work, they should challenge them to ponder this question: "In my current job, am I doing all I can to deploy my vocational power to promote kingdom foretastes? Am I truly blooming where I'm planted?"

But I'm Not the CEO

As church leaders share stories like those in this chapter, they may hear a question from some members: "Those people were high up in their companies. How can I, not being the CEO, really make any difference at my work?"

Fear that one lacks any authority to influence positive change in the workplace is a legitimate concern. The good news that pastors can share, though, is this: even believers with limited authority at their workplaces can be creative about stewarding the level of influence they *do* possess. Specifically, church leaders can respond with the following.

First, they can encourage church members to educate themselves about the working conditions of everyone *below* them in their organization. Believers can strive to develop friendly, respectful relationships with those

workers, learning their names, inquiring about their families. This little step may have more punch than expected. Too often, the lowliest workers in a company can be virtually invisible to those above them. Others fail to acknowledge them, fail to see them. And that's problematic, since Christ-followers should never treat people like furniture.

Church leaders can encourage their parishioners to take time at work to notice the janitor, the woman who empties the trash, the groundskeepers and the folks down in the basement mailroom. They should observe the conditions these employees labor under. They might discover, for instance, that the janitorial staff doesn't have as nice a lounge as do the white-collar workers, or that lower-level employees face overly restrictive rules concerning phone use or break times.

Second, aware of such things, believers in the firm—including those not high up themselves—may be encouraged by church leaders to improve the quality of life for the lowest-level workers in some simple, practical ways. What if, for example, a mid-level Christian employee at a hotel took up a collection from her peers to buy a nice coffee maker, some comfortable chairs and some green plants to fix up the housekeeping staff's break room? That would be a practical way to introduce a little bit of the kingdom foretaste of beauty.

Moreover, regardless of what position a believer holds at the firm, he could start a quiet, intercessory prayer ministry. Step one might be to get a few other believers at the company on board. Step two could be requesting permission to place a prayer box in some common space in the office (a locked box with a slot where index cards—provided next to the box—can be inserted). Employees can be informed that a prayer group has started and that anyone with a prayer request could jot it down on an index card—anonymously if they desire—and put it in the box. Then the intercessory group would open the box once or twice a week and pray for those matters. This would be a tangible demonstration of love for fellow workers.

Third, church leaders should remind their congregants that, in many firms, even employees in the lower echelons can offer suggestions about ways the organization could be more engaged in the community. It could not hurt for a believer to ask for a meeting with the head of the firm's human resources or marketing departments, for example, and propose that the company start a corporate volunteering program.

There is also nothing to stop a small group of believers at an organization from forming their own emergency benevolence fund. They could seed the fund with their own contributions and then invite other employees to contribute. They could also invite participation in a benevolence committee that would be in charge of distributing the funds. To keep things as simple as possible, the committee could outline a limited eligibility—for example, the fund would only help employees in cases of serious medical illness in their immediate family.

Additionally, even employees with modest positions or low seniority can suggest small, doable reforms in terms of the organization's energy and resource use, to inch the firm in a "greener" direction. Such suggestions could include using energy-efficient light bulbs, launching a campaign to help remind all employees to turn off their computers over the weekend, recycling used paper, or encouraging a serious reduction in the use of plastic and paper cups.

Another strategy involves tweaking initiatives that already exist at the company in order to promote the values of equality or opportunity. For example, suppose an organization already has a job-shadowing program or a summer internship program for young people. A Christian employee at the firm could learn who tends to benefit from these initiatives. If the programs largely cater to white, middle-class (or wealthier) kids, the believer could suggest an alternative approach to the program's director. The program could be expanded or redirected in ways that could spread its benefits to young people with greater needs. If the director is open to the suggestion, the Christian employee might volunteer to do some of the legwork in identifying new partners—such as a Christian school in the inner city that is eager to expose its youth to professional careers.

The point is this: congregants need to understand that wherever they are, regardless of their status, they can probably do at least one thing that advances kingdom values like justice or beauty or compassion or economic opportunity or creation care.

What About the Traditional Church Teaching on Work?

Many of the stories in this chapter have something of a "sexy vibe" to them, as my twenty-something friends say. How astonishing it is that Tom

Hill paid his employees to work for Oklahoma City for a year and half; how impressive it is that young Wendy Clark has created not just jobs but a deeply supportive work environment for low-income Latinas who would more typically face grueling labor conditions. As the twenty-somethings would say of these actions: "How cool is *that*!" And these actions are indeed impressive.

In addition to telling these kinds of inspirational success stories, though, there remains a role for church leaders to continue to teach on some less "sexy" familiar topics as they disciple their people for blooming. One is *ethics*. Since the workplace is fallen, there will always be a place for strong teaching from the pulpit on personal holiness on the job. The second is *evangelism*. Church leaders should regularly remind their flocks that the amazingly good news of the good news needs to be shared with our non-believing coworkers. Finally, church leaders should continue emphasizing one other E-word: *excellence*.

Recently I learned that a friend has a malignant brain tumor. Right now, more than anything else, I want her doctor to be *really good* at brain surgery. Right now, I care more about that than I do about whether he offers his services pro bono at the free clinic or if his management style is hierarchical. Similarly, when I'm driving over a long bridge, I trust that the bridge inspector is someone who takes her job very seriously, who is highly competent and vigilant. I want the chemists and engineers at our region's nuclear power plant to be diligent, careful experts in the safe operations of the facility. I want my veterinarian to be on top of the latest research that can help my sick pet. The quiet, faithful, diligent pursuit of excellence in a vocation can be absolutely vital.

Telling stories of excellence may feel less exciting than showcasing the sorts of stories we've looked at here. But every vocational stewardship initiative should be careful to include teaching on this virtue. Indeed, in some cases, given the weight of their individual responsibilities, some believers may need to view excellence as the highest among the kingdom values they are seeking to live by as they bloom for Jesus in their profession.