

Following Jesus Christ Today

The Transformation Series



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*This booklet is dedicated to the wonderful members of the
Banks Presbyterian Church. Thank you for the last ten years
of life and ministry together!*

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“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.” Luke 9:23-24

Here is my prayer for you, the reader. “Lord, thank you for those reading this booklet. May they find you in it. May they find that for which their heart has always yearned for—and that for which you have been patiently waiting. May they be led into your truth—that truth which says, ‘The work of God is this: to believe in the One he has sent.’ Lord, I give this booklet over to you. I pray this in the mighty name of Jesus. Amen.”

For years I have been concerned about the “disconnect” I’ve seen between the joyful and God-powerful lives of those we read about in the New Testament and then my own life and those in my congregations. Well meaning lives, but seeming to lack power and holy authenticity, my own included. What is now clear to me is that being a “believer” is not enough. Holding correct beliefs about Jesus is important, but until we bring our full life into submission to those beliefs, they remain just one more set of inspiring, but somewhat irrelevant ideals we pledge allegiance to. I am grateful to have finally found a way of bringing credibility to this yearning to live as an authentic Christian. That is what I hope to share with you in this booklet.

How do we follow Jesus Christ TODAY? In first century Palestine to follow Jesus meant to locate him and then stay with him. The Gospels show though that crowds of people followed Jesus in that manner and yet were not really his “followers.” To follow Jesus in this more refined sense, then and now, is to follow him as his DISCIPLE.

THE KINGDOM OF THE GOD. Before we go further into the “how to’s” of discipleship, we need to understand Jesus’ message of the kingdom of God. We start first by understanding his teaching about WHERE God

is to be located. This is extremely important. Many believe, because of cartoon images of God and heaven we have been exposed to, that God is floating in heaven somewhere, a place that is very far away, “somewhere over the rainbow.” Jesus taught that God occupies the air around our bodies! *“After this manner therefore, pray ye, ‘Our Father who art in the heavens...”* (Matthew 6:9). Notice the word “heavens.” While most translations use “heaven,” in the original Greek New Testament the word is plural—“the heavens.” The difference is this. The Jews understood there to be three heavens. First the air that surrounds our body, including the sky where the birds fly, then the atmosphere where the Sun, Moon, and stars shine, and then on into the very throne room of God. The term “heavens” encompasses all of these. So when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “Our Father who art in the heavens,” he was locating God for them. God was as close to them as the air they breathe. And so too for us.

We live “in” God like a fish lives in water. *“In him we live and move and have our being”* (Acts 17:28). God fills all space like we fill our bodies. And he is fully present everywhere. Nothing escapes his gaze. *“I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve”* (Jeremiah 17:10). For those trying to avoid God, clearly this is an uncomfortable thought. But for those who wish to find God, it means that God notices the least turning of the human heart towards him.

So God is fully present to humanity waiting for us to seek and find him.

GOD REIGNING IN HIS KINGDOM. The Lord God rules over everything in heaven and on earth. *“For the Lord is the great God, the great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land”* (Psalm 95:3-5). From electrons, to earthworms, to elephants, God is intimately overseeing all things, not only on this planet, but throughout the universe. Jesus taught that not even a sparrow falls to the ground apart from the knowledge and will of

God (Matthew 10:29). This immediately brings to mind however, the question of evil. If God is running the universe, and he is good, why does he permit evil to also be present? This is a very large question, of course. If we had eyes that could see we would immediately recognize that there is a lot more of the goodness of God present in this world than evil. But that aside, the Bible doesn't answer all our questions about the "why's" of evil—just that for good purposes of his own, God has created a world in which evil is permitted to exist and have some range of freedom—for now. But God is also in the process of making all things right, person by person by person, overcoming evil with good. This project will succeed. One day, the Bible promises, *"The earth will be full of the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea"* (Isa 11:9).

For now though, God permits evil to be present because of a greater good yet to come. More to our point though, of all created things, God permits human beings alone to resist his will—again, for the time being. He is seeking our willing choice to place ourselves under his charge and participate with him in his "divine conspiracy" of overcoming evil with good. I highly recommend the book by Dallas Willard, *THE DIVINE CONSPIRACY* on this very subject.

THE MESSAGE OF JESUS CHRIST. The message Jesus preached is the availability of the kingdom of God. *"The times have been fulfilled. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the good news!"* (Mark 1:14) Jesus proclaimed that God's kingdom, his personal rule over everything, was available now to individual human lives. In other words, God is willing to take under his concentrated love and care the lives of individual human beings who want him to be in charge of their lives. No matter who they might be. Immoral people, crooked people, diseased people, weak people, poor people, as well as the strong, the rich, and the healthy.

How does one enter God's kingdom? Jesus said "repent and believe." To repent is to change your mind. Specifically, you change our mind

about who is best suited to run your life. Who will be in charge? Shall we continue to be in charge of our life? Or shall God be in charge? The flip-side of repentance is to “believe,” or in other words, to trust God. We surrender control over ourselves into God’s capable hands and then we proceed on the basis that he is in fact, in charge. We learn not to take matters into our own hands, but rather wait on God and take measured steps of obedience in response to his leading.

WHERE DOES JESUS FIT INTO THE KINGDOM OF GOD? Jesus is the king in God’s kingdom. *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,”* Jesus said (Matthew 28:18). Jesus is also the way into God’s kingdom. *“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”* (John 14:6). We relate to God and his kingdom by trusting and following Jesus. Here is an illustration that may help. When I fly back to the United States from a mission trip to Honduras and arrive at the airport in Atlanta, I first pass through customs before I am truly “in” the USA. I am on United States soil, but have not “entered” until I pass that gate. How do I enter that gate? I declare my intentions and belongings and (by implication) promise to submit to the governance of the United States of America. In a similar way, while everyone is present to the kingdom of God, since it fills all space, we are not “in” until we enter by the gate. Jesus is both that gate and the gatekeeper. We enter declaring our intentions to submit to his governance and leave behind our former life. At that point, the gatekeeper, who also happens to be the king of the kingdom, takes personal charge of us and then becomes our guide! He leads us into *“green pastures, quiet waters, and paths of righteousness for his name’s sake,”* in other words, the full life of God’s kingdom and his mission of overcoming evil with good.

Our role is to yield to his leadership. We become his follower; his disciple.

WHAT IS IT TO BE A DISCIPLE OF JESUS? I love the definition Dallas Willard uses. A disciple of Jesus is one who is with him, learning from

him, how to become like him. What about you, the one reading this? Have you decided to become a disciple of Jesus Christ? If so, I hope this booklet will be of real help to you.

Jesus accepts all who wish to be his disciple, provided they have counted the cost. *“Come to me,”* he said, *“all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls”* (Matthew 11:28-29). Notice his phrase, “learn from me.” A disciple, then and now, learns directly from Jesus Christ. But how can this be possible? He no longer walks the earth in the flesh. True. But having been raised from the dead, he still is present, invisibly, by the Holy Spirit. In fact Jesus Christ fills all heaven and earth in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Having resumed his rightful place ruling all things in heaven and earth, Jesus is everywhere present to everyone at every time. All who cry out to him, no matter who they are, or what they have done, or where they might be, can find him. The Bible emphatically says that *“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved”* (Acts 2:21). Right now as you read this, Jesus is present with you. At this moment, you can begin to trust him and follow him.

But how? Let’s use Jesus’ own words. *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me”* (Luke 9:23). Jesus insists on three necessary things if we wish to follow him. Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow. These three are linked-parts in an ongoing way of life, namely that of following Jesus as his disciple. For the sake of clarity, let’s break his teaching into those three parts.

DENY “SELF.” Some people deny themselves certain pleasures, like coffee or chocolate, during the forty days of the Christian season of Lent. While such practices may help as a reminder of the sacrifice of Jesus, denying oneself pleasure is NOT what Jesus meant in his teaching. To “deny self,” Jesus meant that we give up on life as we had it planned. We sign-over all rights to control our future. We change our mind about

who is best suited to run our life. From this point on, Jesus is in charge of our DayTimer as well as our checkbook. He is in charge of what happens to our time, and what happens to our money. Jesus is in charge of our marriage, our family, our ministry, our health, our career, our recreation, our friendships, our house, our car, and all our other possessions.

To come after Jesus is to release the care of our keeping to his charge. Jesus taught, *“Anyone who will not receive the kingdom like a little child shall never enter it”* (Luke 18:17). Little children always have an adult in charge of them. To enter the kingdom is to place ourselves, like a little child, under God’s charge. This means we give up on our plans. God is not interested in improving the life we were living. That life must die. He is interested in a brand new life for us, leading us in paths of his choosing. To “deny self” means we lay aside our plans so as to walk in his plans.

When I was twenty-four, one sentence from my father changed my life. Since graduation from college, I had been working as a sales representative for the Dow Chemical Company. Because of various personal happenings, I found myself drawn towards becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ. But I was stuck. There was something I wanted even more. In my ambition, I wanted to pursue a career where I might one day become the president of the Dow Chemical Company. So I asked my dad, “Can’t I become a Christian and also try to become president of the Dow Chemical Company?” My dad paused, and then said the words that would change my life: “Scott, God might want you to become president of the Dow Chemical Company. But that is for him to decide. You need to follow Christ.” With that, the choice before me became clear. The next day, standing alone in the kitchen, I said to God: “Whatever you want to do with my life is just fine with me.”

I want to be clear that this “death to self” is not some dread thing. It is a wonderful thing. It truly is “good news” to those who have discovered in Jesus the meaning and purpose of life. Disciples of Jesus have proven

to themselves that God can manage their life better than they can. It is with relief, even joy, that they relinquish control over to Jesus. What is more, the disciple understands, at least in part, that the very purpose of the universe has to do with the honoring of Jesus. It is a sublime joy for the disciple to think that God would use his life to be a part of the cosmic giving of appreciation to the smartest, strongest, kindest, and most wonderful being who has ever existed! Jesus illustrated the joy of this choice: *“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it”* (Matthew 13:44-46). Jesus reigning over God’s kingdom is the treasure hidden in the field; Jesus himself is the pearl of great price. To the disciple, the love of Jesus is easily worth any cost, any price.

Obviously, for those who are not fully convinced about Jesus, to surrender everything to him will prove an impossibility. But for those who are his followers, “losing their lives for his sake” is a cheerful choice. They have found real, eternal life. What is eternal life? Eternal life, according to Jesus, is not simply an endless, enduring life. Eternal life is a new TYPE of life, the life of the new heavens and new earth to come, experienced now as the resurrection life of Jesus and consists of daily interaction with God in his kingdom. Jesus taught, *“Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent”* (John 17:3). To “know” in the Biblical sense is to have personal intimacy with. Eternal life is life NOW experienced by daily, close companionship with God. Yes, Jesus came to get men into heaven—but just as surely, he came to get heaven into men. This “life of the heavens,” this eternal kind of life is one penetrated with divine love, received from God and then extended to others. It includes righteousness, peace, joy, faith, and hope. But love is its greatest attribute. In fact, anyone who does not live in divine love lives in darkness, no matter how religiously active they might otherwise be.

TAKE UP YOUR CROSS DAILY. This solemn statement from Jesus is a further extension of “denying self.” All the original disciples of Jesus had witnessed the Roman practice of crucifixion many, many times. It was the grim Roman way of making examples of trouble-makers. Those who were seen carrying their cross were on their way to death. When Jesus told his disciples to take up their cross daily, he meant they were live every day having fully abandoned themselves to his control, no matter what, even if it meant death itself. This shocks us. But Jesus meant it literally. We start each day by presenting ourselves to Jesus for him to do with as he pleases. Then we rest in the fact that everything that comes our way that day will have either been sent by him or at least allowed by him. Of special importance is the abandoning of outcomes. We simply refuse to rescue situations so as to make them turn out more to our liking, nor do we try to “make” things happen on our own. We abandon outcomes to the Lord, and accept whatever he chooses to do with our plans, whether big or small, success or failure, “for better or for worse.” We trust that we are under his direct charge. Yes, we work diligently, but “as unto the Lord.” Success is for him to determine. We seek to be faithful.

The beauty of this abandonment lies in the assurance that whatever suffering comes our way, including our eventual death, everything will be caught up in the full life of God. And untold thousands and thousands of Christian disciples, then and now, have lived every day taking their lives into their hands and then entrusting those lives to Jesus, that they might follow Christ. Once prepared to die, everything else becomes easy.

For most of us Americans, literal martyrdom seems unlikely. But other extensions of “dying to self” come into play. First, we turn loose of having to have things go our way. We’ve given up on it. And what a relief that is! The anger and striving so common to those who insist on having things their way, just evaporates. Dead men don’t have to have their way. In fact, a careful reading of the New Testament shows us that indeed, disciples of Jesus have died. Our old self died in Christ on his

cross. When we were born “from above” by the Spirit, two things immediately happened. Our “old-self death” in Christ was instantly applied to our spirit as was simultaneously the resurrection life of Christ. We have now been raised up in Jesus, experiencing in part and progressively more fully his resurrection life, seated with Christ in God (see Colossians 3:1-4; Romans 6:1-11). The old person really has gone. A new person has been raised up inside ourselves. The reason we continue to struggle with sin is not because the old “sinner” inside has somehow returned to life, but because of the force of habit. Our bodies, souls, will, minds, and emotions have all had the practice of a lifetime conforming to the sinful patterns of life in this world. All these aspects of self—body, soul, will, mind, and emotions—must be retrained by Jesus Christ so that we can become the kind of persons who easily and naturally do the things Jesus teaches.

A second extension of our “dying to self” is the humble acceptance of the many “crosses” of our daily life, those unpleasant and hurtful things we can’t change. Having died to our own way, we let go of the fear and discouragement, which on the face of it, our limitations would seem to bring. But God is not limited by those things that limit us. It is in our weakness alone that we can find his grace. Carrying our cross means we take up the things that cause us pain, “shoulder” them peaceably, and keep on following Jesus.

FOLLOW ME. Now as to the actual following. There are two aspects to this “following.” One is the listening to his “still, small voice” and obeying what he tells us to do. The other is the putting into practice the recorded teachings of Jesus we find in the Gospels. Both are part of what it means to follow Jesus. Both are things we LEARN to do. As in any kind of learning, we will make mistakes. But as long as we learn from our mistakes, we continue as his disciples.

However, we will find this “following” of Jesus, both to his spoken voice in our spirit, and to his written teachings in Scripture to be IMPOSSIBLE without our having taken some prior steps. We must take seriously his

words to his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, *“The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak”* (Matthew 26:41). Our human condition is such that there is a built-in resistance to trusting and obeying God. Our human nature, designed originally to be fully cooperative with the reign of God, has now been formed under rebellious habits of sin. Through the new birth, our inner-most nature has been grafted into the very life of God. We do indeed have God-implanted desires now, such as the desire for holiness, for obedience, and for the love of God. But the habits of our body, soul, will, mind, and emotions have been trained otherwise. We are distressingly, consistently, “creatures of habit.” Until our “flesh” (those human abilities we exercise independently of God) is re-trained we will find that we simply cannot muster up enough faith to consistently WANT to listen to and obey Jesus. And even when we want to, we will not completely succeed. This can be quite discouraging for the well-intended follower of Christ. We must realistically accept the fact that though our intentions are good, the past habits of sin are engrained. As the apostle Paul wrote, *“I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out”* (Romans 7:18). The wagon rolls along in the ruts laid down from long previous use. New habits must be formed. And until that happens, our automatic tendencies will be to “run our own show,” to give way to fear, to be dragged-down by longing for the approval of others and for personal glory, and for bodily pleasure and ease. We will find our best intentions to follow after Jesus thwarted by the distractions and antagonisms of our culture. But we need not despair. There are proven ways to rise above the downward pull of sin and to be renewed and retrained.

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES. The way of retraining our self-directed impulses is through the practice of spiritual disciplines. Spiritual disciplines are activities we practice that open our inner selves to be re-formed by God’s Word and Spirit. They are modeled directly after the spiritual practices of Jesus and his apostles. Anyone who intends to learn from Jesus so as to become like him will need to design his weekly schedule in such a way that regular place is given for these disciplines. People design their week around all kinds of lesser things, such as

favorite TV shows, working out at the gym, and soccer games for children. We can surely make a similar practice of designing our week to facilitate the following after Christ. Need it be said that going to church for an hour and a half once a week will not form us as disciples? Church attendance is important, but it is the private practice that counts.

Akin to physical disciplines, such as lifting weights and running, spiritual disciplines bring about spiritual strength. They have their full effect when engaged in on a REGULAR basis, and over time. These disciplines are not ways of “earning” grace but rather are wise practices which the Lord uses to pour into the disciple a greater awareness of his presence.

There is no “authoritative” list of spiritual disciplines. However, the practice of solitude and silence, prayer and fasting, service and worship, study and memorization of Scripture, and thanksgiving, giving, and forgiving are all proven, time-honored ways that help us to become “God-conscious.” These ancient practices are ones engaged in by Jesus himself and his apostles. If we want to follow him in terms of his teaching, we must also follow Jesus in terms of the disciplines he practiced. Two wonderful books on the topic of spiritual disciplines I recommend are Celebration of Discipline, by Richard Foster, and The Spirit of the Disciplines, by Dallas Willard.

The activities listed below have stood the test of time as reliable ways to bring about inner transformation. The place to start is by prayerfully experimenting in small doses. Results should become evident after just a few weeks of regular effort. Interacting with some trusted “fellow travelers” as you progress is very important. At different seasons in your life, you will find the need to practice different disciplines. Some will remain constant, but others will change as you continue to follow the Lord Jesus.

SOLITUDE. In solitude, we create times to be completely alone with God and away from human companionship. Solitude wakes us to the

constant presence of God, it disturbs our fleshly habit of “needing” people around us, and it brings godly focus to our life. It will cure our loneliness. Getting up early in the morning, having a lunch hour alone, walking in a park, and taking a weekend retreat are all ways to practice solitude.

SILENCE. The practice of silence means getting away from human noise and listening to God’s “still, small voice.” Inner silence will heal our being driven by fear. It can be practiced by driving with the radio off, sitting alone on the back porch, walking in nature, but above all in contemplative prayer. In contemplative prayer, we sit quietly, waiting on God to speak, if he should so choose. Like a courtier waiting on his king, we are available to be addressed, but not striving to get his attention. Distracting thoughts will come. When you become aware that your mind has wandered, don’t condemn yourself, but gently turn your thoughts back to the Lord and thank him for reminding you of his presence. In silence we become aware of the truth that since Christ lives within us, we really do have already everything we want. *“One thing I ask of the Lord; this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple”* (Psalm 27:4).

PRAYER. Prayer takes many forms, but as it develops it becomes a lifestyle. In the words of Dallas Willard, “Prayer is talking with God about the things we are doing together.” In other words, prayer is the conversational relationship between companions who share life together. Sometimes we talk, sometimes we sing, sometimes we listen, and sometimes we just enjoy each other’s company in silence.

FASTING. Fasting is to go without food for a certain period of time. A common Christian practice is to take one day a week, skip breakfast and lunch, and then eat supper. The discomfort felt in doing without food tends to press our attention towards God. Once practiced with some regularity, fasting is not nearly as difficult as you might think. What does fasting do for the believer? Fasting enables us to peacefully bear

up when we don't get our way. Fasting breaks addictions to food, spending, drugs, sex, and alcohol, and it creates an ability to be "master" of our body in remarkable ways. Those who practice fasting find significant spiritual strength.

SERVICE. Service, as a discipline, is the choosing to do some necessary thing for other people, particularly those with whom you live and work. If the service can be done in secret, so much the better. Choosing to serve breaks us free from the peevish, "Whose turn is it to serve now?" that commonly arises in human company. In your home, or at work, pick the necessary chore that nobody else wants to do. Make that your service.

WORSHIP. The regular gathering with other believers to celebrate, praise God, give him thanks, and enjoy life together is a vital discipline. Complaining and "stressing," so common in worldly life, takes a back seat when disciples gather to turn their attention deliberately to Jesus Christ and honor Him. Jesus said, "*Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them*" (Matthew 18:20). He wasn't kidding.

STUDY AND MEMORIZATION OF SCRIPTURE. Thoughtful reading of the Bible requires a plan. A plan that works well for some is to use three bookmarks, one placed in Psalms and Proverbs, one in the Old Testament, and one in the New Testament. Each day meditatively read one chapter in each section, moving the bookmark as you do so. Reading Scripture is done at two levels: to gain a greater knowledge of God and His ways and to let His truth reconstruct our thinking, attitudes, and feelings. Our media culture affects our vital understanding in completely wrong, even outrageous ways. Only a steady diet of God's Word can transcend the anti-Christian indoctrination from our modern world. Classic passages of Scripture should be memorized and recited often. Many people are reluctant to try to memorize, but the human mind is actually designed by God to do so. It is not hard to memorize, as long as you take just one line at a time, repeat it regularly until you

“have it,” then add one more line, rehearsing the previously learned lines. Some of the great passages the disciple may want to consider memorizing are the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13), The 23rd Psalm, The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17), 1 Corinthians 13, Colossians 3:1-17, Philippians 4:4-8, Proverbs 3:5-6, Psalm 91, Romans 6-8, and The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Yes, it may take a lifetime to memorize these passages. But do we not have a lifetime to do so?

THANKSGIVING. As a discipline, thanksgiving is the practice of noticing the goodness of God in the small details of life and deliberately using our mouth and tongue to say the words “thank you.” Christians speak of the virtue of having a “thankful heart.” This condition is one to grow into, but without the deliberate practice of giving thanks, it won’t happen. Waiting till we “feel like giving thanks,” could possibly mean never! Sadness, sorrow, and grief are inevitable (and often appropriate) responses to events in life. We choose to practice thanksgiving even in suffering, first to honor God, then to release helpful emotions associated with love, joy, peace, faith, and hope, and then to build our character as men and women who give thanks at all times. *“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you”* (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

GIVING. Giving to others is not only a virtue, but also a discipline. The giving of personal finances to help support those in the pastoral and missionary ministry of the Church, as well as the giving of money to help the poor are time-honored customs from both ancient Israel and the early Church. As a discipline though, giving sacrificially frees us from the clutch of fear that lack of money so often brings. When the disciple chooses to give more than he can easily afford, he immediately places himself in a position to depend on God. How much should be given? Whether one uses the tithe (ten percent) as a guide or not, the amount given needs to be more than we can easily afford. Otherwise, how would faith in God’s provision manifest itself? C.S. Lewis was once asked how much the Christian should give. His response was, “If it doesn’t hurt, it is probably not enough.”

FORGIVING. From inconsiderate drivers, to unkind remarks, to unintentional slights and grievances, opportunities to take offense—or practice forgiveness—abound daily. Forgiveness is a virtue, but it doesn't come naturally. Forgiveness must also be practiced as a discipline. How? By immediately saying the words, "I forgive." Since feelings of injury and outrage can be so powerful, it is common to believe that we should wait until we no longer feel hurt to then forgive. But if one no longer feels hurt, what is there to forgive? No, forgiveness takes place in the context of a "live" injury or grievance. We practice forgiveness as a discipline by choosing ahead of time, before any offense occurs, to simply live in a state of forgiving others. Like surfing, riding the wave with a curl of water pushed out front, we choose to live on the swell of God's forgiveness. Intending to live in forgiveness, we practice by immediately saying or praying, "I forgive," releasing to God those who injured us as soon feelings of hurt or offense rise up within. Otherwise, delaying forgiveness, we become like the ghost of Jacob Marley, dragging around massive, heavy chains of remembrance of injuries received by others. The decision to forgive casts off those chains.

Over time, the regular practice of solitude, thanksgiving, contemplative prayer, fasting, worship, giving, and the internalization of Scripture will have trained our "flesh" so that our normal responses will become aligned with the leading of the Holy Spirit. Again, these practices do not earn us merit. They are simply wise things we do that in turn enable us to do by grace, what we could never have done by our natural ability alone. More than any other single thing, spiritual disciplines turn our inner self toward God so as to reach out in trust and receive divine love.

RECEIVING GOD'S LOVE. Receiving divine love is the essential ingredient in Christian transformation. We cannot force this or "make it happen." Yet it is clearly the will of God for us to receive his love and abide in it. The apostle Paul wrote, *"I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to*

know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:17-19). It is love that drives out fear. It is love that moves us to trust and be filled with joy and hope. Those who live in divine love are able to “bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things” (1 Corinthians 13:7).

Compare yourself to a cast-iron wood stove. The fire on the inside is the presence of the living God. The Bible says that our bodies are “temples of the Holy Spirit” and that “our God is a consuming fire.” The fire within is the love of God, but we have a role in tending the flame. This involves two things: removing what quenches the flame and our adding the wood. Haste and hurry quench the flames, for we are no longer able to listen. What we bring as fuel to the fire are our desires and worries. Placed on the altar of God, our desires and worries are consumed in his love. As we continue to surrender more and more aspects of our self-directed life and give them to the Lord, we rest in his presence, trusting him, and receive more and more of the inflow of divine love. It is not that his love was not already there for us. It is that we were not in a position to receive. Surrender fuels the flame of love.

Living an increasingly “God-conscious” life, the disciple learns to listen for the voice of his Lord and hearing him speak, obeys. This is indeed the short version of discipleship: to listen to Jesus and do whatever he tells us to do. It must be said though, that our Lord is not interested in creating zombie-robots who can only do what they are told. Jesus wants us to become the kind of persons who have so imbibed his Spirit and teaching, that we freely put it into practice without having to think about it. His teaching becomes the natural thing we do. The left hand truly does not know what the right hand is doing. Once we are fully trained, we will be like our master (Luke 6:40). As in any other kind of training, at first we start very deliberately, at times clumsily, making mistakes, learning from them, but determined to keep on practicing. Over time, our habits become trained and we respond more naturally and easily to life as Jesus himself would. And no wonder, for we are his disciples and he himself lives in us. We discover that life becomes

relatively simple. In large part at least, we experience his promised rest. *“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls”* (Matthew 11:29-30).

LISTENING FOR HIS VOICE. Each disciple can learn to recognize the voice of Jesus. He himself said, *“My sheep listen to my voice. I know them and they follow me”* (John 10:27). How do we recognize someone’s voice? Familiarity. Granted, it is hard to describe to others how you are able to recognize a certain voice, say your mother’s voice for instance. But you know that you do. The same is true with our Lord’s voice. The “still, small voice of God” comes as a calm, strong, quiet whisper of thought in the mind. His is not a loud voice, nor is it a silly voice. The voice of God does not whine, or plead, or agitate, or leave us feeling condemned. Instead, when God speaks, there is a steady, strong sense of authority to his voice. Even when the Lord speaks to us about sin, there is relief at hearing him speak. We feel encouraged that he notices us and wants us free from what, until that time, had been hidden from our eyes. The usual way of his speaking is by confirming and highlighting the plain-sense meaning of Scripture as we read. But God also speaks to our deepest personal concerns that are not specifically addressed in the Bible. God is willing to teach us how to recognize his voice. He is not picky, nor is he a fault-finder. He is patient with us as we learn. God is willing to keep teaching the lesson until we get it. And we will make mistakes. But so what? God is bigger than our mistakes. If we trust him, then even when we get it “wrong,” it will still turn out right.

For me, when I hear God speak, it is usually a brief conversation with succinct statements. Sometimes the Lord interrupts my activity to speak to me, but most of the time he speaks when I have drawn apart in silence to be alone with him. And then it is usually in response to a question I have raised in prayer. I have learned I cannot make God speak to me. There have been times when I felt desperate for a “word from the Lord,” and none came. But when his word does come, I come to life. There is no greater help to me than to hear his voice. It sustains

me. I really do know what Jesus meant when he said, *“Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God”* (Matthew 4:4).

FOLLOWING HIS TEACHING. In one sense, the entire Bible is the teaching of Jesus Christ. Specifically though, his teachings in the four Gospels (and illustrated in the rest of the New Testament) are what Jesus wants us to put into practice. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5-7) is a summary of his teaching. The central message in the Sermon on the Mount is that God reigns over everything now as a loving Father and is completely competent and sufficient for the life of those who come under his charge. Therefore, those who enter his kingdom have nothing to worry about. Even if they are persons who are not well-off in worldly terms, such as the poor, the grief-stricken, the non-descript, the outcast, and the persecuted, they are still blessed by God to be a blessing. That being the case, the disciple places God’s reign of love over his life before every other concern.

Everyone wants to believe he is a good person. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus went to great pains to paint a portrait of the really good person. He was teaching in a highly-charged religious environment, with very strict rules defining righteousness. The goodness of the kingdom, Jesus said, goes well beyond the righteousness of the scribe and Pharisee. That righteousness was external observance to ritual law, designed to be achievable by very strict effort. The subtle motivation in Pharisaic righteousness was to draw praise from men as well as to gain the smugness of being able to say, “I haven’t done anything wrong.” But is “not doing anything wrong,” all that God seeks to develop in his children? Of course not. The fullest expression of his kingdom righteousness is love.

How would you describe a good man? Many would describe a good man as one who has not murdered anyone, a man who has not committed adultery, a man who doesn’t break his promises, a man who

defends himself “righteously,” and a man who protects his family and his friends. The righteousness of the kingdom goes beyond this.

Jesus taught that the good man is not simply one who has not murdered, but one who is not angry and does not view others with contempt; one who is easy to be reconciled with. He went on to say that the good man is not simply one who has refrained from the act of adultery, but one who does not lust after other women, and who puts up with almost anything to protect his wife in marriage. The good man not only fulfills his oaths, Jesus said, but is the kind of man who simply tells the truth and does not manipulate others. The good man is concerned about justice and righting wrongs—just not his own. This man, according to Jesus, does not retaliate for injuries suffered, is generous even to those who don’t deserve it, and is peaceful about going “the second mile” when appropriate. He doesn’t feel the need to spend much energy “protecting” himself, because he is confident that an almighty God has him in charge. This good man, Jesus concludes, loves his neighbors; yes, but he loves his enemies too, and seeks their good, and not harm.

Who could be this good? Well, Jesus could be. So too those in whom he fully lives. If one attempts to keep his teaching as commands to obtain righteousness, he will find that not only is it not achievable with very strict effort (the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees) but IMPOSSIBLE, at least by unaided human effort. But Jesus’ disciples, receiving divine love and learning to abide in God himself, can become this kind of good person. This kingdom righteousness, or goodness, is a life thoroughly permeated with divine love.

Confident of God’s charge and tender love over him, the disciple learns to “turn loose” of hurry and haste, fear and anger. Living in the present moment, the disciple does each task calmly, listening for God’s voice, aware of his presence, finding divine help with even small details. “To live worshipping” becomes not just an ideal, but an actual experience as the disciple learns to abide with the Lord in the present moment, doing

each little thing unto God in trust and love. Having abandoned himself to God, no longer does the disciple shoulder the burden of anger, contempt, lust, manipulation, retaliation, showing off, greed, anxiety, and straightening-out those who trouble him. This is especially so in the matter of our loved ones. We release them to God's care, taking our hands off, sensitive to his leading, but leaving them the responsibility and privilege of also responding to God. We give up our strategies to "fix them." Jesus' teaching, in large part, is the "turning-loose" of such things. He promised, *"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free"* (John 8:31-32). And we shall be free indeed. Nothing can shake us or separate us from the love of Jesus. Abandonment to God results in unshakeable peace and rest.

WHERE DO YOU BEGIN? I want to be perfectly honest with the reader that even though this matter of following Jesus as his disciple seems clear to me now, it has taken me a long time. God has been very patient with me while I have been in the process of learning. Even though I have been a pastor for many years and have had every resource at my disposal, my own path of discipleship has been a faltering one. God has put up with sin, mistakes, and foolishness on my part. I have had obedient years and not-so-obedient years. I have had long seasons where my trust was deep and strong and also long seasons when frankly, I lived in anxiety and striving. Oddly enough, the event that most catapulted me into this present clarity about following Jesus was the death to cancer of my father, Sam Hilborn, in September 2006. Now that he has gone on to be with the Lord, I yearn for that day when I will see him again. The fact that he is waiting there to greet me has deepened my resolve to more carefully and fully abide in the presence of the Lord Jesus and to live life ONLY in terms of what Jesus would like. I am his. Whatever.

So where do I recommend that you, the reader start? Start with trust. Discipleship is a life in which we get to trust Jesus with everything. So, begin now to release to the Lord every single thing that you feel anxious

or scared about. Those feelings are the signal of what we are to abandon to him. Specifically ask the Lord to teach you how to live the life you have been given. When you believe he has shown you a step to take, take it. Keep on asking him to teach you.

You have been given a “kingdom.” It is that sphere of responsibility over which you have “say.” Your kingdom begins with your thoughts and your body, it includes your clothes, your car and driving habits, your house and its upkeep, how you spend your money, what you do with your free time, your family responsibilities, your pets, your ministry, your church participation, the way you do your job, what you buy and how you take care of what you buy. Salvation is found in placing all these aspects of your “kingdom” under Christ’s charge in his kingdom. You begin to trust Jesus with the oversight, management, and running of your “kingdom,” now meshed with his larger kingdom. Your role is to thank him and cooperate with his leadership.

Because we are stubborn and slow to learn, I am of the opinion that for much of this life, just continuing to re-relinquish control over the various aspects of our kingdom into his hands will occupy a good deal of our “followership.” But we do learn. We do grow. Our faith clarifies and strengthens. We gain increasing peace, trusting that our affairs truly are under his capable control. We discover that we can *“be not anxious for anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”* (Philippians 4:4-8).

I am very confident that as you ask Jesus to teach you, you will be led into the practice of certain spiritual disciplines. Exactly which ones, and when, and how, the Lord himself will show you. These practices will become a welcome part of your life. At times they will change. But the Lord is the teacher—we are his pupils. We don’t ever want to stay in a certain routine just because it is familiar. The point is to listen to the Lord and do as he instructs us.

Let's also acknowledge that the disciple will have times when the following of Jesus just doesn't seem as compelling. We get distracted. We can lose interest. There will be times, due to the weakness of our flesh, when we prefer the comfort and pleasures of the world over God. Sometimes we will avoid coming to Jesus because we just don't have the heart to take up some new step of obedience. And there will be times when we flat-out disobey. These lapses are grievous and they are serious. But they are also common for most of us. They have been for me. So let us keep short accounts with the Lord. The important thing to do when we have fallen in sin is to get back up!

Confess slowness to obey as sin. Admit wrongdoing as sin. Agree with God that whatever does not come from faith and love is sin. Don't minimize it, but don't exaggerate it either. The Lord doesn't need a "song and dance" about how "miserable" a sinner we are. We just need to get it straight in our own mind that yes, we sinned, then come clean with it, and ask forgiveness. We don't make excuses or blame others. We accept responsibility and make restitution as appropriate. But we are confident that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has atoned for our sin. *"This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins"* (1 John 4:10). That being the case, we ask the Lord to forgive us—and then, we thank him that he does forgive us! *"For I will forgive their wickedness, and I will remember their sins no more"* (Hebrews 8:12). We pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and keep on following after Jesus. In Christ we have instant, fresh beginnings. We again ask of him, "What would you have me do now, Lord?" And then we do what he tells us.

Jean-Pierre de Caussade was a spiritual director for a convent of nuns in France in the early 18th century. During that time, he wrote a wonderful little book titled, The Sacrament of the Present Moment. I want to close with his summary of Christian discipleship.

“A state in which one discovers how to belong wholly to God through the complete and total assignment of all rights over oneself—over one’s speech, actions, thoughts, and bearing; the employment of one’s time and everything relating to it. There remains one single duty. It is to keep one’s gaze fixed on the master one has chosen and to be constantly listening so as to understand and hear and immediately obey his will.”

May it be so with us.

“And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.” 1 John 5:11-12

