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Storied Discipleship: Nine Practices for Jesus-Shaped Living

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

PROJECT PORTFOLIO:

STORIED DISCIPLESHIP:

NINE PRACTICES FOR JESUS-SHAPED LIVING



IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY
PORTLAND SEMINARY

BY:

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PROJECT FACULTY:

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PORTLAND, OREGON

FEBRUARY 2023



CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This certifies that the doctoral Project Portfolio of

David Bach

has been approved by
the Evaluation Committee on March 15, 2023
for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Semiotics, Church, and Culture.

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Dedication

This project is dedicated to Lisa, my wife and best friend.
Without the goodness of her soul, sacrificial love, unwavering patience,
timely encouragement and inexhaustible care,
this endeavor would not have come to fruition.
I love you (more) and thank you.

Acknowledgments

Swiss philosopher Henri Frederic Ariel believes thankfulness is the beginning of gratitude and gratitude is the completion of thankfulness. He says thankfulness is mostly expressed in words, but true gratitude is shown in our actions. For now, these words of thanks will have to suffice for the deep gratitude I carry in my soul for the many who have carried me through this project.

Thank you to my family, Lisa, Nicole, Kaelen, and Bryan; words fall short of expressing my love and gratitude for you – you mean the world to me, and your support gave me the strength to press on.

Thank you to ‘The Lost Boys’ peer group, Chris Richardson and Phil Berlin, two friends who made pressing forward in this journey together both possible and a joyful highlight. Thank you to all my colleagues in the ‘Covidian Cohort 19,’ your presence and support through life and ministry transitions have truly been life-giving.

Thank you to Leonard Sweet, the finest lead mentor and friend one could have to inspire new ways of thinking and unique and perceptive ways to see the world and guide the church. Thank you to Mark Chironna, a mentor, friend, and champion of this project. Thank you to the team at Portland Seminary: Loren Kerns, Cliff Berger, Jen McNab, and Heather Rainey for your timely help and encouragement, and of course, your consistent and clear support.

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Thank you to all of you who have prayed, poked, prodded, and applauded.

Epigraph

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord,
continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him,
strengthened in the faith as you were taught,
and overflowing with thankfulness.
Colossians 2:6-7

The Jesus story is a story of creation and created, Creator and creativity.
Leonard Sweet, *I Am a Follower*

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
O what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God.
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.

This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior, all the day long,
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior, all the day long.
~Fanny Crosby~

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Research Method

This Doctoral Project utilized a blended research and design methodology called ‘Collaborative Design for Ministry and Nonprofit Contexts’. In Collaborative Design, practitioners work with stakeholder representatives to address a Need, Problem, or Opportunity (NPO) in their context. Using a combination of bibliographic resources, local knowledge derived from stakeholder Workshops, and an iterative process of continuous adjustment using ‘just enough’ feedback information at each juncture of development, practitioners produce an application-oriented Project that seeks to effect Christ-centered change.

Abstract

This project germinated out of the observation that many evangelical congregations are facing the malaise of a profound lack of true faith formation, which is creating a wide gap between authentic Christ formation and secularization, and is further exacerbated by the genuine blind spot of denial in the minds of Christians that this is problematic. In a distracted and frenzied world, faith formation is becoming less of a priority, which is caused by an inherent bent toward selfish independence. Changing the narrative on these observations would mean Christians prioritize and cultivate their relationship with Jesus Christ, propelling them outwardly towards a selfless interdependence. These observations were made as I peered through the windshield of my ministry context in both a Midwest and West Coast local congregation and farther out into the religious and secular climate of the cultural moment of the years leading up to and through the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic.

Storied Discipleship: Nine Practices for Jesus-Shaped Living is the plant that is beginning to grow from these observations. It was born out of the desire to help distracted people refocus their attention on matters of faith and help them begin developing new and healthier habits in their spiritual formation process. The nine practices articulate that disciples of Jesus will find themselves living a praying, learning, caring, blessing, celebrating, sharing, resting, simplifying, and tending life. Each part of this project is designed to assist disciples in evaluating the story they are living, to be captivated by and trust the Jesus-story, to live the Jesus-story out in ever-increasing ways, and to share the story with others.

Introduction to Research Journey

What you are holding or scrolling through on your device, *Storied Discipleship: Nine Practices for Jesus-shaped Living*, is the evolving product of a journey through vocational observations and educational explorations over the last several years. This project germinated out of the observation that many evangelical congregations are facing the malaise of a profound lack of true faith formation, which is creating a wide gap between authentic Christ formation and secularization, and is further exacerbated by the genuine blind spot of denial in the minds of Christians that this is problematic. In our distracted and frenzied world we live in, faith formation is becoming less of a priority. The unlimited options at our fingertips are cultivating and reinforcing the sinful bent in humanity towards selfish independence.

The Covidian era exposed the shadowy underbelly of negative cultural tendencies that have been mounting over the past several decades. We live in an age of distraction with endless options of for investing our time, attention, and resources. We are being pulled in so many directions and down so many paths that the result is shallowness, not depth, in our relationships and spirituality. The consequences of our distraction are numerous - anxiety, burnout, depression, restlessness, and volatility, to name a few. The allure and whole-scale adoption of fast-paced efficiency is stunting our ability to slow our minds and bodies and truly rest, which is taking a toll on our health and well-being and is damaging our souls. My observations of Christians over the past five years led me to believe that the Church's efforts in discipleship, while many, have been anemic and ineffective in developing deeply rooted Christian character to help them weather the storms of life. This left me wondering if discipleship has become an optional piece of following Jesus in the minds of modern believers.

Watching fellow brothers and sisters in Christ struggling and blowing in the winds of the political, social, and pandemic turbulence of the past several years weighed heavily on my soul. Why are Christians not setting an example by living the Jesus-story? Why are Christians succumbing to the winds and waves of anger and frustration and not modeling how Jesus would respond to difficulty and adversity? I noticed the discrepancy between victorious living in Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit and how Christians were living defeated lives with little distinguishable difference from the world. Did we need to go through this season to expose failed discipleship models of the last half-century? I was impressed with the belief that there is a better way, a greater story to get caught up in - the Jesus-story. During the COVID lockdowns, I enrolled in Portland Seminary, specifically the Semiotics, Church, and Culture Doctor of Ministry track with Leonard Sweet. This launched me into a season of growth as I began to think about these things through the lens of semiotics and how this moment could be interpreted and addressed to help the Church. My desire throughout this research journey has been to provide a means of flipping the script on these tendencies in the life of Christians, to help them prioritize and cultivate their relationship with Jesus Christ, which will propel them outwardly towards a selfless interdependence.

Discover

When this journey began, I was pastoring a medium-sized church in a small town in Western Washington that is mostly rural but has easy access to the urban sprawl of Seattle to the north and Portland, OR to the south. The people in this community are 'rugged individualists' bent on forging their way through life. Deeply immersed in this kind of thinking, the people of faith often struggle between living their faith in Christ and living in the secularization around them.

Even before gathering a group of people to help me think through the issue at hand, I had started with the notion that to grow the church of tomorrow, you first had to grow 'bigger' Christians, yet in this time of infinite options and endless distractions, faith formation is growing less and less of a priority. Faith formation is not an instant thing; rather, it is a long slow process, which left me with the question: How do you encourage patience, persistence, and depth of Christ formation? At the outset of the discovery phase, my initial thoughts surrounding my NPO were to research and produce a tool to help professing Christians prioritize their faith and grow deeper in their relationship with Jesus Christ. I desired to offer something that would encourage growing roots to provide strength to withstand and survive the crises of life, and as this happens, would help the church grow and be a more authentic and faithful witness in the world.

Everyone who participated in the discovery workshop, an age- and vocationally-diverse group of people, personally identified with the NPO statement and notion that the lack of faith formation is an issue both personally and communally with far-reaching consequences. From a personal perspective, people seem too busy to prioritize their relationship with God due largely to the many options available to fill our time. When one's faith fits alongside everything else in life, it tends to get watered down and become superficial. When this happens, the tendency is that a Christian's life does not look perceivably different than that of a non-believer. As the camera lens widens, the church and its witness come into view. If the church is full of superficial believers, it will appear to be filled with hypocrites and will likely be inwardly focused, thereby compromising its impact on the world.

Our conversation was lively, rich, and exposing. At the end of the discovery workshop, we concluded the root cause of unprioritized faith formation is an attitude of selfish independence. Our cultural climate feeds this human tendency towards selfish independence because we are constantly told we can decide what is best for ourselves, picking and choosing from the many sources we think we need to customize our faith journey. As a result, this endless stream of content can sow confusion and discontentment in our minds leading to a smorgasbord approach to our faith. While this approach will fill you with many things, good and bad, it tends to make you grow superficially wider, not deeper. Our culture heavily pushes this selfish independence because many no longer see their faith as a relationship with Jesus or other believers but as just another activity or task on the list of options. This individualization has devastating effects on the church community, as each believer is conditioned to want a different 'personal' experience. Further, this inward focus blinds us to the needs of our world.

At the conclusion of the discovery phase, I was left with this summary to guide my research and thought. When considering professing Christians, we discovered that faith formation is becoming less of a priority, which we believe is caused by an inherent bent toward selfish independence. However, we believe there is hope to change this tide and a solution that would see people prioritizing and cultivating their relationship with Jesus Christ, propelling them toward a selfless interdependence. In addition, the church would begin to look more like Jesus, naturally wanting to go where Jesus goes and do what Jesus does.

Design

Discipleship is such a broad topic with many facets to consider; the challenge of my research and design was choosing a path forward. As I proceeded, I was convinced any solution needed to be relational in nature, instead of one more offering in the crowded field of activity-based programming. What I was driving towards, but not yet able to articulate, was that the solution needed to be story-driven. During the early stages, I narrowed my focus to producing something specifically designed for pastors and other ministry leaders to help lay church leaders grow deeper in their walks with Christ. Effective spiritual leadership is unlikely to come from 'distracted' or 'underdeveloped' leaders and is more likely to happen through disciples already living the Jesus-story. However, I kept receiving feedback from stakeholders, colleagues, and friends that this NPO was so far-reaching that I ought to think bigger and design something that would reach a larger audience. As this story unfolds, the impact of this feedback is important, and my project has grown significantly from my initial outline.

Just before I launched into the design phase, I had a huge change in my context, ultimately impacting my project. My ministry shifted from the largely unchurched Pacific Northwest to the religiously saturated Midwest. I was called to pastor a church in Racine, Wisconsin, and we made the move in the summer of 2021. This church is located in Southeast Wisconsin in a community of nearly 200,000 people; it sits between Milwaukee, WI, and Chicago, IL. Racine is diverse demographically, including an eclectic mix of small-town farmers, suburban commuters, and urban city-dwellers. This warm and friendly Midwest community is well-versed in 'church,' albeit an expression of faith culturally assumed, not necessarily lived. People in the Pacific Northwest who did not believe in God or have an interest in the church were upfront and frank about their beliefs; I appreciated this kind of honesty because it did not leave any room for wondering. In the Midwest, many people profess Christianity and church affiliation but are effectively disconnected and inactive. I've found it easier to deal with professed atheism than practical atheism (professing faith but not living it).

To begin my design workshop, I needed to spend considerable time bringing my new group up to speed on my research and project ideas. All participants quickly caught on and readily affirmed my working NPO – that Christians were struggling with distractions and their faith formation was suffering. The agenda for this workshop included the following sessions: 1) Identify specific distractions people deal with and how those impact productivity and, more importantly, their faith formation. The second part of the exercise focused on how 'solving' the distraction problem, or

reducing our susceptibility to distractions, would help us become better persons and leaders. 2) Discuss the essentials of Christian discipleship. 3) The final session took the bulk of our time, we attempted to discover ways to increase focus by removing distractions. Our session ended with discussing potential development models for faith formation in individuals and congregational settings.

After completing the design workshop and coming to some clarity on what a solution might look like, at least in theory, I worked on building three prototypes to help Christian leaders prioritize their faith, develop in 'underdeveloped' areas of their faith, and grow deeper in their relationship with Jesus Christ. The project goal is to create a model for pastors to use in discipling leaders within their congregations inspiring growth and cultivating depth in their relationship with Christ so these leaders can be more effective in offering spiritual leadership within the congregation and be more effective disciple-makers.

My prototypes focused heavily on the spiritual disciplines (e.g. praying, studying the Bible, worshipping, serving others, etc) necessary for faith formation. The challenge was to craft a model that invites participation to go deeper with God and one another as believers in a way that does not just add 'one more thing' to leaders who may already feel overburdened. My working solution attempted to operate within this tension of time by utilizing their already scheduled time and re-shaping it to foster development and growth, inspire people to form new habits and lay aside the distractions of life to become more fully devoted followers and more fully developed spiritual leaders. The three prototypes and how I tested them are as follows:

- 1) Create a sermon series and corresponding all-church interactive study on the essentials of Christian discipleship, which would work at reaching a wider audience, including church leaders, and collectively address matters of faith formation. In January 2022, I wrote a sermon series and small group study on the practice of prayer entitled "Prayer: Learning to Pray by Praying." This simple discipline is often overlooked or minimized due to the rapid pace of life and overly full schedules. In pastoral conversations through the years, one recurring theme is that most people pray, at least sometimes, but also that very few people report being satisfied with their prayer lives. The consensus of the congregation was that this series was both needed and helpful, eliciting comments that their prayer lives had grown deeper and more meaningful.
- 2) Create a series of retreats with curated content on faith formation in leaders that reached them directly and utilized retreat times already calendared. An opportunity arose through a conversation with a mentor to lead a seminar for twelve church boards on the Washington Pacific District Church of the Nazarene. Coming out of the pandemic, two full years of reduced ministry for many churches was devastating. We noticed discouragement settling in and difficulty re-engaging in ministry. The pandemic took a toll on community discipleship, and we were looking for a way to re-ignite creativity and help church leadership teams discover the abundance of resources God has given each of them. A part of discipleship is noticing where God is at work and moving, and then figuring out ways to

connect with that work; this workshop was specifically designed to identify where God was at work, notice specific needs within communities, and catalog resources God has already entrusted to our care that can be positioned and utilized for missional purposes. Judging by participants' comments, this workshop achieved its goal by generating new ideas and excitement for ministry and by helping them see how we are formed together in Christ. Several attendees went out of their way to tell me they felt discouraged before the seminar and were leaving with renewed hope and fresh perspective on new ministry ideas. Two district leaders commented that the mood shifted, and they sensed a new excitement and enthusiasm in these churches as they looked toward ministry together in the future. Perhaps the most telling comments for me were the ones related to feeling closer to God and more connected to their brothers and sisters in Christ.

- 3) Design a 2-year cycle of development material for church boards and leadership teams; such materials would be used to open leadership team meetings to focus on faith-formation topics together. To test this model, I began writing and using devotionals to open leadership team meetings specifically tailored to encourage depth in discipleship and form new habits in our faith development together. The focus of this testing was on prayer. We began each meeting with 30 minutes of discussion and prayer together. My hypothesis that setting the tone with prayer and spiritual matters would lead to more focused and efficient work on administrative matters was confirmed.

In each feedback session with stakeholders, pastoral colleagues, denominational leaders, and those involved in the testing groups, there was a desire for more. The project model should be designed to reach a larger audience. The results in all three prototypes were positive; so I expanded my target group and built my most valuable prototype as a hybrid model, which included a 2-year cycle of development material for church boards and leadership teams, plans to repurpose board retreats, and create an introductory sermon series and small group study. The last piece that would clarify itself in the coming months was a coaching component based on my research on habit formation and the necessity of accountability in this process.

Deliver

Leading into the project delivery phase, I sharpened my NPO statement to highlight the harmful effect congregations were facing due to the lack of faith formation in believers and to expose the fact that the lack of authentic faith formation is a blind spot for many Christians, as there is denial that it is a problem for them. During these months, I continued asking questions, experimenting with models and materials, and listening to critical feedback. As I sat with my work and looked out at the state of Christianity, in my context and beyond, and prayed over this project, I was overwhelmed with the notion that true discipleship ought to be telling people about the ongoing story of God. My eyes told me people were trying to live their own story with a little bit of Jesus sprinkled on top, and my heart told me to work on a model that helped people change their allegiance and begin living the Jesus-story.

Storied Discipleship: Nine Practices for Jesus-Shaped Living is the plant that is beginning to grow from all my observations, studies, and conversations. It was born out of the desire to help distracted people refocus their attention on matters of faith and help them begin developing new and healthier habits in their spiritual formation process. The nine practices articulate that a disciple of Jesus will live a praying, learning, caring, blessing, celebrating, sharing, resting, simplifying, and tending life. This project has six parts:¹ a cycle of devotionals for church leadership teams; an introductory sermon series for *Storied Discipleship* on the nine practices; a podcast and blog for digitally accessible materials; a website to function as the hub for the whole project; a personal coaching and assessment model; and at some point in the future, writing the book on *Storied Discipleship*. Each part of this project is designed to help disciples know the story of Jesus, live the story, and share the story with others.

As I evaluate this emerging project launch, I will be using the following six benchmarks:

- 1) I would like to see eight small groups within my local church work through the *Storied Discipleship* series in the Fall of 2023
- 2) I would like to have 50 people subscribe to my podcast after its launch by the end of 2023
- 3) I would like to have 10 pastoral colleagues commit to using the board leadership materials by the end of 2023
- 4) I would like to have 5 pastoral colleagues commit to using the *Storied Discipleship* sermon series by the end of 2024
- 5) I would like to have two districts in the Church of the Nazarene commit to using my project as a model for church board development during the first year of project launch
- 6) I would like to have a high-quality production of materials, website, and podcast.

The numeric benchmarks will be easy to measure. However, more importantly, I will have personal conversations with those engaging in my work to gain helpful insights and critical feedback so I can adjust and create materials that will reach the intended audience and help them. As this project is being launched within my congregation as a pilot, I have had significant feedback. The sermons

¹ By nature, discipleship is a very broad and all-encompassing topic. As alluded to earlier, my initial goal and attempt was to create a narrowly defined project in the wide field of discipleship that was specifically designed to help pastors model, teach, and encourage depth in faith formation in their lay leaders. This was born out of the idea that people of spiritual depth will provide better spiritual leadership within a congregational setting. As I discussed this with my peers, workshop participants, mentors, and denominational leaders within the Church of the Nazarene, the overwhelming feedback was to widen the project, and develop *Storied Discipleship* into something that would be accessible to pastors, ministry leaders, and lay people. Therefore, this project has grown in scope to provide multiple access points at a variety of levels to the materials created.

series on *Storied Discipleship* that I began in January of 2023 has gained significant traction and positive comments and is inspiring people to join groups to discuss and go deeper.

What is presented in this project is just scratching the surface, and there is so much more to continue working on and offering. My long-term objectives are to re-tool what has been produced for my local congregation for public distribution. The materials generated in this project will need to be distilled down to their main points, teaching content, and suggestions for adding personal stories and illustrations, which will make it easier for other pastors and leaders to use. The timeframes I have given myself are workable and give me the space to launch the website, podcast, blog, and prepare professionally designed printed and electronic content in a timely fashion. Additional work on the coaching model is critical, as this whole project is predicated more on the process and habit formation than on the specific content. Content matters for sure, but the practice and habituation of it is crucial in faith formation. Part six was a late addition, as I had tabled the idea of writing a book early, instead desiring to provide more widely accessible material through digital means. However, based on feedback and encouragement, I will work on writing and publishing a book on the story, research, and theory behind each of the nine practices outlined in *Storied Discipleship*.

Experience and Next Steps

This has been a rigorous, time-consuming, sometimes exhausting, and frustrating experience that I would not trade for anything. My personal growth has been significant. I found, in studying authentic Christ formation in the life of a believer, some areas of my discipleship were deficient and blind spots to me. If I am going to write, preach, teach, and nudge others along in their faith formation, I certainly ought to pay attention to my own.

As with any journey, there are obstacles and challenges to overcome; the most significant one was moving across the country. Moving is difficult enough logistically, uprooting relationships, developing new friendships, learning new streets and grocery stores, and more. I faced the added challenge of learning a new ministry context in relation to my studies and how my initial research and work fit into this new dynamic. In the end, even with the extra work required, my project is stronger for overcoming this terrain of change because it forced me to expand my thinking to consider new contexts.

The second huge setback for me was the death of one of my dear friends and mentors, who also happened to serve as my district superintendent. He has been behind my work ever since my first conversation with him about it, and he always offered timely encouragement and pointed feedback to help sharpen my thinking and writing. He planned to use my project on a district-wide initiative to help local pastors develop their boards through intentional discipleship. This project is but a drop in the bucket of importance compared to my friend's life, yet it will be impacted. Not in the development or completion but in the benchmarks for distribution I have set in place. Launching this project within my district of churches will be significantly delayed, at the very least, and perhaps not at all, at the very worst. Much will depend upon new leadership appointments, which will not

happen until mid-2023. Given this outlook, I must cultivate new frontiers for launching Storied Discipleship in two districts within the Church of the Nazarene in 2023.

I have constantly battled myself that I am working on a project that is too large, yet in my conversations, I have been encouraged to tackle it. Spiritual formation, Christ formation, discipleship – whatever your preferred way of talking about it – is a vast topic, one that is the prime directive of Jesus, “Go make disciples.” With the volume of work out there, I know gaps and shortcomings in my thinking will be uncovered along the way, which is motivation to keep exploring, reading, thinking, and praying. Given the nature of websites, blogs, and podcasts, as new learning happens, I will be able to share in real time with my audience. This will keep this project fresh in my mind, and I will be engaged with it long after graduation; this is only the beginning.

As I explored what else is available to encourage faith formation, I mostly came across what I place in the category of programmatic approaches for pastors to adopt and use in their context – a series, study, or book that promises results in creating devoted disciples. There is no shortage of content out there, but does it really encourage people to change their narrative, or does it just make them feel good about checking the ‘Jesus’ box off their never-ending ‘to-do’ lists? Simply encouraging religious behavior does not guarantee one becomes a true disciple. This is no indictment on the content of said materials, but I view many of them as playing into the cultural demand for an instant solution and quick fix. I am encouraged by increased writing and conversation focused on habit formation, which I believe will be key in my work and take us back to spiritual disciplines.

Final Thoughts

During the Covid-19 pandemic, we were Cohort 19; the irony is not lost on me, nor are the disappointments that this would mean. Our cohort’s experience was unique and ‘not as advertised.’ From the beginning, our first group meeting was moved from in-person format to online. As good as technology has become, online meetings will never replicate the same relational experience as face-to-face, flesh-and-blood meetings. Then the featured trip to Cambridge, England, was canceled, which was disappointing for sure. Fortunately, we were able to meet in person for the first at another location. Being together was wonderful and led me to identify my fellow sojourners and leaders as the greatest joy in this experience. The support through life and ministry transitions, social unrest, and political turmoil has truly been life-giving to me, an outlet for conversation and a weekly respite for my soul! Simply saying thank you to Dr. Sweet, Dr. Chironna, Cohort 19, the wonderful leaders at Portland Seminary, and especially my peer group fellows, Chris Richardson and Phil Berlin does not seem quite enough, for words will never express my genuine gratitude for them.

Already I can see evidence that this academic journey is paying dividends in my own life and also in the life of my congregation. With the help and leading of the Holy Spirit, I feel more equipped and prepared to lead the Church into the future. Keeping my eye on the signs of our times, I am grateful for the opportunity to learn how to interpret what they mean and how we might better prepare and align our ministry now and into the future.

My prayer for this project is that it will help disciples truly be disciples who live Jesus-storied and Jesus-shaped lives – Christians who go where Jesus goes, and do what Jesus does. In my mind's eye, we need *Storied Discipleship*. As we see Jesus practicing a life of praying, learning, caring, blessing, celebrating, sharing, resting, simplifying, and tending, how much more should we?

Doctoral Project

Introduction to the Project

My first college major was music education, but after a few semesters, I gave up because I did not invest enough time in learning to play the piano. I could identify all the notes and play with one hand or the other, but I failed at putting them together simply because I needed to practice the core exercises more. Have you ever quit something because you needed to invest more time in the basics of making it work, or found yourself settling for something less than your intended goal? People often experience this at the turn of each calendar year when they make New Year's resolutions to 'get healthy' and exercise more, but quickly fall away when the hard work gets the best of them.

Core exercises are the worst culprit in causing people to quit. I'm not just talking about sit-ups or crunches to get the 'six-pack abs.' Your core is not just your abs; your core is made up of all the muscles in the center of your body. Think of your muscles forming a strong column connecting your upper and lower body. Any movement you make - standing, lifting, running, sitting - begins in or flows through your core. Your balance, stability, and posture all come from your core muscles. When you're on a bumpy car ride, your core holds you up. When you put your shoes on, your core muscles help you bend over and get back up. *Harvard Health* published an article on the real-world benefits of strengthening your core, observing that wherever motion begins in your body, "it ripples upward and downward"² through your core. If you have weak or inflexible core muscles, you may have difficulty moving other parts of your body. If your core is weak, it saps power from many of the moves you make.³ So, if you work on building up your core strength and flexibility, it will help crank up your power, giving you a solid baseline for almost everything you do.

I have spoken with several personal trainers; they are all consistent in telling me people resist working out their core - easily confirmed by a quick perusal of the gym. You will observe lots of people on treadmills, ellipticals, resistance machines, and free weights - and these are good elements to include in an exercise regimen - but when you look at the machines to work out the core muscles, they are often empty and lonely.

Of course, a few are diligent and disciplined and recognize that having a strong core greatly increases their balance, stability, and strength to stand up, move, and carry weight. Your life as a follower of Jesus is very similar. You must exercise your spiritual core. You need to have a strong center to stand up under the pressures and burdens of this world. Without authentic Christ-formation, we risk being crushed by the crippling weight of secularization, consumerism, and the infinite distractions we face throughout life.

² "The Real World Benefits of Strengthening Your Core," Harvard Health Publishing, accessed January 31, 2023. <https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/the-real-world-benefits-of-strengthening-your-core>.

³ Harvard Health, "Real World Benefits."

I don't enjoy working out my core muscles. It's hard, it hurts, and requires patience because it takes a long time, but in the end, the results remind me the endeavor is worthwhile. Spiritual exercise can be every bit as challenging, but like physical exercise, if it doesn't hurt, stretch, or inconvenience you, it's probably not doing you any good. Jesus often prompted his disciples to do things that stretched them physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, and he asks the same of us. He challenged them to live a new narrative, his narrative, and to switch allegiances from living their own story to his. What they needed was a new set of exercises and habits. If we are to change how we live and take up the Jesus-story, we must change our habits. This project is a journey in learning to live the Jesus-story through Christ-formation in us, which, at its core, is habit formation.

In his book, *Change or Die*, Alan Deutschman poses the question of whether or not we could change if a well-informed authority figure told us we needed to make some difficult choices and changes in the way we think, feel, and act, or else our time would soon end. Given the set-up of the question, most people would quickly say, "Yes, of course, I could change." Yet, experts who have studied this in-depth think otherwise and suggest the odds of you changing are stacked against you.⁴ Our world says we can take power over change by taking a rational approach, believing that facts will convince us to change. If we learn enough facts, that ought to compel us to make changes, but Deutschman says it doesn't work this way. Nine out of ten heart patients didn't change their way of living even when their doctors told them what they needed to do to prolong their lives.⁵ We can know and be certain of things in our head, but if that information does not permeate our entire being and work its way into our 'heart,' our motivational center, we will not change. Change is hard, partly because it is difficult to admit we are wrong and going in the wrong direction; it is much easier to stay in the ruts we have created for ourselves.

Deutschman proposes three Rs: Relate, Repeat, and Reframe, as the 'Keys to Change.' To relate is to form a new, emotional relationship with someone or a community that inspires and helps you sustain hope for something better. This new relationship helps you learn and practice new habits for better living, and this repetition within the community is critical for success. Finally, these new relationships help you learn new ways of thinking about your situation and life. "You look at the world in a way that would have been so foreign to you that it wouldn't have made any sense before you changed."⁶ This book has nothing to do with Christianity and at the same time, has everything to do with it. Jesus comes to call us out of an old way of living and into a new one. He calls us out of our sin and challenges us to repent and start living in a new direction and in a new community.

⁴ Alan Deutschman. *Change or Die: The Three Keys to Change at Work and Life* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 1-2.

⁵ Deutschman, *Change or Die*, 10.

⁶ Deutschman, *Change or Die*, 15.

He says, in a very gracious way, you must 'change or die.' Believe in me; I'm the way, the truth, and the life; I will connect you to God. You can trust me, and I will help you begin living my story.

The communal aspect of our faith formation is vital and an essential part of this project. Author James K.A. Smith believes "discipleship needs to be centered in and fueled by our immersion in the body of Christ."⁷ Not only do we learn the Jesus-story together, but as my teacher Leonard Sweet says, we discover "our identity in Christ when we sit at his table and dine with him, and with our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ."⁸ Discipleship is finding our place in the ongoing story and beginning to live out the Jesus-story in every facet and moment of our lives. Certainly, this involves developing healthy habits that I believe we can discover as we explore the story. Sweet believes "Christian identity formation is a *process* of soul-making that comes through story shaping."⁹ As we take up 3D residence in the Jesus-story, we become aware of what I am calling the nine core essentials of Christian discipleship.

This project does not contain magical thinking, rather it focuses on the small, intentional steps we need to take to switch our habits and live a new narrative. Author James Clear says this kind of change is difficult because "We often dismiss small changes because they don't seem to matter very much in the moment...We make a few changes, but the results never seem to come quickly and so we slide back into our previous routines."¹⁰ This project suggests small steps, opportunities, and practices to help effect lasting change in concert with the transformational work of the Spirit. The goal is to start the conversation, practice new spiritual rhythms and habits, and encourage people to create a rule of life around the Jesus-story, attending to how they live each of the nine practices offered in this work.

Leonard Sweet often passionately reminds his students that "Authority is authorship, and that whoever or whatever you allow to author your story is your authority."¹¹ We live in an image-driven culture that is fixated on authority and identity, one that responds to narrative over propositions. What is at stake is the authorship of our lives. To whom or what will we give ourselves over and

⁷ James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), xi.

⁸ Leonard Sweet, *From Tablet to Table: Where Community Is Found and Identity Is Formed* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2014), 15, and on 47 when he writes "Jesus gave his disciples a 'storied identity.'"

⁹ Sweet, *From Tablet to Table*, 57-58.

¹⁰ James Clear, *Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2019), 17.

¹¹ Leonard Sweet, Portland Seminary Doctor of Ministry in Semiotics, Church and Culture, Cohort 19 Lecture Notes, September 28, 2020.

grant authorship rights of our story? Jesus claimed that “all authority has been given to me,”¹² which is a powerful statement, one we need to wrestle with and come to terms with in our lives and our faith. Do we insist on personal autonomy and autobiography, or will we bow our will to Jesus as “the author and finisher of our faith?”¹³ Will we trust Jesus and submit to him, granting him authorship rights and thereby giving him complete authority in and over our lives?

Countless storylines exist in the world, and people are often drawn to the ones with the most eye appeal and the narratives that provide the most opportunity to rise in status. My mentor Mark Chironna notices that people prefer entertainment instead of being spiritually formed in Christ.¹⁴ Seeking things purely for entertainment will lead to distraction from a greater purpose. When we are given to bouncing between the options available, it will lead to constant shifts in focus and direction and will push us away from things that are slower, more cumbersome, and require patient effort and perseverance. As will be addressed throughout this work, we are floundering in distractions that undermine true faith formation in Christ-followers. Bob Goff rightly believes “The way to beat distraction is to become captivated by something much bigger and much better.”¹⁵ For story-driven people who are struggling with faith formation, and for those in our world who are stumbling around lost, the only way to effect change is to present a new narrative, which is really an ancient-current-future narrative, the Jesus narrative.

Leonard Sweet says, “You can trust the (Jesus) story.”¹⁶ A good story produces altering moments that affect some sort of change or response in the participant. *Stored Discipleship: Nine Practices for Jesus-shaped Living* is designed to help you and those you lead and coach to trust the Jesus-story, receive the Jesus-story, live the Jesus-story, and share the Jesus-story. If discipleship is the formation of Christ in us, then we must know and trust the Jesus-story, intentionally find our place within it and learn what it means to live a Jesus-shaped life.

¹² See Matthew 28:18.

¹³ Hebrews 12:2 NKJV.

¹⁴ Mark Chironna, Webinar on the Psychology of Language, February 2021.

¹⁵ Bob Goff, *Undistracted: Capture Your Purpose Rediscover Your Joy* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2022), 9.

¹⁶ Leonard Sweet, Portland Seminary Doctor of Ministry in Semiotics, Church and Culture, Cohort 19 Lecture Notes, October 19, 2020.



FIGURE 1: CIRCLE OF NINE PRACTICES

Before defining the nine practices for Jesus-shaped living, I want to elaborate on the infographic in Figure 1, which pictures how the nine practices relate to one another and function in our faith formation. The outermost circle shows the cycle of breathing, inhaling and exhaling, one of life's necessary, basic functions. Parts of our faith journey fall into both categories. Our spiritual formation is rhythmic; it's a breathing exercise. In the infographic, some of the practices are exercises in breathing in God, which fills and empowers us to live out the Jesus-life. Some of the practices are characterized as exhaling and working out our Christ-formation in daily living. In John 20:21, when Jesus appeared to the disciples after his resurrection, he said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." Then in verse 22, he breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." With His peace and empowerment of the Spirit, they are commissioned to go live the Jesus-story, work out their faith in the world, and continue his ministry and bear fruit. They must inhale Jesus before they exhale his love and life to others. The same is true for us; we inhale the Spirit and exhale, living the Jesus-life.

Some of the practices are like breathing in; some are like breathing out. You can't just breathe in and hold your breath; you must exhale and inhale again. Learning, praying, resting, and simplifying

are all inhaling exercises. Caring, blessing, and sharing are exhaling. Celebrating and tending are both transitional in nature and function as inhaling and exhaling.

The infographic flows in the direction of breathing in the outer circle. The inner circle is divided into nine parts, each containing one of the practices. The second or middle circle splits the nine practices of the inner core into three directions of focus: upward, inward, and outward. This follows the pattern observed when Jesus says, "Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence.' This is the most important, the first on any list. But there is a second to set alongside it: 'Love others as well as you love yourself.' These two commands are pegs; everything in God's Law and the Prophets hangs from them."¹⁷ We start with God in the practices of praying, learning, and celebrating; then move into the interior parts in the practices of resting, simplifying, and tending, and then outward to others in the practices of caring, blessing, and sharing. I acknowledge that the category boundaries are blurry, and a case can be made that these practices are multi-dimensional, and I do not disagree. Evaluation of the general trajectory of each practice led to my choices to help think through how these practices impact spiritual formation.

Here then, are the definitions of the nine core essentials of Christian discipleship, each helping us grow and strengthen our spiritual core and helping form us into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

Practice One: Praying

The *practice of praying* is talking and listening to God personally and communally. Praying is a time of breathing in the Holy Spirit; it is an exercise in thanking God for his presence and blessings; it is an open conduit for confessing sin and being honest with him, and an opportunity to submit our will to his, seeking his will be done on earth in our lives as it is in heaven.

Praying is an *inhaling* practice as we open our hearts and minds and breathe in what God has for us. Praying takes us upward toward our Heavenly Father. Secondly, praying connects us with other believers, as together, we seek God's guidance, will, comfort, healing, and strength.

Practice Two: Learning

The *practice of learning* is a lifelong pursuit of engaging one's mind and time spent studying God's Word regularly: meditating upon it, memorizing it, and feasting on it, expecting the Holy Spirit to offer new and fresh insights. The learning life is not only personal in nature; we learn in community by sharing and teaching what we have learned with others.

Learning is an inhaling practice; it is feasting on the word of God to nourish our souls. Learning takes us upward into the wisdom and teaching of God and exposes us to his love and grace.

¹⁷ Matthew 22:37-40 MSG.

Secondarily, learning connects the body of Christ as we share in it together, spurring on one another.

Practice Three: Caring

The *practice of caring* is enjoying soul friendship, being knit together with other believers in unity with the Spirit. Caring is loving others as Christ loves us and forgiving others as Christ forgives us. The practice of caring encourages depth of relationship; it is an embracing and welcoming of all the people God places in our circles of influence and leads one into a life of compassion, mercy, fellowship, and hospitality.

Caring is an *exhaling* practice. As we give of ourselves to be in community with one another, we love and forgive as Jesus does. Caring is outwardly focused on the other person in front of us.

Practice Four: Blessing

The *practice of blessing* is serving others in the name of Jesus. It challenges us to be doers of the Word and not simply hearers of it. As God gives us his vision for people, living the blessing life is living the giving life, and it opens our hearts to meet others' needs. Living the blessing life is also living the encouraging life, looking for ways to build others up, inspiring them with the hope of Jesus, and reminding them that they are one of God's beloved children.

Blessing is an *exhaling* practice as we work out our salvation by putting what we hear it into practice. Blessing is outwardly focused as we serve and encourage others.

Practice Five: Celebrating

The *practice of celebrating* is worshiping and glorifying God in every facet of life. The celebrating life is learning to see God and express our joy in his presence as we move through life. Celebrating also draws us into the community of believers to join our hearts and voices in worship, praise, and thanksgiving to our Creator, Lord, and Savior, delighting in God's presence as one.

Celebrating is both *inhaling* and *exhaling*, in that, through our worship, we seek to experience or inhale God, and at the same time, we exhale our praise and offer all of ourselves to him. Celebrating is a multi-dimensional practice, as it takes us upward toward God, inward as we soak in the joy of God's presence, and outward as we worship together in the community of believers.

Practice Six: Sharing

The *practice of sharing* is being a witness for Christ, sharing your story of how Jesus has made a difference in your life, and is in the process of transforming you. Sharing is fulfilling Jesus' prime directive to go into all the world, sharing the good news of Jesus with people, and inviting them into a life of discipleship.

Sharing is an *exhaling* practice that inspires us to be witnesses for Jesus in the circles we travel by the way we live and the words we speak. Sharing is outwardly focused as we seek to fulfill Jesus' command to 'go and make disciples' by interacting with others.

Practice Seven: Resting

The *practice of resting* is acknowledging our physical, emotional, and spiritual limitations and taking time to refresh in God's presence. The resting life is learning the discipline of slowing down in the midst of a chaotic and hurried world and learning to practice sabbath as a means of connecting with God and allowing him to recharge us in the places where we have grown weary.

Resting is an *inhaling* practice that helps quiet our hearts and slow our bodies so we can refuel and refresh - spiritually and physically. Resting is an inward discipline; it is a very intentional choice we must make to enter times of silence and solitude.

Practice Eight: Simplifying

The *practice of simplifying* is living simply and creating space for God by setting aside other things that have cluttered our lives. The simplifying life is the unplugging-and-the-untangling life, which allows us to be more fully present to God and others. Learning the simplifying life includes fasting and the loosening of our attachments to things and structures in such a way that frees us from distractions and allows us to live a life of feasting and depending on God.

Simplifying is an *inhaling* practice that encourages us to remove things that distract our attention from God. Simplifying is inwardly focused, helping us examine and lay aside everything we have propped up in our lives that give us a false sense of security. Secondly, simplifying is *exhaling* because it encourages us to work at removing things clogging the conduit between God and us.

Practice Nine: Tending

The *practice of tending* is attending to all of God's creation; it is honoring God by fulfilling our assigned work of tending the garden and being good stewards of all God has entrusted to our care. The tending life is the exercising-and-eating-right life, the playing life, the participating-with-God-in-creating life, and the child-like-'faithing' life.

Tending is a transitional practice and can be characterized by inhaling, in that it leads us to care for our bodies through healthy eating habits, exercise, and play. It can also be characterized by exhaling, in that it leads us to work at caring for all God's creation. It is an *inward* discipline, focusing on personal needs for a healthy body, and it is *outward*, urging us to be good stewards of the world in which we live.

Given time, much more could be written about each of these practices and how they interrelate with one another, and as this project unfolds in the future, more will be discovered and shared through the means and mechanisms of this project.

One final note as we move into the body of the project: my experience has always been on the practical side of ministry, and so much of this work is not new and groundbreaking, rather it is a representation of how I believe disciples of Jesus can grow deeper in their faith and begin thinking of their life with Jesus as living his story. The processes and practices are the keys to moving forward and deeper in faith. Yes, content is important, but it is ever-changing and expanding. This project includes helpful contextual content curated in a specific time and place for specific people, and so it speaks into their lives. This project is written with the end user in mind and in a language and style that is accessible to the average disciple of Jesus. Everything contained in this project has been field-tested in a congregational setting, within small groups, leadership teams, and in the personal daily lives of Jesus followers. Perhaps it is helpful to you, but what I desire is that this project sets the framework for process and practice development and that new and lasting habits can be formed around the nine practices of praying, learning, caring, blessing, celebrating, sharing, resting, simplifying, and tending, that we see imaged for us in the life of Jesus. After decades of programmatic endeavors in discipleship training, *Storied Discipleship* seeks to move the conversation away from principle-based curriculums to knowing and living the story of Jesus. This is not a 'check the box' program; it is narrative living - it is what I am calling *Storied Discipleship*.

This project has six parts:

- 1) A cycle of devotionals for church leadership teams;
- 2) An introductory sermon series for *Storied Discipleship* on the nine practices of Jesus-shaped living
- 3) A podcast and blog for digitally accessible materials
- 4) A website to function as the hub for the whole project
- 5) A personal coaching and assessment model
- 6) Writing the book on *Storied Discipleship* at some point in the future

As you partner with the Holy Spirit in this work of the core essentials, my prayer is that you will grow deeper in your walk with Jesus, find refreshment for your soul, and grow in resilience and endurance through a newfound strength, reaping a great crop of the fruit of the Spirit.

Part One: Cycle of Devotionals for Church Leadership Teams

My observation has been that the modern church may be stunting people's growth in faith by an (over)emphasis on programmatic pedagogy designed to fill believers with the correct content and do so in a short series format. I truly believe the motive has been noble in these discipleship efforts, and what we are seeing and experiencing are the unintended consequences of such models. Discipleship is not encouraged and found in principles; it happens when we practice living the story of Jesus. From the outset of this project, a primary goal has been creating something to help pastors and ministry leaders lead their people, who are often distracted, in living the Jesus-story.

Luke shares the story of when Jesus and the disciples went to Martha and Mary's house. Martha was an excellent hostess, hospitality was her gift, and with such a large group arriving, she busied herself with all the details and preparations for providing such a large meal. Luke says she was perturbed with Mary, who was sitting with the disciples at the feet of Jesus, taking in all he had to teach instead of helping her. Martha approaches Jesus to address the situation, wanting him to tell Mary to help her, to which Jesus replies, "Martha, Martha, you are worried about many things." Martha is a distracted disciple. She is not distracted by bad things, hospitality and care for people are wonderful, and yet they kept her attention from something greater – Jesus himself. Jesus redirects her attention, suggesting that the food she was preparing, while delicious and nourishing for the body, is not the nutrition that is most needed at the moment.¹⁸

Our world is filled with things pulling at us and demanding our attention. Therefore, is it surprising how often we find ourselves and the people we shepherd distracted and kept from the most important thing? The leadership teams within our church, tasked with administrative details and ministry planning, often get caught up being overly focused on 'attending to the details,' just like Martha. Again, these are necessary and good things, and yet, are still secondary to sitting at the feet of Jesus. Part one of this project is designed to help ministry teams sit at the feet of Jesus before attending to the details of the work at hand. Given the regularity of meetings with congregational leaders who attend to the ministries and business of the church, this part of the project seeks to repurpose some of the time already shared to focus on growing deeper together in Christ formation.

I have created a cycle of devotionals and questions focusing on the nine practices of Jesus-shaped living. Each session includes a brief devotional, two or three questions to discuss, and an application step. The intent is to facilitate a discussion around one practice during your monthly meetings. These are not necessarily sequential, but the recommendation is to touch on one of the nine practices each month in a calendar year, then continue into the second cycle and hopefully, continue beyond. These are story-driven devotionals that encourage followers of Jesus to live the Jesus-story and consider new habits for daily living that will help keep them in the Jesus narrative.

¹⁸ See Luke 10:38-42.

INSTRUCTIONAL NOTE TO PASTORS, MINISTRY LEADERS, AND COACHES

Will Willimon reminds us that we are not disciples by birth, but by training and practice. Jesus did not tell us to go out and “discover or evoke disciples,”¹⁹ he instructed us to make disciples. This means that in our churches and ministries, we will have a continuum of people in the process of becoming fully devoted followers of Jesus. Given the current crisis of people succumbing to all the distractions and noise in our world, my observation is that we have churches filled with people who are stunted in their discipleship, or what Dallas Willard describes as people who have not yet decided to follow Jesus, which he bluntly labels as, ‘undisciplined disciples.’²⁰ Deciding to follow Jesus is part of it, and so too, is cultivating the right conditions for growth. If you hike in higher elevations, you will notice the trees are smaller. They are underdeveloped because the conditions are not conducive for growth: they lack pressure, moisture, and a sufficient growing season with appropriate temperatures. As you ascend in elevation, you eventually reach the tree line, an altitude at which trees stop growing altogether. I believe we have an opportunity to help people mature as disciples of Jesus, teaching and training them in good spiritual habits, so they have healthy conditions that encourage growth. At the same time, remember that as we encourage our people to grow in grace, the work of transformation of ‘the human heart is a divine prerogative.’²¹

One particularly difficult challenge we face as ministry leaders is the reality that for many people struggling with true Christ-formation in their lives, this is a blind spot, one of denial that the lack of authentic Christ-formation is a problem. How, then, do you effectively address a ‘problem’ that is not viewed as a ‘problem’? I believe it will happen by helping people know and trust the story of Jesus, by patient encouragement, and by coaching in new habit formation.

Each session is designed around one of the nine practices for Jesus-shaped living and includes three parts: 1) *Conversation* - a devotional thought to begin the conversation on the practice; 2) *Consider* - questions to facilitate a discussion; and 3) *Challenge* - a specific way to apply the practice in daily living that is realistic, achievable, and sustainable. Eventually, these daily commitments and practices will help shape (or reshape) a personal rule of life. As you lead, feel free to make this content your own by including personal stories of both struggle and victory. I hope that with these sessions, intentional practice, and your coaching, people will live out the story of Jesus in their lives.

¹⁹ William H. Willimon, *Pastors: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 204.

²⁰ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: HarperOne, 1988), 259. Willard credits Jess Moody with the term ‘undisciplined disciples.’

²¹ Richard Foster, *Casting a Vision: The Past and Future of Spiritual Formation* (Denver: Renovare, 2019), 4.

PRACTICE ONE: PRAYING**FIGURE 2: PRACTICE ONE - PRAYING****CONVERSATION:**

How do you feel about your prayer life? If you were giving yourself a grade, what would it be? As you consider those questions, if you sense a hollow feeling or any kind of shame, know you are in good company. As a pastor, I talk to people about their prayer lives frequently, and most people have a couple of things in common, whether they are Christians or not. Most everyone prays, yet, they feel like their prayer life is either anemic or ineffective or even both. Some people go through the motions but feel powerless, so they give up. Others report having issues with God, thinking he is aloof and unreachable, and questioning why they should bother with praying. Still, others cite past prayers they feel are unanswered and therefore invest minimal time and effort into their prayer lives now. A few, though, describe a rich, vibrant, life-giving prayer life. What about you? What is your experience?

Our Christian experience begins with prayer, simply talking with God; the foundational piece for all other core spiritual exercises. Prayer is more than our idea of or even our practice of it. The good news is you can learn to pray. When I was young and learning to ride a bike, my parents did not buy me a book on the proper mechanics and techniques for mastering the skill. One learns to ride a bike by riding it.

Similarly, children begin learning a language to communicate, even before official schooling begins, mainly because they are exposed to and given a vocabulary from those around them. We learn to talk by talking. Your prayer life is no different. When Jesus' disciples asked him to teach

them how to pray, he did not lecture them on a theory of prayer; he gave them a basic prayer, effectually saying, you learn to pray by praying. We have come to call this prayer, The Lord's Prayer, and when you struggle with what to say, Jesus gives you this vocabulary of prayer:

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we have also forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from the evil one (Matthew 6:9-13 NIV).
(For yours is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen.)*

Do you hear the simplicity in this prayer and at the same time, sense its depth? You could make the case that all our prayers are contained in this way of praying. Jesus was not saying you must pray these exact words all the time, although they are always appropriate; he is encouraging our prayer to take on this shape - begin with God and then move to human need.

Three observations on this prayer:

1. **It is a centering prayer.** This prayer leads you to the heart of God and centers your focus on him. When the world around you seems to be spinning out of control, go to Abba Father in prayer. This prayer turns our attention away from our problems and needs and turns us toward praise - asking for God's name to be lifted above all other names and for his will to "be done, on earth as in heaven."
2. **It is a connectional prayer.** Jesus teaches this prayer using plural language, 'our Father,' 'give us,' 'forgive us,' 'lead us;' not the singular, yours or mine, but ours.
3. **It is to be a consistent prayer.** Built into this prayer is the need to return to it at least daily to ask once again for 'daily bread.'

CONSIDER:

1. How do you think one's view of God affects one's view and practice of prayer?
2. What do you find rewarding about prayer? What do you find challenging?
3. What practices have you discovered that have deepened and energized your prayer life?

CHALLENGE:

For the next month, pray through the Lord's prayer, focusing on one phrase each day. Use this method as a means to sort out the things you want to bring to God.

Sunday - "*Hallowed be your name*" - Pray for God's name to be lifted up, set apart, and made holy in and through your life. You may also pray for this to be true of your church. Take time to pray for those Christian service who lead us weekly in worship.

Monday - "*Your Kingdom Come*" - Pray for evidence of God's kingdom and for his rule to be evident as you enter your workplace or school this week. Pray for your neighbors and those you interact with routinely, asking God to make himself known to them.

Tuesday - "*Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*" - Pray for an understanding of God's will in your life, pray for wisdom, discernment, and clear thought, and pray that you would be obedient to what you hear God asking of you.

Wednesday - "*Give us today our daily bread*" - Pray for God's provision of what you need. Take time to pray for those struggling to provide enough resources for their own basic living needs.

Thursday - "*And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*" - Pray for God to work in your life, our church, and our world to bring reconciliation and unity to broken relationships.

Friday - "*And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil*" - Pray for our country and our leaders (local and national). Pray that God would make himself evident by delivering us from the power of evil permeating this world.

Saturday - "*For yours is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever*" - Thank God for his presence in your life this past week and any victories you may have experienced; then begin to prepare your heart for tomorrow's gathering for worship.

PRACTICE TWO: LEARNING

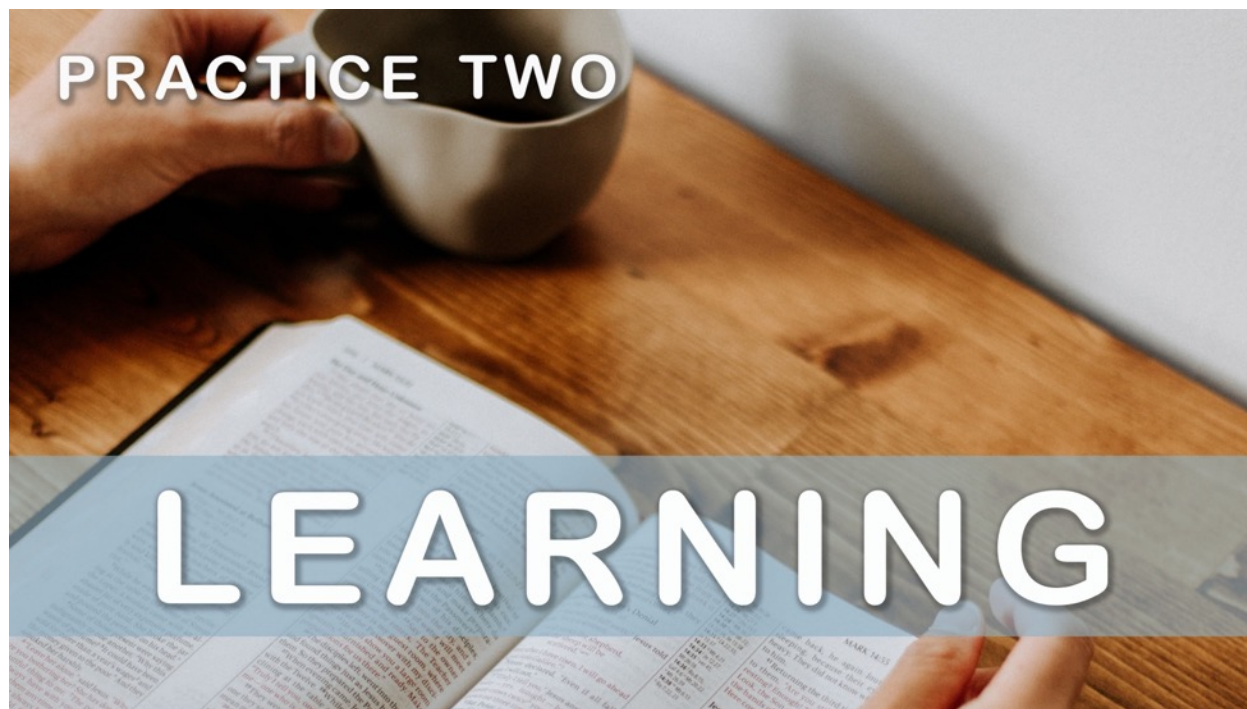


FIGURE 3: PRACTICE TWO - LEARNING

CONVERSATION:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son... (Hebrews 1:1-2a NIV)

God has been speaking a word into his creation from the very beginning, and he is still speaking to us through these means and through his written word, the Bible. We are bombarded by millions of words each day; we are distracted by our technology; and we are consumed with our busyness too – all of which may seem louder than the voice of God, making it difficult for us to focus on and listen for his voice. In a difficult time of questioning, even confusion, the prophet Elijah was up on a mountain waiting to hear from the Lord. He did not hear him in the earthquake, the wind, or the fire; instead he heard God in a still, small voice, a whisper. When someone whispers something to you, proximity is key to hearing what they are saying. If you have headphones on or you are in a noisy café, it is likely that you will not hear and take in the message. The intentional study of God's word is essential in becoming a fully devoted follower of Jesus. It helps keep us close enough to hear the whisper of God's voice in our souls.

Are you practicing things that put you close to God? Are you taking time to immerse yourself in his Word? Proverbs 1:5 reads, "Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance..." The Apostle Paul reminds us that "all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). Learning to hear God speak to us through his Word is essential for becoming fully devoted followers of Jesus.

The first Christian believers told and taught one another the story of Jesus and what it meant for their daily living. They were a 'learning church,' hungry for spiritual nourishment, and eager students who made every effort to learn the teachings of Jesus handed down through the Apostles. The Bible may have been written in ancient times, but it is timeless and speaks into our lives today. You and I are invited into the ongoing story of God in our world. To live the Jesus-story in our lives, we must first learn and know it.

We strive to be connected spiritually, so we can grow together as disciples of Jesus. Imagine a chain of people holding hands, now think that in one hand you are holding the hand of someone who is teaching you, and in the other, you are holding the hand of someone you are teaching and passing along the story of Jesus. How are you getting to know the story of Jesus personally, and how are you participating in sharing the story with others?

CONSIDER

1. When you read the Bible, what are you looking for? Do you find yourself reading for 'head' knowledge, 'heart' transformation, or something else? How do you think this influences your study time?
2. What do you find rewarding about studying the Bible? What would you identify as your biggest distraction and challenge when studying the Bible?
3. What practices have you discovered that have deepened and energized your Bible study times? When do you find it easiest to focus your thoughts and attention on studying?
4. What new habits would you like to form in reading and studying God's word?

CHALLENGE

This month, commit to memorizing Luke 15. As you work at memorizing this chapter, think and pray about the message of Jesus' words. How do these stories tell the redemption story of God?

PRACTICE THREE: CARING



FIGURE 4: PRACTICE THREE - CARING

CONVERSATION:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.

All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47 NIV)

The idea of 'commitment' in relationships seems to be a fleeting concept. Many people speak of wanting community but back away from it when it gets difficult and messy. We are wired for relationships, and we all long for commitment, but in the day and age of individualism and 'personal' happiness, we just aren't very good at it. Since the late 1920s, when Herbert Hoover coined the phrase 'rugged individualism,' our society has been shaped by the notion that everyone should be able to 'help themselves.' Unfortunately, this philosophy has drifted into Christian thinking. You have likely heard someone say, "I don't need to be part of a church to be a Christian." There is no such thing as a solitary Christian; we are saved into the community, into the body of Christ.

In the Book of Acts, Luke highlights the profound sense of responsibility and commitment the early Christians felt for one another when he said they were of one heart and mind. They were devoted

to fellowship and the breaking of bread together, which means they were committed to one another through all seasons of life - forged *together* in Christ *and* called *together* by God based on their shared confession that Jesus is Lord and Messiah.

We know life is hard and relationships are complicated, and when things get difficult, the temptation may rise within us to disconnect and move on or away from adversity. The caring life though, beckons us to remain connected in community with one another, trusting Jesus to help us be people of love, forgiveness, and hospitality.

If you look closely at my kitchen table, you will notice some gouges, dents, small scratches, a burn or two, and a thousand little dings. Each mark has a story. Some of them bring joy to my heart, remembering times of fellowship, laughter, and communion with dear friends. Some of them remind me of difficult times. Good or bad, happy or sad, all the marks form the story of our family and faith community, and I would not trade them for anything. Jesus uses all the ups and downs in our relationships to form a community and foster deep fellowship.

Is your table open to others? Your kitchen table can be a special place where you share the joys and sorrows of life with others while you are sharing food. Jesus connected with people by eating and drinking with them, which was a source of contention with the Pharisees. They felt he was hanging out with the wrong sorts of people. Jesus befriended them, anyway, saying he came to heal the hurting.

In his book *From Tablet to Table*, Leonard Sweet writes about caring in the form of sharing meals and communing with one another as believers and as a way to expand our tables to include others in our sphere of influence. He says it is about intentionally choosing to spend time together, talking with and bonding with one another. Our schedules tend to fill up quickly these days, and what does not get put on the calendar usually does not happen. Sweet identifies the importance of prioritizing together-time. He writes, "The value statement is about choosing relationships over isolation, making time when time is scarce."²² As people seeking to live a Jesus-shaped life, we should be intentionally generous in our hospitality and care for people, seeking to share life, trusting that Jesus will cultivate a genuine love and unity among us.

To those of us who have been in church for a long time, we may think this kind of discussion is ordinary. But to those whom the world has beaten down or who have been hurt or abused by a church or church community, and to those who have never felt the love of a family, or even a community of people centered around a common belief; to those who are alone and have no one to eat with; to those who feel marginalized and isolated - to these people, the idea of joining a group of people swept up in a common life around the saving grace of Jesus can be rather exciting, it can be life-changing. It opens new horizons, and it turns people's worlds upside down. These are

²² Leonard Sweet, *From Tablet to Table*, 87-88.

Kingdom moments where heaven and earth are joined; the coming Kingdom is present. Let us commit ourselves to this kind of fellowship and care.

CONSIDER:

1. Part of 'caring' is welcoming people and giving them a safe place to be themselves. When have you felt most welcomed somewhere? When have you been hurt because you did not feel welcomed?
2. We live in a world that encourages us to be independent, yet life within the body of Christ suggests something much different. How would you describe the connection Jesus wants us to have with one another?
3. What does living a 'caring' life look like to you? What habits or practices could you build into your life that would encourage you to model the compassion and care of God to the people around you in greater ways?

CHALLENGE:

Jesus was a person who loved sharing meals with other people, and it was one of his ways of seeking the lost. For the next month, practice expanding your circle by bringing people you do not know very well to your table (neighbors, co-workers, new people at church). Commit to opening your home once a week to host a meal like this.

PRACTICE FOUR: BLESSING



FIGURE 5: PRACTICE FOUR - BLESSING

CONVERSATION:

Faith that is alive is a faith that leads to faithful action - loving and serving in a way that points people to Jesus Christ. If your faith means something to you, if the Holy Spirit is transforming you, it will make a difference in how you approach life and people; it will lead you to a life of blessing others wherever and whenever God gives you an opportunity.

James, the brother of Jesus, the one I refer to as Mr. Accountability, is straightforward in his instructions, and it's hard to miss his point about putting what we read in the Word into practice. His short book in the New Testament can be a challenging read and raise our defenses. When teaching is difficult and irritates those coarse places in our lives, we need the reminder that the Holy Spirit nudges us toward perfection or wholeness in Christ purely out of love, even when it seems rather sharp. He's not there to shame us or guilt us but to graciously guide us into all truth.

James 1:18 reads, "He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created." This gives us a picture of our identity in Christ we are transformed and given new life, saved by God's grace to extend the blessing we receive to others. All the moral teaching in the text hinges on us getting this picture in our minds - it all leads to something bigger than we can even imagine, more beautiful than we can dream. We are caught up in the great drama of God's salvation - when he will one day make all things new and bring everything to completion and perfection! Seeing this image of beauty is critical. Without it, all the instructional teaching will come across as a long list of rules to follow and boxes to check. You will either quit and wander off,

wear yourself out trying to follow this list, or go through life with a severe guilt complex that you're not making God happy.

We are challenged by the amount of data flying at us, we can only process so many words and thoughts, and our world keeps piling on more. It can be paralyzing. We risk allowing God's word to be just another voice or simply 'words of wisdom' instead of the primary voice. We might hear, but we don't 'do' what we hear. Therefore, we must work extra hard to practice what we read in Scripture. Let me encourage you with the words of Jeremiah 31:33 that tell us that God puts his law in our minds and writes it on our hearts. When you are overwhelmed, saturated with information, and confused, remember God has inscribed his word deep in your soul. Pause, listen for God's direction, and act upon that.

James constantly focuses our attention on faith and works. This is the heart of his message - our faith should lead us to do good works and practice self-sacrifice, humility, and generosity. We don't work to earn our salvation, we are saved by faith and the gift of God, and at the same time, our salvation motivates us to live out our faith in real and practical ways. The love of God compels us to love other people and motivates us to live a life of blessing and serving. Again, faith that is alive leads us to faithful action and spurs us on to love and do good works. He shows us what is good and what is righteous: to act justly, working for the good of others; to love mercy and extend kindness and blessing to those who need it; and to walk humbly with God at a pace where you have enough breath to carry on a conversation, allowing him to speak into and through your life and shape your thoughts and actions.

CONSIDER:

1. How do followers of Jesus deceive themselves by just listening to God's word? Many Christians affirm the Bible is the Word of God. Why, then, is it so easy to quickly forget what we hear and read?
2. What does it mean to live a life of blessing in service to others? Evaluate yourself honestly. Do you prefer to serve or be served? How so?
3. How does your life reflect the instruction to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God? What new habits would you like to develop in this area of living a 'blessing' life?

CHALLENGE:

Each week for the next month, choose one person who is not a Christian to bless in a meaningful way. Be attentive to their needs, and offer them words of blessing and acts of kindness. Speak meaningful words of affirmation that add value to them and build them up, and offer expressions of care demonstrating you've noticed something about them.

PRACTICE FIVE: CELEBRATING



FIGURE 6: PRACTICE FIVE - CELEBRATING

CONVERSATION:

Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his splendor is above the earth and the heavens. (Psalm 148:13 NIV)

Are you a list person who writes down everything you need to complete? Does your list ever seem unmanageable, and do you ever struggle with knowing which thing to do first? You must prioritize things, but deciding what is most important can be difficult and overwhelming. Urgent things often rise to the top, even if they are less important. You get a text message that distracts your attention from the work project with a looming deadline, yet you find yourself picking up your phone and responding. How do you decide what is most important? Which begs the question, what is your most important work?

Psalm 148 is a relentless call to praise; one that answers our question on priority and beckons us to put God first in our lives. Considering your lists and priorities, this Psalm encourages you to put time with God at the top. Always. Make the time to praise the Lord, even when you don't feel like it or don't think you have enough time, somehow, some way, praise the Lord first. This will be a constant challenge in our distracted age, with our overly saturated schedules, frenetic pace, and constant demands for our time and attention. This is a critical piece in our faith formation. If you truly desire to grow deeper in your faith, you will need to develop habits and systems that place God first as your number one priority. The challenge and one God will help you with, is calming and silencing all the sirens that will go off in your mind convincing you that you are falling behind,

missing out on something else, and being unproductive. God doesn't want to be one of the little books tucked away on your bookshelf; he claims the place of *being* the bookshelf upon which every other part of our life rests.

The book of Psalms concludes with resounding notes of praise that are to reverberate in every facet of life. Whatever your circumstance, whether it be the 'highs' of life or the depths of despair, the psalmist chooses to praise the Lord. Many would say this kind of Psalm isn't realistic. How can you praise when your life seems like it's falling apart? How can you praise God when there are so many problems in the world? There seems to be a disparity between the extreme gladness expressed in the Psalm and the extreme sadness we see in the world. But reading through the Psalms, you will notice that the psalmist considers the pain and brokenness of the world and wrestles with it, acknowledging there are times when we "walk through the valley of the shadow of death." Trouble and pain exist, and yet the Psalmist declares his praise to God. Kathleen Norris writes that "*psalms demand that we recognize that praise does not spring from a delusion that things are better than they are, but rather from the human capacity for joy. Only when we see this can we understand that both lamentation and exultation can be forms of praise.*"²³ As we pray through all the seasons and emotions of life, talking with God about all of it, we will find that with enough time, all our prayers will end in worship and praise.

Let me share a story about a lesson I once learned about praising God through disappointment. One of my favorite hobbies is trying to capture the beauty and story of creation through photography. Most of the photos I keep have a story, and this picture of Image Lake in Washington's Glacier Peak Wilderness is no exception (see Figure 7). We were on a fifty-mile hike that took us along part of the Suiattle River, up over Cloudy Pass, and then down to the shores of Lake Chelan. To get to Cloudy Pass, we had an aggressive climb up to Miner's Ridge lookout tower, which was not far from Image Lake. The goal in a longer hike is to travel as lightly as possible, but somehow, I convinced myself that carrying an extra five pounds of camera gear was a good idea.

A week before our hike, a wildfire began to burn in the area, and as we ascended the mountain ridge, I noticed how hazy and smoky the air had become. As a photographer, I was sorely disappointed, and I was already lamenting not being able to get all the shots I had planned. With each step up, there was increasing noise in my spirit. You've probably noticed that grumbling and complaining, whether out loud or in the deep places of your soul, never sounds pleasant. There is no way to modulate the human voice to make complaining sound good. Noise is unpleasant and irritating; it is disruptive to your soul.

After arriving and setting up our camp, I walked over to Image Lake, the location of my most prized, planned photograph. I was already grumbling about how disappointing it would be, and my negativity was not helped by the vampire mosquitos and drone-sized horseflies carrying nuclear

²³ Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1996), 93.

warheads. Just like I thought, the haze almost completely blocked the view of the mountain, and there was little reflection of it in the lake, as you can see in the photo below.

I walked to the far side of the lake, snapping a few shots along the way. After taking this photo, I paused and clicked the preview to see if anything worth keeping. And at this moment, I was convicted and reminded that it's in our disappointments when God does some of his best work in us. Staring at the screen, I saw this amazing picture of the magnificence of God. Pause, and look closely at the photo (see Figure 7). Do you notice how the tree line and its reflection in the lake look like a sound wave? I could imagine the praise rising to the King of Kings from all his creation, and this reflection was but a small glimpse of it. What song are the trees singing? Amazing Grace? How Great Thou Art? Whatever the song, it was like I could hear the Holy Spirit whispering the poetic words of Isaiah, *"You will go out in celebration, and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills will burst into song before you; all the trees of the field will clap their hands."*²⁴ The trees and all creation were bursting forth praising God, and in that moment, all my spirit was doing was making noise. I was distracted from my most important work.

How often do we go through life having little pity parties for ourselves? We're so focused on our disappointments that we miss how God is all around us, reaching out to us, speaking to us. I'm really glad I previewed the picture in that moment because it totally changed my attitude, and despite the smoke, haze and carnivorous bugs, I was able to praise God. The noise in my spirit was transformed into the pleasant sounds of praise.

Physicists describe matter as vibrating strings of energy, which means all of us are instruments intended by God to make beautiful music. But like any stringed instrument, we get out of tune. My teacher, Leonard Sweet, likes to say that God gave us a 'tuning fork' in the person of Jesus Christ, God's 'perfect pitch.' When we submit ourselves to him, he tunes us up, and we can find a beautiful resonance with Christ in our souls. However, it takes humbling ourselves; as Walter Brueggemann says, praise is 'lyrical self-abandonment.'²⁵ Putting God first and yielding ourselves and our desires to his will and purposes is the way forward.

You choose the sounds you make. Choose praise, it's your most important work. May your heart be tuned to see and hear God in all of your surroundings and every facet of your life. May you agree with the psalmist who declares, *"Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands."*²⁶

²⁴ Isaiah 55:12 NIV.

²⁵ Walter Brueggemann, "Bounded by Obedience and Praise: The Psalms as Canon," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 50 (1991), 67.

²⁶ Psalm 63:3-4 NIV.



FIGURE 7: SOUND WAVES OF NATURE

CONSIDER:

1. Where and when do you most naturally worshipping and praising God?
2. What things distract you from celebrating God? What things help you focus? What is it about God that moves you to celebrate him?
3. How would you describe what worshipping God is to a non-believer?

CHALLENGE:

Choose a verse, poem, or image that inspires you and reminds you of God. Print it and place it in various places around your home and workplace. Each time you see it, pause and celebrate God, worship him for who he is and what he has done and is continuing to do in your life.

PRACTICE SIX: SHARING



FIGURE 8: PRACTICE SIX - SHARING

CONVERSATION:

On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God. (1 Thessalonians 2:4 NIV)

Of all the things God entrusts to our care, like money, time, skills, the earth, our health, or other people, what do you think is God's highest priority? I would say all of these are important, yet none are at the very top of God's list. What I'm about to suggest is something I think is often overlooked when we consider our stewardship responsibility, and that is God's message of salvation, or what we often refer to as the gospel. Paul says, "...we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel..." It's not our gospel; it is God's. It was Jesus who came to live as a human, was crucified, buried, and raised from the dead; he was the one who proclaimed victory over sin and death, and it is through him that we are saved. This is the gospel, the good news of Jesus, and it's his salvation that he gives freely to us as a gracious gift.

Paul says he was entrusted with sharing the good news about Jesus. Even when he was shipwrecked and his plans were changed. Even when he was persecuted, beaten, ridiculed, and run out of town, he still carried on with the command of Jesus to "go make disciples." Going was urgent, not optional. As Paul shared the gospel, people believed. He passed along this idea that followers of Jesus are 'entrusted' with its message and become carriers of it to share with others. Salvation does not end with you; we are to live the 'sharing' life. We are to be credible Christian witnesses, living and speaking the message of Jesus in specific ways to real people with names, to

our family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and beyond. Paul goes even further and says we 'owe' the gospel, like paying on a debt, to everyone who hasn't heard it yet (Romans 1:14).

Your life preaches a message; what is it saying? What would your friends far from God learn about Jesus just by observing your life? Don't get all freaked out about preaching, think of it as sharing. Think about it like this, "As you go about the routines of your day, live the Jesus-story, and look for opportunities to share how Jesus has and is changing your life."

Witnessing is something that most Christians know they are supposed to do but find it very intimidating to follow through on. Why do you hesitate? Do you fear rejection? Do you think you'll be 'canceled' because of the anti-Christian sentiment in the world? I know we've all seen bad examples, the zealots wearing sandwich boards and shouting through megaphones very harsh sounding messages that come across as 'God hates you unless you change.' They leave a bad taste in the collective mouths of the public and are far from the message of God. The real story you have to share is the most amazing story of love and forgiveness ever.

Lost people matter to God, period. And you might be the person to share God's love with someone who desperately needs to hear there is a better way that does not lead to the darkness and death they are experiencing. Jesus encountered sinners, ate at their tables, ministered to them, and protected them, all to demonstrate God's love for them. He didn't condone their sin; he proclaimed forgiveness and said, "Go and sin no more." This is what it means to share your faith. Jesus doesn't hold you responsible for the results; he takes responsibility for that. You don't save anyone; God does. What Jesus will hold us responsible for is being obedient in sharing his good news with those around us. So, be ready, take the initiative, and pass along the good news about Jesus.

CONSIDER:

1. What is the most challenging, difficult, or scary thing about sharing your faith in Jesus with others? What would build your confidence and make it easier to share what Jesus has done for you?
2. If there was no such thing as the New Testament, what would people know about Jesus based on your life (How you live and what you say about him)? What would your friends far from God know about Jesus just from being in your presence?
3. When we accept the responsibility to share the good news of Jesus with other people - the church grows. Considering this responsibility, what habits or rhythms have you found helpful as you follow Jesus?

CHALLENGE:

Write down the names of three people you would like to share Jesus with. Begin praying that God would open a door of opportunity for you to do so. This intentionality will help you look for the situations and conversations where sharing your faith and what Jesus is doing in your life will come up naturally in your everyday conversations. Make this a regular part of your prayer time.

PRACTICE SEVEN: RESTING



FIGURE 9: PRACTICE SEVEN - RESTING

CONVERSATION: To be written later as outlined in the Project Launch Plan below

Let the beloved of the Lord rest secure in him, for he shields him all day long, and the one the Lord loves rests between his shoulders. (Deuteronomy 33:12 NIV)

CONSIDER:

1. What parts of your life make it difficult to stop and rest? What things nourish and replenish your soul?
2. On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being bad and 10 being excellent), how are you taking time to rest? Why did you choose this score? What do you notice about yourself when you are constantly on the go and resist slowing down and taking the time to rest?
3. How might practicing Sabbath increase your joy and improve your worship of God?

CHALLENGE:

Write a plan for a weekly Sabbath time of rest for the next month. Choose a day you will set aside each week, and jot down a few things you will do or not do on those days. Share this plan with someone and ask them to help hold you accountable by checking in on you a couple of times during the month.

PRACTICE EIGHT: SIMPLIFYING



FIGURE 10: PRACTICE EIGHT - SIMPLIFYING

CONVERSATION: To be written later as outlined in the Project Launch Plan below

He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna...to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.
(Deuteronomy 8:3 NIV)

CONSIDER:

1. What has been your experience with fasting? What did you struggle with? Did you feel like the experience brought you closer to God? How so?
2. 'Planned neglect' is choosing to give up things of lesser importance and priority for the sake of time with God. What could you sacrifice to free up time to spend with God?
3. What other areas of your life do you believe need to be simplified? What new habits and strategies will you implement to make this happen?

CHALLENGE:

For the next month, choose one day a week to fast from something, whether it is food or your digital devices. If you choose food, eat dinner the night before your fast and skip breakfast and lunch. You may consume water and vegetable broth. When you feel hunger pangs, turn to God in prayer. Make a similar commitment if you choose to fast from your digital devices.

PRACTICE NINE: TENDING



FIGURE 11: PRACTICE NINE - TENDING

CONVERSATION: To be written later as outlined in the Project Launch Plan below

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. (1 Corinthians 9:24-25 NIV)

CONSIDER:

1. What does it mean to be healthy? What should motivate Christians to be healthy? Why do you think God cares about how we treat our bodies?
2. What exercises or diet changes do you feel you need to make in your life? What is holding you back? How do you think better care of your body will impact your relationship with God?
3. How do you like to spend your leisure time? What is your favorite way to have fun and relax by 'playing'? What do you think playing has to do with spiritual formation?

CHALLENGE:

For the next month, choose one thing you can do to honor God with your body and begin practicing this daily. Perhaps it is going for a daily walk or making healthier food choices. Whatever you choose, make it rigorous enough to stretch you but easy enough to be achievable.

Part Two: Sermon Series and Small Group Questions

To introduce Storied Discipleship to the wider audience of a full congregation, I developed an introductory nine-week sermon series on the nine core practices for living the Jesus-story, following the order: The Praying Life; The Learning Life; The Caring Life; The Blessing Life; The Celebrating Life; The Sharing Life; The Resting Life; The Simplifying Life; and The Tending Life. Each of the nine will include a small group discussion guide. Future development will include additional sermon series and small group guides to focus on each of the nine practices individually and with more depth. During the project design phase, a pilot series was created on prayer, entitled: Prayer: Learning to Pray by Praying. A description and outline of the series are included below to provide an image of what is to come in this area of work.

Included in the project are four 'storied sermons' that are, at the time of this publishing, part of the pilot series that is being written and shared within the context of my local congregation in the first quarter of 2023. Like any good narrative sermon, they are personal to me and the people I shepherd. They are organic to this time and place and take on the 'terroir' of this soil. Each message includes stories and illustrations that are meaningful and formational to this specific people and place. Before publishing and sharing these with a larger audience for use in other congregational settings, I will pare them down to the main points of content and teaching and offer suggestions for the kinds of stories and illustrations to share. For now, these messages are providing examples of 'storied sermons' already making a lasting impact in the life of actual believers, helping them grow deeper in their faith and live out the nine practices in their daily lives.

Complementing each message is a small group leaders' guide to use within their groups. The main content or curriculum is the sermon. The provided questions will help facilitate discussion around the biblical passage and the practice highlighted for each week. These questions are designed to help participants discover ways to apply the message in their daily lives and to consider developing new habits around each of the practices for Jesus-shaped living. The messages are a key piece, and yet the group discussion and accountability are critical in taking the messages to a deeper level in the life of the believer.



FIGURE 12: STORIED DISCIPLESHIP SERMON SERIES GRAPHIC

Chances are good you would identify with some of the following observations: life moves at a crazy, unsustainable pace; our schedules are often over-booked; we are distracted by a thousand different things and have trouble focusing; and our world is confused, divided and moving in directions contrary to God. Even if you only identify with one of these, it adds weight to your soul that can quickly become overwhelming. As the speed of life quickens or the weight of living presses down, you may find that you are distracted in your faith, giving up time praying or reading your Bible to address other pressing matters. That may seem like a good idea in the short term, but eventually, you find yourself frazzled, blowing in the wind, and not rooted in your faith. Over time, you may find yourself caught up in living the 'story' you want or the one the world wants, and not the Jesus-story that you were created to live. Is there a better way? Is there more to life? When people look at your life, what do they see? Do they see someone shaped by the influences of the world, or do they see Jesus?

Storied Discipleship: Nine Practices for Jesus-shaped Living is a series designed to help you evaluate the story you are living and focus or re-focus your life on Christ. It's so easy to get out of sync, out of rhythm with God. Unhealthy habits creep in before we know it, and we wonder what happened. This series will help you contemplate and uncover the habits in your life - good and bad; consider healthy new practices that will help root you in the Jesus-story; and help expose more of the transformational work of the Holy Spirit, leading to a Jesus-shaped life characterized by praying, learning, caring, blessing, celebrating, sharing, resting, simplifying, and tending.

STORIED DISCIPLESHIP: NINE PRACTICES FOR JESUS-SHAPED LIVING SERMON SERIES OUTLINE

Week One: The Praying Life - Luke 11:1-4

Week Two: The Learning Life - Luke 24:13-35

Week Three: The Caring Life - Luke 10:25-37

Week Four: The Blessing Life - Luke 9:10-17

Week Five: The Celebrating Life - Luke 4:14-21

Week Six: The Sharing Life - Luke 19:1-10

Week Seven: The Resting Life - Luke 6:1-11

Week Eight: The Simplifying Life - Luke 12:22-34

Week Nine: The Tending Life - Luke 18:15-17

THE PRAYING LIFE - SAMPLE SERMON AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

Luke 11:1-4, 18:1-8

We are starting a new worship series today on discipleship, which doesn't sound all that exciting. Maybe we notice the word discipleship resembles the word discipline, and so it seems difficult, or it carries negative connotations. As a pastor, I have found that many people desire to grow in their faith, yet find it difficult. Some people will have short gains, but then fall off the pace, much like New Year's resolutions often get cast aside when the grind of the work sets in. It might not be the difficulty and discipline of practicing your faith, maybe for you, it's the endless distractions you face. You simply don't feel like you have time to attend to your faith and relationship with God. Life comes at you fast, and you have so much to do, that you neglect praying and reading the Bible and worshipping God with fellow believers.

I am convinced it does not have to be that difficult. For a long time, I had this checklist mentality about faith formation. I had to do this or that with regularity: read the Bible so much; pray for so long; go to church; serve; things like that. I would make a list of all these good things, but I found that my focus was on the wrong thing - I was more concerned about list completion than I was about the relationship with God that was supposed to develop through doing these things. My focus was on the goals, not the systems and habits I needed for changing and improving over the long haul. When you concentrate on the 'what' you often miss the 'why,' and while you may be doing good things, they remain at a surface level and don't penetrate your soul and open your spirit to the transformative work of the Holy Spirit.

Maybe you could say I wasn't changing the story I was living; I was still living my own story, only with some spiritual components added. I was the author, not Jesus. I was in control, I had not surrendered control to God, and it took a long time to realize I needed to let Jesus be the author and ultimate authority in my life. My identity is found in Him, not in my status or career or anything else I may be tempted to elevate in my life.

I've been working on a project in seminary over the last few years, and over the next nine weeks, I want to share parts of it with you. It's called 'Storied Discipleship: Nine practices for Jesus-shaped living.' It was born out of this idea that to be a fully devoted follower of Jesus - a true disciple - we need to start living the Jesus story. As Christ forms within us, we will think and act and love and serve more and more like he did. Each of these practices focuses on things that Jesus taught and modeled in his life. We will live the Jesus story by living a: praying, learning, caring, blessing, celebrating, sharing, resting, simplifying, and tending life.

Practice one is living THE PRAYING LIFE, talking and listening to God communally and personally. As we read the Gospels, we see Jesus praying all the time, he is constantly spending time with his Father. His disciples notice something different about his prayer life, and they ask him about it and want him to teach them how to pray.

Do you ever wonder about prayer? Is it a mystery to you? Prayer can be a challenge. How do we talk with someone we cannot see? What do we say? Can I really tell God how I'm feeling, even if it's

bad? I've heard lots of questions about prayer, and I've asked many of my own. One thing that has helped me is reading the Psalms and noticing how they touch on every aspect of human existence. On the one hand, they express confident hope, yet on the other, they expose the doubts we carry. They praise God from whom all blessings flow, and they lament the brokenness of life. They proclaim victory, and they wallow in defeat. In one breath they thank God, and in the next cry out for help. If you ask me, this is an accurate depiction of my prayer life. Just like the Psalmist, there is a 'bi-polar' nature to my praying.

Are you a 'bi-polar' pray-er? It's okay. When you pray, do you find that in one moment you are full of faith and trust, boldly declaring God's faithfulness and thanking Him for who he is and what he's done? Then the next moment, find yourself crying out with raw emotion, pleading for deliverance and help? That's normal. The disciples didn't quite have it figured out either, and they watched Jesus, and were curious and asked him.

There are many ways we could talk about prayer, and there is no way we'll cover them all this morning. We're not going to talk about 'what' to pray, let's think more about what the praying life looks like. What I've encountered in all my years talking with people about their prayer lives, is that many of us get what I call, "prayer fatigue." We grow weary in praying what seems like the same things over and over again. We beg like the Psalmist; we ask God to turn his ear and hear us; we ask him to come quickly to our rescue; we ask him to be our rock, and yet we may not see immediate answers or answers at all, and so we give up trying.

May I suggest we try to have a more childlike faith? Not childish - childlike! One filled with awe and wonder, curiosity and exuberance and joy, and persistence! Jesus taught his disciples to have a childlike faith.

I love watching the exuberance of kids. They have so much energy and innocence and joy! Have you ever noticed that kids are often happy for no reason at all? They find reasons in the moment to enjoy life, often in ways adults have forgotten. Ralph Waldo Emerson says, "It is a happy talent to know how to play." Kids love playing, and they never seem to grow tired of things that bring them joy! But as adults, we grow tired of doing the same thing over and over and over again.

Our family used to camp at Lake Le-Aqua-Na State Park in Illinois, and there was a playground with a merry-go-round. I remember spinning that thing around and around, the kids were laughing and screaming and getting dizzy, and just when I thought I was going to pass out and die, my kids would shout, "Do it again daddy! Do it again!" Or the times we would read a Dr. Suess book, and at the end, they would say "Do it again daddy! Do it again!" And so, we would start back at the beginning. Anything that brought them joy and delight, they would say, "Do it again daddy!" Kids have boundless energy and vitality, and they delight in repetition! You know what I'm talking about, and as adults, it will wear you out!

G.K. Chesterton observes that adults are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But listen to this, he says, *"But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, 'Do it again' to the sun; and every evening, 'Do it again' to the moon. It may not be*

automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never grown tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we. The repetition in Nature may not be a mere recurrence; it may be a theatrical encore.”²⁷

When we feel like God is distant, or maybe not listening; or when we’re not ‘delighting in the results,’ it’s easy to pray less and less, but Jesus says to pray more and more. He knows that God does not hear our prayers as monotonous and will not grow tired of listening. Jesus encourages us to be persistent in our prayers. He teaches the disciples about persistence in prayer by sharing a story with them about a woman who is persistent in seeking justice, let’s read it together. It’s found in Luke 18:1-8.

Jesus starts by telling the disciples that they should pray always, or pray without ceasing, as the Apostle Paul might say. How do you do that? It sounds impractical, impossible even. How do you pray without ceasing? Is that like starting a prayer right before you go to sleep and not saying ‘amen’ until you wake up the next morning? Probably not.

The praying life is an ongoing conversation with God

We come to God and say ‘Do it again daddy! Here I am. Here’s my need. “

You might wonder if you need to keep pestering God with your requests. Aren’t we supposed to have enough faith to hand something over to God and trust that he’ll deal with it? Many Jewish Rabbis taught that too much prayer annoyed God. They said the three ‘hours’ of prayer a day were plenty. Three hours – that would be nice. I think American Christians pray an average of 4 minutes a day. Jesus takes us to a different place, one beyond the checklist. It’s not about a specific amount of time, **the praying life is about being in relationship with God.**

Be persistent, says Jesus. If we’re talking about childlike faith, maybe we need the boldness and tenacity of kids who think nothing of asking boldly and relentlessly for things they want. “Hey mommy, can I go outside? Can I have a snack, Can I? Can I? Can I?”

That’s the kind of picture we get here in Luke. He tells us this funny little story about a widow seeking justice from a judge. She was one in the marginalized class. In that male-dominated society, with her husband being gone, she didn’t have many legal rights; nor did she have an advocate, so she took her plea to the judge directly. We don’t know exactly what her plea was, but it was likely economic in nature, as she would not have had a claim on her husband’s estate. She was helpless. She felt like all those who are trying to access health benefits for needed care but only encounter bureaucracy and dead ends. She felt like the person laid off in the twilight of their career and now

²⁷ G. K. Chesterton. *Orthodoxy*. Originally published in 1908, public domain.

find it hard to get hired because of their age. She felt like the person who has been trying to get medical answers and instead receives the run-around. You get the point.

So she goes to the judge herself. Help me! Jesus tells us this judge did not fear or honor God, which meant he didn't care about what God cared about, so we can gather that he doesn't care about this woman or her situation; and further, we're told he was arrogant enough not to care about what anyone else thought of him. She was trying to get help from a system that didn't care.

But Jesus says this woman wore him down. I love the imagery of the words Luke chooses here. Luke says she was persistent, meaning tenacious. She kept asking, knocking on his door; I imagine her showing up in random places making her presence felt and her needs known. When he pulled up to the stop sign, there she was on the corner with a sign 'will you help me now?' When he was out to dinner with his family, you can picture her peering in the window wondering if he would give her justice now.

The judge tried to ignore her plea, but she wouldn't take no for an answer. At some point, the judge has a conversation with himself. This woman is bothering me; she's driving me nuts! She is a campaign nightmare. She's going to wear me out. I think she might attack me. Luke uses a colorful Greek expression out of the boxing ring to describe this woman's persistence. The word literally means "striking the eye" or "giving me a black eye." You can picture this lady rabbit punching this guy right in the eye...jab, jab, jab, wearing him down through persistence.

Now, this is not a lesson to say that if we pester God enough he will relent, throw in the towel, and give you what you want. Jesus doesn't say that. He's simply teaching the disciples to pray without ceasing. When it seems like we should just give up, don't give up. When you want to throw in the towel, don't. We are tempted to lose heart when we don't get the promotion we've been praying for; or when a loved one falls back into addiction; or when the cancer doesn't go away; or when our wayward child keeps straying further and further away. As these difficult situations seem to close in on us, we may grow weary in bringing them to God in prayer. We are prone to disappointment and discouragement, and maybe we want to give up on God and just try to bolster whatever strength we can manage on our own, or perhaps, we simply lose heart, and prayer fatigue set in.

In these moments, Jesus comes alongside us and says keep praying. He whispers, "Don't lose heart... be encouraged, I'll never leave you or forsake you. I will lend you my strength to keep believing and trusting that God hears you."

Repeated prayer isn't a sign of 'little faith', but persistent faith. So go ahead, be persistent in your praying and asking the Lord to help and intervene and heal and provide and rescue!! God is not squeamish about us being persistent, he values the conversation and seeks to develop our relationship with him.

This is a 'how much more' parable. If a wicked judge will finally relent and give this woman justice, HOW MUCH MORE will God, who himself is righteous and loves people? The point is God is full of compassion and ready and willing to hear the prayers of his people. THE PRAYING LIFE is not

always about the answer. Really, prayer is about communication with God and spending time in the presence of a friend, and a loving father. That's how Jesus says to pray, "Abba, Father," a way of addressing God that was shocking, unheard of, and scandalous at the time. But that's the image of God, a loving, compassionate, caring father who is concerned and interested in hearing from his children.

One more image on persistence: Frederick Buechner says about persistence that it's "not because you have to beat a path to God's door before God will open it, but because until you beat the path, maybe there's no way of getting to your door." Continually going to God exposes us, and clears away the distractions that may be blocking our communication with him. Persistence in prayer helps move obstacles out of the way, and it keeps the pathway to God open. And when we experience the presence of God and have a closeness to him, then he can help change our outlook and attitude. He can help quiet our hearts, so we can truly hear him and open ourselves to Him, and his spirit can mold us and shape us into the likeness of his Son Jesus.

As the Psalms show us, we can declare our faith and expose our doubt; we can celebrate victories and cry out to God for help. We can keep coming to the throne of grace over and over again, saying DO IT AGAIN DADDY!

That's the PRAYING LIFE, talking with God, trusting him, and asking Him to do it again!

Amen.

Small Group Discussion Questions

1. What was your method of trying to get what you wanted out of your parents? Did it work better on one parent? Why?
2. As you begin your discussion, read Luke 18:1-8. How do you think one's view of God affects one's view and practice of prayer? What does this parable teach us about God? What does Jesus teach us about prayer?
3. Why do you think Jesus used this story to teach about prayer? Have you ever given up on a specific prayer because you did not think God answered your request? Jesus teaches persistence in this parable, what does persistent prayer do to the one praying, even if it seems God does not immediately answer?
4. What do you find rewarding about prayer? What do you find challenging? What practices have you discovered that have deepened and energized your prayer life? Paul teaches us to pray without ceasing, what does that mean, and what could it look like in your life? What new habits would you like to develop in your prayer life?

THE LEARNING LIFE - SAMPLE SERMON AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

Luke 24:13-35

Do you know what is sweeter than honey and better than money? Any guesses on this riddle? The psalmist writes in Psalm 19:9-10, that it's the decrees or word of the Lord. So, the Bible you're holding is the answer. We are in week two of our Storied Discipleship series, where we are looking at nine practices for Jesus-shaped living, and exploring what living a Jesus life looks like. Last week we talked about practice 1, the Praying life. This week we are focusing on practice 2, the learning life. Disciples of Jesus are to be both students and teachers of the Word. We are to be people who engage our minds and spend time studying, meditating on, and memorizing Scripture.

Carl was a dear friend in one of my congregations, and he epitomizes what it means to be a lifelong learner in all facets of life. Every pastor needs a Carl as a mentor, a man of unmatched intelligence and stunning humility whose quest for knowledge and understanding never wanes. He was a wise elder who was quick to walk across the sanctuary and say thank you for offering new learning and insight into Scripture. It humbled me every single time and inspired me in living a learning life.

I was looking at the *State of the Bible 2022* published by the American Bible Society, and the word they chose for 2022 was 'under-engaged.' They determined that Bible engagement fell by 21% last year alone. The survey also identified that 60% of people only read the Bible once or twice or less a year outside of church, and a full 40% said they never read the Bible at all. On the other end, 14% of people read the Bible four or more times a week.²⁸ The news is not entirely bleak. There is some hope in the fact that over the past few years, curiosity is up - people say they are curious about Jesus and/or the Bible.

As a pastor, I know people often express frustration with reading the Bible, and I'm not just talking about people who don't believe in Jesus, I'm talking about people who say they are Christians too. I hear all sorts of reasons for this. Some people say they don't have enough time or don't know where to start; or that it's too confusing because they don't understand the background or connect with the language. Some really honest folks simply admit they just aren't excited about it because it's boring.

Well, you know me, I love this book, but that wasn't always the case. For a long time, I waffled on the word - I had to learn to fall in love with it too. I know the struggles and frustrations you report. I remember the first time I set out to read the Bible through and I figured I'd do it 'the old-fashioned way' and read it from cover to cover. I started with a lot of enthusiasm, and the first part of Genesis is great with lots of intriguing stories - creation, Adam and Eve, the serpent, the Fall, Noah and the flood, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob, and then the pages turn into Exodus and the story of Moses and the epic confrontation with Pharaoh, and the people of Israel's escape from slavery out into the wilderness. But soon this narrative bogs down with a bunch of old rules that don't seem to

²⁸ *State of the Bible 2022*. Philadelphia, PA: American Bible Society, 2022, E-Book.

connect with anything, and there are the descriptions of the sacrificial system, and then you get to Numbers and the 'begats.' Oh my, what am I doing? And my adventure came to a screeching halt, and I put my Bible on the shelf, and only pulled it down on Sundays. If you ask me about those days, I had a severe case of 'versitis,' I'd read one verse at a time when I felt like I needed to, but not much more than that.

Does that sound familiar to you? Do you struggle with reading and loving the Bible? Do you wonder how it connects with your life? I want to help you engage with it and learn to love it! **Hearing God's word is a critical part of faith formation.** Bible engagement is directly related to spiritual growth.

Our world is full of words – lots of words! We're inundated constantly with words, whether they are written, or spoken, or in music, memes, or tweets. Many of them distract us and demand our attention and bog us down. Some of them are good words, that God uses to speak to us. But the primary way that the Holy Spirit opens us up to God is through the words of Scripture. When we spend time reading the Word, we learn the story of God and are introduced to Jesus. When we read the Bible, we are confronted with our sin – which is devastating and leads to death, but we also encounter God's incredible love for us and his plan of forgiveness.

The passage in front of us in Luke 24 is one we normally look at right after Easter, it's a resurrection story. We're people of the resurrection so I think it's always appropriate. This is also one of the stories that I'd most like to inhabit if I could enter any Bible story. As we consider the learning life, this passage is one that shows us that Jesus makes himself known to us through Scripture. Let's take a look.

- **V13-14.** Two disciples are headed home from Jerusalem after Jesus' crucifixion. They are dejected, disillusioned, and confused. They were talking about everything that happened. I imagine they are probably remembering the good times, all the miracles, but then the devastating end. Why couldn't Jesus have worked a miracle for himself? Why did God let this happen?
- **V15.** Jesus shows up and starts walking along with them; he seeks them out and meets them right where they are. Remember he came to seek and save the lost, he does just that.
- **V16.** They do not recognize him, maybe Jesus is wearing a hoodie, all we're told is they were kept from recognizing him. He is outfitted with the resurrection body.
- **V17-18.** Jesus asks, 'What are you discussing?' which brings them to a halt. And then Cleopas asks, "Are you the only one who doesn't know what happened?" It's an innocent question because he doesn't know it's Jesus, but you can't miss the humor in it.
- **V19-24.** Jesus says, 'What things?' Did something happen? I love it! And then Cleopas explains what happened to Jesus...to Jesus himself. "The things that happened to Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet, powerful in word and deed, but he was crucified. We had hoped he was the One who would redeem Israel, but they killed him, and now there's a report that his

body is missing, and there was a report that some angels said he is alive...but we haven't seen him." They were hoping in the right person but in the wrong thing. They had misguided expectations; they were hoping for a different kind of rescue.

- They had the Scriptures and what God had said; they had listened to Jesus teach and talk about what was going to happen, but they missed the resurrection, the whole point. They were looking for political rescue, but are given a spiritual rescue to restore them to God - which is far greater than what they were looking for.
- **V25-26.** Jesus lets them expose their hearts in their lamenting, and finally says, "How foolish you are." How dull you are, how slow you are to believe all the prophets (Scriptures). How could they miss that the rejection, suffering, and death of the Messiah are clearly taught in Scripture? They were slow to believe and quick to give up; are we? It's a good thing Jesus is a patient teacher, when we do not understand, he is willing to go back and teach us again. The learning life is opening ourselves to the teaching of Jesus.

V27. "And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." Wow! Jesus takes them on a tour of the Word. Jesus pointed out all the places in the Old Testament where he is present - connecting all of what they had seen and witnessed to what is written right here in the Bible. Jesus tells them HIS WHOLE STORY.

Which Scriptures does he share? We do not know for sure, which is fine. Jesus had been quoting Scripture and saying he was fulfilling it all along. At this moment, he's not paging through a Bible and picking a verse here and there to proof-text himself. He is helping them understand the larger picture. He was showing them that all the writings of Moses and the prophets (the whole OT) pointed forward to have their fulfillment in a Messiah who suffers.

There are hundreds of prophecies in the Old Testament pointing to Jesus. A few years ago, I set out to read the whole Bible out loud during the 40 days of Lent. When you read the whole Bible through in a relatively short period of time, many of these passages jump off the page at you. The connections seem closer together. I know, many people wonder about the Old Testament, it seems so violent and brutal. We have it because not much has changed in how humans treat one another. There's so much talk about death and being cut off from the people, so much talk about sacrifices for sin. We have it to show us just how much we have rejected God and his ways. Sin cannot stand in the presence of a holy God. We need it to remind us that we aren't going to find salvation on our own - our way ALWAYS FAILS in the end. We need God to do something drastic to redeem us. I was overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of God's grace that we see over and over again, and finally poured out upon us in Jesus, who took on himself our punishment.

One theme of the passage in Luke 24 is that Jesus Christ is made known to us by revelation. We're told their eyes 'were opened' to the truth and reality of Jesus' resurrection, and through his teaching they came to understand what Scripture had been saying all along.

Jesus is made known to us through the Bible. Later in the story, if you look at V28-30, after they arrived home, they invited Jesus in for a meal, and at the table Jesus took over as host, taking the bread, giving thanks, and breaking it, and in that moment their eyes were opened and they recognized Jesus, and he disappeared. V32 says, "They asked each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?'" **They had a case of 'Holy Heartburn.'** Their broken hearts have become burning hearts – a revelation of Jesus through the Scriptures. They begin to see and understand that Jesus' death is not the END of grace, but the MEANS of God's grace. Maybe there is HOPE on the other side of this.

Jesus reveals himself to us through Scripture...he will give you this Holy Heartburn too as you immerse yourself in his Word. As we live the learning life and engage the Word, His story will come to life in us, and we will begin to live Storied and Scriptural lives, guided by Spirit

Amen.

Practical Application Discussion: As we seek to live The Learning Life, let me offer a couple suggestions for your time in the word and how you approach it.

Read the Bible Relationally

When you read the Bible, think about reading it relationally instead of informationally. Think about your reading as time you are spending to 'hang out with God.' Sometimes God will teach you something, other times, he just wants your presence, so you do not always have to read with the specific purpose of gaining information. It is kind of like the difference between reading a novel for pleasure, and a textbook for learning. Move your thinking from study to story, imagining yourself as being part of the ongoing story of God. When you come to the Bible relationally instead of 'informationally' it is much more likely it will be transformational in your life, and that's what we want. You don't have to learn something every time you read the Bible. When you read relationally, you'll find that when God does want to teach you something, he will; when he wants to challenge you or comfort you, he will.

View 'Scripture' as a Verb

In our everyday language the word Scripture is a noun, a thing, the Bible, the Word of God. What if you considered making Scripture a verb, 'to Scripture' or 'Scripturing'? I am Scripturing, living my life to be faithful to the living God who has given us his word, and who continues to be present among us. As the word of God comes to life in us, we will be people of the word, allowing Scripture to shape us and inform our living. Let's reverse the trend in our world that minimizes what God says and maximizes personal preference and feelings, and let's all say 'I am Scripturing' as a witness to how God is actively present and at work in my life, in our church, and in this world.

Work at Finding Enjoyment in Reading the Bible

Here are seven suggestions:

1. **Read Prayerfully:** Praying sets the tone for your time reading the Bible, and reminds you that you're reading to encounter God. Praying opens the conversation with God, asking for him to help you concentrate and focus on the word, and speak to you through it. He inspired the Word, and he can inspire you through it. Additionally, praying provides protection from distractions and a wandering mind, temptations to quit, and from the adversary who doesn't want you to read.
2. **Read with High Expectations:** Enter your reading expecting to encounter God, and that the Holy Spirit will transform you through your reading. If you expect to be bored, you'll probably be bored. If you expect to be confused, you'll probably be confused. If you don't expect to like and enjoy your reading, you probably won't. You can make the choice beforehand that you will be engaged and hear from God.
3. **Read Out Loud:** Practice reading the Bible out loud or listen to a recording of it. Reading out loud slows your pace, and helps you focus on what you are reading. Hearing and experiencing the vibrations of sound reverberating deep in your soul will bring the words to life in a whole new way.
4. **Read Alone:** Or as I like to say, 'Read Naked.' Strip away all the devotionals, study guides, dictionaries, and commentaries, so it is just you, God, and the Bible. None of these extra words are bad but can sometimes be distracting. There will be other times for deeper study where you engage with helpful sources, but set aside times where it's just you, God, and the Bible. Don't fall for the myth that you can't understand the bible without study aids. What happens is you depend more on the 'commentary' then on the Bible. What happens is we sometimes access the Bible through other sources instead of starting with the Bible and then moving to other's thoughts about it. Trust me, I know this, I'm a professional at it. There have been times, especially during my seminary days where I spent more time reading about the Bible than reading the Bible itself, and I could tell. Even during a time of deep theological learning, I felt like the Bible wasn't speaking to me in the same way, and it was because I was not starting with Scripture. Trust that the Bible is accessible to you, just as it is written. It is alive and active, and the Holy Spirit will help you and speak to you in and through your reading. Allow the Word of God to interpret your life, rather than you always trying to interpret what it says.
5. **Read Together:** Okay, that sounds contradictory, is it read alone or read together? Yes. It's actually both. Study God's word with other people. Having conversation with other people about God's word will help you immensely. Knowing you're going to study with someone else improves your consistency because there is accountability, and relationships are deepened in studying God's word together.
6. **Read the Whole Story:** The challenge is to read through the whole Bible, and have an experience with all of it. Yes, read the whole thing, even the hard parts, even the parts you think are boring or irrelevant. It gives you exposure to the whole story so you can begin to see the continuity from beginning to end. Reading the whole story allows you to begin to

see the devastating effect of life without God, and allows you to see God's relentless pursuit of relationship with us, and the continual ways he reaches out to save us. God's grace is evident in the whole story, and when we read all of it, each passage and verse can be viewed in light of the whole picture. Now before you write off the challenge as too time consuming, let me give you a few facts. One, there are 775,000 words in the Bible. Two, the average person reads 200-250 words per minute. Three, the math on this says it will take you approximately 10-12 minutes per day to complete the challenge. Even if you think you're a slow reader, can you find 10-15 in your day to read the Bible? It may require sacrificing some time on social media or watching Sportscenter, but I think it'll be worth it.

7. **Read with a Daily Plan:** John Wesley encouraged people to read at the beginning and ending of each day, believing that regular exposure to the Word changes us. So I encourage you to find a plan to read daily. There are many published plans, and apps that can help you. Choose one and go for it.

Small Group Discussion Questions

1. What is one of your favorite stories or passages in the Bible? Why is this one meaningful to you, and how does it continue to speak to you each time you read it? Why is studying the Bible an important part of being a disciple of Jesus?
2. What do you imagine the scene in Luke 24 was like? What do you think the two were discussing? How does Jesus, unknown at the time, change the conversation? Why do you think Jesus walked the two disciples through the Scriptures instead of just revealing himself to them? What might that teach us about how he reveals himself to us?
3. Read the following passages and talk about how they point to and teach us about Jesus. Genesis 3:15, 22:15-18; Numbers 21:6-9; Deuteronomy 18:15-19; Ruth 4:4-9; 2 Samuel 7:12-13; Psalm 2:2-7, 22:1-2; Isaiah 9:1-2, 53; Jeremiah 23:5-6; Ezekiel 17:22-24; Daniel 3:24-25; Hosea 11:1; Micah 5:2; and Malachi 3:1
4. Part of living 'the learning life' is knowing and living the story of Jesus; how would you summarize the message of the Bible to someone unfamiliar with it?
5. What new study habits would you like to develop?

THE CARING LIFE - SAMPLE SERMON AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

Luke 10:25-37

So far in our Storied Discipleship series as we explore nine practices of Jesus-shaped living, we have discussed the praying life and the learning life, two foundational pieces in becoming a fully devoted follower of Jesus, and two practices that begin to open our hearts and give us instruction on Christ forming in us. As Christ forms in us, we begin to take on his character in our thinking and behaving, and today we turn our attention to The Caring Life.

When we use the word 'care' in our everyday language, it is not a mysterious or complicated word to understand. It usually refers to a desire or an action. As a desire, it means that we 'feel concern' or are 'interested in' or that we 'feel affection for' someone or something. If I say, "I care about something," you know what I mean. Or if I don't care about something, whether I say it or not, you probably can sense it. We have funny ways of sharing, "I don't care." You know the coffee mugs that have the 'levels of care' marked on the side [show a picture]. When the cup is full, please don't talk to me, I don't care, but as one drinks their coffee and the caffeine kicks in, magically our care, concern, and interest rise. I have a friend who operates on the philosophy that before his second cup of coffee, he doesn't care and can't engage.

We also know that care is an action, we give care to people, offering help and assistance. Sometimes it is both a desire and an action, sometimes you get one without the other. Desire without action is just a feeling, and action without desire is just plain cold. I'm sure we've all been served at one time or another by someone who we could tell just didn't care and they were going through the motions of their job - you don't leave that experience feeling very good.

Biblically speaking, care requires both desire and action. Compassion, being moved from our insides, is part of caring. We know from Scripture that **God's character is defined, in part, by compassion and care.** Consider these verses about God's character:

"But you, Lord, are a compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness."
Psalm 86:15 NIV

"Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion."
Isaiah 30:18 NIV

"Rejoice, you earth; burst into song, you mountains! For the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones." Isaiah 49:13 NIV

God's character is imaged for us perfectly in his Son Jesus.

"When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." Matthew 9:36 NIV

Similarly, in Mark 6, Jesus and the disciples were sailing off, trying to retreat to a quiet place and get some rest, but when they landed and stepped out of the boat a large crowd was gathered, and

Mark 6:34 says, "Jesus had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd." Then he began teaching them and ministering to them, and this vignette ends with Jesus miraculously feeding the whole crowd.

In Luke 7:11-15, we see Jesus entering a town called Nain, and as he approached the town gate, he met a funeral party carrying the body of a young man out of the city for burial, and we learn he is the only son of a widowed woman. Luke says when Jesus saw her 'his heart went out to her' and he said to the woman, 'don't cry,' then he spoke to the young man, saying, 'get up,' and he did.

In Matthew 20:29-34, we see Jesus leaving Jericho with a large crowd following him. Two blind men were sitting along the roadside and when they figured out it was Jesus going by, they began calling out for help, "Have mercy on us!" People in the crowd tried to 'shush' them, but the two men shouted even louder. Jesus stops the procession, and asks them what they want, "We want our sight," and Jesus had compassion on them, and healed them.

Over and over, we see Jesus imaging the compassion of God. He was moved to help people who were hurting, and lost, wandering without a shepherd.

Discipleship is learning to follow Jesus, it's Christ forming in us, and so **we are instructed to live out the character of God in our lives.** Consider these instructions from Paul:

"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." Ephesians 4:32 NIV

"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." Galatians 6:2 NIV

"...if I have faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing."
1 Corinthians 13:2b NIV

"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." Colossians 3:12 NIV

Practice Three in Storied Discipleship is caring - living the caring life. It has a wide range of meaning and can be described as: The practice of caring is enjoying soul friendship, being knit together with other believers in unity with the Spirit. Caring is loving others as Christ loves us, and forgiving others as Christ forgives us. The practice of caring encourages depth of relationship, it is an embracing and welcoming of all the people God places in our circles of influence and leads one into a life of compassion, mercy, fellowship, and hospitality.

Acts 2 gives us a picture of the early church having a genuine love for each other which was motivated by the love of God; they were devoted to each other, spending time as friends, eating together, and sharing the joys and sorrows of life with each other. There will be another time for sermons about fellowship and hospitality, today I want to look at caring from a different angle.

This is what it means to live the caring life, but the question we often ask is *who* am I supposed to care for? People have wondered about this for a long time, and in the passage we read earlier, we

entered into the story of a lawyer who once asked Jesus what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. How do I make sure I get into heaven? As the story unfolds, Jesus masterfully teaches us how to think about who we are to care for as 'neighbor' and what that entails. Let's take a look.

Let me share FOUR observations about The Caring Life from this parable

The caring life will lead you to exercise Compassion over Caution

The priest and the Levite give us a picture of people who practice extreme caution. They worry about themselves first. If they cared for the man in the ditch, they did not care enough to help, so their 'care' was just a feeling. They were obviously schooled in the character of God, and ought to know what God cared about, but that didn't motivate them, did it? They kept on walking. Maybe justifying their inaction by believing it the guy was running a scam, and was faking his injury as a trap to rob them. Or that he was a decoy, and his buddies will jump out and attack. These were legitimate thoughts, but express a 'me first, others later,' attitude that only considers helping when we believe it's safe.

The Samaritan faced the same situation as the priest and Levite but was willing to place himself at risk for the sake of offering mercy and compassion. The Samaritan didn't decide his action based on a 'what if' scenario - he chose to act out of compassion rather than being paralyzed by caution.

What fears and excuses do you find yourself using to justify putting caution ahead of compassion? The question caution asks is "What will happen to me?" The question compassion asks is "What will happen to them if I do nothing?" The Caring Life leads us to exercise compassion over caution... not in a careless put yourself in clear danger way...although it might sometimes...but in a way that prioritizes living a Jesus-shaped life, acting on the character of God, who put himself at risk and was killed, as an act of mercy, for us.

The caring life will drive you to give up Convenience for Concern

The priest and Levite had likely been serving their time at the temple and were headed home, notice how Jesus says they were 'going down the same road (to Jericho).' They have been away from their families for a couple of weeks, perhaps tired from their duties, and they just wanted to get home to their wives, families, recliners, and a home-cooked meal. If they paused to help and were rendered unclean by touching a corpse, that would have been a huge inconvenience for them and their families. They did not want to face this inconvenience, and so they walked by. You know what? It's often good things that distract our attention from helping other people.

We get another picture though. The Samaritan, who was also traveling and had a destination, and probably people he loved at the other end. But he was willing to give up convenience and act on his concern for the hurt man. He changed his course and altered his plans and trajectory to attend to someone who needed help. The caring life drives us to give up convenience to act on our concerns.

When I was 9 or 10 years old, my mom and I were out walking near the shores of Lake Superior. It was winter, and one of the interesting features of a big lake and freezing temperatures is that the water slowly freezes out from the shoreline. Big lakes have nearly constant waves crashing the shores, and with some of the winter storms, the ice freezes in wave formations, and it almost appears like what you might imagine the surface of the moon or another planet to look like. As the waves continue to crash and freeze, there is a phenomenon called an ice volcano that forms, it's where an ice shaft freezes and water shoots up from below, splashing freezing water just like a volcano spews molten lava. Eventually, these ice volcanoes freeze up and the icy shoreline reaches further out into the lake. As we were walking around this landscape, as a young boy I thought it would be funny to run ahead and find a place to duck down and hide, and then jump out and yell 'Boo!' at my mom. I found this little depression at the top of what I thought was just a mound of ice and decided this would be the perfect hiding spot. To my surprise and horror, when I stepped in, the icy snow gave way and I fell into an ice volcano. The bottom had frozen, but I could see the darkness of the water below me through the ice. The inside was so slick there was no way for me to climb out, and the surface was about two and a half feet higher than I could reach. I yelled so my mom could find me, and she did, but there was no way for her to pull me out without her tumbling down into the cave as well. She had to walk the quarter mile back to shore and hope some cross-country skiers were in the area, and wouldn't you know just as she reached shore, two men came skiing around the bend. I don't know this, but I'm guessing she was a bit frantic in asking for help. These men had places to go, people to see, and things to do, but they were willing to inconvenience themselves to help. You never fully know the story of what's going on in someone's world when they ask for help. And God just might have you in the place where he needs you to help someone - if only you'll give up thinking your convenience is the most important deciding factor.

The caring life will move you beyond Counting the Cost

It will cost you, time, money, and potentially even your reputation. When we genuinely care for another, just like the Samaritan, it will cost us something. The Samaritan gave up his time, changing his agenda to render help. It cost him money. And, what we might miss is the emotional toll this act might have taken on him. He put himself in a place where he might fear for his life - a Samaritan entering a Jewish town, carrying a beat-up Jew, he could have faced the wrath of the people. He may have faced scorn upon arriving in his own town: "Why are you late?" "Well, I was helping a Jewish man." "Why would you do that?" When you stand with people who might be viewed as outsiders, sometimes your other friends might be upset, or make accusations about you, or distance themselves from you. But living the Caring Life moves you beyond counting these kinds of costs for the sake of practicing the compassionate love of God and helping those who need help and can't help themselves.

The caring life will challenge you to Change your Categories

The story we read in Luke 10 began with a lawyer asking a 'how' question. 'How do I inherit eternal life?' Jesus knew that as a student of the law, he already knew the answer, and when Jesus asked

him, he gave a flawless one. But he wanted to ask the 'who' question. Will you give me a legal definition of neighbor Jesus? Will you define who is 'in' and, more importantly, who is outside the boundary? Jesus tells a story to answer.

I've noticed through the years that when you pray for help, you don't get to control where it comes from. Think about the guy in the ditch, who was left for dead, I'm guessing he prayed for help, and I'm guessing he was hoping for a fellow Jewish person to be the one to rescue him. But along come two Jewish guys, a priest and a Levite, who ought to have been motivated to help him, yet they didn't. Then along comes a Samaritan, we call this story the parable of the Good Samaritan, but in the time it was told, that was an oxymoron for a Jew - 'good' and 'Samaritan' did not belong in the same sentence. There was a deep hatred that went back centuries. But when you're lying in a ditch dying, praying for help, you're at the mercy of whoever shows up to help.

I think of my friend whose car broke down on a remote country road. He was traveling along, windows down, wind blowing, radio playing, when his car made a funny sound and the engine died. He pulled his sputtering car over to the side of the road, got out, and popped open the hood. He didn't know anything about engines but figured opening the hood made it look like he was having problems. It was evening, on the edge of twilight. He was out of cell range and could not call anyone. He was at the mercy of fellow travelers. Several cars passed by, but nobody stopped to help. Then my friend heard some very loud engines in the distance, and as the noise approached, he realized it was a group of motorcyclists. They slowed and stopped. He said they looked exactly how you would imagine a motorcycle gang to look: sunglasses, bandanas, leather vests, tattoos, and some had long scruffy beards and hair in ponytails. He admits that at that moment he didn't know if he was being helped or if he was in more trouble. But before he knew it, one of the guys had popped the hood of his car; and a couple of guys magically produced tools out of the leather side bags on their bikes, and while he was talking to a couple of other guys before he knew it he heard his car engine fire up. The whole group of bikes escorted him to the nearest town and helped him find a garage, and well, he says my stereotypes were shattered that day.

You don't get to choose where help comes from, AND, when you pray to God and say, "Here I am, send me, I want to be a person who shares your love and life with others." You lose control of whom God might want you to help. He may just nudge you across the boundary line you've drawn for yourself. Jesus is good at getting one of those big pink erasers out and working his way around the boundaries we've drawn, smudging, blurring, and erasing our definitions of 'in' and 'out.'

Jesus gets to the end of his story and asks the lawyer, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" In other words, which demonstrated The Caring Life? And the lawyer responded, "The one who had mercy on him." The one who felt concerned and acted upon it, and wasn't concerned about category or cost or convenience.

Living the Jesus-shaped CARING life challenges us to change our categories... it redefines who we ought to help and care for.

I like using the WINDSHIELD analogy. It's easy for me since I've worn glasses for as long as I can remember. I have two windshields in front of my eyes all the time. I look out through these pieces of plastic at the world around me. We all have lenses in our eyes that we look through, they are windshields. Your car has a windshield, your houses have windows. We look out at people through our windshields. According to Jesus, everyone you see through your windshield is your neighbor. Someone he says you are to exhibit care for. Now that will mess with your categories because if we're honest, there are plenty of people we put in the Samaritan category, the 'other' category, people we label as 'them.' People we don't trust or like; people who don't share our beliefs; people who make us uncomfortable; people we're in conflict with; people who live differently or sin differently than you do; or people you fear. The 'other.' And Jesus says, these people in your windshield are your neighbor, people who God loves dearly and are worthy of your compassion and care.

We saw the lawyer's categories change right in front of our eyes. At first, he was trying to define people out, and in the end, he's changed. Maybe, just maybe, Jesus' story caused this lawyer to re-evaluate his vocabulary – it's no longer 'them' or 'the Samaritan' – it's now the one who SHOWED MERCY. The Samaritan is no longer defined as a category, but by his actions, the one who acted as God would, the one who was truly fulfilling God's expectations.

The lawyer knew what was required in the law – he had a flawless answer to Jesus' question, but that's like passing the written part of your driver's license exam, which is good, but it doesn't mean a whole lot if you never get in a car and drive. Jesus wanted him to get behind the wheel of life, put his heart in gear, and take it for a drive – to be able to demonstrate he could put what he knew into practice.

When you live the caring life, you are living a Jesus-shaped life, and you are living close to the heart and character of God; and when you are living close to the heart of God, you will find life.

Small Group Discussion Questions

Questions:

1. What does it mean to live 'The Caring Life'? In what ways do you enjoy soul friendship with other believers? Take a moment and talk through how you define the words 'fellowship' and 'hospitality.'
2. Describe a few stories where we see Jesus living a caring life. What about the story gives away his care and compassion for people?
3. What do you think the lawyer was trying to accomplish with the questions he asked Jesus? Why do you think Jesus answers with a story instead of a straight-up answer? Was this an effective way to engage the inquisitor? Why, or why not?
4. Based on this parable, who are we supposed to care for? How does this challenge your categories or the boundaries you have drawn around who you define as your neighbor?
5. What new habits would you like to develop to help you live a Jesus-shaped caring life through fellowship and hospitality?

THE BLESSING LIFE - SAMPLE SERMON AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

Luke 9:10-17

The miraculous feeding of a crowd of 5,000 plus people is a story that appears in all four gospels. At the beginning of chapter 9, just before this story, we see Jesus gathering his disciples and giving them the power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and then sending them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. You've been following me and watching and helping, now go and do. It's time to get out and practice what you've been learning.

Back in the day when I hired and trained outside sales associates, one part of the interview process was to take them on a ride-along in the territory and introduce them to the art of cold-calling. This is one of the more intimidating parts of being in sales, and I needed to know how they would respond. After demonstrating 10-15 cold calls, I would look at my interviewee and say, 'Okay, you've got the next one!' The look on their faces was priceless, and often told me everything I needed to know. I gave them what they needed and the authorization to go and do it. Would they?

Off the disciples went, ministering just as Jesus had taught them. They went out living The Blessing Life, putting their faith into action. And that's the fourth practice in Storied Discipleship, blessing.

Now in the story we just read, the disciples had returned and were telling Jesus all their stories. Jesus takes them to the town of Bethsaida to get away and talk more about their mission, a time of debriefing and learning based on their experience. But the crowds followed them, and Jesus welcomed them. Remember he lives 'The Caring Life,' he did not 'shoo' the crowds away and tell them he was busy and to come back later. He took time to teach them and heal those who needed healing. I imagine this was exhausting for Jesus and the disciples. They were mentally prepared for a break and some needed time off. Don't you find it more draining when you expect to be on vacation and you are pressed into some kind of work responsibility? When you're tired and expecting rest, you may feel like your cup is empty, and it's hard to pour from an empty cup.

Late in the afternoon the disciples came to him and said, "Send the crowd away so they can go to the surrounding villages and countryside and find food and lodging, because we are in a remote place here." It's like they were saying, wrap the sermon up Jesus, it's time to eat. They were met with the most basic human need, food, and their solution was to send the people away. Feeding the crowd themselves was the furthest thing from their mind.

Jesus looks at them and says, "You give them something to eat." We'll have plenty of time in the future to talk about the miracle itself, what I'm drawn to is how Jesus challenges his disciples to put their faith into practice and bless other people. He challenges us in the same way!

The disciples saw the need of the people, and they had just returned from ministry work where they cast out demons and healed people - they had been given power and authority, but in this case, they did not engage, they did not think they had anything to offer. Send the people away. And Jesus says, no, you feed them.

In Luke's telling of this story, the disciples already have five loaves and two fish, and they didn't think that was enough, why would they? Mark's gospel tells us a bit more. Mark says the disciples tell Jesus 'We don't have enough money to buy bread for everyone.' They look at what they have and determine it is not enough, they assume they can't help; we're not able to be a blessing. Jesus tells them to go take an inventory, "What do you have?" he asks.

The disciples had what is called the mindset of scarcity, and it paralyzed them from doing anything. We can't Jesus. One of our kid's elementary school teachers had a rule in her classroom that there were to be no sightings of the 'T'naci' (T'naki) monster. T'naci is 'I can't' spelled backward. She was teaching the kids to try and to push through things that appeared too difficult at first glance. When her students would whine, "I can't," she would call out the monster, and the kids understood what she meant. The T'naci monster is out in this story. There's no way we can feed the whole crowd, we don't have enough. **Do you ever feel like you don't have enough? Let alone enough to feel like you can share and give it away to others?**

I made a 2,500-mile cross-country trip from Western Washington to Wisconsin a few years ago. As I planned out the trip, I looked closely at the map to plan out our 'estimated' fuel stops. Everything was going well until we reached Eastern Montana, and all the dots on the map indicating towns turned up to be exits with 'no services.' One exit went by, no fuel. Then another. The fuel light on my Ford Expedition came on, 40 or 50 miles before empty. Another exit came and went, no services. We were now more miles away from the next opportunity than we had gas in the tank to make it. I coasted down all the hills, dropping into neutral just to see if I could coax out a few more miles. The exit was in sight, we rolled into the closest gas station and when I shut the vehicle off, the fuel indicator needle didn't move, it was resting on the little peg that holds it in place. I opened the gas cap and I got that pfffft air sound. We made it, somehow; a miracle of provision in my book.

Have you ever faced a situation where you were sure you were going to run out of something, but somehow, somehow, you had just enough?

One of the lines of tension in the Bible hangs between the abundance God provides and the scarcity we often feel. I think about Adam and Eve, they were duped into thinking they didn't have enough and took the fruit. The Hebrew people who had witnessed the miraculous hand of God at work on their behalf to free them from 400 years in slavery were convinced God brought them into the wilderness to starve them to death, and God demonstrated his hand of provision with manna. During a severe drought, the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17) was convinced she didn't have enough flour to make Elijah some bread, but she did so in faith and miraculously had enough flour until the drought was over. In 2 Kings 4, Elisha encountered a woman whose husband had died and was being pursued by his creditors who wanted to take her two boys into slavery. She had nothing but a small jar of oil. Elisha told her to collect all the jars she could find, and then pour her one jar of oil into them. Miraculously the oil did not stop running until every last jar was full. She sold them and paid off the debt. We see the tension between the scarcity we feel and the abundance of God.

When we take on the mindset of scarcity, you know what happens to us? We shrink back. We move inward. We begin to worry about not having enough. And WORRY KILLS GENEROSITY. It's hard to

think about blessing and serving and giving to others when we're worried about ourselves. Instead of giving, we might find ourselves tucking things away for a rainy day. Worry also narrows our vision and we begin to minimize what God has blessed us with. Maybe we think what we have is not enough, or maybe that what we have is not good enough.

When you feel like you don't have enough, Jesus may just send you on a mission to take inventory of what he's already blessed you with, telling you to "Go and see." What you have, in his hands, is more than enough to bless others. Where the disciples saw scarcity, Jesus saw abundance! He knew the 'lunchable' was more than enough and he called on them to do more than they believed was possible. The needs of the world may feel overwhelming, especially when we feel small and insignificant, but Jesus sees something different.

Jesus lives THE BLESSING LIFE, the giving life, the serving life, and he challenges the disciples to ACT ON THEIR FAITH. We often hear Jesus talking about hearing and doing. Hear my words and obey them – put them into practice. In Luke 6:47-48, he shares that the one who hears and does is like the person who built their house on a solid foundation and when the storms hit they were not shaken. In Luke 11:28 he says, "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it." In John 14:21, Jesus goes as far as saying, "Whoever has (knows) my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me..." Our love for him is demonstrated in our doing what he says. Hearing is nothing if there is no doing and obeying that follows.

This teaching sunk in over time. Jesus' brother James writes a lot about faith and works. Look at these verses in James:

"He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created." James 1:18 NIV

We are saved by God's grace to be the first fruits and extend this blessing to others. Verse 18 gives us a picture of our identity in Christ. We are transformed by God's grace. It's a beautiful picture of God reconciling the world to himself; and we, in the church, are to be a picture of this beauty – a model of grace, mercy, and forgiveness.

"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do." James 1:22-25 NIV

"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." James 2:14-17 NIV

That's pretty straightforward. You may not like that, and it might make you feel uncomfortable, but you can't misunderstand James, who is teaching what he learned directly from Jesus. I think it is Mark Twain who says it's not the parts of the Bible that he doesn't understand that bother him, it's the parts he does understand and can't escape.

It's not just about serving and giving – it's about our everyday living too. If you want a healthy marriage, there's teaching in the book. If you want to tame your tongue or control your anger, there's teaching in the book. If you want to learn kindness or patience or self-control, it's in the book. BUT if you don't DO what it says – it's useless! James says you can't just read God's word, or even just talk about it, it's useless unless you put it into practice. It's like an accountant who reads the IRS tax code but does not put it into practice for their clients.

James' message to the church is "Faith that is alive is a faith that leads to faithful action in loving and serving (blessing) others in a way that points people to Jesus."

Not in an effort to earn grace, but as a result of grace experienced. We are saved by grace – not by works. Working out your faith in obeying and blessing and serving is the fruit of the Spirit at work in your life, transforming you from within. It is Christ in you – and you living out his story in and through your life. You cannot escape this – it's not an optional extra in your faith walk, and so we ought to be motivating each other to acts of love and good works.

Jesus lives the blessing life, and he challenges us to follow him. When the disciples were stuck and frozen from acting, saying, "We don't have enough," Jesus says, "Well, what do you have? Figure that out for me." And they discover they have a 'lunchable' – five small loaves and two fish. Would you describe what you have to offer as a 'lunchable,' a small snack when a full meal is needed? You might look at your resources, and you may think you don't have anything of value to offer anyone else – know this, Jesus thinks differently.

You have a lunchable. That's enough. Bring it to me, watch this. Jesus took what they had, blessed it, broke it, and gave it back to them to distribute. It was hands-on training in living the blessing life. Jesus involves us in his work. He wants us to trust him, listen to his words, and then go and do, putting our faith into action!

Jesus challenges us to think bigger – to think beyond what we can see. He wants us to recognize and learn that when we trust him with his provision, it is more than enough. God has already provided everything we need to accomplish his will for us right now. Our inadequacies, real or imagined, are opportunities to let God work through us and accomplish what we might think is impossible. He sends us out to live THE BLESSING LIFE with what we already have – and it's enough for what he wants of us right now.

The challenge is to change your mindset from scarcity to one of abundance. Enough.

Let me give you a summary – a definition of The Blessing Life. The practice of blessing is serving others in the name of Jesus. It challenges us to be doers of the word and not simply hearers of it. As God gives us his vision of people, living the blessing life is living the giving life and opens our

hearts to meet others' needs. Living the blessing life is also living the encouraging life, looking for ways to build others up, inspiring them with the hope of Jesus, and reminding them they are God's beloved children.

Wherever there is plenty of God there is plenty of everything else. And God will turn your 'not enough' into 'plenty!' to bless others.

So friends, go and live the blessing life, the giving life, the serving life – Hear the Word, and put it into practice. Leave a legacy of blessing wherever God gives you opportunity!

Amen.

Small Group Discussion Questions:

- 1) A prominent part of Jesus' teaching is to first hear the word and then obey it by putting it into action. How do we see this evident in the story of Jesus feeding the large crowd?
- 2) The disciples see the need of the crowd and bring that need to Jesus. How does Jesus respond and challenge them? What other stories can you recall where Jesus invites his disciples to put their faith into action to meet the needs they encounter?
- 3) When have you seen God use limited resources to meet a challenging situation?
- 4) Read through James 1:19-27 and 2:14-26. James is very blunt when he says that faith is dead when it does not result in faithful activity. How do you respond to this claim considering our understanding that we are saved by grace through faith? How do faith and deeds work together? What are some of the ways James says we ought to put our faith into practice?
- 5) How do Christians deceive themselves by just listening to God's word? What happens when you read and read, but never practice? When have you been blessed by doing the word of God and blessing someone else?
- 6) What does it mean to live 'The Blessing Life'? How do you define the words blessing, serving, and encouraging? What new habits would you like to develop to help you live a Jesus-shaped blessing and serving life?

PRAYER: LEARN TO PRAY BY PRAYING – SERIES DESCRIPTION AND OUTLINE



FIGURE 13: LEARNING TO PRAY BY PRAYING SERIES GRAPHIC

When I was young and learning to ride a bike, my parents did not buy me a book to study the proper mechanics and techniques for mastering the skill. You see, one learns to ride a bike by getting on a bike and riding it. You don't master it right away, and you can't pedal in a straight line and fall a few times. But before you know it, you learn to balance and speed, and suddenly a whole new world is opened! Your prayer life is no different. When Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them how to pray, he gave them a basic prayer, and, in effect, said you learn to pray by praying. As a pastor, I talk to people about their prayer lives, and most people have a couple of things in common, whether they are Christians or not. Most everyone prays, and most feel like their prayer life is anemic or ineffective. This series is designed to help you develop a healthy prayer life and discover the many different kinds of prayer which are modeled for us in the Bible.

Week One: Learning to Pray by Praying – Matthew 6:9-13

Week Two: Prayer of Adoration – 1 Samuel 2:1-10

Week Three: Prayer of Asking – Nehemiah 1:4-11

Week Four: Prayer of Admitting – Jonah 2:1-10

Week Five: Prayer of Awareness – 1 Thessalonians 5:17

Week Six: Prayer of Anguish – Psalm 6

Part Three: Develop and Launch a Podcast and Blog

This part of the project is to create and launch a podcast and blog to further the conversation around *Storied Discipleship* and the nine practices for living a Jesus-shaped life and to give users a vehicle to experience these lessons in a digital listening and reading format. This presentation includes the outline for Season One and four sample podcast episode scripts.

Everything is in place for the *Under the Broom Tree* podcast to go live in the Fall of 2023. I have procured equipment to record and edit podcasts to ensure a high-quality audio experience. Using the Anchor platform, I have built the podcast base and recorded a preliminary season of Bible readings as a test run. The podcast can be found at <https://anchor.fm/dave-bach>. I have included a screenshot of the podcast page in Appendix E.

The *Under the Broom Tree* blog will provide a place for shorter writings, observations, and helpful hints about living a storied life in Jesus. This will be a repository, if you will, of content that is directly or tangentially related to this work. When fully operational, it will be a place to ‘think out loud’ and invite a wider audience into the conversation, invite questions, and offer feedback. The blog will be hosted at www.broomtree.org. I have included a screenshot of a sample blog in Appendix E.

PODCAST EPISODES: SEASON ONE PROJECTED SCHEDULE

Episode 1: Introduction to the ‘Under the Broom Tree’ podcast

Episode 2: Habits, and the Basics of Forming New Ones

Episode 3: What is Storied Discipleship?

Episode 4: Overview of the Nine Practices for Jesus-shaped Living

Episode 5: Edgy Faith

Episode 6: Praying as Breathing

Episode 7: Learning the Story: How Do I Study the Bible?

Episode 8: What’s Love Got to Do with It?

Episode 9: Leaving a Legacy of Blessing

Episode 10: What is Worship?

Episode 11: How Do I Share My Faith?

Episode 12: The Rhythm of Rest in Sabbath

Episode 13: How Do I Simplify My Life?

Episode 14: What Does ‘Playing’ Have to Do with Faith Formation?

NINE PRACTICES OF JESUS-SHAPED LIVING - SAMPLE PODCAST SCRIPT FOR EPISODE 4

Today, I want to introduce you to the nine practices of Jesus -shaped living that I briefly mentioned in the last episode on Storied Discipleship. Before we get into that, I came across something interesting that parallels how I think about measuring health in our walk with Jesus.

The science world tells us about Seven Signs of Living Things. All living things will exhibit the following signs:²⁹

1. **Nutrition** or Feeding: Living things take in substances from their world, healthy calories that are used to produce energy to survive
2. **Moving** or Movement: All living organisms have the ability to move nutrition through their body, which is characterized as internal movement. Some living things also have external movement, meaning they can move about (walk, hop, fly, swim, etc)
3. **Breathing** or Respiration: For example, humans exchange oxygen for carbon dioxide in the respiration process
4. **Excreting**: Living things have a way to remove toxins and waste from the body
5. **Growing**: Living things use energy to become larger and more complex
6. **Sensing** or Sensitivity: Living things sense and react to the world around them; reacting to sensations such as light, sound, heat, cold, etc.
7. **Reproducing**: Living things produce offspring; humans make babies; chickens lay eggs that hatch; Maple trees produce those helicopter seeds that fly all over the place, etc.

Now, you're probably wondering, what's with the science lesson? Well, when I hear this list, I can't help but hear similarities to our spiritual lives. I'm often asked the question, "How's your church doing?" or "How big is your church?" I don't like those questions because I'm not exactly sure how to answer them. I know they want me to talk about easy things to measure like attendance and giving. Measuring these things is fine, yet I'm convinced that to grow a bigger church you have to grow bigger Christians first. So, I look at different kinds of things to measure the health of a congregation. I'm looking for VITAL SIGNS... or SIGNS OF LIFE in the followers of Jesus!

The nine signs of life I think followers of Jesus ought to exhibit are the nine practices I want to share with you. They are praying, learning, caring, blessing, celebrating, sharing, resting, simplifying, and

²⁹ Ngepathimo Kadhila, *NSSC Biology Module* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3. The descriptions of the seven signs of living things are brief summaries found in this textbook.

tending. We'll define them in a moment, but these nine things help us live a Jesus-shaped life, and they are also evidence that the Holy Spirit is at work in us, transforming us into the likeness of Jesus.

I drew a picture of how I see these nine practices functioning (you can access it at broomtree.org). It shows three concentric circles. The outermost circle shows the cycle of breathing, inhaling and exhaling, one of the necessary basic functions of life. No breath, no life. There are parts of our faith journey that I think fall into both categories. You could say our spiritual formation is rhythmic, it's a breathing exercise. In the infographic some of the practices are exercises in breathing in God which fills us and empowers us to live out the Jesus life; and there are some of the practices that are exhaling, working out our Christ-formation. In John 20:21, when Jesus appears to the disciples after his resurrection, we're told Jesus says, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." Then in verse 22, he breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit..." He sends them out to work out their faith in the world and continue his ministry, but not before he breathes on them the Holy Spirit to empower their work.

I love this image of Jesus breathing on them. Jesus wants to get what's inside of him inside the disciples. He gives them his peace; and commissioned them to go and bear fruit. Authentic witness comes out of genuine peace with God. Then he breathes on them; he gives them the Holy Spirit; he gives them the power to do what he sent them to do.

Think back to the beginning of our Scriptures. Do you remember another place where God breathes? Genesis 2:7 reads, "God formed man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life." The word for breath is the same. Do you remember when life was breathed into the dry bones in Ezekiel? The same word for breath again. Now the disciples, and ultimately the church, and you and me! He breathes this same breath into you and me. He gives you his breath of life. I'm a C.S. Lewis fan, and this imagery reminds me of the story in the Chronicles of Narnia, where the great lion Aslan breathes over the characters who had been 'petrified' (turned to stone) by the white witch. His breath slowly warms them, reanimates them - he breaths on them the breath of life and restores them.

Jesus is full of the breath of God. He is full of the Holy Spirit. Receive the Holy Spirit says Jesus., and he breathed on them. When Jesus exhales, when he puffs air on them, they are close enough to inhale the spirit, and be empowered by it. Imagine breathing in that holy air. Imagine the fear and doubt and confusion leaving their bodies replaced by the peace that passes all understanding. Jesus' gentle breath lets loose his spirit into the world. Acts 1:8 "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes" And Romans 8:11 "The Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead now lives in you" That's power! He gives them power. I could go on and on about this, maybe another time. I think you get the point - we need to inhale God before we can do anything else, so some of our practices are just that, putting us in the posture to receive what God freely gives.

Some of the practices are like breathing in, some are like breathing out. You can't just breathe in and hold your breath, you must exhale, and inhale again; and so, several of the practices are just that.

The second circle in the infographic splits the nine practices into three directions: Up, In, and Out. Three of the practices (praying, learning, celebrating) focus our attention upward on God. Three of the practices (resting, simplifying, tending) focus our attention inward. And, three of the practices (caring, blessing, sharing) focus our attention outward. We will get into this more in future podcasts on each of these practices.

Let's finish up this one by defining each of the nine. The interior circle of the infographic is split into nine parts, and it flows in the direction of breathing; it flows from 'up' to 'in' to 'out.'

Practice One: Praying

The *practice of praying* is talking and listening to God personally and communally. Praying is a time of breathing in the Holy Spirit; it is an exercise in thanking God for his presence and blessings; it is an open conduit for confessing sin and being honest with him, and an opportunity to submit our will to his, seeking his will be done on earth in our lives as it is in heaven.

Practice Two: Learning

The *practice of learning* is a lifelong pursuit of engaging one's mind and time spent studying God's Word regularly: meditating upon it, memorizing it, and feasting on it, expecting the Holy Spirit to offer new and fresh insights. The learning life is not only personal in nature; we learn in community by sharing and teaching what we have learned with others.

Practice Three: Caring

The *practice of caring* is enjoying soul friendship, being knit together with other believers in unity with the Spirit. Caring is loving others as Christ loves us and forgiving others as Christ forgives us. The practice of caring encourages depth of relationship; it is an embracing and welcoming of all the people God places in our circles of influence and leads one into a life of compassion, mercy, fellowship, and hospitality.

Practice Four: Blessing

The *practice of blessing* is serving others in the name of Jesus. It challenges us to be doers of the Word and not simply hearers of it. As God gives us his vision for people, living the blessing life is living the giving life, and it opens our hearts to meet others' needs. Living the blessing life is also living the encouraging life, looking for ways to build others up, inspiring them with the hope of Jesus, and reminding them that they are one of God's beloved children.

Practice Five: Celebrating

The *practice of celebrating* is worshiping and glorifying God in every facet of life. The celebrating life is learning to see God and express our joy in his presence as we move through life. Celebrating also draws us into the community of believers to join our hearts and voices in worship, praise, and thanksgiving to our Creator, Lord, and Savior, delighting in God's presence as one.

Practice Six: Sharing

The *practice of sharing* is being a witness for Christ, sharing your story of how Jesus has made a difference in your life, and is in the process of transforming you. Sharing is fulfilling Jesus' prime directive to go into all the world, sharing the good news of Jesus with people, and inviting them into a life of discipleship.

Practice Seven: Resting

The *practice of resting* is acknowledging our physical, emotional, and spiritual limitations and taking time to refresh in God's presence. The resting life is learning the discipline of slowing down in the midst of a chaotic and hurried world and learning to practice sabbath as a means of connecting with God and allowing him to recharge us in the places where we have grown weary.

Practice Eight: Simplifying

The *practice of simplifying* is living simply and creating space for God by setting aside other things that have cluttered our lives. The simplifying life is the unplugging-and-the-untangling life, which allows us to be more fully present to God and others. Learning the simplifying life includes fasting and the loosening of our attachments to things and structures in such a way that frees us from distractions and allows us to live a life of feasting and depending on God.

Practice Nine: Tending

The *practice of tending* is attending to all of God's creation; it is honoring God by fulfilling our assigned work of tending the garden and being good stewards of all God has entrusted to our care. The tending life is the exercising-and-eating-right life, the playing life, the participating-with-God-in-creating life, and the child-like-'faithing' life.

If we see Jesus, and we do, practicing a life of praying, learning, caring, blessing, celebrating, sharing, resting, simplifying, and tending, how much more should we? As this series of podcasts continues, we will look at each of the nine in more depth, and explore ways we can begin to develop these as habits in our lives.

EDGY FAITH - SAMPLE PODCAST SCRIPT FOR EPISODE 5

"So, this is what the Sovereign Lord says: 'See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who relies on it will never be stricken with panic.'"

Isaiah 28:16 (NIV)

"Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."

Ephesians 2:19-22 (NIV)

I'm guessing at some point in your Christian life you've had someone say, "Just make sure you have Jesus at the center of your life." Maybe they were offering you what they believed was helpful guidance for you during a time when you had questions of how faith and life work together.

Have you received this advice at some point in your faith journey? Have you been one to offer this advice to someone? I understand the motive behind the counsel, and I get a clear picture of what is intended in the metaphor. It makes sense if you draw a circle and then place Jesus in the middle so everything revolves around him. So, in one sense this is good advice.

The problem is I think that all too often we just want Jesus to come into our life without changing anything, or requiring anything of us. We say, "Yeah Jesus, I'm going to slide you into the center, but please don't disturb everything else I have spinning in orbit right now."

So, I want to say this: **"DON'T MAKE JESUS THE CENTER OF YOUR LIFE."** Now, don't move on to another podcast just yet, hear me out. "Don't make Jesus the center of your life...**FIND YOURSELF AT THE CENTER OF JESUS' LIFE.**" Let me say that again, "Don't make Jesus the center of your life...**FIND YOURSELF AT THE CENTER OF JESUS' LIFE.**"

If we attempt to place Jesus in the center of OUR life, that's really just trying to find some kind of balance on our own. It's a veiled effort in maintaining control. And in the end, it sounds rather selfish. If Jesus is at the center of whatever I'm doing, and whatever I have going on, then I can do anything and justify it as Jesus' will. That's a slippery slope. **Following Jesus takes us out of control.** He says that whoever wants to follow me must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow. It's a call to die to our own will, and a command to lay aside our agenda and adopt his.

Think about this picture, if you're in a boat, you make efforts to keep the weight distribution towards the center, otherwise, you will capsize. We don't really want to tip over and get wet, so we keep what we believe is the greatest weight in the center, not so much as a guide, but as a centering weight to keep us 'safe.' But maybe Jesus wants our boat to flip. Maybe he wants us trusting him enough to get out of our boat and walk on the water with him. Remember Peter?

Jesus doesn't want to be the center of YOUR life, he wants you in the center of his. He wants to be the cornerstone in your life. Did you hear that in the verses I read earlier? I found at least six places in the Bible that describe Jesus as the 'cornerstone.' Are you familiar with what a cornerstone is? In ancient building practices, the cornerstone was the first stone set in the construction of a building; and every other stone is set in relation to the cornerstone. Maybe a more modern metaphor is needed...Jesus isn't a book on your shelf - he ought to be the shelf itself. Your faith isn't just one thing among many - every other thing in your life ought to find its place and meaning based on it.

Let's think about that cornerstone again for a moment. Can you tell me, where is the cornerstone? Is it in the 'Center'? No, it is not the center. It is foundational, yes. It orients everything else around it... but it is not the center, it is on the edge, the perimeter of the foundation. There are plenty of Scriptures that tell us to put Christ first, and none that instruct us to put him in our center. If we are to find and truly follow Jesus, we need to move to the edges and away from our own center. Jesus moves. He's active. He moves at the margins of our lives. He's willing to cross every boundary we draw and take us beyond the edge of where we feel comfortable, safe, and in control. The beauty in this is that in following, he does not leave us alone; we move with him as he moves in the world. If we abide in him, we are actually at the center of God.

Friends, don't make Jesus the center of your life. Follow Jesus wherever he goes - yeah, it will likely destabilize you and you'll have to move to keep your balance in him. But as you follow Jesus, the way, the truth, and the life, you'll find your place at the center of God! Our prayer ought to be: "Jesus, place me in the center of what you're doing" which requires discernment and a willingness to be off-center.

When I've felt confident about being in the center of God's will for my life, it never looks like how I would have engineered my life or plans around my own desires. Literally never. He constantly moves us beyond, 'destabilizes us,' and nudges us to something even greater than we can imagine at the time. We find our balance as we move towards God.

Dan Thurman is a motivational speaker, who wrote the book "Off Balance on Purpose." He is also a juggler and unicyclist. He can balance in a one-handed handstand on an unsteady surface. He says that so often in life when we're trying to find balance, we're trying to juggle so much stuff because we think that leads to a better life. He demonstrates that when you're trying to balance, you must intentionally throw your center of gravity off balance; instead of trying to hold steady and still, you're constantly making small movements and readjusting your weight to stay upright. Attempting to keep your weight or focus in the center is not helpful, and you have to intentionally throw things off balance in order to remain upright.³⁰

³⁰ Dan Thurman, *Off Balance On Purpose: Embrace Uncertainty and Create a Life You Love* (Snellville, GA: Motivation Works, Inc., 2016).

Being in the center of God, is not about staying in one place, it's paying close attention to the Holy Spirit and where he is moving, and tail-gating Jesus as you walk through life, keeping pace and moving along with him. Jesus never stayed or stays in one place. He's out in the world moving. We'll need to keep adjusting course, listening, watching, discerning, moving – just to stay upright – keeping balance by allowing Jesus to throw things off center. We'll often find him on the margins, on the perimeter, beyond the lines we've drawn, and beyond what we can see ourselves. He calls us out into the deep waters where he is! This is where our faith is stretched and strengthened as we rely on the God who is always moving us forward.

Jesus will take you beyond the border of your comfort zone. He will call you out into the deep waters where you must learn to trust him. My teacher Leonard Sweet says the disciples missed out on the 'ride of their lives' and settled for something less by begging Jesus to calm the storm. How often do we miss out because we refuse to get out of our own center and follow Jesus?

Remember back in Exodus 14, after Moses had led the people out of Egypt and they came to this place between a rock and a hard place? They had marched out triumphantly but seemed to be disoriented geographically. They found themselves camped by the Sea, with water on one side, impassible rocky terrain on another side, and the Egyptian army who was thundering across the desert to round them up and bring them back to Egypt. Remember that? Moses said, "Stand still and watch what the Lord will do to save you." And God says to Moses, "Hey, why are you standing around? Get the people moving." I imagine Moses stuttering a bit, "Um, that's great God, but we're kind of trapped right now, there's no place to go." To which God says, "Raise your staff and stretch out your hand to divide the sea." Incredible. All that night the wind blew out of the east and drove the sea back, and the waters were divided.

In Exodus 14:22 we're told that *"The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left."* Did you hear that? The people on the shore started walking into the Sea – they got their feet wet, and they went in trust. They went into the sea and then dry ground happened. How far in did they go before the water parted? There's a psalm that talks about water up to their necks. They were called into the deep and went out in trust. And then they found dry ground, and proceeded through the sea, with a wall of water on their right and a wall of water on their left. They walked through chaos on both sides – sounds like life, right? Chaos is all around. But the Lord provides a way, through the chaos, through the sea on dry ground. They found life in the center of the sea, precisely where God was leading. But they had to take a step of faith.

Help each other follow Jesus... help each other find your place in the center of Jesus' life, knowing he's always on the move, listening for him as he calls you out into the deep.

Don't be afraid – Jesus is already there, going ahead of you – so you can be 'through the sea on dry ground people.' Follow Jesus to the edge, and beyond.

WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT? - SAMPLE PODCAST SCRIPT FOR EPISODE 8

We're going to talk about love. Jesus will tell us in the passage I'll share with you in just a minute that EVERYONE WILL KNOW we are his disciples by the way we love. And I was thinking, we love so many things in a very general sort of way, but Jesus calls us to a love that is very particular. You can say you 'love' people, or justice, or the environment, or anything really, but if you're not loving in a very particular way, what value is that loving? Yes, God loved the whole world, it's his creation, but he loved in a particular way by sending Jesus, who himself loved particular people, in particular ways. And when we love in the same way, he says, everyone will know.

Leading up to the verses I'm going to read from John 13, we hear a door closing in the upper room as Judas leaves and slips out into the cover of night to betray Jesus. And at this moment, it's like Jesus huddles the rest of the disciples in a little closer for some final words; to tell them new things, urgent things. Things that are full of comfort and challenge; things focused on the hope which is based solely on a relationship with Jesus. From now until the end of Chapter 16, Jesus explains he's going away and that they can't follow him just yet, but that they won't be orphaned and alone; and the whole section will end in Chapter 17 with a beautiful prayer Jesus prays on their behalf (our behalf).

"When he was gone, Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once. My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.'" John 13:31-35 (NIV)

When I was in high school, my youth group went on a mission trip, and following our week of ministry work, we spent a few days canoeing the Boundary Waters between Minnesota and Canada. It is a beautiful wilderness country away from all the noise of the world, and most of the time the waters were as peaceful as the atmosphere. But on one day, our route took us across one of the larger lakes which allowed boats with small engines. As we were crossing a power boat sped by and sent a wake of rippling waves a foot or two high. Some of my friends in another boat were not quick enough to turn into the waves and ended up capsizing and spilling all their gear into the water. Nobody was hurt, we righted the canoe and collected all the soggy gear, everything was recovered except my friend's glasses which disappeared into the deep. We shared a similar prescription so for the rest of our time out there we traded my glasses back and forth so she could clearly see the beauty we were traveling through. I share that story because the people in that powerboat were not paying attention to their wake, and what they were leaving for others to face.

If you move in water, you will leave a wake. Many waterways have signs posted where there are 'No Wake Zones.' They are there for safety, to protect other boaters, and sometimes to protect the shoreline from erosion. The signs remind you to be mindful of your wake.

As followers of Jesus, we are to leave a legacy of blessing wherever God gives us opportunity – another way of saying that is ‘to be mindful of what we are leaving in our wake.’ Are we rippling out negativity, brokenness, and anger; or are we rippling out the love of God? As you move through life, are you churning up waves that will capsize other vessels or are you creating gentle ripples that will softly splash the love of Jesus on the beach of people’s souls, like a gentle wave that laps the shore?

Right at the beginning of this farewell discourse, Jesus challenges the disciples to be mindful of what they leave in their wake. He starts with LOVE. He says, ‘others will know you are my disciples, if you love one another.’ LEAVE A WAKE OF LOVE

In verse 34, Jesus gives them a new command, to love another. What does he mean by that? Loving others is a common thread throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. All the Law and Prophets hang on two commands: To love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. So how is this a new command? We’ll get there in a minute.

Let’s spend a moment on what it means to LOVE ONE ANOTHER. Which requires us to define the kind of LOVE Jesus is talking about.

Our world has lots of definitions of love. Society tends to romanticize it. We are told that true love springs up from within. Love is free. Love is spontaneous. Love makes us feel ecstasy. That you can transcend your ordinary life, rise above it, and be connected to powers larger than yourself. HOW DO YOU DEFINE LOVE? Here are a few understandings of love you might see in the world:

- Love is trivial. Love is an overused word in our common vocabulary; saying ‘I love coffee’ diminishes the value of my saying ‘I love you’ to Lisa. There is a loss of depth of meaning
- Love is conditional. We love ‘if and when’ certain conditions are met, or for as long as the requirements are met
- Love is disposable. We will love until it no longer suits our purposes; or until it no longer ‘feels right’ or benefits us
- Love is sentimental. Love is simply a feeling. You get a glimpse of this by listening to the lyrics of love songs or watching movies and shows

All these are signals that we are searching for something lasting. Our culture puts a high value on connection and intimacy. I think because there is great fear of being alone. But I also think we long for love because we are made in the image of our creator who IS love

When Jesus says ‘love one another’ in Greek, the word for love is *agape*, a self-giving, loyal, sacrificial, ‘lift the other up’ kind of love. Apparently, this message sank into the disciples. John was present, and later in his life he wrote some letters that we have in our Bible that pick up on this message.

In 1 John 4, especially verses 7-18, John talks a lot about *agape* love. The phrase ‘Love one another’ shows up three times in verses 7-12. The first in verse 7 is an exhortation, ‘let us love one another.’ The second in verse 11 is an obligation, ‘we ought to love one another.’ And the third in verse 12

presents a hypothesis, 'if we love one another, then God lives in us, and his love is made complete in us.'

- 7) In verses 7 and 16, God is the source of love: "Love is from God." The love John describes here, does not, and cannot, come from our capacities. It stems from God's initiative. It is not "that we loved God, but that he loved us." In other words, it is not of human origin, but transcends us and originates beyond us. God is the source.
- 8) In verses 8 and 16, God is the essence of love: "God is love." God is not an abstract principle, like the Greek understanding of deity; rather we should look to the Hebrew understanding of deity as a dynamic personal force who acts rather than is. To say that God is love is equivalent to saying that God loves - his activity is for our well-being - his love is not hidden or hard to find, but has 'been revealed among us' in the person of Jesus
- 9) God demonstrates his love to us in the person of Jesus, and invites us to dwell in this love by abiding in Jesus, and when we abide in Jesus this love dwells in us.

Love is paradoxical in nature: It is only by knowing God that we learn to love; and it is only by loving that we learn to know God. Love comes from God, and love leads to God.

"What is Love?" John says, point blank, in verse 10, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." Love is defined as God sending his Son Jesus to die for our sins. This is where we circle back to 'loving one another' being a new command; the new part is when Jesus says to love 'just as I have loved you.'

So, I see the definition of love and what we are to live by as LOVE IS:

1. Choosing to act: First, you have to decide and make a conscious choice. Then you have to act on that choice. Just thinking something does nothing to accomplish it. If I decide I want to go fishing more often, I have to put it on the calendar and go, thinking about fishing is not fishing
2. In the best interest of another: This is not about making you feel better, but looking out for another person, and acting on their behalf - trying to make their life better in some way
3. Whether they deserve it or not: sacrificial love is not based on worthiness
4. Even if it costs you: This kind of love holds nothing back; you give of your time and resource; you may give up personal desire. You may even sacrifice your image or credibility. Sacrificial love is costly love - it took Jesus all the way to the cross

This is *agape* (love). Self-sacrificing love. Love that gives without expecting anything in return. It is love that responds by promoting another's well-being, even when they don't deserve it. God's chosen self-definition is *agape*. We do not have to guess what God is like. We simply have to look at what God has done.

Jesus says, Love as I have loved you...and when we look at his life we see things like...

- Jesus washing feet, healing people and feeding the masses
- We see him forgiving those crucifying him

- Teaching what is true, and doing what is truthful
- Setting aside anger and offering mercy
- Praying and serving; Respecting the dignity of every person
- Loving even those who didn't love him back
- Giving everything...

We learn from Jesus that life and love are not about me or my way. The more I look at Jesus the more I understand what love looks like – a love so deep its beyond our understanding. The depth of the love Jesus has for people is clearly evident in his actions, and there is a richness of the teaching through this section. He's encouraging them to love and think deeply. He wants them to love in a very particular way.

Shallow, superficial thinking and living and loving won't suffice. And you often find shallow thinking and shallow loving in the company of one another, and they are often born from shallow theology – or a wrong understanding of God and His love. He loves you particularly.

So be willing to think and love deeply – there is way too much shallowness in our culture, too many instances of 'fake love.' There is so much division, so much arguing – even among the people of God. What are we leaving in our wake? Do we unleash our anger and fury into the world in such a way that it sends out waves to capsize others? Or, are we rippling out the kind of love Jesus modeled?

Over and over, John emphasizes that God's love is self-giving. The kind of love God encompasses does not take us up and out of the earthiness of our life that often feels like muck and mire, rather, we see God's love demonstrated on a cross where Jesus emptied himself for our sake.

The result of God's love, or you could say the story of God's love that we are to live into, turns us inside out. Instead of operating out of selfish desire, we begin to see others and their needs. When God's love takes root in our lives, this is what we will do, this is how we'll love...and everyone will know we are his disciples... Let's commit to being people who

LEAVE A WAKE OF LOVE

THE RHYTHM OF REST IN SABBATH – SAMPLE PODCAST SCRIPT FOR EPISODE 12

I want to talk about something that I sense is largely lost in our current culture. Slowing down. Resting. Sabbath. We don't live in a culture that slows down much. Sure, some people do better than others, but this is one thing I think every generation struggles with to some degree. We begin with the demands of school, and then college, and then graduate to work, work, and more work. For those who marry and have children, life never seems to stop moving. I've talked to many 'empty nesters' who think they're going to have all sorts of time, but there's still work and there's visiting the kids and grandkids, any thoughts of slowing down are quickly set aside. And I am constantly surprised at how many retired folks tell me how little time they have. The struggle to slow down and just rest in the Lord is real, yet critical in our faith formation.

Consider these Scriptures:

"By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done." Genesis 2:2-3 (NIV)

"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." Exodus 20:8-11 (NIV)

"Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Say to the Israelites, You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the Lord, who makes you holy.'" Exodus 31:12-13 (NIV)

Sabbath Rest is one of the nine practices in living a Jesus-shaped life. It's an essential in Christian discipleship. It's critically important for us, yet so difficult to do. We live in a 'post-Sabbath world' that never stops. 24/7/365, go, go, go. We are made to think that if you stop or even slow down, you're at risk of falling behind. Constantly busy people. Working to control everything in life. Amos (8) describes an attitude consistent with our times, *"When will the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?"* Sabbath-rest clashes with our culture's emphasis on consumption, efficiency, productivity, and time management... it just seems antiquated.

I read a news article sometime back that pointed out that it took labor unions about 100 years of fighting to get nights and weekends off (or fair work hours, depending on the occupation), but that the smartphone took this away in about three years. How often do you check your phone? How much work do you do when you are not technically working? In our culture, we have come to associate busyness with importance. In our Western way of thinking, we're usually rewarded or applauded for busyness and long hours. That's what's valued and celebrated...to the detriment of our souls. This is dangerous, and it fights against what God teaches about finding a rhythm of rest.

God gives us a RHYTHM OF REST. And it's modeled after his own practice. In the verses we read in Genesis, it's important to note that the cessation of work is part of the created order...it's not a response because God is worn out and fatigued. God doesn't need rest, but he kicked back on the seventh day and rested, and he enjoyed what he had created. Rest, therefore, is holy and pausing from work one day a week puts us in touch with God's own practice and pattern of creation.

The Pharisees confronted Jesus on his treatment of the Sabbath. In Mark 2, the Pharisees got after Jesus because his disciples were picking some heads of grain on the sabbath. To which he replied, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." What he is saying is that God created Sabbath for humans and our enjoyment, and refreshment and re-centering. God did not create us for 'Sabbath keeping' in a legalistic way. Sabbath is a blessing not a burden. It's a gift to enrich and refresh you, not a heartless demand to oppress you. It's there to help remind us that we are utterly dependent on the grace of God.

Walter Brueggemann talks about SABBATH AS RESITANCE.³¹ Pushing back against the culture of perpetual motion and activity. In Jesus' statement in Mark, he tells us that we become slaves to our work, to economic factors, if we are constantly in motion trying to be productive. It's so easy to lapse into believing that everything depends on what we can provide for ourselves through our own efforts. The intent of Sabbath is breakdown this tendency within us. When we practice Sabbath we remember that God is the creator and we are not, and so we conform to his rhythm of rest.

I've been thinking through the Ten Commandments and how they fit together. It's commonly pointed out that the first four focus on relationship with God and the last six focus on our relationships with people. I'm exploring the idea that the fourth commandment, the one that says keep the Sabbath day holy - the one that tells us to take a day to break routine, a day to rest and glory in God and let him refill you - I'm exploring the idea that this fourth command is kind of like a hinge. Follow me for a second. God commands his rightful place in our lives and in all things we are to honor God. Then, as he teaches us how to live with one another peaceably he begins by telling us to follow his pattern of rest because he knows we need it.

When our defenses are down, and we're totally worn out, we are far more susceptible to breaking the last six commands. My favorite line in the whole Harry Potter series comes from Professor Albus Dumbledore who says, 'there will be a time when we must choose between what is right and what is easy.' If you're not rested and refreshed in the Lord, you will not have the strength or the wherewithal to choose what is right...you'll be tempted, and you'll give in to what is easy...and you'll give in and crash and then carry that guilt around. ***Our ability to follow God's commands hinges on our finding rest.*** If we do not rest properly, we will find it hard to obey. Think about that for a second, it's true. When you're worn out and your defenses are down, when some says

³¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath As Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017).

something to make you angry, it is so much harder to respond kindly, and not take the lazy way of returning anger for anger.

Let's think about that for a moment, I want us to consider why we are here. What is God's purpose for us? We believe we're created in God's image, and that when sin entered the world, our image was tarnished. And we believe that Jesus came into the world as a perfect human, who lived a sinless life. We know he was crucified; and we believe he was raised from the dead. We believe that when we profess Jesus as our Savior and ask him to forgive our sins, he does – he cleanses us and purifies us. And we believe God has given us the constant presence of His Holy Spirit to guide us and direct us. God wants us to go out into the world as his image bearers. To show people His love; to point people to his mercy and forgiveness. Now this is difficult work, and when we're out there actively living as His agents in all the areas of our life (the places we go; the way we talk; how we spend money; how we love our family; etc.) it will be hard to maintain – he knows we're going to get tired. And, he knows that the turbulence and pace of our lives will wear us out too. He knows we'll get caught up chasing our tails trying to make a way and a living in this world... and it will wear us out.

God knows we need the Sabbath to re-center and recharge or we'll fall down. Doing the right thing is not easy and takes work. Jewish theologian, Abraham Heschel, writes in his book on Sabbath that: "Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else."³² Do you hear the value of rest in that statement? The world may demand a lot from us, but when we practice Sabbath rest, we resist giving it our soul, as we realign ourselves with our creator.

We need to practice disconnecting from the pace and intense pressure of life...and remember that God is God, and we are not. It takes incredible discipline to do this. I'll be honest. I'm not good at taking time off. I am not very good at resting. I know this about me; I know it's not healthy. Deep down I know resting doesn't indicate weakness or lack of commitment – and I'm working on it – and I am improving because God is helping me! I have to be very intentional about time off. I usually work six days a week. My Sabbath day is Monday, it is hard for me to truly rest on Sundays given my responsibilities as a pastor. Your Sabbath might be Sunday, or it might be on a different day because of your occupation that's ok...the point is setting aside a day as Sabbath. I do my best not to involve myself with work on Monday, but I know if I sit down and the computer comes out, well...you know. I also find that having some accountability helps too, knowing someone will occasionally ask me about my Sabbath, helps motivate me to make sure I take it.

³² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2005), 8.

When we lay aside our own work, we leave room for God to work within us. Keep in mind that Sabbath rest is not a request God makes, it is a command. It's not designed to be a 'when you get a chance' kind of thing, or a 'here's a good idea,' no, it's 'you are to build this into your life.'

When many of us think of Sabbath our thoughts gravitate toward solitude and silence. I want to give you three action words that help us practice a good and healthy Sabbath.

- **WORSHIP.** Enjoy God. Go to church to immerse yourself and remind yourself of our defining story as Christians. In worship, which is something that can happen anywhere by the way, we can experience fresh spiritual vision and it forms our character. Pray. Read the Bible. Listen to music. Jesus said he is Lord of the Sabbath, imagine what a day devoted to the Lord could be like!
- **REST.** This is a biological necessity for good health. Retreat. Pause. Disconnect from technology. Nap. The point is to recharge your batteries, which looks different for different people... introverts and extroverts recharge in distinctly different ways.
- **CELEBRATE.** PLAY! Playing is good for the soul! Connect with friends. Create something; enjoy your hobbies. Immerse yourself in nature. Go for a walk or a bike ride.

This is what I want for Mondays. This is what I try for every week. Doing things that will help me joyfully affirm the goodness and trustworthiness of God; and learn to stop thinking about what I'm not accomplishing. **What are you doing in your own life to live in God's rhythm of rest?** Is this a priority for you? May I encourage you to build in a Sabbath day, one where you 'don't do, but just are' For the health of your soul and the glory of God the Father.

Listen to these words of Isaiah 58:13-14 NIV
 "If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath
 and from doing as you please on my holy day,
 if you call the Sabbath a delight
 and the Lord's holy day honorable,
 and if you honor it by not going your own way
 and not doing as you please or speaking idle words,
 then you will find your joy in the Lord,
 and I will cause you to ride in triumph on the heights of the land
 and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob."

Part Four: Design and Launch Website

I have secured the website broomtree.org, which will function as the banner under which the project will be branded, and it will provide a vehicle for Storied Discipleship content availability. As this work grows, I will explore launching another website specifically designed for the Storied Discipleship material.

Description of Broomtree.org

The Elijah narratives in 1 Kings are some of my favorite stories in the Old Testament. I have always been drawn to what transpired after Elijah's monumental victory over the prophets of Baal and Asherah on Mount Carmel. Afraid for his life, exhausted, overwhelmed, and even depressed, Elijah ran out into the wilderness and collapsed under a broom tree. Finding a bit of shade under a small, bush-like tree, he sat down and prayed to die. God responded to Elijah by providing nourishment and encouraging him to get some rest for his journey. The strength Elijah gained from this experience allowed him to continue on his journey, later experiencing the presence of God and hearing him speak to him through a still, small voice.

Everyone is likely to experience exhaustion from the frenetic pace of life, face bouts of depression over the worries and concerns of daily living, metaphorically run out into the wilderness to escape, and eventually collapse under something that resembles a 'broom tree,' wishing it all away. In the soothing shade of the broom tree, we pause and pray, asking God to provide nourishment and rest to refuel us for the journey ahead. Under the broom tree, we long for his presence and to hear his voice.

Broomtree.org is designed to help refresh your soul by providing helpful resources to rekindle your relationship with God. I believe we all need time under the broom tree and to learn that it is a holy place to encounter God and receive his grace. As we surrender to him, he gently teaches and nudges us forward in our faith. When fully developed, this website will serve as the primary hub of content and communication for the *Storied Discipleship: Nine Practices for Jesus-shaped Living* project. It will be designed for leaders and laypeople to find and access resources on the nine practices, weekly devotional thoughts, coaching connections on developing a personal habitus, and links to the 'Under the Broomtree' podcast and other video teaching segments on the practices.

Part Five: Personal Coaching and Assessment

The model I am building for addressing discipleship in an age of distraction seeks to align the trajectory of our lives with the confession of our faith through habit formation and re-formation. Although focusing on small incremental habits might seem insignificant at the moment, they can potentially yield powerful long-term results. Changing spiritual habits in tiny increments can lead to significant growth over time. However, the temptation to prematurely truncate efforts exists for those who adopt a scarcity mindset, believing there is insufficient time to invest. The ordinary habits of spiritual formation will shape our souls in extraordinary ways. An important part of this project is to build and launch a personal coaching model to help people identify and work on changing their key habits concerning faith formation and on creating a 'rule of life' to live by. Additionally, a spiritual coach will provide timely accountability, wise counsel, and encouraging motivation to increase the likelihood of continued pursuit in faith formation.

The personal coaching and assessment parts of the project are in the developmental stages, as articulated below in the project launch plan. Coaching is helping people move from the place they are to the place they envision, and more importantly, in the life of a believer, to the place where Jesus leads. This intentional coaching strategy will be pastoral in nature and in concert with the transformational presence of the Holy Spirit. Coaching will help disciples evaluate Christ-formation in their lives prayerfully and creatively, helping them think deeply about what Jesus is asking of them. The coaching model will help lead people to identify areas of opportunity and places that need work, examine the systems they have in place, expose places of resistance, modify where necessary, and create a rule of life to aid in focusing their spiritual development. Coaching will drive people toward outcomes, and a way forward in joining together education through knowledge acquisition and holiness of heart and mind through attending to spiritual disciplines - the result being an outwardly focused life of service to God and others.

Lasting habit change is more likely to occur when an accountability partner or group is activated and involved. I believe the accountability of this personal coaching is a crucial step in our faith formation, and ought to yield many dividends spiritually, relationally, and organizationally. The goal of this piece of the project aims to help people evaluate their level of spiritual engagement in each of the nine practices for living a Jesus-shaped life and assist them in going deeper in their faith and living out the Jesus-story.

While there are numerous personal assessments to gauge personal faith formation, I will develop a Likert Scale-based assessment tool corresponding to the nine practices presented in this project to help users and coaches evaluate areas for fine-tuned focus and growth.

Part Six: Write the Storied Discipleship Book

This is a new edition to the project based on encouragement from those I have interviewed along this journey. As I develop the first three parts of the project, I will begin writing a chapter on each of the nine practices based on my research and thinking about each throughout this project. I envision this work will wrestle with the tension we experience between the work of the Holy Spirit, growing the fruits or 'evidences' in our lives, and the reality that we partner with the Holy Spirit, intentionally practice and work towards living a Jesus-shaped life. It is a both/and scenario; we are not casual observers in the process of sanctification; rather, we are full participants. With that said, part of each chapter will focus on habit formation and training our mind, body, and soul to focus over the long term, recognizing that spiritual formation does not fit the desire for instant gratification so prevalent in our world. Patience is not a virtue in our fast-paced, distracted world, yet is a critical part of our faith journey. My initial goal will be to complete the writing process in 2025 and seek publishing opportunities from there.

A preliminary table of contents might look like this:

Introduction to Storied Discipleship, Living a Jesus-shaped Life

Chapter 1: The Praying Life

Chapter 2: The Learning Life

Chapter 3: The Caring Life

Chapter 4: The Blessing Life

Chapter 5: The Celebrating Life

Chapter 6: The Sharing Life

Chapter 7: The Resting Life

Chapter 8: The Simplifying Life

Chapter 9: The Tending Life

Chapter 10: Continuing the Journey

Conclusion

Assessment of the Project

Five of the project's six critical success indicators are post-public-launch measurables. Based on preliminary conversations with pastoral colleagues about potential participation and use of the Storied Discipleship material, I am confident I will hit the targets outlined in the Project Launch Plan in the next section. I also anticipate that their experience and feedback will be similar to what I have found in my own pilot launch within my congregational setting. Therefore, this assessment will focus on the launch of part one and part two in my local ministry setting.

Part One: Cycle of Devotionals for Church Leadership Teams. In January 2021, I began using my project material within my church ministry teams, beginning each meeting with a short devotional based on one of the nine practices of living the Jesus-story. My format was to introduce the practice by sharing a devotional based on a story from the life of Jesus where it was evident and follow that up with a discussion centered around two or three specific questions. Previously we opened our meetings with prayer and then proceeded directly to business. Now, we use the first 30-35 minutes of our meetings for teaching, discussion, and prayer, and have noticed that our meetings do not run longer and we are still able to manage the business of our agenda. As I have followed up with my team, I have probed to find out if they had noticed any significant changes in their walk with Christ over the past year. Of those I interviewed, 7 out of 9 reported increased focus and depth in their faith. The notable specifics were, 1) more time set aside to pray, 2) spending more time reading and studying Scripture, 3) prioritizing Sunday morning worship even when other enticing options came up, 4) improved relational connections within the body, and 5) taking some steps to slow down by reducing the craziness of overly packed schedules. This was probably the most encouraging and helpful feedback I have received to date.

Part Two: Sermon Series and Small Group Questions. In January and February of 2022, I piloted a sermon series and small group study on prayer. This series generated a lot of conversation, and most of the people I spoke to about their experience in prayer reported that they felt like their prayer lives were enriched through the course of the eight-week focus and were spending more time praying. During this pilot, we had five groups use the small group study questions, each reporting high engagement with the material and growth in their practice of prayer. Then in January 2023, I launched the full sermon series and small group study on Storied Discipleship. We are halfway through the series at the time of this publishing, and the feedback has been phenomenal. People engage with the material, talk about it, ask questions, and share it with their friends on social media. This feedback suggests to me that the intentional focus of this project is beginning to show effectiveness in its designed purpose and desired outcomes. As I have discussed the materials, blog, and podcast yet to come, interest is high, which bodes well for meeting my subscription and interaction benchmarks.

My final benchmark relates to producing a website, podcast, and high-quality materials. Included in Appendix E of this project are the draft mock-up of the digital PDF for part one (the devotionals for pastors, ministry leaders, and coaches); screenshots from the website and the Under the Broom Tree blog set to launch later in 2023; and a screenshot of the Under the Broom Tree podcast platform page. I have sought feedback from a wide range of people, from industry professionals to

fellow pastors to lay people in my church. The majority of critical feedback was positive, indicating the layouts were professional, graphically appealing to the eyes, and easy to read and follow. I also recorded and published a season of podcasts in the summer of 2022 to accompany a sermon series I shared with my congregation on the Minor Prophets. They provide a way for people to listen to the Scripture throughout their week. This allowed me to work with sound and production and interact with the podcast platform. Based on the number of plays and the positive comments I received on the sound quality, I believe I am set to produce a high-quality podcast for this project.

Finally, I want to mention a study called "The Walkabout," which I launched in November of 2021 in conjunction with my doctoral studies and project. We met weekly to walk slowly through scripture, studying the story of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke and what it means to live the Jesus-story in our lives. The sessions are dialogical in nature, fluidly moving between teaching, questions, and discussion. We average about 20 people weekly, and the participants range in age from mid-20s to 80s and represent various stages of discipleship, from beginners to mature followers. I mention this to share that this group has helped focus this project and sharpen my thinking, asking critical clarifying questions and pressing for more clearly articulated definitions.

I am pleased with the process and form and how it has come together so far to encourage people to become more fully devoted followers of Jesus. I believe the content included in this project is solid, and I recognize that content can be modified and expanded along the way based on continual conversations and feedback. So far, I am pleased with the progress and look forward to the Storied Discipleship journey ahead.

Project Launch Plan

DOCTORAL PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This project germinated out of the observation that many evangelical congregations are facing the malaise of a profound lack of true faith formation, which is creating a wide gap between authentic Christ formation and secularization, and is further exacerbated by the genuine blind spot of denial in the minds of Christians that this is problematic. In our distracted and frenzied world, faith formation is becoming less of a priority, which is caused by an inherent bent towards selfish independence, but to flip the script on this would mean people would prioritize and cultivate their relationship with Jesus Christ which will propel them outwardly towards a selfless interdependence.

Storied Discipleship: Nine Practices for Jesus-Shaped Living is the plant that is beginning to grow from this observation. It was born out of the desire to help distracted people refocus their attention on matters of faith and help them begin developing new and healthier habits in their spiritual formation process. The nine practices articulate that disciples of Jesus will find themselves living a praying, learning, caring, blessing, celebrating, sharing, resting, simplifying, and tending life. Each part of this project is designed to help disciples know the story of Jesus, live the story, and share the story with others. This project will be an ongoing endeavor with new content added regularly.

AUDIENCE

In the planning stages, I initially focused on helping pastors and ministry leaders work with their leadership teams in faith formation. I believe spiritual leadership within a congregation would be more effective coming from authentic disciples deeply rooted in their faith. As conversations progressed with mentors, peers, and laypeople, the audience question repeatedly surfaced. I found a deep desire for this work to address a wider audience. So I expanded this project to include components for both pastors and church leaders and contain significant pieces accessible to a more general audience. Ultimately this work will apply to any Christian seeking to become a more fully devoted follower of Jesus.

To connect with pastors, ministry leaders, and coaches, I am producing a two-year cycle of devotionals and coaching questions based on the nine practices for Jesus-shaped living. These are conversation starters specifically designed to be used at the beginning of leadership team meetings to focus on what authentic Christ-formation looks like in the believer and why it matters. To begin the connection with larger Christian audiences, I am developing a sermon series and small group study for pastoral leaders to use within their congregations.

To cast the net even wider, I am launching a podcast and blog to make this content available in a digital format. Additionally, I am launching the website *broomtree.org* to function as the hub for all the material created in *Storied Discipleship*.

DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Part One: Cycle of Devotionals for Church Leadership Teams

- It is recommended that pastors and ministry leaders begin all church board and leadership team meetings focusing on faith formation, ideally using the *Storied Discipleship* model of the nine practices for living a Jesus-shaped life. Part one of this project provides the framework, writing, and design of these devotional and discussion guides.
- The initial project will create a two-year cycle of materials, but additional years will be added on as time progresses.
- Material for years one and two will be completed by July 2023; usage can begin immediately since the material is not 'month' specific.
- Subsequent years will be created in 2024.

Part Two: Church-wide Sermon Series and Small Group Curriculum

- To introduce *Storied Discipleship* within my congregation, I will create an introductory nine-week sermon series on the nine core practices for living the Jesus-story, following the order: The Praying Life; The Learning Life; The Caring Life; The Blessing Life; The Celebrating Life; The Sharing Life; The Resting Life; The Simplifying Life; and The Tending Life. This series will occur in January, February, and March of 2023. During this time, I will assess each week through personal conversation, and more specifically, with the pilot groups using the sermons as the primary curriculum for their small groups.
- During the second quarter of 2023, I will draft the small group guides for each practice. These studies will help users grow deeper and guide small group leaders in facilitating discussions leading to application and group accountability. Groups will form and launch within my congregation in the Fall of 2023.
- Future development will include a mini-sermon series focusing on each practice providing more depth, including new small group guides.
- After the pilot series in my congregation, I will distill the main points of the sermons and create outlines for publication and distribution to pastoral colleagues to use within their settings.

Part Three: Develop a podcast and blog to provide access to digital content

- Create and launch the 'Under the Broom Tree' podcast and blog to further the conversation around the *Storied Discipleship* practices and to give users a vehicle to experience these lessons in a digital listening and reading format.
- Using the Anchor platform, I have built the podcast base and recorded a preliminary season of Bible readings for a sermon series during the Summer of 2022. The podcast can be found at <https://anchor.fm/dave-bach>.
- The 'Under the Broom Tree' podcast and blog will launch in the Fall of 2023.

Part Four: Design and launch a website to function as the hub for the project

- I have secured the website broomtree.org, which will function as the banner under which the project will be branded. The website will eventually serve as the hub of content and

communication for all the materials, blogs, and podcasts associated with the *Storied Discipleship* project, as well as personal assessments in the practices and coaching connections on developing a personal rule of life.

- Website design and launch: Fall 2023.

Part Five: Personal Coaching and Assessment

- As this project unfolds and gains traction, I will develop a personal coaching model to assist disciples in going deeper in their faith and living the story of Jesus. This intentional coaching will be pastoral in nature and can yield many dividends spiritually, relationally, and organizationally.
- While there are numerous personal assessments to gauge personal faith formation, I will develop a Likert Scale based assessment tool corresponding to the nine practices presented in this project to help users and coaches evaluate areas for fine-tuned focus and growth.
- Coaching Model and Assessment timeframe: 2024.

Part Six: Write the book *Storied Discipleship: Nine Practices for Jesus-shaped Living*

- This is a new edition to the project based on encouragement from those I have interviewed along this journey. As I develop the first three parts of the project, I will begin writing a chapter on each practice. My initial goal will be to complete the writing process in 2025 and seek publishing opportunities from there.

The following six key performance indicators will be used to measure the quality and success of this project. While numeric indicators are not a full measure of effectiveness in faith formation, these benchmarks will help determine if this work is perceived as valuable and helpful. Future benchmarks will include the development of personal scoring assessments to measure individual progress in each of the nine faith formation practices.

- Eight small groups of 8-12 persons³³ form within my local congregation to work through the *Storied Discipleship: Nine Practices for Jesus-shaped Living* in the Fall of 2023.
- 50 subscribers to the podcast by the end of 2023.
- Ten pastoral colleagues commit to using the cycle of leadership team materials by the end of 2023.
- Five pastoral colleagues commit to using the *Storied Discipleship* sermon series and small group materials by the end of 2024.

³³ Based on personal experience leading small group ministry within a congregational setting, I recommend that groups have a minimum of 6 persons with a maximum of 15, with the ideal range falling between 8-12. This size group is small enough for people to be comfortable sharing and growing in trust relationships and large enough to have a well-rounded conversation. This is backed up by research on small group effectiveness, and promoted by leaders in group ministry; for example, see Larry Osborne, *Sticky Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

- Two districts in the Church of the Nazarene commit to using my project as a model for church board development during the first year of the project launch
- High-quality production of materials, website, and podcast

DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

As I will use this project within the context of my local congregation and responsibilities as a pastor, much of my feedback will come through personal conversations and observations. Being both the creator and end user is helpful; I can make modifications along the way before publishing to a wider audience.

Secondly, I will communicate with peers using *Storied Discipleship* to learn about their experience(s) - successes, setbacks, and suggestions for improvement. This helpful feedback will be incorporated into the ongoing work, and any recommendations for future areas of focus and development will be evaluated.

Thirdly, I will continue to seek outside counsel and obtain critical feedback from mentors and other professionals to improve the quality of this work. These ongoing critical assessment conversations will help provide me with focus and direction. I relish the opportunity to learn and grow from others.

Finally, as the project takes off, I will undoubtedly need to explore contracting with web designers and publishers to help manage the ongoing workload. While I enjoy the creative design outlet, it requires an exorbitant amount of time. I will be better suited to using my time to focus on content creation and market development.

FUTURE PLANS

Storied Discipleship will be an ongoing work in my ministry, and hopefully, it will catch on and be helpful to others. As I identified in Part Six above and based on many conversations about this project, I have felt a nudging to arrange all this work into book form. At first, I was resistant. The thought of adding another book to an already saturated discipleship market seemed counterproductive. Over time, the idea has grown on me, and I can see an opening in the crowded field. For those weary from all the programs that pile long to-do lists, this project can add enrichment, be life-giving and offer something that helps them change their narrative to live the Jesus-story.

Appendix A— Milestone 1 The NPO Charter

PERSONAL RESEARCH MANIFESTO

With integrity and careful discernment, I will engage in thoroughly researching my NPO, seeking clarity and direction, hoping as Vince Lombardi quipped, to find excellence in the chase for perfection.

NPO STATEMENT

To grow the church of tomorrow you first have to grow 'bigger' Christians, yet in a time of infinite options and information, faith formation is becoming less and less of a priority.

NPO SCOPE AND CONSTRAINTS

Looking to the end of this process, I plan on researching and developing a tool that can help professing Christians prioritize their faith and grow deeper in their relationship with Jesus Christ. At this point in the journey, the scope will be narrowed down to a specific audience (e.g., church leaders) to make the solution more usable and effective. As this project develops, I will have a better idea of materials needed and associated costs.

NPO CONTEXT

My current context is a small town situated on the I-5 corridor in Western Washington that is mostly rural in nature but has easy access to the urban sprawl of Seattle to our north and Portland, OR to our south. The people in this community are 'rugged individualists' bent on forging their own way through life. Deeply immersed in this kind of thinking, people of faith often struggle between living their faith in Christ and living into the secularization around them. I am currently serving in the Church of the Nazarene, and also have many inter-denominational connections in my community. My primary focus and work will be with the people and leaders of my church with a secondary focus being the wider body of believers in the Washington Pacific District Church of the Nazarene.

ROOT CAUSES

Everyone who participated in the discovery workshop personally identified with the NPO statement, so conversation was lively, rich and exposing. The primary root cause of faith formation not being a priority is an attitude of selfish independence. With endless options of activities competing for time, and unlimited sources of content and data available to fill the mind, many people take a smorgasbord approach to their faith. While this approach will fill you up with many good things, it tends to make you wider, not deeper. The observation is that our culture pushes selfish independence so heavily, that many people no longer see their faith as a relationship with Jesus, but just another activity or task on the list of options.

DISCOVERY WORKSHOP STAKEHOLDERS

The stakeholders in my workshop included a worship leader who is also a young mom, a marketing entrepreneur with extensive experience in higher education, an administrator, a youth director, a communication and connections director, and a health consultant.

ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS

My one-on-one interviewees included a current district superintendent and former lead pastor in the Church of the Nazarene, a school administrator, an assistant district attorney and Sunday school teacher, and a personal friend and mentor who is a long-time pastor.

3-5 KEY BIBLICAL TEXTS

Psalm 1:1-3; 1 Kings 19:4-8; Matthew 5:6; Colossians 2:6-7; 2 Peter 1:3-11; Titus 2:11-14

ACADEMIC RESOURCES

In my exploration of spiritual formation, I will lean into the significant voices of spiritual formation Dallas Willard, Richard Foster, Henri Nouwen and Eugene Peterson. Dr. Mark Chironna made the outstanding suggestion to explore a coaching model for discipleship and pointed me towards the work of Pamela McClean at the Hudson Institute, and the work of Dr. Patrick Williams. I will also be exploring the rise of individualism and how that has impacted faith formation; and the impact of the digital culture on our psyche, and more specifically how the overload of information plays a role in our spirituality.

APPENDIX

DISCOVERY WORKSHOP STATEMENT

Considering church goers, we've discovered faith formation is becoming less of a priority, which is caused by an inherent bent towards selfish independence. If solved, it would mean people would prioritize and cultivate their relationship with Jesus Christ which will propel them outward towards a selfless interdependence.

Further parsing of the audience will likely occur as I research the topic in semester two. At this point, based on my workshop and interviews, more specific focus was split between narrowing it down to Church leaders and the Christian family with children still at home.

CRITICAL INSIGHTS FROM DISCOVERY WORKSHOP

The notion that the lack of intentional faith formation is an issue was readily affirmed, so we quickly moved into our discussion of who is impacted and why. The group identified that this is both a personal and communal problem, with far-reaching consequences. From a personal perspective, people seem too busy to prioritize their relationship with God, due in large part to so many options available to fill our time. When one's faith simply fits alongside everything else in life it tends to get watered down and become superficial. When this happens, the tendency is that a Christian's life does not look perceivably different than that of a non-believer. As the camera lens widens, the church community comes into view. This is not just an NPO addressing individuals, the witness of the church is impacted as well. If the church is filled with superficial believers, then it will appear to be filled with hypocrites and will likely be inwardly focused.

We spent quite a bit of time discussing why this is happening and came to the conclusion that our cultural climate is feeding the human bent towards selfish independence. We have been taught we can decide what's best for us, and can pick and choose from a plethora of sources exactly what we think we need to customize our faith journey. This individualization has devastating effects on the church community, as each believer is conditioned to want a different 'personal' experience. Further, this inward focus blinds us to the needs of our world.

Finally, we discussed how a solution would help in training believers to be 'selflessly interdependent.' If we are working, individually and collectively, at cultivating a relationship with Jesus, we will begin to look more and more like him, and we will naturally want to go where Jesus goes and do what Jesus does.

ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEW DISCOVERIES

The conversations I had in my one-on-one interviews were encouraging and very helpful in clarifying some direction and focus for my project. Each of the people I interviewed identified with my NPO and agreed that from their perspective faith formation is becoming less of a priority, and all echoed the reminder to focus on cultivating a relationship over activity-based programming. One interviewee made the thoughtful suggestion to spend time in my research exploring the

effects this is having on people. Another was intrigued by narrowing the audience to church leaders, as his experience has led him to the conclusion that many spiritually leaders do not take their own relationship with Christ seriously enough. The biggest caution was the broadness of the topic, and the biggest encouragement was simply the worthiness of the effort and helping people move deeper into their relationship with God will have significant impact in individual lives, but also in the overall health of our churches and communities.

SYNTHESIS

Everyone who participated in the workshop and interviews identified with the NPO, both personally and corporately. All the discussions identified that the culture of individualism and personal choice exposed the sinful human inclination towards selfishness, and that much of the issue of this NPO is caused by our 'selfish independence.' Further, the cultural climate of 'busy-ness' and the deluge of available information exacerbates the issue. With everything available to us, it is easy to slide into syncretism, instead of having our relationship with Christ be the over-arching premise by which we live life. If addressed, everyone had an optimistic view of the personal and corporate change that can happen through transformation brought about by the Holy Spirit.

NEXT STEPS

These sessions were very helpful in looking ahead to areas of study for my academic research. Specifically, I will add these topics to my research: 1) exploring the troubling symptoms of a lack of faith formation in Christians, both personally and as it pertains to the witness and reputation of the church; 2) the rise of individualism; 3) the impact on our practice of Christianity in a culture of endless options and infinite information; and 3) a coaching model to discipleship as it relates to one-on-one models and as a model for discipleship in community.

DISCOVERY WORKSHOP DOCUMENTATION

DISCOVERY WORKSHOP NOTES AND SUMMARY

Beginning Premise: Faith formation seems to be less and less of a priority...

How do you effectively disciple people in a distracted and instant culture?

ACTIVITY ONE: NPO DEFINITION AND AUDIENCE

Synopsis of 'whiteboard' notes

What is the key issue you are trying to address and why is it important?

- The key issue is effectively communicating the vitality of faith formation in a way that inspires hearers to participate in that faith and community
- Personal faith versus communal faith

- Inward bent and focus
- Looking different than the world
- View that the church is full of hypocrites
- Apparent lack of authenticity (surface-level Christianity) and depth
- Superficial or 'fake' sense of church
- Deterioration of Christian ethics and morals
- People are 'too busy' to cultivate a relationship with God
- Worldly opportunities take higher precedent/priority
- People's desire for independence
- How can we be salt when we aren't salty

Note the pattern of selfishness, individualism and 'worldly opportunities' that take precedent. Also note the impact is both personal in nature, but also impacts the church's witness and reputation in the world.

Who is impacted by the NPO and who should I focus on?

- In a sense, everyone is included, or those who profess Christianity
- Students
- Families
- 18-30 year-olds
- Church leaders
- Church community
- Professing Christians
- Church-goers

What social/cultural factors shape this NPO?

- Abundance (over-abundance) of options and information
- Everything is online
- Technology explosion

- Cultural norms are breaking down
- Training to receive data in small doses (limited number of characters)
- The fast-paced nature of society breeds impatience
- Short, not deep content
- The splintering of relational structures
- Split families
- Rise of 'echo chambers'
- Culture of individualism
- Extra-curricular activities (school, sports, music, lessons, etc)
- Instant gratification
- The notion that you can choose your own truth
- We are 'full' on our own (consumption of the world)

What evidence do you have that this is worth the investment?

- Social and relational signs like the increase in anxiety, loneliness, depression, suicide, drug and alcohol use
- Disintegration of marriages
- Idolatry, even in the church (e.g., the gospel of nationalism and consumerism)
- Weakened influence of the church on culture
- People are trying to fill a perceived void in their life with the world, not God
- Deepening faith and cultivating a healthy and rich relationship with Christ has the potential to make an incredible impact on our world, and foster authentic community among believers

Which audience would be most impacted by addressing the NPO?

The consensus was mostly general in nature focusing on 'Professing Christians/Church-goers,' yet all agreed the project would need to focus on a more specific segment of believers.

ACTIVITY TWO: UNDERSTANDING THOSE IMPACTED BY THE NPO**How will the audience THINK differently when the NPO is addressed?**

- That how they live in the world matters
- Value other's passion as important
- Getting others involved/sharing is important
- Church community is important
- Their contribution matters
- They would think more and value the learning experience

What will the audience SAY differently when the NPO is addressed?

- My relationship with Jesus is worth prioritizing
- Faith is essential to my well-being
- I need this faith community
- Articulate a closeness to God
- Be more intentional in conversations with others
- Would be able to share their faith with greater ease

How will the audience FEEL differently when the NPO is addressed?

- A love for others, compassion
- Valued in the church and faith community
- Like they can contribute and make a kingdom impact
- More connected to God and others
- Joyful and Hopeful
- At peace, not because everything will always be okay in life, but because God is tangibly present to them
- That they matter to others

What will the audience DO differently when the NPO is addressed?

- Practice hospitality
- Small group participation
- Be more attentive and outwardly focused on the people in their 'windshield'
- Stewardship; Give more (time, money, effort, etc)
- Prioritize faith formation and spiritual disciplines (read, pray, etc)

ACTIVITY THREE: FINDING THE ROOT CAUSE

Why is studying and practicing faith formation important?

- Draws one closer to God (in relationship)
- Formation and growth of the church
- Unity with brothers and sisters in Christ
- A deeper understanding of Scripture
- Sense of being rooted in God, not on things that will pass away
- Discover Truth is a person, not merely a concept
- Betterment of the community (church and at large)
- Encourages sharing Jesus with others (witness)
- Without a relationship with Christ, we digress into selfishness
- Done both personally and in community. Faith formation as a community is important because an over-emphasis on personal formation may lead to a 'gospel of the individual' which tends to lead to hurt, hypocrisy, confusion, etc.

The group struggled with the five 'whys' when thinking about it individually, but when we discussed it as an entire group, the conversation was much better.

At the end of the discussion, we determined that the culture of individualism and personal choice exposed the sinful human inclination towards selfishness. We agreed that much of the issue of this NPO is caused by our 'selfish independence.'

Appendix B– Milestone 2 NPO Topic Expertise Essay

INTRODUCTION

Just a quick perusing of my news feeds and social media accounts gives ample anecdotal evidence that people in my sphere (and beyond) are troubled, angry, empty, joyless and in many cases, hopeless. COVID-19 restrictions and shutdowns, social tensions and political drama all have cast long shadows over us, which have impacted our collective psyche and done damage to our emotional and relational health, and dare I say our spiritual well-being. Looking at masked faces forces me to read people's eyes, and I see a deep longing for something better and deeper and more meaningful, even in my Christian friends. What has left us hungry and thirsty? Is it simply the condition of the world around us, or does it go to the deeper issue of how we tend to our spiritual health? How do we form a Christian faith that keeps us rooted in Christ, even when the gale-force winds of this world threaten to uproot us? This essay will explore several biblical texts on faith formation, John Wesley's model of discipleship, and two more modern voices in spiritual formation.

SECTION 1: BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Faith Formation in the Biblical World: Textual Discussions

The Bible has much to say about faith formation and practice³⁴, ultimately urging believers to be conformed to the character of Jesus Christ. Scripture repeatedly nudges us closer and closer to God, and calls on us to pass along our faith to others, especially telling the next generation(s) into the ongoing story of God.³⁵ Faith formation is less about a set of principles and practices and more about cultivating a vibrant relationship with the Triune God. For the purposes of this study, I will explore two beatitudes, the first found in Psalm 1:1-3, the second in Matthew 5:6; a character illustration from the life of Elijah in 1 Kings 19; and close with a brief teaching from the Apostle Paul to the church in Colossae found in Colossians 2:6-7.

Psalms 1:1-3

The book of Psalms stands as one of the most important faith formational texts for the people of Israel. Upon examination, the collection does not begin with a prayer or a song, but rather a beatitude that reads as follows:

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither – whatever they do prospers.³⁶

³⁴ See for example 2 Timothy 3:16, 1 Peter 2:2, 2 Peter 3:18.

³⁵ See Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and Matthew 28:18-20.

³⁶ Psalm 1:1-3 NIV.

James Mays asserts that the Hebrew Psalter begins by blessing a preferred way of living³⁷, which in my mind, leads the reader to contemplate the notion that how one lives their life will determine its course and ultimately its destination. Psalm 1 constructs a world, characterized by two ways of being with opposing results – sinners and saints. Mays goes as far as suggesting this psalm is a gateway inviting ‘us to read and use the entire book as a guide to a blessed life.’³⁸ Given that Mays emphasizes reading the Psalms as a guide to living the blessed life, if we accept such a premise, we then need to adopt a similar praxis. The goal of such a praxis would lead to bringing the psalms to speech through song and prayer, enabling us to live into them by participating in the work and life of the indwelling Spirit as part of what Jesus refers to as a life of abiding.³⁹ These practices, repeated over time, will begin to form one into an obedient, God-honoring believer.

As this Psalm begins, the one who is blessed is first described by the negative, or void, of what a person does not do, and then is followed by the positive, or blessed activities of one’s life. Blessing comes from delighting and immersing one’s self in the law, or instruction, of the Lord, and not by walking, standing or sitting with the unrighteous. The progression of walking to standing to sitting evident in verse 1 suggests this is not simply casual association with the wicked, but full identification with them. God’s torah, or instruction, is a means of grace, something to delight in, as Mays teaches ‘not because it is an available instrument of self-righteousness, material for a program of self-justification, but because the Lord reaches, touches, and shapes the human soul through it.’⁴⁰ In other words, this psalm confronts the reader with a decision, will you be formed by and follow the ways of the Lord, or will you be formed by and follow the path of the wicked? These two paths are set against one another and lead to very different destinations and ways of living.

Keil and Delitschz say the godless, whose moral condition can be described as lax, have no staying power or stability of character, and are tossed about like a stormy sea.⁴¹ The unrighteous are later described as chaff (v4), lifeless and rootless material that is blown and strewn about by the slightest of breezes. Conversely, one who is rooted in the word of God is ‘firmly planted, so that no winds that may rage around it are able to remove it from its place.’⁴² One path leads to an unsettled existence; one to a sense of being firmly rooted, which does not suggest one will not sway in the

³⁷ James L. Mays, *Psalms: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 40.

³⁸ Mays, *Psalms*, 40.

³⁹ John 15:4, 10. In v4, Jesus identifies bearing fruit as a result of abiding in him; and in v10, he links obeying the Father’s commandments as a means for abiding in his love.

⁴⁰ Mays, *Psalms*, 42.

⁴¹ C. F. Keil and Franz Delitschz, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969), 84.

⁴² Keil and Delitschz, *Commentary*, 85.

breezes of the troubles of this world, but that one is not uprooted when he/she abides in Jesus Christ.

The righteous are further described as having been planted, which can be more accurately described as being transplanted, which means a gardener is doing the work.⁴³ God is the planter and his Torah is the stream of life-giving water. Given these new conditions, this newly planted tree is said to have leaves that do not wither and that produce fruit in season. Keil and Delitsch note this “foliage is an emblem of faith, which converts the water of life of the divine word into sap and strength, and the fruit, an emblem of works, which gradually ripen and scatter their blessings around; a tree that has lost its leaves, does not bring its fruit to maturity.”⁴⁴

Finally, in verse 6, we see the Lord standing at the apparent fork in the road urging those that pass to take the path of the righteous. In this picture what is intended is “a knowledge which is in living, intimate relationship to its subject and at the same time is inclined to it and bound to it by love. The way, or life’s course, of the righteous has God as its goal.”⁴⁵ The intention of torah, and the way of the Psalms⁴⁶ is a life-giving relationship with the Lord himself. Our discipleship, our faith formation is dependent on a life-long walk with our Savior Jesus in the way of the righteous.

*Matthew 5:6*⁴⁷

In light of what has already been looked at, consideration needs to be given to the second beatitude in the Matthean account of the Sermon on the Mount, where Matthew attributes to Jesus these words: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”⁴⁸ That the metaphors of hunger and thirst are used here by Jesus is worthy of consideration. Humans are in constant need of food and water to sustain life. Being immersed in a culture of plenty, may blind us to those in our midst who lack basic necessities. When we think about the plight of those who have little, we might come to the conclusion that hungering and thirsting are actually a curse.

Upon first review it might seem like Jesus got this beatitude backwards. It seems more likely that Jesus would want to bless the righteous, not the hungry. Yet Jesus says, ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst...’ In our vocabulary, hungering and thirsting suggest emptiness and signal need; these are symptoms of unfulfilled desire. While we all experience physical hunger, we are not

⁴³ Roger Van Harn and Brent Strawn, *Psalms for Preaching and Worship: A Lectionary Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 52.

⁴⁴ Keil and Delitsch, *Commentary*, 86.

⁴⁵ Keil and Delitsch, *Commentary*, 87-88.

⁴⁶ Van Harn and Strawn, *Psalms*, 53.

⁴⁷ This section is based on notes from a study of The Gospel of Matthew at Nazarene Theological Seminary using texts from Allison, Hagner, Hahn, Keener and Wright which are noted in the bibliography.

⁴⁸ Matthew 5:6 (NIV).

always hungry for righteousness. Most of us do not like to be hungry or thirsty, but Jesus' radical statement suggests that righteousness is the blessing, and hungering and thirsting are the precondition.

The Greek word translated 'hunger' (*peinaō*) means to 'to hunger' or 'to desire strongly.'⁴⁹ By coupling 'hunger' with 'thirst' (*dipsaō*), Jesus emphasizes the meaning of great desire⁵⁰, so we could say metaphorically that being hungry is to seek something with eager desire. Physical hunger is about emptiness, but the hunger Jesus blesses is about recognizing our constant need and craving to be filled with God's righteousness. It is interesting to note that the figurative meaning of thirst refers to those who painfully feel their want of those things by which the soul is refreshed. According to Jesus, our souls are refreshed by the righteousness of God. As we seek hungrily after him, Jesus promises that we will be blessed. The promise of righteousness is offered to those who are empty and are acutely aware of their lack. When we seek the kingdom, it is better to come with emptiness than fullness.

What does Jesus mean by 'righteousness'? If he was referring simply to the personal ethics, it would be a tall order for anyone to be perfect enough or work hard enough to gain this blessing. Righteousness in this case also implies living in right relationship with God and with other people. Out of personal ethics would grow the desire to see social justice in a world full of injustices. Righteousness is a way of life for those who are generous with what they are entrusted with; the righteous seek justice for all the oppressed and seek to do good on behalf of others.

When you have worked up a good appetite for God, Jesus says you 'will be filled.' The verb here suggests a removal of our hunger pangs by the activity of God himself. Recall how Jesus says he is the Bread of Life – those who come to him will not go hungry, and those who believe in him will never be thirsty. Eugene Peterson says Jesus is the 'food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.'⁵¹ Those who are truly hungry and thirsty for righteousness 'will be filled.' Instead of indulging in our appetites and desires, how can we let them act as a guide that leads us to God?

1 Kings 19:1-18

In 1 Kings 18 we read about the story when Elijah faces off against the prophets of Baal in the epic contest at Mt. Carmel where God triumphed, and many people repented and turned back to God. This was one of the high points in Elijah's life, yet the toll of ministry and being on the run wore him out. He was close to God, rooted in God, yet in 1 Kings 19 we see him battling discouragement and depression. He had lost perspective of the larger narrative of God, and even in victory he felt a sense of defeat because one victory did not mean the 'war' was over. Elijah was also afraid for his life, and having received a death threat from Jezebel, he fled out into the wilderness. In 1 Kings

⁴⁹ J. P. Louw and E. A. Nida, *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1) (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 290.

⁵⁰ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon.*, 290.

⁵¹ Matthew 5:6 MSG.

19:4 we see him collapsing under a broom tree where he asks God to take his life. He was exhausted, burned out, and ready to give up on life. This man of God took his eyes off the greatness of God, and allowed his fear to overtake him. Elijah stands as one character in Scripture to remind us that even the strongest, most faithful followers of Jesus are susceptible to these human realities. As the story continues, God honors Elijah's faithfulness and sends an angel to feed him. After receiving nourishment, Elijah knows he needs God to make it, so he heads to Mount Sinai, the mountain of God. It is at Mount Sinai where God revealed himself to Elijah and they have a very honest conversation. God gently speaks truth and gives him a vision for the future. Even though he was rattled to his core, Elijah trusted his relationship with God and went to the source of all life when he felt like his was over; he poured out his heart, opened himself to the correction of God, and left with a renewed spirit and passion. He was hungry and thirsty for righteousness, and once again, was indeed filled by God. He was formed through obedience to God's instruction and was given life through his relationship with God.

Colossians 2:6-7

To close this section, I want to look briefly at some words of instruction Paul gave to the church in Colossae. He wrote, "So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness."⁵² Paul says the gospel you received wasn't simply a set of ideas, or popular teachings; the gospel you received was the Living Lord.⁵³ "You received Jesus Christ as Lord," so continue to live (walk) your lives in him. Paul loves this metaphor of 'walking with Jesus.' He uses it 32 times in his letters, and he is saying we should walk in such a way that our lives begin to mirror Jesus in our thoughts, words, and conduct. He uses it in the present tense which means we should '*continue* to walk with Jesus;' we ought to keep moving forward and keep going in the direction you've already begun. When you live and walk daily under the Lordship of Jesus, you will be strengthened against the temptations and empty philosophies of the world.

In verse 7 Paul picks up the metaphor we discussed in Psalm 1, being rooted in the Lord, and then he quickly adds another metaphor, one of 'building up.' Strong roots (foundations) are necessary for the stability and strength of a building. As followers of Jesus, we are rooted in Christ and established in his love – he is our foundation. With this foundation, we are built up like living stones into a spiritual house.⁵⁴ Paul says you will know you are going in the right direction when thanksgiving begins to overflow from your life. When you keep in step with Jesus, sink your roots down into him and abide in him, and when you allow him to build you into a holy and spiritual temple, you will reap a harvest of gratitude – thanksgiving for what God has done and is doing in and through you will bubble up out of your soul. Be thankful that the Lord satisfies you with good

⁵² Colossians 2:6-7 NIV.

⁵³ See also 1 Corinthians 15:1-5.

⁵⁴ See 1 Peter 2:5.

things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle.⁵⁵ This is the goal and product of our faith formation.

Synthesis of Themes, Values, and Commitments

Ronald Rolheiser suggests our spirituality is the way we address and channel what he identifies as a fire that burns deep within us, a holy longing, if you will.⁵⁶ N.T. Wright uses the metaphor 'echoes of a voice' to describe spiritual longings humans have wired deep within their souls, and these longings only begin to make sense as one moves closer and closer to God.⁵⁷ For the scope of this project on faith formation in a rapidly changing, information overloaded world, it is my contention in our fast-paced, overly scheduled, media-saturated lives when confronted with the two paths as described in Psalm 1, many people, even long-time followers of Jesus, end up taking the wider, easier, faster route that follows the way of the unrighteous. Further, when pulling into the 'rest stops' of our lives, too many people settle for bite-sized snacks to fill our spiritual hunger and thirst, when the full banquet and finest wines are available through relationship with Jesus Christ.

Wright says Christian holiness is not about denying something good, but rather 'growing up and grasping something even better.'⁵⁸ How we deal with our longings, or what we digest to slake our thirst and satisfy our hunger will, in the words of Rolheiser, leave us 'healthy or unhealthy, loving or bitter.'⁵⁹ He goes on to say that how we channel this longing and the disciplines we choose to live by "will either lead to a greater integration or disintegration within our bodies, minds, and souls, and to a greater integration or disintegration in the way we are related to God, others and the cosmic world."⁶⁰ When we settle for empty calories, Wright suggests we being "Made for spirituality, we wallow in introspection. Made for joy, we settle for pleasure. Made for justice, we clamor for vengeance. Made for relationships, we insist on our own way. Made for beauty, we are satisfied with sentiment."⁶¹

⁵⁵ See Psalm 103:5.

⁵⁶ Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Image, 2009).

⁵⁷ N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 3-51.

⁵⁸ Wright, *Simply Christian*, 237.

⁵⁹ Rolheiser, *Holy Longing*, 7.

⁶⁰ Rolheiser, *Holy Longing*, 11.

⁶¹ Wright, *Simply Christian*, 237.

Section 2: WESLEYAN DISCIPLESHIP and OTHER Key Voices

As this project will mainly focus on faith formation within the context of the Church of the Nazarene, the following historical exploration focuses on our main theological forbear, John Wesley, and his thoughts and methods regarding faith formation through discipleship. Following this brief study into Wesley's theology of discipleship, I will explore more recent voices in faith formation that lean into the disciplines of spiritual formation.

Wesleyan Discipleship

In studying John Wesley's faith formation, or discipleship model, one cannot help but notice his painstaking attention to detail and a careful, methodical approach in nurturing Christians in their relationship with Jesus and their journey to personal holiness. He was passionate about saving the lost and spurring people on to 'Christian perfection.' Several life experiences instilled this value system in Wesley. During Wesley's childhood, his mother (who took particular interest in his spiritual condition) was insistent that he learned *personal discipline* and *spiritual submission*. While at Oxford, Wesley started the Holy Club and during this time he figured out that cognitive acquisition needed to be followed up with the intentional *practice of Christian service*.⁶² This concept of Christian service was further solidified during Wesley's observations of de Renty. From the Moravians and his time at Herrnhut settlement, Wesley discovered the small *group dynamics of accountability* and the importance of *careful administration*. Wesley's discipleship model was not simply a 'tossed salad' of all these life lessons; rather, he was a brilliant innovator with the ability to take the experiences and practices he learned, add his own interpretation, and utilize the outcome for present and future benefit. This need for a well-formed plan of assimilation was born out of the success of John Wesley's preaching ministry. Rather than bank on the organized religious system to nurture new Christians, Wesley chose to take holiness to the masses through a grass-roots campaign of small group accountability. With the high number of converts needing pastoral care, Wesley developed this system to assist people in the deepening of their Christian walk. He sought to recapture the spirit of *koinonia*, supportive fellowship, in these fledgling faith communities as their Christian faith was being formed. Henderson suggested that the medium of transmission developed by Wesley might be the most significant agent of change - even overshadowing the content. He identifies Wesley's understanding that human nature can be perfected by God's grace as the first major step in Wesley's faith formation model.⁶³ This was the basis and ultimate goal of Wesley's discipleship methods.

⁶² Michael D. Henderson, *A Model for Making Disciples John Wesley's Class Meeting* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Press, 1997), 43.

⁶³ Henderson. *A Model for Making Disciples*. Henderson, in his discussion of The Affective Mode states, "It could be said metaphorically that the society aimed for the head, the class meetings for the hands, and the band for the heart." I found this a helpful way to think about Wesley's methodology - it truly addressed every part of the human experience both mentally, physically and spiritually.

Wesley practiced a faith formation model that had several interlocking pieces that built upon one another. For the purposes of this study, I have outlined the system in three categories: *head*, *hands* and *heart*.⁶⁴ First, education through knowledge acquisition was metaphorically targeted at the *head*. One of Wesley's chief concerns was preaching the gospel to the masses, particularly the poor. God blessed him with a very fruitful ministry; these new converts had made a decision with their mind that they needed to turn their lives over to Christ. It was extremely important to Wesley that a follow up system was in place to continue knowledge transfer to these individuals and encourage them in growth in grace, so he developed Society Meetings. Wesley believed in an open admission policy – the only requirement for entrance into a Society was “a desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from sins.”⁶⁵ These Societies were organized by locale and provided a means for transferring the Christian doctrine through preaching, teaching and public worship. These were forums for instructional teaching, and very little audience participation was required at this level, but like all of Wesley's groups, regular attendance was mandatory to remain as part of the Society.

The second part of Wesley's system, formation through practice, focused on the *hands*. Wesley believed that long-lasting spiritual transformation was not the product of doctrinal teaching; rather it came through the faithful and regular practice of disciple building.⁶⁶ The centerpiece of Wesley's discipleship methodology was the Class Meeting – a vehicle for internalizing the message of Christianity. According to Wesley, the Class Meeting was the closest model for recreating the spiritual life of New Testament Christianity.⁶⁷ These regular, intimate meetings were one way in which Christians could mediate the gap between social pressures and spiritual demands. Wesley's insistence on a new set of Christian practices challenged the ‘social practices’ of the day such as drinking, hurling, and wrestling.⁶⁸ Essentially, Wesley replaced secular activities with spiritual activities. By filling time with ‘devotions and duties’ there was literally no free time left to participate in the secular practices of the day. Furthermore, these small groups provided opportunity for Christian companionship and friendship that fostered an environment of love and trust. Henderson refers to the small group method as the ‘Behavioral Mode’ because these groups were organized for the sole purpose of behavior modification. This was the place where the cognitive learning met the practices of Christian service through, what Wesley called, the *means of grace*. This was such a large part of Wesley's philosophy that I have included a section below to discuss the *means of grace*.

⁶⁴ Henderson, *A Model for Making Disciples*, 112.

⁶⁵ Henderson, *A Model for Making Disciples*, 76.

⁶⁶ Henderson, *A Model for Making Disciples*, 31.

⁶⁷ Dean Blevins, “Practicing the New Creation: Wesley's Eschatological Community Formed by the Means of Grace,” *The Asbury Journal*, Vol 58, No. 1, (Spring 2003), 25. Also noted in Henders *A Model for Making Disciples*, 13.

⁶⁸ Blevins, “Practicing the New Creation,” 13.

The third part of Wesley's system, education through inward purification, aimed for the *heart*. Wesley noticed that there were some people who wanted to go deeper than what the Class Meeting structure would allow. He realized some people wanted to pour out everything that was on their hearts and minds – particularly about spiritual struggles. Out of this observation, Wesley created another level of small groups called 'bands.' Henderson refers to these bands as a means for 'affective redirection.'⁶⁹ These bands fostered a culture of brutal honesty and openness for the purposes of improving attitudes, intentions and affections. According to Wesley, holiness came through the combination of two parts – ethical morality (outward uprightness) and inward purity.⁷⁰ The band could specifically focus on inner purity – the cleansing of impure motives and attitudes. Both the Class Meetings and the Bands promoted strict adherence in practicing what Wesley called the *means of grace*.

Means of Grace

The means of grace is *how* we live with Christ in the world and grow in loving and knowing God, our neighbors, and ourselves. Christian faith is more than agreeing with a set of doctrines; it is more than outward appearances; it is more than just professing Christianity. Faith is ultimately about what is happening on the inside. Wesley believed practicing the *means of grace* was essential to the life of Christian discipleship because the prescribed activities point to Christ and help to assimilate people into a new way of life. These basic practices are how Christians open themselves to grace and allow the Holy Spirit to form them in Christlikeness. In other words, the means of grace are how Christians live out and demonstrate faith and the changed life within. Through intentional practice, Christians make themselves available to God and his grace, sanctifying the totality of their lives.

The means of grace are divided into two general categories: *works of piety* and *works of mercy*. Works of piety are how Christians grow and mature in loving God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. These are works of worship and devotion and include practices like prayer (private and family), celebrating the Lord's Supper, scriptural study, fasting and practicing accountability in small groups. The works of mercy are how disciples live out their love for God in the world by loving their neighbors as themselves in acts of compassion and justice. These works harmonize and balance the works of piety by providing an outlet for Christian service to the world and include practices like feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, ministering to those in prison and sheltering the homeless. Blevins notes that Wesley also used the terminology of 'instituted' and 'prudential' means of grace.⁷¹ Instituted means were similar to acts of piety and prudential means included things like holy living, particular rules, acts of ministry and exercising the presence of God.

⁶⁹ Henderson, *A Model for Making Disciples*, 112.

⁷⁰ Henderson, *A Model for Making Disciples*, 115.

⁷¹ Dean Blevins, "Renovating Christian Education in the 21st century: A Wesleyan Contribution," *Christian Education Journal*, Series 3, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Spring 2004).

Blevins uses three categories to summarize authentic Wesleyan discipleship: *formation*, *discernment* and *transformation*.⁷² Blevins chooses this triad for the following reason, Wesley understood the instituted means of grace as a means for training and assimilating persons into the faith community through intentional Christian practice. This is where the formative process finds its locus, in the socialization that occurs over time by taking methodical, deliberate actions that connect 'faith with daily life.'⁷³ *Discernment* is the practice of deciphering and determining what formative practices are relevant to a particular context. Blevins states, "Discerning which practices are truly means of grace involves both critical investigation and a constructive (or imaginative) appreciation of God's ongoing activity."⁷⁴ Wesley invited ongoing discussion of what constituted his 'prudential means of grace.' Discernment engaged the mind and encouraged dialog about the means of grace; further, this allowed for the activity of the Holy Spirit to act as a guide in determining what practices might express the grace of God. Finally, if I am following Blevin's train of thought accurately, transformation is through the acts of mercy which were associated with the prudential means of grace. Through these activities and the focus of Wesley's educational efforts, transformation occurred in individuals, Christian communities, society and in all of creation.⁷⁵

These three ideas (formation, discernment and transformation) work together to encourage people to live seeking holiness of heart and life - and in so doing create a means for transforming the world in which they live. Wesley was in a sense training people to live life looking forward to the coming reign of God. Blevins uses the analogy of 'realized eschatology' inherent in worship to describe the effect of the Christian community practicing the means of grace in our world.⁷⁶ Blevins discusses the means of grace as being a vehicle for attempting to live and practice the New Creation.⁷⁷ The connection Blevins makes between realized eschatology and new creation provides the reasoning for the Christian community bringing the -in-breaking of the Kingdom to bear by living life as if 'heaven has come down.'⁷⁸ This is the transformation Wesley sought through Christian faith formation.

Much of Wesley's system was predicated upon the involvement of strong leaders at all levels. One of the key concerns for Wesley's model, as explained by Henderson was leadership development. He says, "The primary function of spiritual/educational leadership is to equip others to lead and

⁷² Blevins, "Renovating Christian Education."

⁷³ Blevins, "Renovating Christian Education," 10.

⁷⁴ Blevins, "Renovating Christian Education," 11.

⁷⁵ Blevins, "Renovating Christian Education," 14.

⁷⁶ Blevins, "Practicing the New Creation," 23.

⁷⁷ Blevins, "Practicing the New Creation," 16.

⁷⁸ Blevins, "Practicing the New Creation," 24.

minister, not to perform the ministry personally.”⁷⁹ The concern Wesley is addressing clearly reveals the need for a system of discipleship that formed a ladder for spiritual formation, and at the same time provided a built-in system for leadership development. As leaders on one level became competent, they had opportunity to participate and lead in the next level up the ladder. Wesley had figured out a way to continually deepen the spiritual walks of believers and a way to keep the leadership funnel full of trained candidates.

Wesley was rather unique in his time with the use of non-ordained lay people as leaders of his small groups. These leaders had a significant role and responsibility as the point of accountability in the discipleship groups, yet they had no formal theological training. Lay leaders were recognized from within the ranks for their natural giftedness in leading people. Henderson says that leaders were trained *in* ministry, not *for* ministry. Wesley was a master at detail and sought to be in control of as much as possible and insisted upon providing strong oversight to his designated leaders. Blevins points out this might be due to his desire to remain doctrinally orthodox. However, Henderson demonstrates that Wesley, while very controlling, was an example of a team player. In any case, the leadership development strategy remained flexible, but was extremely organized and effective.

The prophet Micah says, “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”⁸⁰ Micah’s words seem to approximate the intent of Wesley’s approach and model as it addresses the head, hands and heart. Wesley’s method of discipleship was a process that led towards Christian perfection; likewise, the creation of his educational system was also a process. Wesley’s key concerns for Christian discipleship could be summarized as follows:

- Wesley believed that lost people matter to God.
- Doctrinal instruction was critical, but was internalized through Christian service.
- Learning is solidified and quickened through regular (mandated) participation in a community of trust and accountability.
- Being a Christian is not just a proclamation to believe, it is an active lifestyle of service to be embodied by practicing the *means of grace*.
- Identifying and training leaders in ministry, not for ministry would ensure the ongoing viability of the Methodist movement.
- A change in actions preceded a change in attitude; entire sanctification was possible through the grace of God and proper care and discipline.
- Education was a means living in light of the New Creation through transformed lives and communities.

⁷⁹ Henderson, *A Model for Making Disciples*, 129.

⁸⁰ Micah 6:8 NIV.

In conclusion, it can be stated that Wesley's method of formation, in concert with the Good News of Jesus Christ, the transformative work of the Holy Spirit and the grace of God is the most significant aspect of living a life of holiness.

Key Voices

Before turning our attention to the modern voices on faith formation of Eugene Peterson and Dallas Willard, a brief synopsis of James Fowler's stages of faith development will provide a helpful rubric for the analysis to follow.⁸¹ Fowler author's the seminal work of structural-developmental psychology, outlining an innovative stage theory of faith development. Because Fowler's work is so comprehensive and considered a classic in the development of the psychology of religion, it offers pastoral counselors and ministry professionals a framework for identifying where a person is at in their faith development, and what might be holding them back from moving forward in the progression. I do not intend on critiquing Fowler's model, nor do I intend to offer commentary outside of a description of each stage. Fowler's model sets the stage for my concluding remarks and assessment of the current state of faith formation in Christians today, particularly as it relates to the church and her efforts to help people become more deeply rooted followers of Christ and growing in their faith.

It is important to note that Fowler maintained that faith allows human beings to conceptualize what he called the "ultimate environment,"⁸² the versions of the world that individuals create in their minds that shape the ways in which they understand and live in the real world. According to Fowler, there are seven primary stages of faith, including Stage 0, in the life of the individual. They are as follows:

- Stage 0 - Infancy and Undifferentiated Faith (Ages Birth-2): The infant lives in a foundational state of either trust or mistrust, depending on the care it receives and its sense of safety in the world. When children experience warmth, love and safety from those providing their primary care, then there is free movement to the next stage of development; while experiences of neglect may lock the infant into patterns of isolation and cultivate a lack of confidence in others. At this stage, children experience faith as a connection between themselves and their caregiver.⁸³
- Stage 1 - Intuitive-Projective Faith: Fowler places this stage between the ages of two and six years, when the child is first able to use speech and symbols to organize thoughts and

⁸¹ James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: HarperOne, 1981). Fowler's work can be compared to others, such as Erik Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development which bears some similarity. I chose Fowler's work as it was both comprehensive and compelling, especially from a ministry standpoint. For a more in-depth study, comparing these stages to Jean Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development is a worthy endeavor, but outside the scope of this essay.

⁸² Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 24.

⁸³ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 119-121.

experiences. The cognitive development of children of this age is such that they are unable to think abstractly and are generally unable to see the world from anyone else's perspective. Faith is not a thought-out set of ideas, but instead impression that are largely gained from parents or other significant adults in their lives. During this stage, children become involved in the rhythms and routines of their faith community by experiencing them and learning from those around them. At this age, without the logical processes that allow for discernment or questioning, children simply assume that what they are taught is the only possible perspective.⁸⁴

- Stage 2 – Mythical-Literal Faith: A child in this stage, generally ages 6-12, begins to make meaning of what was previously fantasy, having the ability to re-tell stories; and are beginning to decipher between what is literal and non-literal, starting to consider the figurative meanings of the stories. In fact, the strength of this stage is the child's growing ability to think logically and to put order on their world. Like the previous stage, faith is something to be experienced through the stories told and rituals practiced, but now children begin to own for themselves the stories and rituals of their faith community, which are still understood literally. At this age children's source of religious authority starts to expand past parents and trusted adults to others in their community like teachers and friends. Later in this stage children begin to have the capacity to understand that others might have different beliefs than them. Although this stage is typical for elementary school age children, Fowler's research shows that adolescents and some adults have faith locked in at this stage.⁸⁵
- Stage 3 – Synthetic-Conventional Faith: This stage is the stage of spiritual adolescence, and begins around age 13 and goes until age 18; however, some people stay at this stage for their entire life. Faith is now constructed in relational, or interpersonal terms, where both conformity and authority are viewed as important. An adolescent's belief and value systems are largely unexamined, yet deeply felt and held. This is the stage when youth begin to question their own thoughts, and assumptions about others they have held, as part of creating a personal identity and building relationships with the world outside the immediate family. This impacts on how adolescents pull into a synthesis their values, beliefs, and relationships that will support and confirm their struggle for a workable sense of identity. Further, the anthropomorphic images of God and the narratives from Stage 2 become more personal and less distant as a person enters Stage 3. God becomes a significant other who knows the depths and the secrets of the self, and offers companionship, guidance and support.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 122-134.

⁸⁵ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 135-150.

⁸⁶ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 151-173.

- Stage 4 - Individuative-Reflective Faith: This stage usually starts in late adolescence (ages 18-22), but is not limited to this, as people of older generations experience the dissonance that comes with the real questions of faith that begin in this stage. Fowler says the transition from stage 3 to stage 4 is "particularly critical for it is in this transition that the late adolescent or adult must begin to take seriously the burden of responsibility for his or her own commitments, lifestyle, beliefs and attitudes."⁸⁷ During this stage, symbols developed in previous stages are now translated into concepts for critical reflection and examination. A reconstitution of values and beliefs takes place including a shift from an external to an internal authority and the creation of an "executive ego."⁸⁸ Along with questioning their own assumptions about their faith, people at this stage start to question and examine the authority structures of their faith tradition that have sustained them to this point; leading some to abandon their faith communities if the answers to the questions they are asking are not to their liking. Greater maturity is cultured by affirming some parts of their faith while rejecting other parts. As a result, the person starts to take greater ownership of their faith journey. While this stage can begin as early as the late teens, it can also begin at various times during adulthood, but in adulthood many people hover indefinitely between Stages 3 and 4 because it is more difficult to make changes when relationships, habits, patterns and lifestyles have been firmly established.⁸⁹
- Stage 5 - Conjunctive Faith: What was hidden, or out of awareness or suppressed in earlier stages is now recognized and integrated. A person reaching stage 5 is able to acknowledge paradoxes and the mysteries of transcendent values, allowing them to move beyond conventional religious beliefs and traditions that may have been assumed or learned in a previous developmental stage.⁹⁰
- Stage 6 - Universalizing Faith: Fowler describes people who reach Stage 6, which is rarely achieved, as having unity with God, and their central point of reference is no longer the self, but the Ultimate. When this happens, people begin to live out in what Christians and Jews call the Kingdom of God as if it had already been realized. People reaching this stage put their faith to work by living in such a way that beliefs and actions are aligned.⁹¹ Fowler says of those persons who reach stage 6, they "kindle our imaginations...because, in their

⁸⁷ Fowler, *Stages of Faith, Stages of Faith*, 182. Fowler is identifying here that faith becomes one's own and not the assumed faith of childhood from one's parents or other significant influences in the transition from stage 3 to 4.

⁸⁸ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 179.

⁸⁹ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 174-183.

⁹⁰ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 184-198.

⁹¹ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 199-211.

generosity and authority, in their freedom and their costly love, they embody the promise and lure of our share futurity.”⁹²

With this in mind, we now turn our attention to a brief look into the thought and work of Eugene Peterson and Dallas Willard on faith formation.

Eugene Peterson

Eugene Peterson writes that faith formation, at its core, is becoming alive to God, and his will and holiness, and to his kingdom, power and glory.⁹³ When a person is born again, in Christ, a maturation process begins as one becomes alive to God. The Apostle Paul affirms this when he wrote to the Christians in Ephesus, encouraging their faith formation by exhorting them to become “mature in, attaining the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.”⁹⁴ While believers have active agency in their formation, they are not left alone in the endeavor. Believers are not left alone in this work; the Holy Spirit works alongside us and with us to form our born-again spirits into the likeness of Jesus Christ.⁹⁵

Of the problems and difficulties that exist in stunting one’s growth in Christ, Peterson identifies two significant concerns. The first can be identified as having faulty vision, or a vision of God that’s too small. In his long pastoral career, Peterson discerned the difficulty of Christians thinking in ways that are too small about God which held them back from reaching full maturity in Christ.⁹⁶ I understand this to be the observation that Christians tend to try to fit Jesus into their already full lives, and maturing is more like ‘making room’ for one more thing. This may be what Peterson is getting at when he describes Christians feeling claustrophobic because of not being able to fit the magnificence of God into the smallness of our lives.⁹⁷

A second major detractor to growth is the deeply engrained belief in our world that anything worthwhile can be obtained quickly,⁹⁸ even easily and efficiently. Our attention spans have been conditioned to be shorter by things as benign as commercials and text messages. Peterson

⁹² Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 211.

⁹³ Eugene H. Peterson, *Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up in Christ* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 2010), 1.

⁹⁴ Ephesians 4:13b-15 (NIV).

⁹⁵ Peterson, *Practice Resurrection*, 2.

⁹⁶ Peterson, *Practice Resurrection*, 274.

⁹⁷ Peterson, *Practice Resurrection*, 274.

⁹⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 15-16.

acknowledges that it is not difficult to get people's attention, and even garner interest in the gospel message, but it is something different and difficult to sustain this interest. He says, "There is a great market for religious experience in our world; there is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations called holiness."⁹⁹ The attention deficit he identifies exposes the weakness of many church growth strategies that are program driven and focus mainly on new birth and filling seats, and less on discipling believers to grow up and mature in Christ.

Peterson's understanding of faith formation can be summed up in the title of his book, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*¹⁰⁰ as he believes there are no shortcuts in growing up in Christ. The road of faith formation to maturity in Christ is one that is long, slow, rigorous and intentional, one in which Peterson claims, 'hurry is no virtue' and there is 'no secret formula squirreled away that will make it easier or quicker.'¹⁰¹ This goes against the grain of culture that has little tolerance for things that require submission to conditions where growth requires patience, quietness, and giving up control.¹⁰²

Growing up in Christ involves being told into or recognizing one's place in the ongoing story of God. Peterson points out that being immersed in the intricacies and complexities of life is what gives form, beauty and meaning to life.¹⁰³ He says we 'must stay in the story as it is being told, give our consent, and not impatiently or angrily go off and improvise on our own.'¹⁰⁴ As it pertains specifically to faith formation, the biblical narrative is the most comprehensive story for such a task, one where we will find endless complexities, but also commonalities in dealing with the human condition and maturation. The gospel story is livable in every arena of life, and to live out the gospel in our homes, workplaces, schools, churches, and relationships, one must be committed for the long haul.

Throughout his life in ministry, Eugene Peterson was driven by the goal of getting the gospel of Jesus "into the lives of these men and women with whom I was living, and doing it the only way I knew, through Scripture and prayer, prayer and Scripture. I preached and taught the Scriptures that

⁹⁹ Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 16.

¹⁰⁰ Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 13. Peterson harvests his title from an unlikely source, Friedrich Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, where he said, "The essential thing 'in heaven and earth' is...that there should be long obedience in the same direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living."

¹⁰¹ Peterson, *Practice Resurrection*, 276-277.

¹⁰² Peterson, *Practice Resurrection*, 6-7. Peterson identifies the American Christians psyche is conditioned to want to accomplish things in 40 days, after all, that's how long it took Jesus in the wilderness.

¹⁰³ Peterson, *Practice Resurrection*, 277.

¹⁰⁴ Peterson, *Practice Resurrection*, 277.

revealed Jesus. I prayed with and for this mixed bag of saints and sinners that was my congregation, prayed in the name of Jesus.”¹⁰⁵ It is apparent that he was personally invested in living into the gospel story and being formed by a long obedience in the same direction, and invited people to walk along with him on the journey. Yet he recognized, in his words, that he “was neither capable nor competent to form Christ in another person, to shape a life of discipleship in man, woman or child. That is supernatural work, and I am not supernatural.”¹⁰⁶

Peterson’s strategy for faith formation was found in the work of scripture and prayer; helping people listen to God speak to them through the Bible and teaching them how to dialog with God through prayer.¹⁰⁷ This is the slow, intentional work of learning to live a long obedience in the same direction. Peterson admits his own impatience caused him to revert to strategies that promised faster results, but he found the other methods anemic in helping people attend to God¹⁰⁸ and returned to the patient work of Scripture and prayer. These two things are not to be viewed as separate entities but rather fused together. Peterson says, “It is this fusion of God speaking to us (Scripture) and our speaking to him (prayer) that the Holy Spirit uses to form the life of Christ in us.”¹⁰⁹ Christians embarking on a life of faith are best guided and sustained by the combination of these two practices, but a casual commitment will not suffice to grow up into the fullness of Christ. Peterson believes the fusion of Scripture and prayer requires ‘diligent attentiveness.’¹¹⁰

John’s vision in Revelation included instructions from an angel to ‘take and eat’ a scroll, which he did.¹¹¹ Peterson uses this passage to name a book about consuming and digesting the Holy Scriptures through the practice of spiritual reading.¹¹² This kind of reading is called *lectio divina*, it’s a reading that ‘enters our souls as food enters our stomachs, spreads through our blood, and becomes holiness and love and wisdom.’¹¹³ Not only does the Bible become spiritual nourishment for us, it weaves us into God’s story. Peterson writes that Karl Barth “insists that we do not read this book...in order to find out how to get God into our lives, get him to participate in our lives. No. We open this book and find that page after page it takes us off guard, surprises us, and draws us into

¹⁰⁵ Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 201.

¹⁰⁶ Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 202.

¹⁰⁷ Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 202.

¹⁰⁸ Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 202.

¹⁰⁹ Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 202.

¹¹⁰ Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 203.

¹¹¹ Revelation 10:9-10.

¹¹² Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

¹¹³ Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 4.

its reality, pulls us into participation with God on *his* terms.”¹¹⁴ This is the goal, to be formed by a prayerful reading of the Word, so that we are moved beyond ourselves and formed into the likeness of Jesus. Peterson elucidates a spiritual reading of the Word, and outlines the fusion of prayer and Scripture in this way – reading the Scriptures: slowly, imaginatively, prayerfully, and obediently.¹¹⁵

- **Slowly.** Peterson speaks of the immense nature of God, suggesting it takes time to adjust to his majesty. He writes, “The Bible is deep and wide with God’s love and grace, brimming over with surprises of mercy and mystery.”¹¹⁶ It is kind of like how our eyes need time adjust when we step out into the dark, or how we need to find our bearings when entering into an unfamiliar place. We must go slowly so we can take it all in, and not rush through and miss things. Most often these days, Christians employ a reading style that is “fast, reductive, information-gathering and, above all, practical” and we read the Bible for “what we can get out of it”¹¹⁷ and apply right now. Peterson teaches us to slow down, take in everything that is in the text, and find our place in the narrative.
- **Imaginatively.** As we are told into the ongoing story of God, we will find ourselves included in the Bible, and in order to recognize this we ‘must enter the story imaginatively’ to see how our thoughts and experiences fit.¹¹⁸ A risk we face, or a tendency we have in reading is to depersonalize the stories, characters, and content, turning them into abstractions or truths we can mine from the text and then use or apply in our lives. Peterson reminds us that thinking imaginatively about Scripture ‘is the capacity we have of crossing boundaries of space and time, with all our senses intact, and entering into other God-revealed conversations and actions...’¹¹⁹
- **Prayerfully.** To read the Bible prayerfully is to begin to realize that the Bible is not giving us some bit of information or idea or some rules to follow, but rather it is God speaking the very words of life into our being.¹²⁰ We are taught to read in order to gather information, look for facts, yet the Bible is not simply a source of information it is one of the primary ways that God speaks to us, doing the work of inviting, promising, blessing, confronting, commanding, and healing.¹²¹

¹¹⁴ Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 6.

¹¹⁵ Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 203.

¹¹⁶ Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 204.

¹¹⁷ Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 204.

¹¹⁸ Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 204.

¹¹⁹ Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 205.

¹²⁰ Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 205.

¹²¹ Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 205.

- **Obediently.** We grow up in a culture that encourages us to take charge of our own lives and are taught to use information at our disposal to our own progress and advantage. Peterson identifies the common narrative taught to Christians that the Bible is useful, and that we quickly pick it up, page through it, looking for anything useful to apply to our lives. In other words, we are prone to exert control of the Bible instead of letting it take charge over us. Peterson argues we are not smart enough to use the Bible as a toolbox or guidebook to improve our lives. Instead, he says, "The Author of the book is writing *us* into *his* book, we aren't writing *him* into *ours*. We find ourselves in the book as followers of Jesus. Jesus calls us to follow him and we obey - or we do not. This is an immense world of God's salvation that we are entering; we don't know enough to 'apply' anything. Our task is to obey, believingly, trustingly obey."¹²²

Dallas Willard

Dallas Willard provides this definition of spiritual formation: "Spiritual formation in the tradition of Jesus Christ is the process of transformation of the inmost dimension of the human being, the heart, which is the same as the spirit or will. It is being formed (really, transformed) in such a way that its natural expression comes to be the deeds of Christ done in the power of Christ."¹²³ As far as how this works in a believer's life, Willard leans on the progression of spiritual formation outlined in Peter's second letter as follows: "...make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge, and to knowledge, self-control, and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love."¹²⁴ Considering what has already been written about stages of faith development, Willard, without coming up with his own categories, affirms the progressive pattern our maturing faith takes. He goes on to identify that when progressions (such as the one included above from 2 Peter) are found in Scripture, they always conclude with love,¹²⁵ with love being at the center of it all.¹²⁶ I would affirm his observation, considering it is God's unrelenting love that enables our growth in grace in the first place.

It is by God's grace that we progress in faith formation, yet there is a passive and an active element to it. God is the initiator, and his very presence makes it possible, for without God all our efforts are in vain; but we must also acknowledge that if we do nothing we will not progress forward in our faith. Willard uses the example of 'keeping your heart,' pointing out this is something in which we

¹²² Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 206.

¹²³ Dallas Willard, *Spiritual Formation: What it is, and How it is Done*.
<https://dwillard.org/articles/spiritual-formation-what-it-is-and-how-it-is-done>.

¹²⁴ 2 Peter 1:4-7 NIV.

¹²⁵ See for example Colossians 3:12-14.

¹²⁶ Willard, "Spiritual Formation."

have active agency.¹²⁷ I appreciate Willard's thoughts here on cooperation with the Holy Spirit and believe this needs more consideration in our teaching. We are responsible to keep our heart, not completely alone, but we are to 'make every effort'¹²⁸ to add to our faith, in this we are to be diligent. If we do nothing, it will not be done. Spiritual formation is something that 'requires us to take wise steps in accomplishing...' and 'to understand as well as we can what is our part and what is God's part and take care of our part that God may be able to work with us in bringing us to be the kinds of people that we need to be and he wants us to be.'¹²⁹

Willard notes that the popularity of the topic, or emergence of language regarding 'spiritual formation' is perhaps due to the recognition that we have failed at realizing the need of intentional faith formation, instead we have relied "on preaching, teaching, and knowledge or information to form faith in the hearer..."¹³⁰ This critique of the Church's efforts in helping believers move towards maturity in their faith is fair, and points out either a laziness in leadership, or a rejection of the intense, sustained effort needed in prayer, scripture study and obedience on the part of individual Christians. One cannot simply rely on what is presented from the platform on Sunday morning to form the inner life and outward behavior of Christ followers. Adding to the sting of the critique, Willard suggests relying on such a model has not turned out very well, and instead has yielded the result of having "multitudes of professing Christians who well may be ready to die, but obviously are not ready to live, and can hardly get along with themselves, much less with others."¹³¹ In that statement, Willard uncovers an important outcome of faith formation, living. When we are in Christ, the Apostle Paul says new creation, or new life, exists.¹³² As the Holy Spirit begins to transform us and as we become like Jesus, we will be inspired and energized to live as Christ lived out in the world.

Our transformation does not happen by osmosis, but through the grace of God, and intense activity on our part. Willard believes this kind of intensity is "crucial for any progress in spiritual perception and understanding,"¹³³ suggesting that sprinkling a bit of scripture here and there on oneself throughout the week is not enough to "reorder one's mind and spirit – just as one drop of water every five minutes will not get you a shower, no matter how you keep it up. You need a lot of water

¹²⁷ Willard, "Spiritual Formation."

¹²⁸ See 2 Peter 1:4 NIV.

¹²⁹ Willard, "Spiritual Formation."

¹³⁰ Dallas Willard, "Spiritual Formation in Christ: A Perspective on What it is and How it Might be Done," *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, Vol. 28, #4 (2000).

¹³¹ Willard, "Formation in Christ."

¹³² See 2 Corinthians 5:17.

¹³³ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life with God* (London: William Collins, 1998), 355.

at once and for a sufficiently long time. Similarly, for the written Word."¹³⁴ At this point Willard and Peterson have similar views on intensity and duration, faith formation is a long arduous process, but one that will yield healthy, mature fruit.

On this kind of prolonged intensity, Willard admits he did not understand the level of intensity needed, nor did he comprehend the intensity needed a prolonged, uninterrupted period of time each time he made the effort in scripture study and/or prayer.¹³⁵ He calls here for a complete rearrangement of one's life to make this kind of focus a reality, which flies in the face of our culture's insistence on acquiring things quickly with as little effort as possible. Willard is arguing for an unhurried life, and this far into the study, I believe he is suggesting that practicing this kind of spiritual intensity will counterintuitively lead one to a greater sense of peace, with less agitation in one's soul.

Once a disciple catches the full vision of the glorious life in the Kingdom, experiencing God's presence and participating in God's mission now, Willard says the next step is 'intention.' One must decide, of one's own volition, to live as a kingdom person, trusting, believing and obeying the teachings of Jesus. Once there is a vision and intention, Willard moves to 'method', the means by which one actually obeys Christ, referring to the 'method' as 'spiritual disciplines.'¹³⁶ This triad, vision-intention-method, makes sense when you consider that a vision without any intention will simply remain a two-dimensional picture; and having intentions to do something to realize the vision without any means, will simply be a good intention. But when you add the method or means to intentionally work at the vision, that's when formation happens. Willard says these "means for spiritual transformation" are, "for replacing of the inner character of the 'lost' with the inner character of Jesus: his vision, understanding, feelings, decisions, and character."¹³⁷ With this statement Willard reminds us that our spiritual formation is really the process by which Christ is being formed in us.

¹³⁴ Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 355.

¹³⁵ Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 355.

¹³⁶ Dallas Willard writes about this triad, vision, intention and method in multiple places, most notably in *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2002).

¹³⁷ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 89.

Section 3: Synthesis and Conclusion

Agreement and Consensus

The obvious agreement and consensus from the vast material available on the topic of faith formation is that it does not happen by chance or expeditiously. Given the biblical foundation that faith formation is to be passed from one generation to the next, the pragmatic and disciplined nature of discipleship Wesley offered, and the harmony in the voices of Peterson and Willard in their insistence on patient attendance to spiritual disciplines, the direction of any viable effort towards helping believers become more fully formed in their faith must involve an intentional lifelong look, perhaps with important milestones along the way. On the recommendation of Dr. Mark Chironna, I have begun exploring coaching models, which while not explored in this paper, primarily because it drives towards outcomes, is potentially a way forward in joining together education through knowledge acquisition, holiness of heart and mind through attending to spiritual disciplines and the result of an outwardly focused life of service to God and others.

A second point of agreement among the authors I studied is that faith is relational in nature in two specific ways. First, our faith formation cultivates our relationship with Jesus. As we abide in Christ and are obedient to him, we find ourselves becoming more and more like him, and our outward behavior bears testimony to the sanctifying work of his Spirit in our lives. Second, while there is a very personal and individual component to our faith formation, it is not disconnected from the body of Christ. We progress forward in faith together, encouraging one another and spurring one another on. Further, as we are formed together in community, we pass along our faith to others and subsequent generations as commanded by Jesus.¹³⁸

A third point of agreement is the insistence that the process of faith formation is both a lifelong and intensive endeavor that moves one through stages of faith development, in a fashion such as outlined by Fowler. Effective discipleship and the practice of the spiritual disciplines prepares us for a long obedience in the same direction (to borrow from Peterson). This does not mean we will not have setbacks on our journey of faith, but that we are committed for the long haul. Further, these practices are not meant to be done lightly or haphazardly, but intentionally and vigorously, with one's complete focus.

Area of Opportunity

When considering the biblical foundation and the writings reviewed on faith formation alongside Fowler's stages of faith development, my observation is that the modern church may be stunting people's growth in faith by an (over)emphasis on programmatic pedagogy designed to fill believers with the correct content and do so in short series format.¹³⁹ A former pastor of mine, Jeff Crosno,

¹³⁸ See Matthew 28:19-20

¹³⁹ More specific study could be included, but one need only to scroll through any denominational publishing house website to view the number of six to eight week series on a multitude of faith-based topics.

astutely observes that “after riding the tide of an endless succession of congregational emphases, our pastors and lay people may be forgiven for growing skeptical regarding the latest promise that the Kingdom will come in its fullness” after buying into the latest published congregational study.¹⁴⁰ Having served on the same ministry team with Crosno for a decade, and having discussed this repeatedly together, I hear this as a critique of the wave of professionally produced and attractively packaged religious goods that continue to flood our congregations. In my opinion, the critique is warranted, and appropriate, as lay people continually pine for such material, and consume it quickly, yet are not visibly progressing in their faith. A shared hope I have with Crosno, is that believers are “waiting for something deeper and more substantial than a diet of so-called Gospel ‘sweetmeats’ that appears at least partially responsible for the alarming rise of Attention-Deficit-Disordered congregations littering North America.”¹⁴¹

Wesley, Peterson and Willard would agree that classes on the Bible and Christian living are valuable, and even successful to a point, in helping people in their faith development. I believe they would also agree that a completely programmatic approach fails to capture the imaginations of believers for the long haul. Programs and studies focused on teaching people ‘what’ to think as opposed to ‘how’ to think do not inspire or nudge people to progress from stage 3 to 4. This may be partly to blame for some people abandoning their faith at this point, as Fowler has identified. A further question I would like to explore is whether, albeit unintentionally, the current models of discipleship the church employs are actually delaying adolescence and keeping people in stage 3, or losing them altogether? As faith development happens in community and is relational in nature, simply teaching content and not coaching people how to be conformed to the character of Jesus Christ must be addressed in working towards a solution.

Gaps, Missteps, and Other Limitations

One notable limitation is simply the breadth of this topic, it is simply massive, and impossible to cover comprehensively. With the large number of scholars and professionals who have set out to study and write about faith formation in recent decades, there is not one common definition of spiritual formation, or an agreed upon definition of what maturity in faith actually looks like. Given this ambiguity, it is difficult to narrow the focus into one working model of faith development based on Biblical principles that is contextually appropriate, and would provide the depth necessary, yet be usable for those wanting to buck the identified trends of busyness, distraction and information overload in society to grow deeper in their faith.

Arriving at this point in the process of writing this essay, it is clear there are some gaps in my study of the topic, and some glaring missteps that will lead me to further reflection and writing. As it relates to literature review, I believe I failed at providing a good flyover of the topic before narrowing the field of view. For example, while I included two outstanding and helpful voices in

¹⁴⁰ Jeff Crosno, “The Designated Reader: An Ecclesiological Metaphor for Pastoral Leadership,” *Didache: Faithful Teaching* 14:1 (Summer 2014).

¹⁴¹ Jeff Crosno, “Designated Reader.”

faith formation, I believe they offer a similar perspective with only slight nuances. While this is not necessarily bad, it does not provide a broad enough sampling of what has been written on the topic. As I continue to work on this project, I will back up and explore more voices from different categories related to faith formation, for example, a relational or psychological approach, and a more programmatic or catechetical approach. I believe this would help widen the view, so that the narrowing towards a practical and helpful 'solution' will come out of a more robust body of work.

Secondly, while I've started researching the nature of the rise of individualism, I would like to explore the psychology of distraction. Culturally speaking, we have an infinite amount of information at our fingertips, our lives are overly scheduled, and we have this incessant drive for 'more and better,' all of which, clutter our minds. These considerations, even more so, than the individualistic nature and tendencies of our society, may be tied to the current resistance to patient discipleship and prolonged focus on spiritual formation.

Conclusion

It is apparent at the conclusion of this essay that faith formation is not a problem to be solved, but a journey to embark upon together. The life of faith in Jesus Christ beckons us to daily exploration into the myriad of ways God's grace is at work in us and in the world and calls us to be observant pilgrims looking for expressions of God's love. As we walk the path of righteousness, we, the Church take on the essential task of fostering environments and establishing healthy routines and practices where fellow travelers are nurtured in their faith, and new travelers are invited to join the journey towards maturity, becoming more like Jesus each day. By this point in considering what faith formation looks like and the intentional effort it requires, one might already have grown weary of the prospect. I am grateful for the word of encouragement Eugene Peterson offers for this life-transforming journey: "We survive in the way of faith not because we have extraordinary stamina but because God sticks with us."¹⁴²

¹⁴² Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, 133.

Appendix C—Milestone 3 Design Workshop Report

NPO STATEMENT

To grow the church of tomorrow you first must grow 'bigger' Christians, yet in an age of infinite distractions, faith formation is becoming less and less of a priority.

As I have been thinking this over, I am narrowing the broad focus of this statement to faith leaders who are 'distracted' or 'underdeveloped' and therefore, have a difficult time leading and discipling people under their care.

NPO SCOPE AND CONSTRAINTS

After completing the design workshop and coming to some clarity of what a solution might look like, at least in theory, I plan on focusing my attention on developing a model to help Christian leaders prioritize their faith, develop in 'underdeveloped' areas of their faith, and grow deeper in their relationship with Jesus Christ. As this project develops, and I begin working on my prototype, I will have a better idea of materials needed and associated costs.

NPO CONTEXT

My current context is Racine County in Southeast Wisconsin, a community of nearly 200,000 people, which sits between Milwaukee, WI and Chicago, IL. Racine itself is diverse demographically, including an eclectic mix of small-town farmers, suburban commuters, and urban city-dwellers. This warm and friendly Midwest community is well-versed in 'church' but for many, any expression of faith is cultural and assumed, not necessarily lived. I am currently serving in the Church of the Nazarene, and am developing other inter-denominational connections in my community. My primary focus and work will be with the leaders of my church with a secondary focus being the wider body of believers in the Wisconsin District Church of the Nazarene and beyond.

ROOT CAUSES

Everyone who participated in the workshop personally identified with the NPO statement, so conversation was lively, rich, and exposing. In my initial discovery workshop, the primary root cause of faith formation not being a priority was an attitude of selfish independence, and this was again confirmed in the design workshop. With the distracted nature of our time, endless options of activities competing for our time, and unlimited sources of content and data available to fill the mind, many people take a smorgasbord approach to their faith. While this approach will fill you up with many good things, it tends to make you wider, not deeper. The observation is that our culture pushes selfish independence so heavily, that many people no longer see their faith as a relationship with Jesus, but just another activity or task on the list of options.

DEFINITION OF 'DONE'

At this point in the journey, my 'definition of done' will be to have created a model for pastors to use in discipling leaders within their congregations that will inspire growth and cultivate depth in their relationship with Christ so these leaders can be more effective in offering spiritual leadership within the congregation and be more effective disciple-makers.

THREE BIG IDEAS

1. Create a sermon series and corresponding interactive study
2. Create a series of retreats with curated content on faith formation in leaders
3. Design a 2-year cycle of development material for church boards/leadership teams

THREE CONCEPT PITCHES

The first big idea to address discipleship in a distracted age is to create a sermon series and all-church study on the specific topic. The suggested ideas to incorporate into the series ranged from dealing with social media to overly full calendars to saying 'yes' to the right things and learning to say 'no' to good things and learning how to slow down and Sabbath. This idea was born out of the groups desire to see this project reach a large audience and impact more people. The idea is to have a sermon series (or series of sermon series) with a corresponding small group study guide. With a church-wide emphasis that goes down into the small group level, the idea is that together we can improve the depth of discipleship. Certainly, focused studies like this have proven effective, and as far as measuring progress, I believe a beginning and ending survey would be required for people to chart or identify personal progress. The inherent risk is that such a study does not break normal routine enough, and becomes part of the 'white noise.' In other words, it may come across as adding one more thing to an already full plate.

The second idea is to create a series of retreats with curated content on faith formation in leaders. This would likely yield a cycle of three or four retreats over the course of two years. Participants would be identified leaders within our congregation, and the primary focus of the retreats would be the essentials of Christian discipleship. The idea would be to encourage a greater depth personally, and also include teaching on how to be a disciple-maker. The most significant challenge identified in our session was this is a big 'time ask' for people who are likely already full. We believe we would have willing participants but are concerned we may not get the participation we desire. Upon further reflection of this idea, I believe there would need to be a mentoring or coaching component for regular meetings throughout the two years.

The third idea is to design a 2-year cycle of development material for church boards or leadership teams. We arrived at this idea as we were discussing the positives and negatives of the first two. The main challenge we feel we need to overcome in this study is answering the question: how do you increase the depth of discipleship in distracted leaders without it seeming like you are simply

adding one more thing? We recognized that we already have scheduled meetings and times of retreat with our leaders, and so this idea intends to reshape the time we have already blocked out. Our idea would include a cycle of discipleship training sessions to begin each board meeting or leadership team meeting, and we would re-purpose our board retreats to focus more on personal and corporate discipleship. Our thought was that when prayer and spiritual matters take precedent, our other 'work' will fall in its proper place. An obvious measure of this will be to monitor the effectiveness of our leadership meetings when it comes to the regular work of the church. A further benchmark of success in my mind would be to see my leaders adopting the model within the teams they lead.

DESIGN WORKSHOP STAKEHOLDERS

The stakeholders in my workshop included an associate pastor of discipleship ministries, a children's ministry director, an associate pastor of youth ministry, an administrator, a marketing entrepreneur, and a health consultant. I also had further conversations with several lead pastors, and a former executive director with Youth For Christ.

ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS

My one-on-one interviewees included a current district superintendent and former lead pastor in the Church of the Nazarene, a school administrator, and a personal friend and mentor who is a long-time pastor and district superintendent in the Church of the Nazarene.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Scazzero, Peter. *Emotionally Healthy Discipleship: Moving from Shallow Christianity to Deep Transformation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2021.

In a journey of self-reflection, Scazzero wrestled with feeling like he was a 'mile wide and an inch deep' both in his relationship with God and with others, concluding that this was a product of how he had been discipled and that something needed to change. Scazzero argues that spiritually healthy disciples can only be as mature and deeply rooted as their leaders and disciple-makers are. This is the kind of formation I am seeking to explore and address. He believes discipleship needs to involve the whole person, including our 'emotional self,' defining an emotionally healthy disciple as one who "slows down to be with Jesus, goes beneath the surface of their life to be deeply transformed by Jesus, and offers their life as a gift to the world for Jesus" (26). Scazzero develops seven marks of deep transforming discipleship which will prove helpful as I build a discipleship model and seek criteria for measuring effectiveness.

Scroggins, Clay. *How to Lead in a World of Distraction: Four Simple Habits for Turning Down the Noise*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2019

This book is not filled with deep theological reflections, but Scroggins does address Christian leaders and the issue of being distracted from what we really should be doing. He covers things like social media and the internet, but what intrigued me enough to invest time in reading this book was his pointing to something deeper, which he calls the Axis of Distraction, the appearance of success, the allure of progress, and the attraction of certainty. In the end, I found the book only mildly helpful for what I am trying to accomplish. I did appreciate how he articulated the problem of distraction; however, I did not find his solution to distraction, or what he calls the four habits, to be very innovative. I was anticipating a little more depth than 'simplifying life,' 'changing your internal monologue,' 'getting quiet,' and 'pressing pause;' all of which are needed, but this didn't offer me any more than my design workshop stakeholders.

Newport, Cal. *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2016

Newport's title intrigued me, as it sounds like there is a connection with my project. Newport comes from a secular perspective, and his work is tangential to mine. Like any other skills we may have developed, the ability to focus is something we cultivate and train. Newport defines deep work as "professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push *your cognitive capabilities to their limit. These efforts create new value, improve your skill, and are hard to replicate.*" For example, you have entered into deep work when you are completely focused on one idea or task. Newport presents four rules for helping one achieve deep work. The two worthy of noting are 1) to 'quit social media', as these platforms are addictive, shallow, and time-consuming, where any benefits come at a cost; and 2) to 'drain the shallows' or reduce the activities in our day that, while necessary, is not productive and often are time-wasters. I can see some application correlating with discipleship, but I don't believe the kind of productivity Newport is seeking is all that relevant to the slower, more patient process of Christian discipleship.

APPENDICES

DESIGN WORKSHOP DESCRIPTION

I conducted my design workshop at Racine Community Church on October 19, 2021, from 9am-2pm. The agenda included the following three sessions: 1) The first session was designed to introduce the topic and set the tone for the workshop. It was based on the question: What types of distractions do you find yourself dealing with on a day-to-day basis? How do they impact your productivity? How do they impact your spiritual life? How do you see distractions compromising leadership? The second part of this exercise focused on how 'solving' the distraction problem or reducing our susceptibility to distractions would help us become better persons and leaders. 2) The second session focused on talking about the essentials of Christian discipleship. 3) The final session took the bulk of our time and was based on the questions: What are some ways to increase focus by removing distractions? What are some spiritual exercises that can help in the process? During this session, we talked about discipleship development models and brainstorming ideas for the project. In each of these sessions, I would ask a question and then give a few minutes to gather responses. While 'on the clock', each thought or idea was not to be discussed, simply added to the record. After the time was up, we spent time discussing the ideas and asking questions of one another.

The stakeholders present in my workshop included an associate pastor of discipleship ministries, a children's ministry director, an associate pastor of youth ministry, an administrator, a marketing entrepreneur, and a health consultant. I also had further conversations with several lead pastors and a former executive director with Youth For Christ.

I would rate my session a 4 out of 5 on a Likert scale. Our interaction and discussion were good, and I am pleased with the three big ideas. Everyone present was very engaged and interested and brought a lot of wisdom, experience, and insight to the workshop. Due to some illnesses and schedule changes, everyone invited to attend the session was not able to make it. I imagine the dynamic being a little better with everyone present, however, I was able to follow up with those who missed and solicit their input.

ONE-PAGE POST-WORKSHOP MESSAGE TO STAKEHOLDERS

Dear Stakeholder, Thank you for taking time to participate in my doctoral project, I am grateful for your insights and the creativity you shared with us all. As we discussed, I am working on a model to address the idea that to grow the church of tomorrow you first must grow 'bigger' Christians, yet in an age of infinite distractions, faith formation is becoming less and less of a priority. As I have been thinking this over, and as you helped confirm, I am narrowing the broad focus of this statement to faith leaders who are 'distracted' or 'underdeveloped' and therefore, have a difficult time leading and discipling people under their care.

During the workshop we came up with these three 'big ideas' to address this need: 1) Create a sermon series and corresponding interactive study; 2) Create a series of retreats with curated content on faith formation in leaders, and 3) Design a 2-year cycle of development material for church boards/leadership teams. At this point in the journey, a benchmark of 'success' will be to

have created a model for pastors to use in discipling leaders within their congregations that will inspire growth and cultivate depth in their relationship with Christ so these leaders can be more effective in offering spiritual leadership within the congregation and be more effective disciple-makers.

As you think about this more in the coming days, if you have any new thoughts or epiphanies, please share them with me as this is an ongoing project. I will continue researching instruments we could develop to help people identify how they are distracted and what it is doing to them, and also ways for people to identify they have made progress. Thank you again, I appreciate your involvement and your passion to see more leaders become fully devoted followers of Jesus. Grace and Peace, Dave Bach

ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS DOCUMENTATION

The conversations I had in my one-on-one interviews were very helpful and encouraging. In each of these conversations, I was able to get to the point quickly as I have spoken to all three individuals regularly about my project. Part of my line of questioning probed to find if they were aware of any other ways this problem was being addressed. While each agreed that from their perspective faith formation is becoming less of a priority in the 'busyness' of our culture, none pointed to any specific ways this was being addressed on a larger scale, especially in relation to developing 'undeveloped' or 'underdeveloped' leaders in this area. Again, the biggest caution was the broadness of the topic, and the biggest encouragement was simply the worthiness of the effort and helping people move deeper into their relationship with God will have significant impact in individual lives, but also in the overall health of our churches and communities. When I asked about the challenge of my project being viewed as adding something to an already full plate, my interviewees acknowledged that as a challenge, but encouraged me that if the 'solution' is relational in nature, and not programmatic, this should be a non-issue.

One exciting development that stemmed from one of these conversations was an invitation to travel to the Washington Pacific District (Church of the Nazarene) and conduct a two-day session with twelve church boards on some things related to my project. This session will take place in the Spring of 2022 and will help in the whole process of developing my final model.

Appendix D—Milestone 4 Design Research Report

PROTOTYPE SUMMARY AND FINDINGS

My prototypes are straight forward in nature, focusing heavily on the spiritual disciplines necessary for faith formation. My challenge will be to craft a model that invites participation in going deeper with God and with each other as believers in such a way that does not just add 'one more thing' to leaders who may already feel overburdened. Yet this is the key, our world pulls us in so many directions and there are an infinite number of distractions, my thesis is that to develop areas in spiritual leaders that may be underdeveloped will require laying aside some other things in life. But by utilizing times that are already scheduled and shaping them in a way to foster development and growth will, hopefully, inspire people to form new habits. As this progresses, my contention is that leaders within the church, who may be very gifted in organizational management, finance, law, etc, will become more fully devoted followers of Jesus and will become the spiritual leaders that we desperately need to fulfill the command of Jesus to 'go and make disciples.'

At the conclusion of the Design Workshop Phase, three potential ideas were proposed to address the need for developing faith leaders within our congregations with the goal of helping them prioritize their faith, develop in 'underdeveloped' areas of their faith, and grow deeper in their relationship with Jesus Christ. The end project goal is to create a model for pastors to use in discipling leaders within their congregations that will inspire growth and cultivate depth in their relationship with Christ so these leaders can be more effective in offering spiritual leadership within the congregation and be more effective disciple-makers.

The first two prototypes will be lower resolution, as my research and thinking has narrowed my focus to the third prototype. With that said, there are parts of the first two that I want to work on developing because they do, or could in a significant way, speak in to the third idea. While it adds time and energy to work up these prototypes, I consider it a worthy investment to ensure the final project is as well-rounded and 'three dimensional' as possible.

PROTOTYPE ONE

The first prototype to address discipleship in a distracted age is to *create a sermon series and all-church study on the specific topic*. The ideas to incorporate into the series range from dealing with social media saturation to overly full calendars to saying 'yes' to the right things and learning to say 'no' to good things and learning how to slow down and Sabbath. The full scope of this prototype is to have a series of sermon series with a corresponding small group study guide. With a church-wide emphasis that goes down to the small group level, the idea is that together we can improve the depth of discipleship. Each sermon series will focus in on what the Bible teaches on the various avenues of spiritual formation (prayer, scripture study, worship, sabbath, etc). In these series, attention would also be given to how these parts of spiritual formation help us deal with distractions and how to build new and healthier habits in our lives.

As I began thinking about the spiritual disciplines necessary, and in consultation with colleagues and advisors for this project, I settled on writing and preaching a sermon series on prayer as a test model for this prototype. Given the rapid pace of life and overly full schedules, this simple discipline is often overlooked or minimized. In pastoral conversations through the years, one recurring theme is that people most people pray, at least sometimes; but also, that very few people report being

satisfied with their prayer lives. The series was entitled, “Prayer: Learning to Pray by Praying” and used the analogy of learning to ride a bicycle. You do not learn to ride a bicycle by studying a book, you learn by getting on a bicycle and riding it, learning balance and speed, and from mistakes along the way. Similarly, you learn to pray, not necessarily by reading about it, but by praying.

This message series was preached in the first quarter of 2022, to a multi-generational Nazarene congregation of about 175 in Southeastern Wisconsin. Three small groups used this teaching and the accompanying questions for their curriculum during this time. The general consensus of the congregation was this series on prayer was both needed and helpful, eliciting comments that suggested these people appreciated this in-depth study on prayer. Further, it was encouraging to hear people talk about their prayer lives growing deeper and more meaningful even in this short span of eight weeks. The small groups reported excellent discussion times, but more importantly, they reported spending much more time praying than they have in the past.

My conclusions on this prototype lead me to believe I touched on a needed area for spiritual growth in many people, and that the small group study was a critical piece in taking the Sunday morning teaching down to the everyday living level. The messages offered people a new vision of prayer and moved people towards change, or the desire to change, but the small group accountability was where I learned the actual work of change and new habit formation began to take shape.

This is a viable prototype, and is worthy of future consideration, as it reaches a large audience and encourages an entire congregation to move in a similar direction. However, for the scope of this doctoral work, it will not be the prototype I use moving forward on this project. While this is good and necessary work, it does not meet the rigor with which I want to pursue answering the questions I have about how to best develop underdeveloped leaders in my congregation and denomination.

PROTOTYPE TWO

The second prototype is a *series of retreats with curated content on faith formation in leaders*. This would likely yield a cycle of three or four retreats over the course of two years. Participants would be identified leaders within our local congregation, and other congregations in the community and around the country. The primary focus of the retreats would be on Christian discipleship, Christ formation in us, both as individuals and as a community. The idea would be to encourage a greater depth personally, how discipleship is also for the community, and would also include teaching on how to be a disciple-maker. I can envision retreats focused on studying the bible individually and in community; on prayer and fasting; on sabbath, solitude and simplicity; on dreaming up new ministry ideas and organizing them for launch to serve our communities in the name of Jesus; and on cultivating a life of worship.

For the purposes of this prototype, and in consultation with some district leaders in my denomination, I chose to create and host one retreat during this semester on discovering and organizing new ministries. Prior to moving cross-country from Washington to Wisconsin, I was involved in a ‘think group’ on improving discipleship in the churches on our district. Before my departure to Wisconsin, we had set several things in motion, which led to an opportunity this semester for me to conduct this workshop with twelve churches in Southwestern Washington in March of 2022. The full group consisted of church pastoral staff persons and church board

members from each of these congregations, a group of 96 in all. Coming out of the pandemic, for many churches, two full years of reduced ministry, we noticed discouragement setting in, and difficulty re-engaging in ministry. The pandemic took a toll on community discipleship, and we were looking for a way to re-ignite creativity and help church leadership teams discover the abundance of resources God has given each of them. As part of discipleship is noticing where God is at work and moving and then figuring out ways to connect with that work, this workshop led these ministry teams through an exercise in asset mapping. It was specifically designed to help people identify where God was at work, notice specific needs within their communities, and catalogue resources God has already entrusted to their care that can be positioned and utilized for mission. The full workshop leaders guide is included in the appendix below.

Judging by the comments of participants, this workshop achieved its goal. Not only did the individual church leadership teams leave with new ideas and excitement for ministry, many connections were made on how we are formed together as disciples of Jesus, having Christ formed in each of our lives individually, but also collectively as a church. Several attendees went out of their way to tell me they were feeling discouraged before the seminar. After having been told for two years what they were not allowed to do, they were finding it difficult to figure out what they 'can' do now. Many were wrestling with a new paradigm for ministry, stuck in the mentality of wanting to 'go back to how things were' but realizing that may not be possible, or even the right strategy. During our weekend together, I sensed that people left having a change of vision, instead of 'looking down,' they were 'looking up.' Two district leaders noticed the same thing and commented that the mood shifted, and they sensed a new excitement and enthusiasm in these churches as they looked towards ministry together in the future. Perhaps the most telling comments for me personally were the ones related to feeling closer to God and more connected to their brothers and sisters in Christ.

This second prototype hit my target group perfectly, as I was able to work specifically with church staff and board leaders, and have meaningful teaching and conversation about discipleship with them. What I found is that this prototype, even with all the positive comments, does not quite go as far as I would like in making headway on developing undeveloped leaders. These types of retreats and seminars will remain a viable piece of the final project model, but in and of themselves are lacking. In my opinion, what is missing is regular interaction and a coaching component that will help people develop new and healthy habits in their faith formation.

PROTOTYPE THREE

The third prototype is where I invested most of my time, granted, the sermon series in prototype one and the workshop designed in prototype two are part of this third model. *Prototype three is a 2-year cycle of development material for church boards or leadership teams.* This prototype has three main parts: 1) The final project will include a cycle of discipleship training sessions to begin church board meetings or leadership team meetings. 2) The final project will include plans to re-purpose board retreats to focus more on personal and corporate discipleship, the thought being that when prayer and spiritual matters take precedent, other 'work' will fall in its proper place. 3) The final project will include a corresponding coaching component for accountability and feedback

along the way. As accountability is crucial in this process, a corresponding sermon series and small group study will partner with the board discipleship training sessions in step one.

This idea most specifically addresses my NPO and developing 'underdeveloped' leaders in an age of distraction, in part, because it focuses directly on leaders over a pro-longed period. With repeated emphasis on faith formation in leaders over a two-year span, coupled with a coaching component, the likelihood of yielding new habits and greater spiritual depth is high.

In each of the feedback sessions with pastoral colleagues and denominational leaders, there was a desire for more, but not anything specific. I agreed to sit with this feedback and see where God might lead and then follow up with each person I interviewed. I concluded that adding a website to act as a home for all the materials generated would be beneficial for people to visit and re-visit as needed. Further, given the time challenges people face and the new ways people digest content, I decided adding a podcast to the final prototype would be helpful. I shared these two new ideas with my colleagues, and they agreed that these would be helpful additions and would add 'the missing piece' they were trying to articulate. One other piece of feedback I am currently weighing is to make it a three-year cycle instead of a two-year cycle. At present, I am leaning toward to the two-year cycle, knowing the formation process will not be finished, and that I will likely continue to refresh and add content along the way.

One final note on this prototype is regarding the coaching model. My project mentor, Dr. Mark Chironna, is a board-certified coach, and he has pointed me to some helpful resources that will be instrumental in creating a sustainable and usable model for spiritual coaching.

BACKGROUND RESEARCH ESSAY ON EMERGING SOLUTION

Ten minutes into this writing adventure, several notifications on various devices have beckoned my attention – a Snapchat, several text messages and the repeated ding of email arriving all demand my time and attention. Each are important and require a response, but clearly count as distractions from the project in front of me. What is the cost of distractions like these? I'm not sure it's entirely calculable. The burden of too much information and too many choices can be overwhelming, even paralyzing, compromising our ability to make good decisions. Marmion believes 'too much information kills information' pointing out that 'the immensity of available resources on the web sometimes confuses the searcher who's looking up a clear, simple fact.'¹⁴³ While he is speaking specifically about data on the web, a similar case can be made in other facets of life, namely in the plethora of distractions that compete for our undivided attention. The shadow side of living in a world where information is infinite, options are endless, and distractions are unrestrained is the suffocation of our souls under the weight of so much abundance.

When our attention is constantly pulled away by its opposite, distraction, it can become a negative habit in and of itself, leading to reduced productivity and feelings of anxiety. In our digital culture, McKibben says that "Technology has made distractions ubiquitous."¹⁴⁴ Certainly, there are benefits to our technology and wondrous new horizons, but on the other hand is the reduction in our ability to pay attention for prolonged periods of time, as Jackson observes, "We are nurturing a culture of social diffusion, intellectual fragmentation, and sensory detachment"¹⁴⁵ which, if taken to its logical end, leads to feelings of disconnectedness from the world and people around us, and in a spiritual sense, from our Creator. Jackson also notes that "the way we live is eroding our capacity for deep, sustained, perceptive attention – the building block of intimacy, wisdom, and cultural progress."¹⁴⁶ Over time, living this way results in shallowness, not depth in our relationships and spirituality. Our technology, specifically the Internet is encouraging rapid, often random, consumption of information in small doses from an infinite number of sources. We operate in a world with an ethic of speed and efficiency. Carr believes the Internet is "remaking us in its own image" and that as we become "more adept at scanning and skimming...what we are losing is our capacity for concentration, contemplation, and reflection."¹⁴⁷ Again, and as it relates to Christian spiritual formation, the current practice within society is forming habits in would-be disciples that seek width, not depth. As will be discussed later, Christian formation is not meant to be done through scanning and skimming, but through slow, intentional practices. These words, concentration, contemplation,

¹⁴³ Jean-Francois Marmion, *The Psychology of Stupidity* (New York: Penguin Books, 2020), 264.

¹⁴⁴ Maggie Jackson, *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus, 2009), 2.

¹⁴⁵ Jackson, *Distracted*, 13.

¹⁴⁶ Jackson, *Distracted*, 13.

¹⁴⁷ Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020), 141-142.

and reflection suggest something deep and meaningful which run contrary to the shallowness we find in sampling quick bites of information.

An overload of techno-gadgets, social media, and information is part of the distraction problem, and so, too, is our 'busyness' and the pace at which we live life. Perhaps unintentionally, we are being shaped by the things that distract our attention. Jackson cautions that the "seduction of alternative virtual universes, the addictive allure of multitasking people and things, our near-religious allegiance to a constant state of motion: these are markers of a land of distraction, in which our old conceptions of space, time, and place have been shattered."¹⁴⁸ Therefore we are increasingly less able to understand what is relevant and permanent, and why so many people feel they can barely keep their heads above water. While there are benefits of our modern technologies, one of the liabilities is this sense of constantly being uprooted. When spiritual formation is lacking due to inconsistency on the part of the disciple, distractions tend to consume time and deter the process from having its intended effect.

While it may feel like we are at risk of societal decline because this "nomadic era is eroding opportunities for deep focus, awareness, and reflection," Jackson believes "there is much room for hope, for attention can be trained, taught, and shaped...we don't have to settle for lives mired in detachment, fragmentation, diffusion."¹⁴⁹ Corrective action is possible, but will require intentional effort and new habits to counter the current trend. The bleak end of fragmented, shallow living can be avoided. The world is not likely to revert to pre-digital times, so the question for Christian discipleship is not how to go backward, but how do we move forward and deeper in our faith, utilizing the best of modern technology while not being consumed and distracted by it? Smith writes that "Discipleship is a way to 'curate our hearts' to be attentive to and intentional about what we love."¹⁵⁰ If discipleship includes emotions, desires, and cravings, our entire paradigm needs to embrace the totality of our humanness when it comes to spiritual formation. If behavior has to be transformed, something needs to be understood in relation to spiritual formation. Fogg points out a common mistake people often make is that given the "right information, it will change their attitudes, which in turn will change their behaviors."¹⁵¹ But in reality, he says, "Information alone does not reliably change behavior."¹⁵² As this relates to Christian formation, one could fall into the trap of believing that learning about spiritual formation will lead to behavioral change. While information is helpful, it alone does not change people or transform people's lives, it must go much deeper, reaching our heart and motives. Smith believes that many models of discipleship aim at

¹⁴⁸ Jackson, *Distracted*, 14.

¹⁴⁹ Jackson, *Distracted*, 25.

¹⁵⁰ James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), 2.

¹⁵¹ BJ Fogg, *Tiny Habits: The Small Changes That Change Everything* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2020), 4.

¹⁵² Fogg, *Tiny Habits*, 4.

"what we think,"¹⁵³ focusing or directing the teaching at our minds to increase our knowledge because we assume "that learning is primarily a matter of depositing ideas and beliefs into mind-containers."¹⁵⁴ This is not a criticism, merely an observation, for we are to be students of the word and take every opportunity to learn more about God, his Word and what it means to follow him. But humans are only, in part, thinking beings, and so Smith writes that "models of discipleship focusing solely on knowledge acquisition only address part of our being."¹⁵⁵ As spiritual formation takes place, cravings to learn more will develop, and, as learning happens, it leads disciples to adopt and practice new Christlike behavior. New knowledge does not necessarily lead to holiness, it's only when behavior and habits are aligned that real change occurs.

By repeatedly giving attention to the myriad of distractions at one's disposal, disciples of Jesus are at risk of allowing these things to become defining habits, even if unintentionally. All habits have a cue, routine, and a reward,¹⁵⁶ and this cycle repeated over and over again, will eventually lead to cravings for the reward. Duhigg believes that "when a habit emerges, the brain stops fully participating in decision making. It stops working so hard, or diverts focus to other tasks."¹⁵⁷ The brain creates habit loops to conserve energy for other thoughts. During the routine of one activity, our mind can wander and process other more pressing issues. The human tendency toward habituation can work for the disciple as opposed to against them, provided their quality of attention and awareness shifts. My contention is that when we are distracted and our attention is pulled in a thousand different directions, our behavior will fall back to whatever habits we have honed over time, whether good or bad. If this is the case, how do we eliminate distractions and build in new healthy habits?

From pastoral experience in relation to faith formation, congregants struggle with consistency due to the myriad of things that distract them from spiritual formation practices, such as, Scriptural study and contemplative prayer, and demand their attention. Sweet says that whoever you allow to author the story of your life is your authority;¹⁵⁸ and given the time allotted to 'distractions,' these seem to

¹⁵³ Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 3.

¹⁵⁴ Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 3.

¹⁵⁵ Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 5.

¹⁵⁶ Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* (New York: Random House, 2014). Duhigg writes extensively about this habit loop in *The Power of Habit*, which is a modern update of work done by B. F. Skinner back in the 1930s who talked about habits having a clear stimulus, response, and reward. James Clear picks up on this building a habit model including a cue, craving, response, and reward in his book *Atomic Habits*. BJ Fogg, in his book *Tiny Habits*, also uses a similar conceptual model of habit with his ABC construct which includes an anchor moment, a tiny behavior, and a celebration.

¹⁵⁷ Duhigg, *Power of Habit*, 20.

¹⁵⁸ Leonard Sweet, Portland Seminary Cohort Class Session, Spring 2022.

be what is shaping and defining our culture. Unaware of how what is taken in from the outside causes them to practice what they see, the aspiring disciple that wants to be formed has to learn that habituation can be an unconscious process that has to become conscious so that change can occur. Part of the destructive toll of this behavior is finding ourselves bowing to an authority other than our creator, the one who is both the author and finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). What simple shifts could we make in our habits that would yield a better, and healthier, ratio between the necessary tasks of life, entertainment and spiritually forming practices? Habits have a powerful effect in our lives, they do not just fill up all the empty places, they have a much deeper impact on our soul formation. Change can happen, but it takes belief in the possibility of change to modify our habit loops. In other words, to achieve more permanent habit change, people must believe they have the adeptness and ability to change, and that things can actually improve.

My research suggests habit formation can have an impact on faith formation. How then do unhealthy habituated patterns get disrupted? Some progress can be made by individuals, but meaningful change and progress will happen when disciples partner together in community. Enlisting the help of a coach, or an accountability group is an excellent way to practice what Fogg refers to as “behavior matching”¹⁵⁹ which pairs aspirations with motivations to determine what behaviors are achievable. The power of doing this with a coach or group is significant, as Duhigg identifies community as having a powerful effect on belief by providing shared experiences and opportunities for people to publicly commit to change.¹⁶⁰ Movement often starts by drawing on the social habits of friendship and the strong bonds of community as accountability partners and companions for the discipleship journey.

A key focus in my project model will be to create opportunities and structures for people to go deeper in their faith, instead of settling for the shallows. Scazzero believes discipleship can slow down our lives “to cultivate a deep, personal relationship with Jesus amidst the hurry and distractions that routinely overload us.”¹⁶¹ Yet this is unlikely to happen without a carefully crafted plan. My project model for discipleship is funnel shaped, beginning with general exposure to the challenge of distraction through larger group session and messages, narrowing down to personal application through small groups, coaching and personalized content. When disciples identify and ‘own’ they have an issue, they are more likely to be willing to address it. The wide part of the funnel includes group sessions that act as a front door to addressing interior work, and potentially, with proper motivation and attentiveness can result in habituation that aids formation. A critical piece in advancing the work of this project will be the creation of small group workshops and a personal

¹⁵⁹ Fogg, *Tiny Habits*, 58.

¹⁶⁰ Duhigg, *Power of Habit*, see chapter 3.

¹⁶¹ Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Discipleship: Moving from Shallow Christianity to Deep Transformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2021), xvii.

coaching model¹⁶² to help people identify and work on changing their key habits in relation to faith formation, and to create a 'rule of life' to live by.

Everyone has certain habits and routines that are more powerful than others. Duhigg calls these 'keystone habits,' and says changing keystone habits can start a chain reaction that over time transforms other patterns of behavior and our overall attitude and outlook on life.¹⁶³ Small victories will convert cumulative successes into routines, or new habits. Fogg writes that creating small "positive habits is the path to developing much bigger ones."¹⁶⁴ And yet, as Clear identifies, people "overestimate the importance of one defining moment and underestimate the value of making small improvements."¹⁶⁵ The tendency being to fall prey to the fallacy that bigger actions will lead to bigger results. Significant and long-term results can be achieved through small incremental steps that grow into something much larger. Changing spiritual habits in tiny increments can lead to significant growth over time, yet the temptation to truncate efforts early exists for those who adopt a mindset of scarcity, believing there is not enough time to invest.

Duhigg identifies willpower and self-control as key elements in habit change, and can be made into keystone habits themselves.¹⁶⁶ Fogg would argue motivation based on willpower is fleeting and undependable,¹⁶⁷ but Duhigg believes it is possible to establish habit loops that make good decision-making automatic,¹⁶⁸ thus learning to have more willpower and gaining an ability to regulate impulses and resist temptation. Duhigg seems plausible that self-control can be a habit that is grown over time. Fogg uses the metaphor of a knotted rope to discuss replacing old bad habits with healthy new ones,¹⁶⁹ with each knot representing an unwanted habit, and the individual

¹⁶² I am currently awaiting some recommended resources to help me think through what such a coaching might look like in the scope of this project. As this progresses, I will be writing and developing more of this part of the project.

¹⁶³ Duhigg, *Power of Habit*, in chapter 4, Duhigg discusses the example of former Alcoa CEO, Paul O'Neill, and his focus on the company's safety routines. He identified safety as a keystone habit and used it as a lever to create widespread change in the entire organization. The focus on safety forced the creation of a new culture of organizational routines.

¹⁶⁴ Fogg, *Tiny Habits*, 4.

¹⁶⁵ James Clear, *Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2019), 15.

¹⁶⁶ Duhigg, *Power of Habit*, 131.

¹⁶⁷ Fogg, *Tiny Habits*, 42-50.

¹⁶⁸ Duhigg, *The Power of Habit*, see chapter 5. Duhigg would agree with Fogg that self-control is at risk of evaporating at crucial times when people are confronted with unexpected stresses or uncertainties but overcomes this reality by making willpower into a habit. One way of doing this is by learning to anticipate possible challenges, which will help people plan to deal with pain, stress, and temptation ahead of time. He argues that over time, these plans become automatic habits.

¹⁶⁹ Fogg, *Tiny Habits*, 201.

knots cannot be undone all at once. This is a step-by-step process, and Fogg suggests finding “the easiest knot to untangle and work [our] way in” because “Often the most difficult part is in the middle and is only exposed as you work through it.”¹⁷⁰ Then, as old habits are overcome and removed, new healthy ones can grow in their place. Fogg and Clear agree that the most fertile ground for growing habits is where our desires and abilities converge,¹⁷¹ for that would lead to germination, and changing parts of one’s life for good. From a Scriptural perspective, it is the inwrought work of the Spirit who leads and guides the believer (John 16:12-14) into all truth and what wants to be realized. The Apostle Paul identifies fruit the Spirit grows in the believer’s life (Galatians 5:22-23). Christ’s metaphoric role as Gardener (John 15:2) involves that which prunes back those areas where our fruit bearing (outcomes) are flourishing, and also removes those areas that fall short of that which he intends (John 15:2-4).

Meadows perceptively writes that “The test of any spiritual discipline is whether it becomes a ‘means of grace’ that deepens our communion with God, in a Spirit-filled and Jesus-shaped way of life.”¹⁷² Careful attention and evaluation of the new habits being formed is required to ensure they are leading the disciple in Christ formation, and to greater experiences of God’s grace. Given the culture of distraction that often derails focus, becoming a fully devoted follower of Jesus is a significant challenge, requiring much work. The model I am building for addressing discipleship in an age of distraction seeks to align the trajectory of our lives with the confession of our faith through habit formation and re-formation. Although focusing on micro-habits may seem insignificant in the moment, they are potentially able to yield powerful long-term results. The ordinary habits of spiritual formation will shape our souls in extraordinary ways.

MVP (MOST VIABLE PROTOTYPE)

Based on what I learned from my prototyping and background research, I identified prototype three as my most viable prototype. Given my NPO and the context in which I serve both locally and denominationally, I believe prototype three offers me the best opportunity to help effect change in healthy and positive ways. The addition of the website as a central location for digital content, and the series of podcasts are both within my skillset, and I believe will make it easier for people re-purpose and redeem usable time for spiritual growth instead of amusement.

This multi-faceted approach will be an effective vehicle helping distracted people refocus their attention on matters of faith and begin to develop new and healthier habits. I envision this model acting like a funnel, having a wide entry through group exposure and practice, and narrowing down to personal change and accountability through individual study and coaching.

¹⁷⁰ Fogg, *Tiny Habits*, 202.

¹⁷¹ Both BJ Fogg (*Tiny Habits*, 58) and James Clear (*Atomic Habits*, 178) cover this ground.

¹⁷² Philip R. Meadows, “Mission and Discipleship in a Digital Culture.” *Mission Studies*. 29 (2012), 163-182.

Appendix E—Project Appendix Documentation

Part One: Cycle of Devotionals for Church Leadership Teams

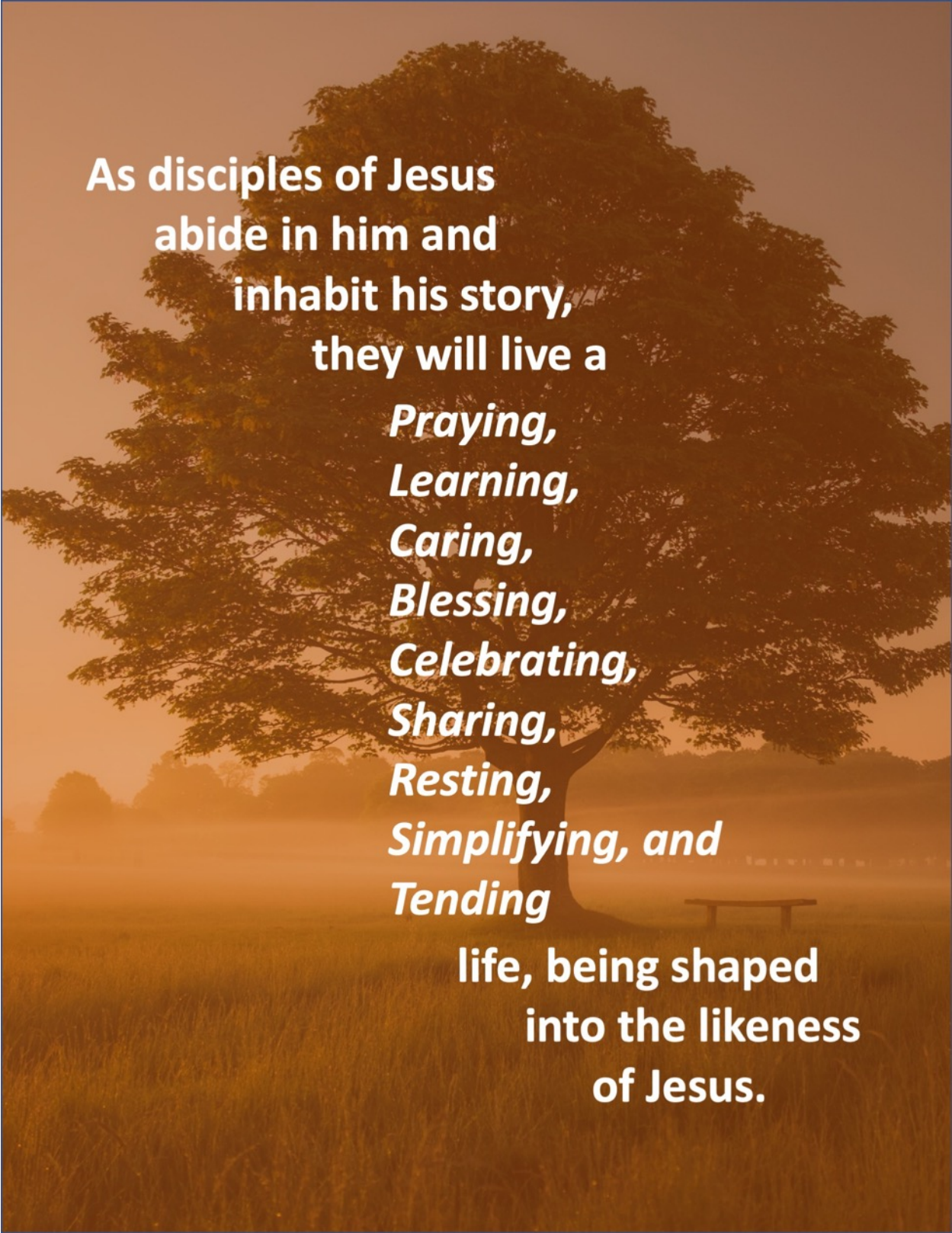
The following images are proofs of the digital booklet I am producing to distribute to pastors, coaches and other ministry leaders who would like to use this material in their setting.



STORIED DISCIPLESHIP

PRACTICES FOR JESUS-SHAPED LIVING

DAVID BACH



As disciples of Jesus
abide in him and
inhabit his story,
they will live a

*Praying,
Learning,
Caring,
Blessing,
Celebrating,
Sharing,
Resting,
Simplifying, and
Tending*

life, being shaped
into the likeness
of Jesus.

A photograph of a person from the chest down, wearing a blue and white striped shirt. Their hands are clasped in prayer over an open book. The background is a soft-focus outdoor scene. A semi-transparent brown horizontal band is overlaid across the middle of the image, containing the word "PRAYING" in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters.

PRAYING

PRACTICE ONE

PRAYING

CONVERSATION

***"Praying
is like seeing
another
dimension of
life."***

James Martin
Learning to Pray

How do you feel about your prayer life? If you were giving yourself a grade, what would it be? As you consider those questions, if you sense a hollow feeling or any kind of shame, know you are in good company. As a pastor, I talk to people about their prayer lives frequently, and most people have a couple of things in common, whether they are Christians or not. Most everyone prays, yet, they feel like their prayer life is either anemic or ineffective or even both. Some people go through the motions but feel powerless, so they give up. Others report having issues with God, thinking he is aloof and unreachable, and questioning why they should bother with praying. Still, others cite past prayers they feel are unanswered and therefore invest minimal time and effort into their prayer lives now. A few, though, describe a rich, vibrant, life-giving prayer life. What about you? What is your experience?

Our Christian experience begins with prayer, simply talking with God; the foundational piece for all other core spiritual exercises. Prayer is more than our idea of or even our practice of it. The good news is you can learn to pray. When I was young and learning to ride a bike, my parents did not buy me a book on the proper mechanics and techniques for mastering the skill. One learns to ride a bike by riding it. Similarly, children begin learning a language to communicate, even before official schooling begins, mainly because they are exposed to and given a vocabulary from those around them. We learn to talk by talking. Your prayer life is no different. When Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them how to pray, he did not lecture them on a theory of prayer; he gave them a basic prayer, effectually saying, you learn to pray by praying. We have come to call this prayer, The Lord's Prayer, and when you struggle with what to say, Jesus gives you this vocabulary of prayer:

"Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we have also forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from the evil one (Matthew 6:9-13 NIV).
(For yours is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen.)



1

CONVERSATION CONTINUED

Do you hear the simplicity in this prayer and at the same time, sense its depth? You could make the case that all our prayers are contained in this way of praying. Jesus was not saying you must pray these exact words all the time, although they are always appropriate; he is encouraging our prayer to take on this shape – begin with God and then move to human need.

Three observations on this prayer:

1. **1. It is a centering prayer.** This prayer leads you to the heart of God and centers your focus on him. When the world around you seems to be spinning out of control, go to Abba Father in prayer. This prayer turns our attention away from our problems and needs and turns us toward praise – asking for God’s name to be lifted above all other names and for his will to “be done, on earth as in heaven.”
2. **It is a connectional prayer.** Jesus teaches this prayer using plural language, ‘our Father,’ ‘give us,’ ‘forgive us,’ ‘lead us,’ not the singular, yours or mine, but ours.
3. **It is to be a consistent prayer.** Built into this prayer is the need to return to it at least daily to ask once again for ‘daily bread.’

“Prayer is not a solitary act... When we pray we are... expressing a connection to our brothers and sisters who also pray.”

“If we are more aware of others when we pray, we are enlarged.”

James Martin
Learning to Pray

CONSIDER

1. How do you think one’s view of God affects one’s view and practice of prayer? What does Jesus teach about prayer?
2. What do you find rewarding about prayer? What do you find challenging?
3. What practices have you discovered that have deepened and energized your prayer life? What practices would you like to learn and try?

PRACTICE ONE

PRAYING

***"Petitionary
prayer remains
primary
throughout our
lives because
we are forever
dependent
upon God."***

Richard Foster
Prayer

CHALLENGE

For the next month, pray through the Lord's prayer, focusing on one phrase each day. Use this method as a means to sort out the things you want to bring to God.

SUNDAY - "Hallowed be your name" - Pray for God's name to be lifted up, set apart, and made holy in and through your life. You may also pray for this to be true of your church. Take time to pray for those Christian service who lead us weekly in worship.

MONDAY - "Your Kingdom Come" - Pray for evidence of God's kingdom and for his rule to be evident as you enter your workplace or school this week. Pray for your neighbors and those you interact with routinely, asking God to make himself known to them.

TUESDAY - "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" - Pray for an understanding of God's will in your life, pray for wisdom, discernment, and clear thought, and pray that you would be obedient to what you hear God asking of you.

WEDNESDAY - "Give us today our daily bread" - Pray for God's provision of what you need. Take time to pray for those struggling to provide enough resources for their own basic living needs.

THURSDAY - "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" - Pray for God to work in your life, our church, and our world to bring reconciliation and unity to broken relationships.

FRIDAY - "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" - Pray for our country and our leaders (local and national). Pray that God would make himself evident by delivering us from the power of evil permeating this world.

SATURDAY - "For yours is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever" - Thank God for his presence in your life this past week and any victories you may have experienced; then begin to prepare your heart for tomorrow's gathering for worship.





PRACTICE TWO

LEARNING

CONVERSATION

"In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son..."
Hebrews 1:1-2a NIV

"We strive to be connected with one another spiritually, so we can grow together as disciples of Jesus."

God has been speaking a word into his creation from the very beginning, and he is still speaking to us through these means and through his written word, the Bible. We are bombarded by millions of words each day; we are distracted by our technology; and we are consumed with our busyness too – all of which may seem louder than the voice of God, making it difficult for us to focus on and listen for his voice. In a difficult time of questioning, even confusion, the prophet Elijah was up on a mountain waiting to hear from the Lord. He did not hear him in the earthquake, the wind, or the fire; instead he heard God in a still, small voice, a whisper. When someone whispers something to you, proximity is key to hearing what they are saying. If you have headphones on or you are in a noisy café, it is likely that you will not hear and take in the message. The intentional study of God's word is essential in becoming a fully devoted follower of Jesus. It helps keep us close enough to hear the whisper of God's voice in our souls.

Are you practicing things that put you close to God? Are you taking time to immerse yourself in his Word? Proverbs 1:5 reads, "Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance..." The Apostle Paul reminds us that "all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). Learning to hear God speak to us through his Word is essential for becoming fully devoted followers of Jesus.

The first Christian believers told and taught one another the story of Jesus and what it meant for their daily living. They were a 'learning church,' hungry for spiritual nourishment, and eager students who made every effort to learn the teachings of Jesus handed down through the Apostles. The Bible may have been written in ancient times, but it is timeless and speaks into our lives today. You and I are invited into the ongoing story of God in our world. To live the Jesus-story in our lives, we must first learn and know it.



2

CONVERSATION CONTINUED

We strive to be connected spiritually, so we can grow together as disciples of Jesus. Imagine a chain of people holding hands, now think that in one hand you are holding the hand of someone who is teaching you, and in the other, you are holding the hand of someone you are teaching and passing along the story of Jesus. How are you getting to know the story of Jesus personally, and how are you participating in sharing the story with others?

CONSIDER

1. When you read the Bible, what are you looking for? Do you find yourself reading for 'head' knowledge, 'heart' transformation, or something else? How do you think this influences your study time?
2. What do you find rewarding about studying the Bible? What would you identify as your biggest distraction and challenge when studying the Bible?
3. What practices have you discovered that have deepened and energized your Bible study times? When do you find it easiest to focus your thoughts and attention on studying?
4. What new habits would you like to form in reading and studying God's word?

CHALLENGE

This month, commit to memorizing Luke 15. As you work at memorizing this chapter, think and pray about the message of Jesus' words. How do these stories tell the redemption story of God?

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."

2 Timothy 3:16



PRACTICE THREE

CARING

***"Believing
without loving
is what gives
religion a bad
name, turning
the best of
creeds into the
worst of
weapons."***

Eugene Peterson
Conversations

CONVERSATION

The idea of 'commitment' in relationships seems to be a fleeting concept. Many people speak of wanting community but back away from it when it gets difficult and messy. We are wired for relationships, and we all long for commitment, but in the day and age of individualism and 'personal' happiness, we just aren't very good at it. Since the late 1920s, when Herbert Hoover coined the phrase 'rugged individualism,' our society has been shaped by the notion that everyone should be able to 'help themselves.' Unfortunately, this philosophy has drifted into Christian thinking. You have likely heard someone say, "I don't need to be part of a church to be a Christian." There is no such thing as a solitary Christian; we are saved into the community, into the body of Christ.

In the Book of Acts, Luke highlights the profound sense of responsibility and commitment the early Christians felt for one another when he said they were of one heart and mind. They were devoted to fellowship and the breaking of bread together, which means they were committed to one another through all seasons of life - forged together in Christ and called together by God based on their shared confession that Jesus is Lord and Messiah.

We know life is hard and relationships are complicated, and when things get difficult, the temptation may rise within us to disconnect and move on or away from adversity. The caring life though, beckons us to remain connected in community with one another, trusting Jesus to help us be people of love, forgiveness, and hospitality.

If you look closely at my kitchen table, you will notice some gouges, dents, small scratches, a burn or two, and a thousand little dings. Each mark has a story. Some of them bring joy to my heart, remembering times of fellowship, laughter, and communion with dear friends. Some of them remind me of difficult times. Good or bad, happy or sad, all the marks form the story of our family and faith community, and I would not trade them for anything. Jesus uses all the ups and downs in our relationships to form a community and foster deep fellowship.

Is your table open to others? Your kitchen table can be a special place where you share the joys and sorrows of life with others while you are sharing food. Jesus connected with people by eating and drinking with them, which was a source of contention with the Pharisees. They felt he was hanging out with the wrong sorts of people. Jesus befriended them, anyway, saying he came to heal the hurting.



3

CONVERSATION CONTINUED

In his book *From Tablet to Table*, Leonard Sweet writes about caring in the form of sharing meals and communing with one another as believers and as a way to expand our tables to include others in our sphere of influence. He says it is about intentionally choosing to spend time together, talking with and bonding with one another. Our schedules tend to fill up quickly these days, and what does not get put on the calendar usually does not happen. Sweet identifies the importance of prioritizing together-time. He writes, "The value statement is about choosing relationships over isolation, making time when time is scarce." As people seeking to live a Jesus-shaped life, we should be intentionally generous in our hospitality and care for people, seeking to share life, trusting that Jesus will cultivate a genuine love and unity among us.

To those of us who have been in church for a long time, we may think this kind of discussion is ordinary. But to those whom the world has beaten down or who have been hurt or abused by a church or church community, and to those who have never felt the love of a family, or even a community of people centered around a common belief; to those who are alone and have no one to eat with; to those who feel marginalized and isolated – to these people, the idea of joining a group of people swept up in a common life around the saving grace of Jesus can be rather exciting, it can be life-changing. It opens new horizons, and it turns people's worlds upside down. These are Kingdom moments where heaven and earth are joined; the coming Kingdom is present. Let us commit ourselves to this kind of fellowship and care.

We purpose to be generous in our hospitality, giving of ourselves for the benefit of others and for the sake of the body of Christ.

CONSIDER

1. Part of 'caring' is welcoming people and giving them a safe place to be themselves. When have you felt most welcomed somewhere? When have you been hurt because you did not feel welcomed?
2. We live in a world that encourages us to be independent, yet life within the body of Christ suggests something much different. How would you describe the connection Jesus wants us to have with one another?
3. What does living a 'caring' life look like to you? What habits or practices could you build into your life that would encourage you to model the compassion and care of God to the people around you in greater ways?

CHALLENGE

Jesus was a person who loved sharing meals with other people, and it was one of his ways of seeking the lost. For the next month, practice expanding your circle by bringing people who you do not know very well to your table (neighbors, co-workers, new people at church). Commit to opening your home once a week to host a meal like this



PRACTICE FOUR

BLESSING

**As God gives
us his vision
of people,
living the
blessing life
is living the
giving life
and opens
our hearts
to meeting
other's needs.**

CONVERSATION

Faith that is alive is a faith that leads to faithful action - loving and serving in a way that points people to Jesus Christ. If your faith means something to you, if the Holy Spirit is transforming you, it will make a difference in how you approach life and people; it will lead you to a life of blessing others wherever and whenever God gives you an opportunity.

James, the brother of Jesus, the one I refer to as Mr. Accountability, is straightforward in his instructions, and it's hard to miss his point about putting what we read in the Word into practice. His short book in the New Testament can be a challenging read and raise our defenses. When teaching is difficult and irritates those coarse places in our lives, we need the reminder that the Holy Spirit nudges us toward perfection or wholeness in Christ purely out of love, even when it seems rather sharp. He's not there to shame us or guilt us but to graciously guide us into all truth.

James 1:18 reads, "He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created." This gives us a picture of our identity in Christ we are transformed and given new life, saved by God's grace to extend the blessing we receive to others. All the moral teaching in the text hinges on us getting this picture in our minds - it all leads to something bigger than we can even imagine, more beautiful than we can dream. We are caught up in the great drama of God's salvation - when he will one day make all things new and bring everything to completion and perfection! Seeing this image of beauty is critical. Without it, all the instructional teaching will come across as a long list of rules to follow and boxes to check. You will either quit and wander off, wear yourself out trying to follow this list, or go through life with a severe guilt complex that you're not making God happy.

We are challenged by the amount of data flying at us, we can only process so many words and thoughts, and our world keeps piling on more. It can be paralyzing. We risk allowing God's word to be just another voice or simply 'words of wisdom' instead of the primary voice. We might hear, but we don't 'do' what we hear. Therefore, we must work extra hard to practice what we read in Scripture. Let me encourage you with the words of Jeremiah 31:33 that tell us that God puts his law in our minds and writes it on our hearts. When you are overwhelmed, saturated with information, and confused, remember God has inscribed his word deep in your soul. Pause, listen for God's direction, and act upon that.



4

CONVERSATION CONTINUED

James constantly focuses our attention on faith and works. This is the heart of his message – our faith should lead us to do good works and practice self-sacrifice, humility, and generosity. We don't work to earn our salvation, we are saved by faith and the gift of God, and at the same time, our salvation motivates us to live out our faith in real and practical ways. The love of God compels us to love other people and motivates us to live a life of blessing and serving. Again, faith that is alive leads us to faithful action and spurs us on to love and do good works. He shows us what is good and what is righteous: to act justly, working for the good of others; to love mercy and extend kindness and blessing to those who need it; and to walk humbly with God at a pace where you have enough breath to carry on a conversation, allowing him to speak into and through your life and shape your thoughts and actions.

“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says”

James 1:22

CONSIDER

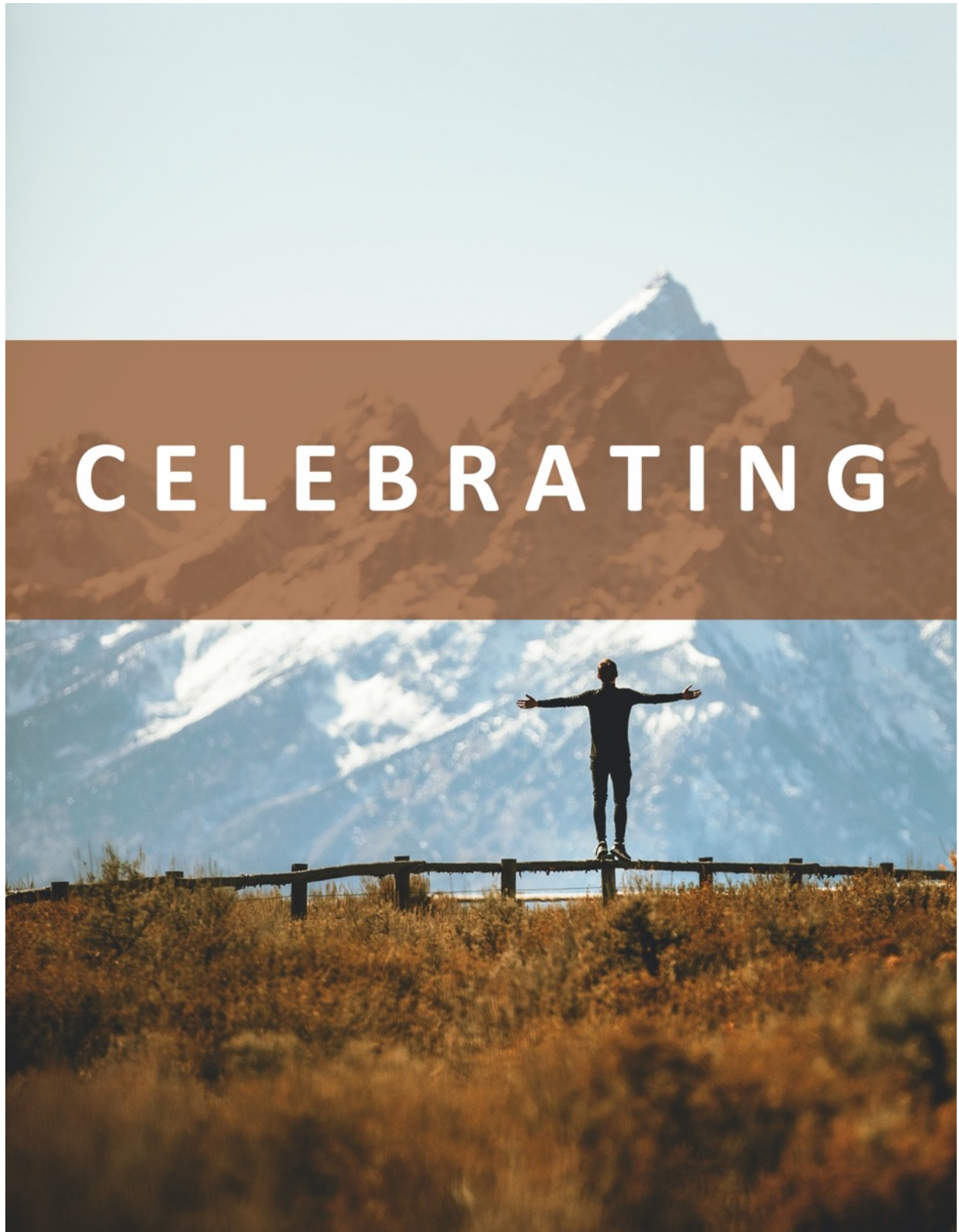
1. How do followers of Jesus deceive themselves by just listening to God's word? Many Christians affirm the Bible is the Word of God. Why, then, is it so easy to quickly forget what we hear and read?
2. What does it mean to live a life of blessing in service to others? Evaluate yourself honestly. Do you prefer to serve or be served? How so?
3. How does your life reflect the instruction to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God? What new habits would you like to develop in this area of living a 'blessing' life?

CHALLENGE

Each week for the next month, choose one person who is not a Christian to bless in a meaningful way. Be attentive to their needs, and offer them words of blessing and acts of kindness. Speak meaningful words of affirmation that add value to them and build them up, and offer expressions of care demonstrating you've noticed something about them.

“Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.”

Philippians 4:9



PRACTICE FIVE

CELEBRATING

CONVERSATION

Are you a list person who writes down everything you need to complete? Does your list ever seem unmanageable, and do you ever struggle with knowing which thing to do first? You must prioritize things, but deciding what is most important can be difficult and overwhelming. Urgent things often rise to the top, even if they are less important. You get a text message that distracts your attention from the work project with a looming deadline, yet you find yourself picking up your phone and responding. How do you decide what is most important? Which begs the question, what is your most important work?

**"Let them
praise the name
of the Lord, for
his name alone
is exalted; his
splendor is
above the earth
and the
heavens"**

Psalm 148:13

Psalm 148 is a relentless call to praise; one that answers our question on priority and beckons us to put God first in our lives. Considering your lists and priorities, this Psalm encourages you to put time with God at the top. Always. Make the time to praise the Lord, even when you don't feel like it or don't think you have enough time, somehow, some way, praise the Lord first. This will be a constant challenge in our distracted age, with our overly saturated schedules, frenetic pace, and constant demands for our time and attention. This is a critical piece in our faith formation. If you truly desire to grow deeper in your faith, you will need to develop habits and systems that place God first as your number one priority. The challenge and one God will help you with, is calming and silencing all the sirens that will go off in your mind convincing you that you are falling behind, missing out on something else, and being unproductive. God doesn't want to be one of the little books tucked away on your bookshelf; he claims the place of being the bookshelf upon which every other part of our life rests.

The book of Psalms concludes with resounding notes of praise that are to reverberate in every facet of life. Whatever your circumstance, whether it be the 'highs' of life or the depths of despair, the psalmist chooses to praise the Lord. Many would say this kind of Psalm isn't realistic. How can you praise when your life seems like it's falling apart? How can you praise God when there are so many problems in the world? There seems to be a disparity between the extreme gladness expressed in the Psalm and the extreme sadness we see in the world. But reading through the Psalms, you will notice that the psalmist considers the pain and brokenness of the world and wrestles with it, acknowledging there are times when we "walk through the valley of the shadow of death." Trouble and pain exist, and yet the Psalmist declares his praise to



5

CONVERSATION CONTINUED

God. Kathleen Norris writes that “psalms demand that we recognize that praise does not spring from a delusion that things are better than they are, but rather from the human capacity for joy. Only when we see this can we understand that both lamentation and exultation can be forms of praise.” As we pray through all the seasons and emotions of life, talking with God about all of it, we will find that with enough time, all our prayers will end in worship and praise.

Let me share a story about a lesson I once learned about praising God through disappointment. One of my favorite hobbies is trying to capture the beauty and story of creation through photography. Most of the photos I keep have a story, and this picture of Image Lake in Washington’s Glacier Peak Wilderness is no exception (see Figure 7). We were on a fifty-mile hike that took us along part of the Suiattle River, up over Cloudy Pass, and then down to the shores of Lake Chelan. To get to Cloudy Pass, we had an aggressive climb up to Miner’s Ridge lookout tower, which was not far from Image Lake. The goal in a longer hike is to travel as lightly as possible, but somehow, I convinced myself that carrying an extra five pounds of camera gear was a good idea.

A week before our hike, a wildfire began to burn in the area, and as we ascended the mountain ridge, I noticed how hazy and smoky the air had become. As a photographer, I was sorely disappointed, and I was already lamenting not being able to get all the shots I had planned. With each step up, there was increasing noise in my spirit. You’ve probably noticed that grumbling and complaining, whether out loud or in the deep places of your soul, never sounds pleasant. There is no way to modulate the human voice to make complaining sound good. Noise is unpleasant and irritating; it is disruptive to your soul.

After arriving and setting up our camp, I walked over to Image Lake, the location of my most prized, planned photograph. I was already grumbling about how disappointing it would be, and my negativity was not helped by the vampire mosquitos and drone-sized horseflies carrying nuclear warheads. Just like I thought, the haze almost completely blocked the view of the mountain, and there was little reflection of it in the lake, as you can see in the photo below.

I walked to the far side of the lake, snapping a few shots along the way. After taking this photo, I paused and clicked the preview to see if anything worth keeping. And at this moment, I was convicted and reminded that it’s in our disappointments when God does some of his best work in us. Staring at the

***“You are
worthy, our
Lord and God,
to receive glory
and honor and
power, for you
created all
things, and by
your will the
were created
and have their
being.”***

Revelation 4:11

PRACTICE FIVE

CELEBRATING



Image Lake
Glacier Peak Wilderness, Washington

Amazing Grace



5

screen, I saw this amazing picture of the magnificence of God. Pause, and look closely at the photo (see Figure 7). Do you notice how the tree line and its reflection in the lake look like a sound wave? I could imagine the praise rising to the King of Kings from all his creation, and this reflection was but a small glimpse of it. What song are the trees singing? Amazing Grace? How Great Thou Art? Whatever the song, it was like I could hear the Holy Spirit whispering the poetic words of Isaiah, "You will go out in celebration, and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills will burst into song before you; all the trees of the field will clap their hands." The trees and all creation were bursting forth praising God, and in that moment, all my spirit was doing was making noise. I was distracted from my most important work.

How often do we go through life having little pity parties for ourselves? We're so focused on our disappointments that we miss how God is all around us, reaching out to us, speaking to us. I'm really glad I previewed the picture in that moment because it totally changed my attitude, and despite the smoke, haze and carnivorous bugs, I was able to praise God. The noise in my spirit was transformed into the pleasant sounds of praise.

Physicists describe matter as vibrating strings of energy, which means all of us are instruments intended by God to make beautiful music. But like any stringed instrument, we get out of tune. My teacher, Leonard Sweet, likes to say that God gave us a 'tuning fork' in the person of Jesus Christ, God's 'perfect pitch.' When we submit ourselves to him, he tunes us up, and we can find a beautiful resonance with Christ in our souls. However, it takes humbling ourselves; as Walter Brueggemann says, praise is 'lyrical self-abandonment.' Putting God first and yielding ourselves and our desires to his will and purposes is the way forward.

You choose the sounds you make. Choose praise, it's your most important work. May your heart be tuned to see and hear God in all of your surroundings and every facet of your life. May you agree with the psalmist who declares, "Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands."

CONSIDER

1. Where and when do you most naturally worshipping and praising God?
2. What things distract you from celebrating God? What things help you focus? What is it about God that moves you to celebrate him?
3. How would you describe what worshipping God is to a non-believer?

CHALLENGE

Choose a verse, poem, or image that inspires you and reminds you of God. Print it and place in various places around your home and workplace. Each time you see it, pause for a moment and celebrate God, worship him for who he is and for what he has done and is continuing to do in your life right now.

A photograph featuring two hands reaching towards each other against a deep blue background. A horizontal brown band is positioned in the center, containing the word "SHARING" in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. The hand at the top is positioned above the band, while the hand at the bottom is below it. The bottom hand has a silver ring on its ring finger.

SHARING

PRACTICE SIX

SHARING

"Our faith becomes stronger as we express it; a growing faith is a sharing faith."

Billy Graham
Hope for Each Day

CONVERSATION

Of all the things God entrusts to our care, like money, time, skills, the earth, our health, or other people, what do you think is God's highest priority? I would say all of these are important, yet none are at the very top of God's list. What I'm about to suggest is something I think is often overlooked when we consider our stewardship responsibility, and that is God's message of salvation, or what we often refer to as the gospel. Paul says, "...we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel..." It's not our gospel; it is God's. It was Jesus who came to live as a human, was crucified, buried, and raised from the dead; he was the one who proclaimed victory over sin and death, and it is through him that we are saved. This is the gospel, the good news of Jesus, and it's his salvation that he gives freely to us as a gracious gift.

Paul says he was entrusted with sharing the good news about Jesus. Even when he was shipwrecked and his plans were changed. Even when he was persecuted, beaten, ridiculed, and run out of town, he still carried on with the command of Jesus to "go make disciples." Going was urgent, not optional. As Paul shared the gospel, people believed. He passed along this idea that followers of Jesus are 'entrusted' with its message and become carriers of it to share with others. Salvation does not end with you; we are to live the 'sharing' life. We are to be credible Christian witnesses, living and speaking the message of Jesus in specific ways to real people with names, to our family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and beyond. Paul goes even further and says we 'owe' the gospel, like paying on a debt, to everyone who hasn't heard it yet.

Your life preaches a message; what is it saying? What would your friends far from God learn about Jesus just by observing your life? Don't get all freaked out about preaching, think of it as sharing. Think about it like this, "As you go about the routines of your day, live the Jesus-story, and look for opportunities to share how Jesus has and is changing your life."

Witnessing is something that most Christians know they are supposed to do but find it very intimidating to follow through on. Why do you hesitate? Do you fear rejection? Do you think you'll be 'canceled' because of the anti-Christian sentiment in the world? I know we've all seen bad examples, the zealots wearing sandwich boards and shouting through megaphones very harsh sounding messages that come across as 'God hates you unless you change.' They leave a bad taste in the collective mouths of the public and are far from the message of God. The real story you have to share is the most amazing story of love and forgiveness ever.



6

CONVERSATION CONTINUED

Lost people matter to God, period. And you might be the person to share God's love with someone who desperately needs to hear there is a better way that does not lead to the darkness and death they are experiencing. Jesus encountered sinners, ate at their tables, ministered to them, and protected them, all to demonstrate God's love for them. He didn't condone their sin; he proclaimed forgiveness and said, "Go and sin no more." This is what it means to share your faith. Jesus doesn't hold you responsible for the results; he takes responsibility for that. You don't save anyone; God does. What Jesus will hold us responsible for is being obedient in sharing his good news with those around us. So, be ready, take the initiative, and pass along the good news about Jesus.

CONSIDER

1. What is the most challenging, difficult, or scary thing about sharing your faith in Jesus with others? What would build your confidence and make it easier to share what Jesus has done for you?
2. If there was no such thing as the New Testament, what would people know about Jesus based on your life (How you live and what you say about him)? What would your friends far from God know about Jesus just from being in your presence?
3. When we accept the responsibility to share the good news of Jesus with other people - the church grows. Considering this responsibility, what habits or rhythms have you found helpful as you follow Jesus?

CHALLENGE

Write down the names of three people you would like to share Jesus with. Begin praying that God would open a door of opportunity for you to do so. This intentionality will help you look for the situations and conversations where sharing your faith and what Jesus is doing in your life will come up naturally in your everyday conversations. Make this a regular part of your prayer time.

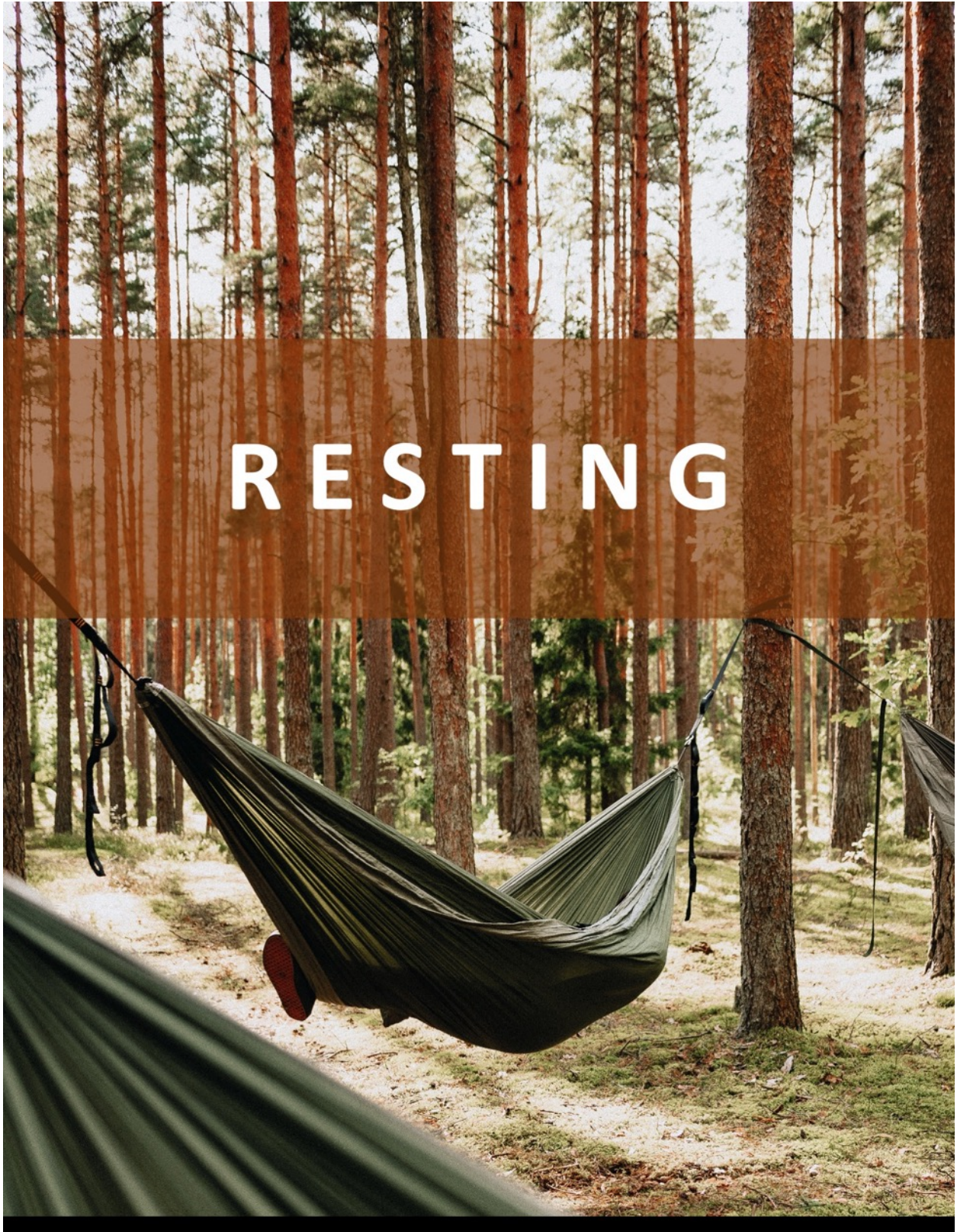
"Authentic evangelism is lifting up the veil of what God is up to and manifesting the image of God in the world we are in."

Leonard Sweet
So Beautiful

"Every Christian is either a missionary or an impostor."

Charles Spurgeon

RESTING



PRACTICE SEVEN

RESTING

CONVERSATION

*"Let the beloved of the Lord rest secure in him, for he shields him all day long,
and the one the Lord loves rests between his shoulders."
Deuteronomy 33:12 NIV*

TO BE WRITTEN

**"Outbursts of
creativity
require intakes
of stillness and
silence.
Nothing comes
forth without
something
doing nothing."**

Leonard Sweet
From Tablet to Table



7

CONVERSATION CONTINUED**TO BE WRITTEN**

**"It is in
deep
solitude
that I find the
gentleness
with which
I can
truly love
my brothers."**

Thomas Merton
*A Year with Thomas
Merton*

CONSIDER

1. What parts of your life make it difficult to stop and rest? What things nourish and replenish your soul?
2. On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being bad and 10 being excellent), how are you taking time to rest? Why did you choose this score? What do you notice about yourself when you are constantly on the go and resist slowing down and taking the time to rest?
3. How might practicing Sabbath increase your joy and improve your worship of God?

CHALLENGE

Write a plan for a weekly Sabbath time of rest for the next month. Choose a day you will set aside each week, and jot down a few things you will do or not do on those days. Share this plan with someone and ask them to help hold you accountable by checking in on you a couple of times during the month.

STORIED DISCIPLESHIP



SIMPLIFYING

PRACTICE EIGHT

SIMPLIFYNG

CONVERSATION

*"He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna...
to teach you that man does not live on bread alone
but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."
Deuteronomy 8:3 NIV*

**"The ability
to simplify
means
to eliminate
the
unnecessary
so that
the
necessary
may
speak."**

TO BE WRITTEN

Hans Hofmann
Search for the Real



8

CONVERSATION CONTINUED**TO BE WRITTEN**

**Simplicity
is the only
thing that
sufficiently
reorients
our lives
so that
possessions
can be
genuinely
enjoyed
without
destroying us.**

Richard Foster
*Celebration of
Discipline*

CONSIDER

1. What has been your experience with fasting? What did you struggle with? Did you feel like the experience brought you closer to God? How so?
2. 'Planned neglect' is choosing to give up things of lesser importance and priority for the sake of time with God. What could you sacrifice to free up time to spend with God?
3. What other areas of your life do you believe need to be simplified? What new habits and strategies will you implement to make this happen?

CHALLENGE

For the next month, choose one day a week to fast from something, whether it is food or your digital devices. If you choose food, eat dinner the night before your fast and skip breakfast and lunch. You may consume water and vegetable broth. When you feel hunger pangs, turn to God in prayer. Make a similar commitment if you choose to fast from your digital devices.

STORIED DISCIPLESHIP



PRACTICE NINE

TENDING

CONVERSATION

**"Humans were
designed
to walk and play
with God in
the Garden
without shame,
reveling in
the joy of
Godplay"**

Leonard Sweet
The Well-Played Life

TO BE WRITTEN

**"The goal
is not simply
to 'work hard,
play hard.'
The goal is
to make our
work and
our play
indistinguishable."**

Simon Sinek



9

CONVERSATION CONTINUED**TO BE WRITTEN**

**"We don't
stop
playing
because we
grow old;
we grow old
because
we stop
playing."**

CONSIDER

1. What does it mean to be healthy? What should motivate Christians to be healthy? Why do you think God cares about how we treat our bodies?
2. What exercises or diet changes do you feel you need to make in your life? What is holding you back? How do you think better care of your body will impact your relationship with God?
3. How do you like to spend your leisure time? What is your favorite way to have fun and relax by 'playing'? What do you think playing has to do with spiritual formation?

George Bernard Shaw

CHALLENGE

For the next month, choose one thing you can do to honor God with your body and begin practicing this daily. Perhaps it is going for a daily walk or making healthier food choices. Whatever you choose, make it rigorous enough to stretch you but easy enough to be achievable.

STORIED DISCIPLESHIP

Part Two: Sermon: Sermon Series

Storied Discipleship Sermon Graphics and Images for Media Slides.

The background picture of the Lord's Supper was chosen to signify the Jesus story. Everything Jesus lived and breathed for is brought together in this image. Sacrificial loving and living on full display; his body given and broken for us; his blood shed for the forgiveness of our sins. His life lived for the glory of God and our salvation, perfectly imaging the love and character of God.

The first image is for widescreen presentation; the second for social media posting.



The Blessing Life Media Slides:

The following slides are a sample of the sermon media presentation for 'The Blessing Life.'

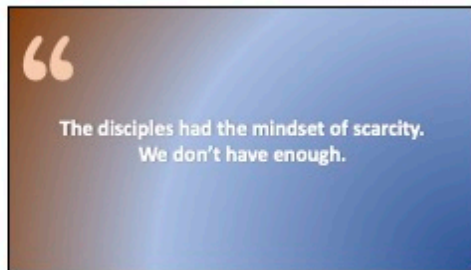
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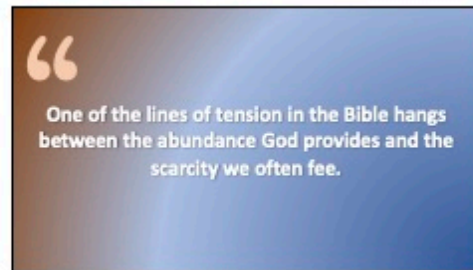
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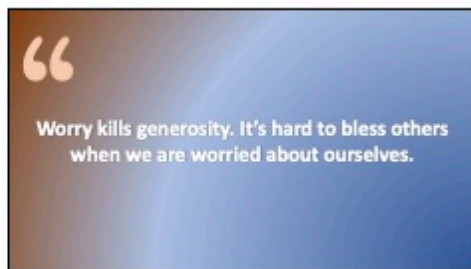
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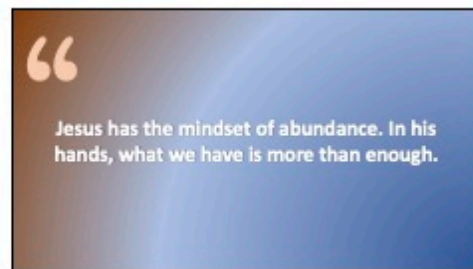
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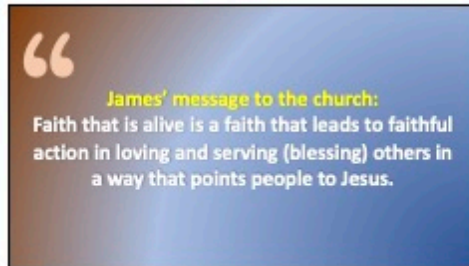


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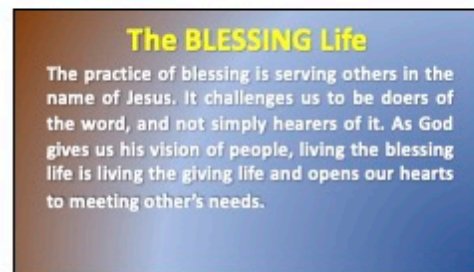
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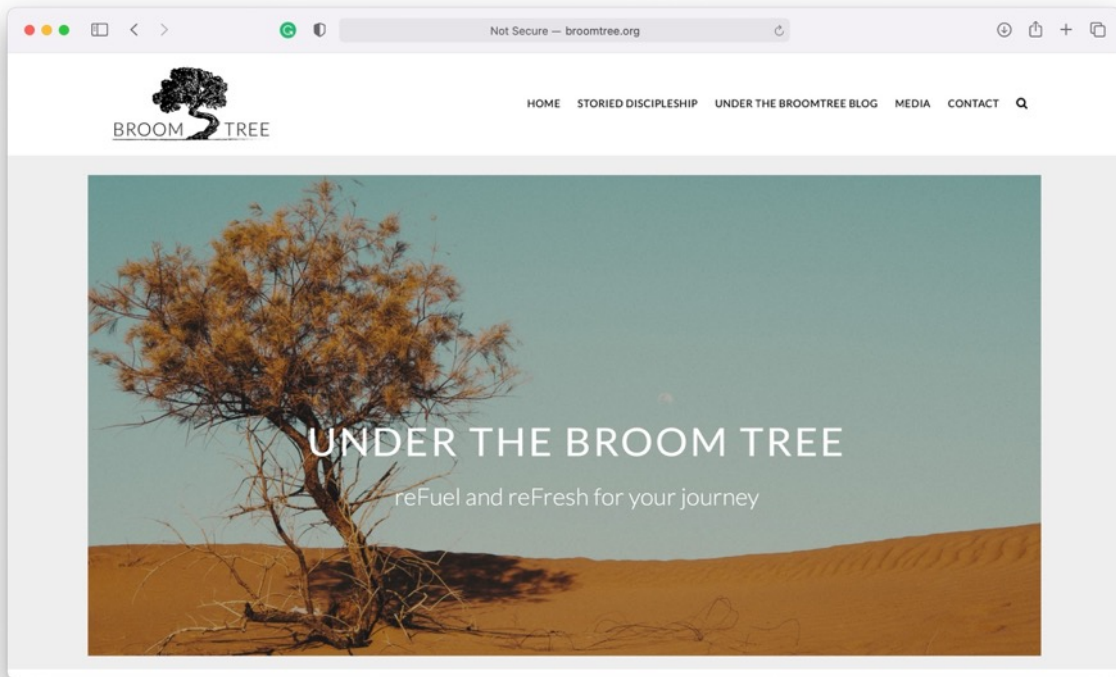


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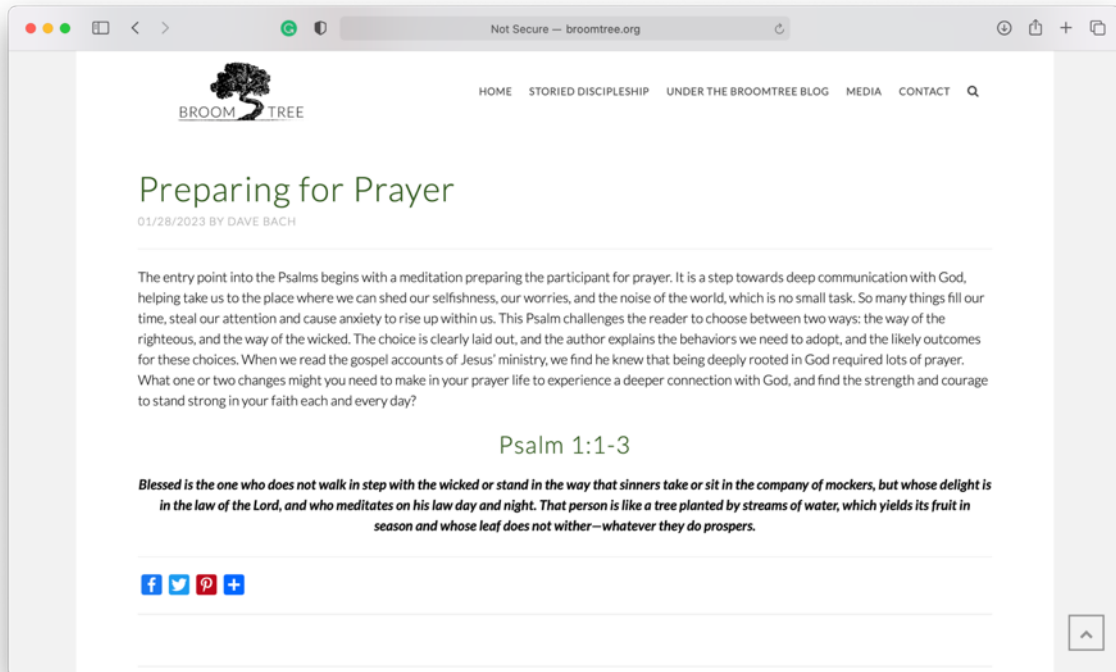


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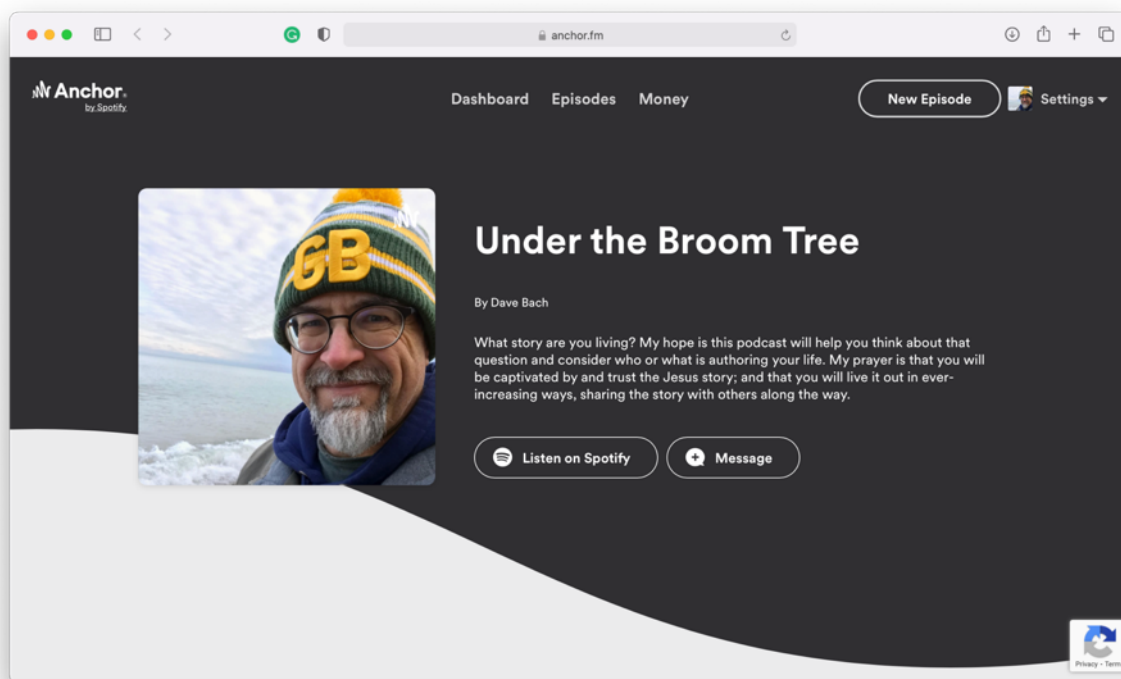
Website Screenshot - broomtree.org



Screenshot of Blog Sample - Under the Broom Tree Blog



Podcast Platform Screenshot



Broom Tree Logo sample

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