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Taking the Yoke of Jesus and Living for God's Glory

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LEARN FROM ME: Taking the Yoke of Jesus and Living for God's Glory

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FOREWORD: The Ragamuffin's Invitation

I need to tell you something right from the start: I am the last person who should be writing this book.

I'm a former firefighter who spent years running into burning buildings, then became a pastor who burned out trying to run a church. I've failed more times than I've succeeded. I've disappointed people I love. I've questioned whether God could use someone as flawed and broken as me. And on my worst days, I still do.

But perhaps that's exactly why I'm writing this.

Because Jesus's invitation in Matthew 11:28-30 isn't extended to people who have it all together. It's not for the spiritually accomplished or the religiously impressive. Listen to His words again: "Come to Me, all 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. For My yoke is comfortable, and My burden is light."

All who are weary and burdened.

That's the entrance requirement. Exhaustion. Need. The admission that we cannot do this on our own.

Brennan Manning, that beautiful ragamuffin saint who understood grace better than most, wrote: "In this life we are to become like Christ. That is our goal and nothing less, nothing more. We are not saved by attaining Christlikeness; we are saved as we put our confidence in Christ." That sentence changed my life when I first read it. It gave me permission to stop pretending and start learning.

You see, somewhere along the way, many of us absorbed a different message. We learned that Christianity is about getting our act together, trying harder, doing better, and eventually—if we work at it long enough—becoming worthy of God's love. We took Jesus's invitation to "learn from Me" and turned it into a graduate seminar with prerequisites we could never meet.

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We made discipleship into an advanced degree program rather than an apprenticeship with a gentle and humble rabbi who specializes in teaching the unteachable, using the unusable, and loving the unlovable.

And we're exhausted.

I've sat with enough burnt-out ministry leaders, disillusioned believers, and spiritually wounded people to know that the American church is full of weary souls dragging themselves under the weight of a yoke that was never meant to be this heavy. We've replaced "My yoke is comfortable" with "Try harder." We've exchanged "My burden is light" for "You're not doing enough." We've traded the rest Jesus offers for the relentless treadmill of religious performance.

This book is not a manual for becoming a better Christian. God knows we don't need another one of those. This isn't a program for spiritual achievement or a roadmap to religious success.

This is an invitation to drop what you've been carrying and pick up something entirely different.

Jesus says, "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me." Not learn *about* Me—learn *from* Me. There's a world of difference. One is academic, the other is apprenticeship. One keeps us at a distance, the other draws us close. One is about information, the other about transformation.

And what does Jesus want to teach us? What's the curriculum in this school of divine discipleship?

The answer is both simple and profound: He wants to teach us how to live as we were created to live—for the glory of God. Isaiah 43:7 declares, "Everyone who is called by My name, and whom I have created for My glory, whom I have formed, even whom I have made." This is not some optional add-on to the Christian life. This is what we were made for. Before sin twisted everything, before shame and fear and striving entered the picture, we were created to reflect and display the glory of God.

And Jesus—the One who perfectly displayed that glory in every moment of His earthly life—invites us to learn from Him how to do the same.

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But here's the scandal that makes this good news: We don't learn to live for God's glory by trying to manufacture glory moments. We don't create a glory-filled life through spiritual disciplines alone, or by achieving religious milestones, or by impressing people with our devotion.

We learn to glorify God by yoking ourselves to Jesus and letting Him teach us, day by ordinary day, in the midst of our real lives with all their mess and failure and beauty and brokenness.

The curriculum isn't complicated. In fact, Jesus tells us exactly what kind of teacher He is: "I am gentle and humble in heart." That's not a throwaway line. That's His self-description—the only place in Scripture where Jesus explicitly tells us what His heart is like. And it matters tremendously, because we become like the one we follow. We learn from the character of our teacher.

If Jesus were harsh and demanding, we would learn harshness. If He were proud and exacting, we would learn pride. But He is gentle and humble. And as we learn from Him, we become gentle and humble. And in that gentleness and humility, we finally learn what it means to live for something bigger than ourselves—for the glory of the God who loves us.

This book is my attempt to explore what it means to accept Jesus's invitation. To actually take His yoke upon us. To learn from Him, specifically, how to live as image-bearers created for God's glory.

We'll look at what Jesus teaches us—not just through His words but through His life, His character, His priorities, and His method. We'll discover that the curriculum is radically different from the religious systems we've known. It's more demanding and yet easier. It costs us everything and yet gives us rest. It kills our pride and yet gives us life.

This journey is for the weary and burdened. It's for those of us who have tried to earn what cannot be earned and are finally ready to receive what can only be given. It's for the ragamuffins and the misfits, the burned-out and the beat-up, the church-wounded and the performance-weary.

It's for anyone who has looked at their own life and thought, *There must be more than this.*

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There is.

Jesus promises it: "You will find rest for your souls."

And along the way, as we learn from this gentle and humble rabbi, we'll discover what it means to live the life we were always meant to live—a life that displays the glory of God not through our striving but through our surrender, not through our strength but through our weakness, not through our impressive achievements but through our humble apprenticeship.

Dallas Willard once wrote, "Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning." That distinction matters. Jesus invites us to effort—real effort, the kind that comes from being yoked to Him. But it's the effort of learning and following, not the effort of earning and proving.

So here's my invitation to you: If you're tired, come. If you're burdened, come. If you've been trying to make yourself acceptable to God through your performance, come. If you're exhausted from religious systems that promised life but delivered only more pressure, come.

Jesus is still standing there, yoke in hand, saying, "Learn from Me."

Not because you're qualified.

But because you're willing.

That's all the entrance requirement there is.

Welcome to the school of Jesus. Welcome to the apprenticeship that leads to rest. Welcome to learning how to live for the only glory that matters—the glory of the God who made you, loves you, and is not finished with you yet.

Let's begin where Jesus begins.

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PART ONE: THE INVITATION

CHAPTER 1: Come to Me—The Foundation of Learning

"Come to Me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

— Matthew 11:28 (NASB)

I. The Universal Call

The first word matters.

Come.

Not "Achieve." Not "Earn." Not "Prove yourself worthy." Not "Clean yourself up first." Not "Get your act together and then we'll talk."

Just *come*.

In the Greek, the verb is *deute*—a plural imperative that carries both urgency and warmth. It's the same word used when Jesus called His first disciples by the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 4:19), and when He invited the crowds to witness His works (Matthew 11:28). It's an invitation that assumes movement toward Jesus, but it places no prerequisites on who can make that movement.

Jesus says, "Come to Me, *all* who are weary and burdened."

All.

That word should stop us in our tracks. In a religious culture that had carefully defined who was in and who was out, who was clean and who was unclean, who was worthy and who was unworthy, Jesus throws open the doors and says, "*All* who are weary."

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The invitation doesn't go to all who are spiritual enough, or all who are morally qualified, or all who have demonstrated sufficient commitment. It goes to all who are weary and burdened. The entrance requirement is exhaustion. The qualification is need.

Brennan Manning captured this scandalous grace when he wrote: "The gospel is absurd and the life of Jesus is meaningless unless we believe that He lived and died for all men irrespective of what they may believe about Him." Jesus is not standing at the door with a clipboard, checking credentials. He's standing with arms open, saying, "If you're tired, you're invited."

The Two Kinds of Weariness

There are two kinds of weariness that drive people to Jesus, and many of us have experienced both.

The first is what we might call *life weariness*—the exhaustion that comes from living in a broken world. This is the weariness of work that feels meaningless, relationships that have failed, bodies that are failing, dreams that have died, and disappointments that have accumulated. This is the burden of financial pressure, health crises, family dysfunction, and the daily grind that wears us down. Life is hard, and we get tired.

Jesus sees this weariness. He knows what it's like to be physically exhausted (John 4:6). He understands grief (John 11:35). He's familiar with disappointment in people (John 6:66-67). He gets it. And He says, "Come to Me."

But there's a second kind of weariness that Jesus particularly addresses in this passage, and it's what we might call *religious weariness*. This is the exhaustion that comes from trying to earn God's approval through our own efforts, from attempting to meet standards we can never reach, from carrying the weight of religious expectations that crush rather than liberate.

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Look at the context. Just before this invitation, Jesus has been pronouncing judgment on the cities that refused to repent despite seeing His miracles (Matthew 11:20-24). And just before that, He's been addressing the resistance of the Pharisees, those religious professionals who had turned the joy of knowing God into an impossible burden of rules and regulations.

Later, in Matthew 23:4, Jesus will explicitly condemn them: "They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger." The religious system had become a crushing weight. What was meant to be a path to God had become a barrier to God.

And into that system, Jesus speaks: "Come to Me, all who are weary and burdened."

Many of us know this religious weariness intimately. We've tried to pray enough, read enough, serve enough, give enough, witness enough, and be enough. We've measured ourselves against the visible spirituality of others and found ourselves wanting. We've dragged ourselves to church activities out of obligation rather than joy. We've performed our Christianity while our hearts grew colder and our souls grew emptier.

We know what it's like to be exhausted by religion.

And Jesus says, "Come to Me."

The Scandal of Accessibility

Here's what makes this invitation so revolutionary: Jesus doesn't say, "Come to the temple" or "Come to the law" or "Come to the religious system." He says, "Come to *Me*."

This is either the most arrogant statement ever made or it's the most grace-filled. And the answer depends entirely on who Jesus is.

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If He's just another rabbi, another religious teacher, another self-appointed spiritual guide, then this is arrogance of the highest order. Who does He think He is, positioning Himself as the solution to human weariness?

But if He is who He claims to be—the Son of God, the visible image of the invisible God, the One in whom all the fullness of deity dwells (Colossians 2:9)—then this isn't arrogance. It's the most natural thing in the world. Of course we come to Him. Where else would we go?

John records a moment when many disciples were turning away from Jesus because His teaching was too hard. Jesus looked at the Twelve and asked, "You do not want to go away also, do you?" And Peter answered with one of the most profound statements in Scripture: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life" (John 6:67-68, NASB).

To whom shall we go?

That's the question, isn't it? Where do we take our weariness? Where do we go with our burdens? We've tried everything else. We've tried self-help and therapy and medication and religion and achievement and relationships and substances and distractions. We've tried working harder and trying harder and doing more and being better.

And we're still tired.

So Jesus says, "Come to Me."

Not to a system. Not to a program. Not to a set of principles or a list of practices. To a Person. To Him.

This is the scandal of Christianity—it's not primarily about what we do but about who we know. It's not fundamentally a religion but a relationship. And Jesus stands at the center of it all, saying, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6, NASB).

Coming to Jesus is not one option among many. It's the only option that actually works.

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II. What We Bring to Jesus

So what do we bring when we come?

Jesus tells us: we bring our weariness and our burdens.

That's it. That's all we have. And it's all He asks for.

The Greek word for "weary" is *kopiaō*, which means to be exhausted from labor, to be worn out from hard work. It's the weariness of effort, the fatigue of striving. And the word for "burdened" is *phortizō*, which means to be loaded down, weighted with a heavy cargo.

Picture a first-century laborer at the end of a long day, muscles aching, back bent under the weight of whatever load he's been carrying. That's the image. Exhausted and burdened.

And that's who Jesus invites.

The Burden of Striving

For many of us, the heaviest burden we carry is the burden of religious striving—the exhausting attempt to make ourselves acceptable to God through our performance.

This burden comes in many forms:

- The burden of trying to pray enough, feeling guilty when we don't
- The burden of Bible reading as a checklist item rather than a life-giving encounter
- The burden of serving at church because we should, not because we're called
- The burden of witnessing to others while our own faith feels hollow
- The burden of maintaining an image of spiritual maturity we don't actually feel
- The burden of comparing ourselves to other Christians who seem to have it all together
- The burden of shame when we fail, again, at the very things we promised God we'd stop doing

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This is the yoke of law rather than grace, of earning rather than receiving, of performance rather than relationship.

And Jesus knows all about this burden because He lived among people who were crushed by it.

In Matthew 23:4, He describes the Pharisees' approach to spirituality: "They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger." The religious leaders had taken God's good law and turned it into an impossible weight. They had added rule upon rule, interpretation upon interpretation, until the joy of knowing God was buried under a mountain of regulations.

And the people staggered under that weight.

Jesus saw them—the crowds who came to hear Him teach—and "He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36, NASB). The Greek word translated "distressed" means "harassed" or "troubled." They were spiritually harassed by a system that demanded everything and gave nothing.

Sound familiar?

The Yoke of the Law vs. the Yoke of Christ

In rabbinic teaching, a "yoke" referred to a rabbi's particular interpretation and application of the Torah. Each rabbi had his own yoke—his own way of teaching what it meant to follow God. Students would "take on the yoke" of their chosen rabbi, committing to learn and live according to his teaching.

But there was also something called "the yoke of Torah" or "the yoke of the commandments"—the burden of keeping all 613 commandments in the Law, plus all the additional interpretations and applications that the scribes and Pharisees had added.

This yoke was heavy.

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In Acts 15, when the early church was debating whether Gentile converts needed to follow Jewish law, Peter stood up and said something remarkable: "Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are" (Acts 15:10-11, NASB).

A yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear.

That's the honest assessment. The law, with all its demands and all its additions, was a burden no one could successfully carry. Oh, people tried. The Pharisees tried harder than anyone. But even they, for all their external righteousness, couldn't bear the weight.

Paul describes his own experience with this unbearable yoke in Romans 7: "For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate... For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want... Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?" (Romans 7:15, 19, 24, NASB).

That's what it's like to try to live under the yoke of law. You end up wretched and desperate, crying out for deliverance.

And then Paul answers his own question: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:25, NASB). And in the very next verse, he declares, "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death" (Romans 8:1-2, NASB).

This is the exchange Jesus offers. We bring our unbearable burden—the weight of trying to earn what cannot be earned—and He offers us His yoke instead. A different way. A lighter load.

But here's what we need to understand: Jesus doesn't just remove our burden and leave us with nothing. He replaces it with something else. He says, "Take MY yoke upon you."

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We'll explore what that means in the next chapter. But for now, we need to understand what we're bringing to Jesus: our exhaustion, our failure, our inability to measure up, our weariness from trying.

The Exhaustion of Trying to Earn What's Already Given

There's a particular kind of insanity in the way many of us approach the Christian life. We begin by grace—we understand that we're saved by faith, not by works (Ephesians 2:8-9). We get that part. We couldn't earn our salvation, so God gave it to us as a gift.

But then, having started with grace, we somehow shift to works. We begin trying to maintain our relationship with God through our performance. We act as if God's love is conditional on our behavior, as if we need to keep earning what He's already given us.

Paul confronted this exact problem in the Galatian church. He asked them, "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (Galatians 3:3, NASB).

That's the question for us too. Having begun by grace, are we now trying to grow by works? Having been accepted by faith, are we now trying to stay accepted through performance?

If so, we're going to be exhausted. Because grace refreshes, but works exhaust. Grace fills us up; works drain us dry. Grace says, "It is finished" (John 19:30); works say, "It's never enough."

And this exhaustion, this burden of trying to earn what's already been given, is exactly what Jesus invites us to bring to Him.

III. Coming As We Are

Here's the revolutionary truth at the heart of Jesus's invitation: We don't clean ourselves up before we come. We come dirty. We come broken. We come as we are.

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Jesus doesn't say, "Get your life together and then come to Me." He says, "Come to Me, and I will give you rest."

The rest comes *after* the coming, not before. The transformation happens in His presence, not as a prerequisite for His presence.

John 6:37 (NASB) contains one of the most beautiful promises in all of Scripture: "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I certainly will not cast out."

I certainly will not cast out.

Not "I might accept you if you're good enough." Not "I'll consider your application if you meet the requirements." But "I certainly will not cast out."

The double negative in the Greek makes this even stronger: *ou mē ekbalō exō*. It's the strongest form of negation possible. Jesus is saying, "I will absolutely, definitely, under no circumstances cast out anyone who comes to Me."

Why? Because He's not in the casting-out business. He's in the gathering business. He's in the welcoming business. He's in the business of receiving the weary and burdened and giving them rest.

The Difference Between Coming to Be Fixed and Coming to Be Loved

This distinction is crucial.

We can come to Jesus because we want Him to fix us—to make us better, more successful, more happy, more blessed. We come with our list of what we want Him to change and how we want Him to improve our lives.

Or we can come to Jesus because we need to be loved—to be accepted as we are, to find worth not in what we do but in whose we are, to rest in the embrace of the Father before we do anything to earn it.

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The first approach is still about us. It's still a subtle form of works-righteousness. We come to Jesus so He can make us into the people we think we should be. It's self-improvement with Jesus as our life coach.

The second approach is about Him. It's about grace. We come because we're desperate for love, and He's the only One who loves us completely and unconditionally. We come not to become someone different but to discover who we truly are—beloved children of God.

Brennan Manning, who spent his life helping people understand this distinction, wrote: "God loves you as you are and not as you should be." That sentence could change your life if you really believed it.

Think about it: God loves you *as you are*. Not as you were (before you messed up). Not as you will be (after you get your act together). Not as you should be (if you were a better Christian). But as you are. Right now. In this moment. With all your failure and fear and doubt and struggle.

As. You. Are.

That's the invitation. Come as you are. Not as you wish you were. Not as you're pretending to be. Not as you think you should be. But as you actually are.

Because Jesus doesn't need you to be impressive. He needs you to be honest.

The Pharisees were impressive. They prayed long prayers and fasted twice a week and tithed meticulously and knew Scripture inside and out. And Jesus called them whitewashed tombs (Matthew 23:27).

But the tax collectors and sinners—the ones who couldn't pretend to have it together—they came to Jesus as they were. And Jesus ate with them (Matthew 9:10-11). He welcomed them. He gave them rest.

Rest as the Starting Point, Not the Goal

Here's something we often miss: Jesus offers rest as the starting point of discipleship, not the ending point.

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We tend to think, "If I can just work hard enough at being a Christian, eventually I'll find rest. If I can discipline myself enough, serve enough, grow enough, then finally I'll experience the peace and rest that Jesus promises."

But that's backwards.

Jesus says, "Come to Me... and I will give you rest. *Then* take My yoke upon you." The rest comes first. The apprenticeship begins from a place of rest, not works toward rest.

Why does this matter?

Because we can't learn while we're striving. We can't hear while we're performing. We can't receive while we're earning.

Learning requires receptivity. It requires openness. It requires the humility to admit we don't know and the freedom to make mistakes. And all of that is impossible when we're in striving mode, when we're trying to prove ourselves, when we're working to earn God's approval.

Rest is the prerequisite for learning from Jesus.

This is why Jesus begins with rest. He knows we cannot become His disciples—His apprentices, His learners—until we stop trying to earn what He wants to give us.

The rhythm of grace is always receive, then respond. Not perform, then maybe receive. Not prove yourself, then possibly be accepted. But receive the gift, rest in the love, then respond out of the overflow.

This is what Paul means when he says, "For the love of Christ controls us" (2 Corinthians 5:14, NASB). We don't love in order to be loved. We love because we have been loved. We don't serve to earn acceptance. We serve because we've been accepted. We don't obey to make God happy with us. We obey because God is already happy with us, and we want to live in alignment with that reality.

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It all starts with rest.

So Jesus says, "Come to Me... and I will give you rest."

Not "Come and work hard enough and maybe eventually you'll find rest."

Just "Come... and I will give you rest."

Present tense. Immediate. Right now. As soon as you come, I give you rest.

That's the invitation.

That's where everything begins.

With coming as we are.

And finding rest for our weary souls.

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CHAPTER 2: Take My Yoke—Choosing Apprenticeship

"Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me"

— Matthew 11:29a (NASB)

After the invitation to come and the promise of rest, Jesus does something that might seem surprising. He doesn't say, "Now just relax and let Me do everything." He says, "Take My yoke upon you."

Wait. I thought we were getting rest?

Yes. But Jesus's rest is not passivity. It's not spiritual retirement. It's not sitting on the sidelines watching Jesus do all the work while we sip lemonade in the shade.

Jesus offers us rest, and then He immediately invites us into partnership. He gives us a yoke—His yoke—and asks us to take it upon ourselves.

This is where the invitation becomes an apprenticeship. This is where grace meets effort. This is where the real learning begins.

But before we can understand what Jesus is asking us to do, we need to understand what a yoke actually is and what it means to take one upon ourselves.

I. Understanding the Yoke Metaphor

The Agricultural Context

If you've never seen a yoke, let me paint the picture for you.

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In first-century Palestine, a yoke was a wooden beam or frame placed across the shoulders of two oxen, binding them together so they could pull a plow or a cart in tandem. The yoke was carefully carved and shaped to fit the specific animals who would wear it. A good yoke distributed the weight evenly across the shoulders of both oxen, allowing them to work together efficiently without chafing or injury.

A poorly made yoke, on the other hand, was torture. It would rub raw places on the animal's neck and shoulders. It wouldn't distribute the weight properly, causing one ox to bear more of the burden than the other. It would make the work of pulling exponentially harder.

In that world, yoke-making was serious business. A skilled carpenter—which, incidentally, Jesus was (Mark 6:3)—would measure carefully, carve precisely, and fit the yoke to the specific animals who would wear it. The goal was to make a yoke that was as comfortable as possible while still accomplishing its purpose: allowing two animals to work together to pull a load.

This is the image Jesus uses. And it's not accidental that He, a carpenter who likely made actual yokes for actual oxen, would know exactly what He was talking about.

When Jesus says "My yoke is comfortable" (Matthew 11:30), He's not using a spiritual metaphor for something He knows nothing about. He's speaking as a craftsman describing His own work. He knows how to make a yoke that fits. He knows how to distribute the weight. He knows how to make the burden bearable.

But there's more to the yoke metaphor than just agriculture.

The Rabbinic Tradition

In rabbinic teaching, "taking on the yoke" had a specific meaning. It referred to submitting yourself to a particular rabbi's teaching and authority. Each rabbi had what was called his "yoke"—his particular interpretation and application of Torah, his way of understanding what it meant to follow God.

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When a student chose to follow a particular rabbi, he "took on" that rabbi's yoke. This meant more than just intellectual agreement with the rabbi's teaching. It meant becoming the rabbi's disciple—living with him, watching him, imitating him, learning not just what he taught but how he lived.

The most famous yoke in Judaism was "the yoke of Torah" or "the yoke of the commandments." This referred to the commitment to keep all 613 commandments in the Law of Moses, along with the oral traditions and interpretations that had been added over the centuries.

In the Mishnah (the written collection of oral traditions compiled around 200 AD but reflecting much earlier teaching), we read: "Rabbi Nehunya ben Ha-Kanah said: 'He that takes upon himself the yoke of the Law, from him shall be taken away the yoke of the kingdom and the yoke of worldly care; but he that throws off the yoke of the Law, upon him shall be laid the yoke of the kingdom and the yoke of worldly care'" (Pirke Avot 3:5).

The idea was that taking on the yoke of Torah would free you from other yokes—political oppression ("the yoke of the kingdom") and anxious striving ("the yoke of worldly care"). If you committed yourself fully to keeping God's law, God would take care of everything else.

It was a beautiful idea. But in practice, it didn't work that way.

The Unbearable Yoke

By Jesus's time, the yoke of Torah had become impossibly heavy. The original 613 commandments had been supplemented by countless additional rules and interpretations. The scribes and Pharisees had built what they called "a fence around the Torah"—additional regulations designed to keep people from even getting close to breaking the actual commandments.

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For example, the Torah says, "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8, NASB). Simple enough, right? But by Jesus's day, the religious leaders had defined 39 categories of work prohibited on the Sabbath, with multiple sub-categories under each. You couldn't carry anything heavier than a dried fig. You couldn't walk more than a certain distance (a "Sabbath day's journey," about 2,000 cubits or roughly 3/5 of a mile). You couldn't heal someone unless their life was in immediate danger. The list went on and on.

The result was that ordinary people lived under a crushing burden of religious obligation. They could never be sure if they were keeping all the rules. They were constantly anxious about whether they were clean or unclean, acceptable or unacceptable, righteous or sinful in God's eyes.

This is the context in which Peter, speaking to the early church council in Acts 15, asks a devastating question: "Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?" (Acts 15:10, NASB).

Neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear.

That's the honest assessment. The yoke of Torah, as it had come to be understood and applied, was unbearable. It was too heavy. It crushed people instead of freeing them.

And then Jesus shows up and says, "Take MY yoke upon you... For My yoke is comfortable, and My burden is light" (Matthew 11:29-30, NASB).

This is either arrogance or salvation. Either Jesus is just another rabbi adding His own impossible yoke to the pile, or He's offering something radically different.

And the people who heard Him had to decide which it was.

The Yoke of Jesus

Eugene Peterson, in his characteristically insightful way, wrote: "The yoke of Jesus is the will of Jesus. His yoke is His burden for the world."

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That's profound. Jesus isn't offering us a set of rules or a system of regulations. He's inviting us to share His burden—to join Him in what He's doing, to partner with Him in His mission, to align ourselves with His purposes.

The yoke of Jesus is not religious performance. It's not a checklist of spiritual disciplines we have to complete. It's not a set of behaviors we have to master.

The yoke of Jesus is Jesus Himself. His way. His priorities. His heart. His mission.

And here's the revolutionary part: His yoke actually is light. Not because it requires nothing of us, but because He carries it with us. Not because it's easy, but because it's right—aligned with how we were made, fitting the contours of our deepest identity, suited to the purpose for which we were created.

Later in this book, we'll explore in detail what Jesus actually teaches us—what His yoke consists of. But for now, we need to understand that taking on Jesus's yoke is fundamentally different from taking on the yoke of religious performance.

The difference is this: The yoke of religion says, "Do these things and then God will accept you." The yoke of Jesus says, "God has already accepted you; now learn to live in that reality."

The yoke of religion exhausts. The yoke of Jesus, while it requires real effort, ultimately brings rest.

And that makes all the difference.

II. The Act of Yoking Ourselves

Now here's where it gets interesting. Jesus doesn't force His yoke upon us. He doesn't grab us and strap it to our shoulders. He says, "*Take* My yoke upon you."

Take. That's an active verb. It requires a choice. A decision. An act of will.

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This is one of the great paradoxes of Christianity: We're saved by grace through faith, not by works (Ephesians 2:8-9). We can't earn our salvation. We can't make ourselves acceptable to God through our efforts. And yet... we're called to actively take up Jesus's yoke. We're called to effort. To discipline. To intentionality.

How do we make sense of this?

Active Submission vs. Passive Compliance

There's a world of difference between active submission and passive compliance.

Passive compliance is what happens when someone forces something on you and you have no choice but to go along with it. It's reluctant. Resentful. Done out of fear or coercion. There's no heart in it, no real commitment, no genuine relationship.

Active submission, on the other hand, is a free choice. It's voluntary. It's something you do because you want to, because you've decided this is the best way forward, because you trust the one you're submitting to.

Jesus invites us to active submission. He stands before us with His yoke in hand and says, "Will you take this? Will you choose My way? Will you voluntarily bind yourself to Me?"

And the invitation assumes we could say no.

This is crucial to understand. God doesn't override our will. He doesn't force us into discipleship. The yoke of Jesus is chosen, not imposed.

Paul captures this perfectly in Romans 12:1-2 (NASB): "Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."

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Notice that language: "*I urge you... to present your bodies.*" Not "God forces you." Not "You have no choice." But "*I urge you... to present.*"

It's an appeal. An invitation. A call to voluntary action.

And the action is significant: we are to *present* our bodies as living sacrifices. The Greek word translated "present" is *paristēmi*, which means to place beside, to offer, to put at someone's disposal. It's what you do when you voluntarily give something to someone else.

We're being asked to take our very selves—our bodies, our lives, our wills, our futures—and place them in God's hands. To say, "I'm Yours. Do with me what You will. I choose Your yoke."

This is active. Intentional. Deliberate.

And it's the exact opposite of the passive, reluctant, obligation-driven religion that so many of us have experienced.

The Paradox: His Yoke Is Chosen, Not Forced

Here's the beautiful paradox: The very fact that we choose Jesus's yoke is what makes it light.

When something is forced on us, it feels heavy no matter what it is. Even something that might objectively be good becomes a burden when we have no choice in the matter. But when we freely choose something, when we voluntarily take it up because we want it, it feels entirely different.

Think about it. If someone forced you to spend time with them, it would feel like an obligation, a burden, maybe even an imprisonment. But if you choose to spend time with someone you love, it's a joy. Same activity, completely different experience.

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Or consider exercise. If someone forced you to run five miles every day, you'd resent it. You'd hate it. It would feel like torture. But if you choose to run because you love how it makes you feel, because you've decided it's important for your health, because you find it centering and life-giving... then it's not a burden. It's something you look forward to.

The difference is choice.

This is why 1 John 5:3 (NASB) can say something that might otherwise seem impossible: "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome."

Not burdensome.

How can that be? How can God's commands not be burdensome when they call us to die to ourselves, to take up our cross, to love our enemies, to give sacrificially, to live in a way that's completely countercultural?

Because we choose them. Because we've taken on His yoke voluntarily. Because we're not trying to earn something; we're responding to something we've already received.

When we grasp that God loves us completely and unconditionally, that we're already accepted, that we're already His beloved children, then His commands stop feeling like demands and start feeling like invitations. They're not weights we have to carry to earn His approval. They're the path to the abundant life He wants to give us.

It's still effort. It's still work. But it's work we choose. And that changes everything.

The Daily Choice

But here's something we need to be honest about: Taking up Jesus's yoke is not a one-time decision.

Yes, there's a moment when we first say yes to Jesus. When we first choose to follow Him. When we first take His yoke upon ourselves.

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But that moment is just the beginning.

Every single day, we wake up and face the same choice: Will I continue to wear His yoke today? Will I keep myself bound to Him? Or will I try to throw off the yoke and go my own way?

Paul understood this. In 1 Corinthians 15:31 (NASB), he writes, "I die daily." Every day, he had to choose crucifixion. Every day, he had to choose surrender. Every day, he had to voluntarily take up the yoke again.

And so do we.

This is why spiritual disciplines matter. This is why we need practices that keep us connected to Jesus. Not because the practices save us, but because they're the means by which we daily, deliberately, choose His yoke.

When I spend time in Scripture in the morning, I'm choosing His yoke. When I pause to pray throughout the day, I'm choosing His yoke. When I gather with other believers, I'm choosing His yoke. When I serve someone in need, I'm choosing His yoke.

Every act of obedience is an act of re-yoking ourselves to Jesus.

And every time we choose His yoke, we find—often to our surprise—that it really is lighter than we thought. That His burden really is bearable. That His way really is better.

III. Partnership, Not Solo Performance

Now here's the part that changes everything: When you take on Jesus's yoke, you're not pulling alone.

Remember the image of the yoke—the wooden beam across the shoulders of *two* oxen. Not one. Two.

A yoke is designed for partnership. For shared labor. For pulling together.

LEARN FROM ME

And that's exactly what Jesus is offering. He's not standing on the sidelines with a whip, yelling at us to pull harder. He's in the yoke with us.

The Double Yoke: We Don't Pull Alone

In the agricultural practice of Jesus's day, there was a standard approach to training a young ox. You would yoke the inexperienced ox together with an older, stronger, more experienced ox. The young ox would learn by walking alongside the veteran. The older ox would bear the brunt of the weight while the younger one learned the rhythm, learned how to pull, learned how to work.

This is the image Jesus is evoking. We're the young ox. He's the experienced one.

We're not expected to bear the full weight. We're not out there alone, straining and struggling and failing. We're yoked to Jesus. He's right there with us. And He's strong enough to carry the weight we can't carry.

This is what Jesus promises at the end of the Great Commission: "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20, NASB).

I am with you always.

Not "I'll check in on you occasionally." Not "I'll be watching from a distance." But "I am WITH you. Always. Every moment. Every step. Every struggle."

He doesn't send us out alone and then judge us on how well we do. He goes with us. He pulls with us. He carries what we cannot carry.

This is why His yoke is comfortable and His burden is light. Not because the work itself is easy, but because we're not doing it alone.

LEARN FROM ME

Learning by Doing, Not Just Knowing

Here's something crucial about the apprenticeship model: You don't learn to be a carpenter by attending lectures on carpentry. You learn by working alongside a master carpenter, watching what he does, trying it yourself, making mistakes, getting correction, trying again.

You learn by doing.

This is what Jesus means when He says, "Take My yoke upon you *and learn from Me.*" The yoking and the learning go together. We learn from Jesus by being yoked to Jesus. By working alongside Him. By doing what He does while He's right there with us.

Jesus used this model with His original disciples. He didn't establish a seminary where they could study theology for three years and then go out and apply what they'd learned. He said, "Follow Me," and they walked with Him. They watched Him heal the sick, so they learned to heal the sick. They heard Him teach, so they learned to teach. They saw Him pray, so they learned to pray. They observed Him interact with sinners, so they learned compassion. They witnessed Him confront religious hypocrisy, so they learned prophetic boldness.

And then He sent them out to do the same things—while He was still with them, available for questions, ready to debrief, present to encourage and correct.

That's apprenticeship. That's learning by doing.

And that's what Jesus still offers us today. We don't just read about Jesus and then try to copy what we've read. We yoke ourselves to Jesus and let Him teach us as we work alongside Him.

Dallas Willard, one of the most important voices on spiritual formation in our generation, wrote something that has become famous: "Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning."

Let me say that again because it's so important: *Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning.*

LEARN FROM ME

We don't work to earn God's love. We don't strain to make ourselves acceptable. We don't perform to prove our worth. That would be earning, and grace is definitely opposed to that.

But grace is not opposed to effort. Grace is not about passivity. Grace doesn't mean we just sit back and let God do everything while we do nothing.

Grace means we work FROM acceptance, not FOR acceptance. We effort FROM love, not FOR love. We strive FROM security, not FOR security.

And we do all of it yoked to Jesus, who is working with us, in us, and through us.

This is what Paul means when he writes, "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6, NASB). God is working. He's the One doing the perfecting. But we're involved. We're participating. We're yoked to Him in the process.

Later in Philippians, Paul puts both truths together in one sentence: "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12-13, NASB).

Work it out... because God is working it in. Our effort and God's grace, working together. Partnership. The double yoke.

IV. What We're Yoked To

So what exactly are we pulling? What's the weight we're bearing? What's the work we're partnered with Jesus to accomplish?

This is where the yoke metaphor leads us to purpose. Because a yoke isn't just about connection—it's about direction. When you're yoked to someone, you go where they go. You pull what they pull. You work toward what they're working toward.

LEARN FROM ME

So when we take on Jesus's yoke, we're taking on His mission. His priorities. His purpose.

And what is that?

The Mission of God's Glory

Jesus describes His own mission in John 17:4 (NASB): "I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do."

Everything Jesus did was for the Father's glory. Every word He spoke, every miracle He performed, every person He touched, every confrontation He engaged in—all of it was aimed at one goal: revealing and magnifying the glory of God.

And now He invites us into that same mission.

We are, according to Isaiah 43:7, created for God's glory. That's our purpose. That's what we're made for. And when we take on Jesus's yoke, we're finally aligning ourselves with the reason we exist.

This is huge. This is the answer to the question that haunts modern humanity: "What am I here for? What's my purpose? What's the meaning of my life?"

The answer is: God's glory. You were created to reflect, reveal, and rejoice in the glory of God.

That's not a burden. That's liberation. Because when you find your purpose—your actual, true, God-designed purpose—everything else falls into place. All the restless striving for significance, all the desperate attempts to make your life matter, all the anxiety about whether you're doing enough or being enough... it all fades when you realize you were made for this one thing: to glorify God.

And you do that not by being perfect, but by being yoked to Jesus. By learning from Him. By letting Him show you what a glory-filled life actually looks like.

LEARN FROM ME

We'll spend much of this book exploring what that means practically. But for now, understand this: When you take Jesus's yoke, you're saying yes to the life you were created for. You're finally pulling in the direction you were designed to pull.

And that's why, paradoxically, it brings rest. Because nothing is more exhausting than working against your design. And nothing is more satisfying than working in alignment with it.

The Work of the Kingdom

Jesus begins His ministry with a simple announcement: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15, NASB).

The Kingdom of God—God's reign, God's rule, God's way of ordering reality—that's what Jesus came to inaugurate. And that's what we're yoked to when we take His yoke.

Later, Jesus teaches us to pray, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10, NASB). That's not just a nice prayer. That's a mission statement. We're asking for God's kingdom to break into this broken world. We're praying for God's will to be done here and now, not just in some future heaven.

And when we pray that prayer, we're volunteering for the answer. We're saying, "God, use me to bring Your kingdom to earth. Let Your rule be established in my life, in my family, in my workplace, in my community. Make me an agent of Your kingdom."

That's what we're yoked to. Kingdom work. Advancing God's reign. Living under God's rule and helping others find their way into that life-giving reality.

Jesus makes this explicit in Matthew 6:33 (NASB): "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

Seek first His kingdom.

LEARN FROM ME

That's the priority. That's the direction we're pulling. That's what our lives are oriented around when we take Jesus's yoke.

Not our kingdom—our reputation, our success, our comfort, our plans. But His kingdom. His priorities. His agenda.

And here's the promise: When we do that, when we seek first His kingdom, then all the other things we worry about—food, clothing, provision, security—God takes care of those. Because He's a good Father. Because He's yoked to us. Because we're not bearing this alone.

The Ministry of Reconciliation

One more thing we're yoked to, and this one is both beautiful and costly: the ministry of reconciliation.

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:18-19 (NASB): "Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation."

Let that sink in. God reconciled us—brought us back from our rebellion, restored our broken relationship with Him, made peace between us and Him through Christ. And then He gave us the ministry of doing the same thing for others.

We're yoked to reconciliation work.

That means we're in the business of helping people find their way back to God. We're in the business of announcing the good news that peace with God is available through Jesus. We're in the business of being ambassadors—representatives of the Kingdom, carrying the message of the King.

LEARN FROM ME

But it also means more than that. We're in the business of reconciling people to each other. Of building bridges instead of walls. Of pursuing peace instead of division. Of practicing forgiveness instead of holding grudges. Of choosing love instead of judgment.

This is hard work. Costly work. It requires us to lay down our rights, to absorb offense, to extend grace we don't feel, to love people who haven't earned it.

But it's what we're yoked to when we take Jesus's yoke. Because that's what Jesus did. He reconciled us to God at the cost of His own life. And now He invites us to partner with Him in that same work.

The Weight That Becomes Light

Here's the paradox we keep encountering: All of this sounds heavy. Living for God's glory. Seeking first the Kingdom. Engaging in the ministry of reconciliation. These aren't small assignments. These aren't easy tasks.

And yet Jesus says, "My yoke is comfortable, and My burden is light."

How?

Because of three things:

First, **we're not pulling alone**. Jesus is yoked with us. The primary weight is on Him. We're the young ox learning from the experienced ox. He bears what we cannot bear.

Second, **we're finally pulling in the right direction**. We're aligned with our design, our purpose, the reason we were created. And there's a lightness that comes from that alignment. It's the difference between swimming upstream and swimming downstream. Both require effort, but one works with the current and one works against it.

LEARN FROM ME

Third, **we're working from rest, not for rest.** We already have God's love. We already have His acceptance. We're already His beloved children. So this work isn't about earning anything. It's about expressing what's already true. It's about living in alignment with the reality of who we are and whose we are.

That makes all the difference.

A yoke worn to earn love is crushing. A yoke worn because of love is bearable.

A yoke imposed by force is slavery. A yoke chosen freely is partnership.

A yoke pulling toward goals we don't believe in is exhausting. A yoke pulling toward our true purpose is energizing.

Jesus knows this. That's why He can confidently say, "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me... For My yoke is comfortable, and My burden is light."

He's not lying. He's not minimizing the cost. He's not pretending that discipleship is easy.

He's telling the truth: When you're yoked to the right person, pulling in the right direction, for the right reasons, the yoke really does fit. The burden really is bearable.

And along the way, you find something you never expected.

You find that you were made for this.

You find that this is where you belong.

You find that the yoke of Jesus is not a burden you bear.

It's the way you finally come alive.

LEARN FROM ME

CHAPTER 3: Learn from Me—The Nature of Discipleship

"Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me"

— Matthew 11:29b (NASB)

We've talked about coming to Jesus and taking His yoke. Now we come to the heart of the invitation: "Learn from Me."

Not "Learn about Me." Not "Study what I teach." But "Learn *from* Me."

There's a world of difference.

I can learn about carpentry by reading books on carpentry, watching YouTube videos, studying the theory. But I only truly learn carpentry by working alongside a master carpenter—watching his hands, mimicking his movements, asking questions when I don't understand, trying it myself under his guidance, getting corrected when I do it wrong, trying again until I get it right.

That's apprenticeship. That's what it means to learn *from* someone rather than just learning *about* them.

And that's what Jesus is inviting us into. Not a classroom. Not a lecture hall. Not a theological seminary where we master information about God.

But a workshop. A lived experience. A relationship where we watch, imitate, practice, fail, try again, and slowly—sometimes painfully slowly—become like the One we're learning from.

This is discipleship. And it's unlike any other educational model we've experienced.

I. Jesus as Rabbi

The Discipleship Model in First-Century Judaism

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To understand what Jesus is offering when He says "Learn from Me," we need to understand the rabbinic system of His day.

In first-century Judaism, the path to becoming a rabbi followed a predictable pattern. As a young boy, you would begin by memorizing Torah—all five books of Moses. If you showed promise, you'd continue your education, memorizing more of the Hebrew Scriptures and studying the interpretations of the great rabbis who came before.

Somewhere around age twelve or thirteen, most boys would leave formal religious education and learn their father's trade. They'd become fishermen or carpenters or farmers or merchants. Their formal study of Scripture was over. They were good Jews, faithful to God, but they weren't going to be rabbis.

But the very best students—the brightest, most promising, most dedicated—these rare few would continue. They would seek out a rabbi and ask to become his disciple. They would literally ask, "Can I follow you?"

And the rabbi would evaluate them. Do they have what it takes? Can they learn not just the teaching but the life? Are they capable of becoming like me?

Most would be turned away. "Go home," the rabbi would say. "Learn your father's trade. You don't have what it takes to follow me."

But a very few—the best of the best—would be accepted. And when they were, their lives would change completely. They would leave everything—family, home, career prospects—and follow their rabbi. Literally. Everywhere he went, they went. Everything he did, they watched. They didn't just learn what he taught; they learned how he taught. They didn't just study his words; they studied his life.

The goal was to become like him. To so thoroughly absorb his teaching, his methods, his way of interpreting Scripture, his approach to living out God's law, that eventually you could think like him, teach like him, live like him.

LEARN FROM ME

The highest compliment that could be paid to a disciple was this: "You are covered in the dust of your rabbi." Meaning you followed so closely behind him on the dusty roads of Palestine that his dust covered you. You were that close. That committed. That shaped by his presence.

This was the educational system Jesus stepped into. This was the model everyone understood.

And then Jesus did something revolutionary.

"Follow Me"

The normal pattern was this: The student sought out the rabbi and asked to follow. The rabbi decided whether the student was worthy.

Jesus flipped it.

He didn't wait for the best students to come find Him. He went looking for ordinary people—fishermen, tax collectors, zealots—and He said to them, "Follow Me."

Not "Do you think you're good enough to follow Me?" Not "Let Me evaluate whether you're qualified." But simply, "Follow Me."

Mark 1:17 (NASB) records Jesus's call to Simon and Andrew: "And Jesus said to them, 'Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men.'"

Notice that promise: "*I will make you become.*"

Jesus isn't looking for people who are already qualified. He's looking for people who are willing to follow, and He promises that He'll do the transforming. He'll make them into something they're not yet. He'll turn fishermen into fishers of men. He'll turn ordinary, uneducated, rough-around-the-edges Galileans into apostles who will turn the world upside down.

LEARN FROM ME

This was scandalous. These men weren't the best of the best. They were the ones who had been passed over. They were learning their fathers' trades because no rabbi had chosen them.

And yet Jesus chose them.

He looked at Peter—impulsive, unstable, prone to putting his foot in his mouth—and said, "Follow Me."

He looked at Matthew—a tax collector, a collaborator with Rome, a traitor to his own people—and said, "Follow Me."

He looked at Simon the Zealot—a political radical, probably a terrorist by Roman standards—and said, "Follow Me."

These weren't the polished religious professionals. These were ragamuffins. Misfits. People with obvious flaws and questionable pasts.

And Jesus said, "You're exactly who I'm looking for. Follow Me, and I'll make you into something you can't make yourselves."

If that doesn't give you hope, I don't know what will.

The Lived Curriculum

Once the disciples said yes to Jesus's invitation, their education began. But it wasn't the kind of education they expected.

Jesus didn't set up a classroom. He didn't assign readings. He didn't give lectures (well, He did teach, but not in the formal rabbinic style). Instead, He simply lived His life, and He let them watch.

LEARN FROM ME

They watched Him pray. They saw Him slip away in the early morning hours to spend time alone with the Father (Mark 1:35). They heard Him pour out His heart in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46). They learned to pray not from a manual but from watching someone who actually knew how to commune with God.

They watched Him interact with people. They saw Him touch lepers (Matthew 8:3). They witnessed Him defend the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). They observed Him eat with tax collectors and sinners (Matthew 9:10-11). They noted how He responded to children (Mark 10:13-16). They learned compassion not from being told "be compassionate," but from watching compassion in action.

They watched Him handle conflict. They saw Him confront the Pharisees' hypocrisy (Matthew 23). They witnessed Him drive the money changers out of the temple (John 2:13-17). They observed Him remain silent before His accusers (Matthew 27:12-14). They learned when to speak and when to be quiet, when to fight and when to surrender, by watching someone who navigated those decisions perfectly.

They watched Him serve. They saw Him wash their feet (John 13:1-17). They witnessed Him heal the sick without fanfare or self-promotion. They observed Him use His power for others, never for Himself. They learned that greatness means service by watching the greatest become the servant of all.

And then—and this is crucial—He sent them out to do the same things.

In Luke 9:1-6, Jesus gives the Twelve authority and sends them out to preach and heal. In Luke 10:1-12, He sends out seventy-two others with the same mission. They weren't just observers. They were participants. They were apprentices who learned by doing, under the watchful eye of their Master.

They came back and reported what happened—both their successes and their failures. And Jesus debriefed with them. He encouraged them. He corrected them. He explained what they didn't understand. He answered their questions.

This is apprenticeship. This is what it means to learn *from* someone.

LEARN FROM ME

Eugene Peterson, who spent decades helping people understand what it means to follow Jesus, wrote: "A disciple is a learner, but not in the academic setting of a classroom, rather at the worksite of a craftsman."

At the worksite of a craftsman.

That's the image. We're not students sitting in desks, taking notes on Jesus's teaching. We're apprentices standing next to Him at the workbench, watching Him work, trying it ourselves, getting correction, learning the craft through hands-on experience.

This is how Jesus makes disciples. Not through information transfer but through life-on-life relationship. Not through academic study but through practical apprenticeship.

And this is what He's still offering us today. Not a theology degree about Jesus, but a lived experience with Jesus.

II. What Makes Jesus Unique as Teacher

Now, you might be thinking, "Okay, I get the apprenticeship model. But lots of teachers use that approach. What makes Jesus different from any other rabbi or master craftsman?"

Everything. Jesus is unique in ways that fundamentally change what it means to be His disciple.

He Is What He Teaches

Here's the first and most important difference: Jesus doesn't just teach truth. He *is* the truth.

In John 14:6 (NASB), Jesus makes this stunning claim: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."

Not "I teach the truth." Not "I know the truth." But "I *am* the truth."

LEARN FROM ME

Every other teacher in history has said, "Follow my teaching." Jesus says, "Follow Me."

Every other religious leader has said, "This is the way to God." Jesus says, "I am the way to God."

Every other rabbi pointed to Torah and said, "This is where you'll find life." Jesus says, "I am the life."

The difference is absolute. When we learn from other teachers, we're learning ideas, principles, practices.

When we learn from Jesus, we're learning from the living embodiment of everything He teaches.

You want to know what love looks like? Look at Jesus. You want to know what humility looks like? Look at Jesus. You want to know what faith looks like? Look at Jesus. You want to know what obedience looks like? Look at Jesus.

He doesn't just tell us what to do. He shows us. He models it. He lives it perfectly.

And here's why that matters: We can read all the books on love, hear all the sermons on humility, study all the theology of faith—and still not know how to actually live those things. But when we see them embodied in a Person, when we watch someone live them out in real situations, we finally understand.

This is why the incarnation matters so much. God didn't just send us a message. He sent us Himself, wrapped in human flesh, so we could see what God is like and what human life is supposed to look like when it's lived in perfect alignment with God.

Hebrews 1:1-3 (NASB) puts it this way: "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power."

The exact representation of His nature.

LEARN FROM ME

When you look at Jesus, you're looking at God. When you listen to Jesus, you're hearing God. When you watch Jesus interact with people, you're seeing how God interacts with people.

Jesus is the ultimate revelation. And learning from Him is learning from the One who perfectly embodies everything He teaches.

His Authority

The second thing that makes Jesus unique is His authority.

Matthew 7:28-29 (NASB) records the people's response to Jesus's teaching: "When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes."

Not as their scribes.

The scribes—the religious experts of Jesus's day—taught by citing other authorities. They would say, "Rabbi Hillel said this," or "Rabbi Shammai taught that," or "According to the tradition of the elders..." They built their teaching on the accumulated wisdom of those who came before them.

Jesus didn't do that. He taught on His own authority.

He would say, "You have heard that it was said... but I say to you..." (Matthew 5:21-22, NASB). He took the authoritative teaching of Scripture and then put His own teaching on the same level—or even above it. He interpreted Scripture with absolute authority, as if He had the right to tell people what God really meant.

Because He did. Because He is God.

This is why people were amazed. They'd never heard anyone teach like this. With this kind of confidence. This kind of authority. This kind of finality.

LEARN FROM ME

When Jesus says something, that settles it. There's no higher court of appeal. No one to check with. No need to verify with other sources.

He is the final authority.

And that changes everything about discipleship. Because when we're learning from Jesus, we're not just learning someone's opinion about how to live. We're learning from the One who designed life, who knows how it's supposed to work, who has the authority to tell us how to live because He's the Author of life.

His Method: Incarnational and Relational

The third thing that makes Jesus unique is His method. It's incarnational—God with us, in the flesh—and it's relational—based on intimate, personal relationship rather than distance.

Think about how God could have taught us. He could have remained in heaven and shouted instructions down to us. He could have sent angels with messages. He could have written His law in the sky where everyone could read it.

Instead, He became one of us. He entered our world. He lived our life. He experienced what we experience. Hebrews 4:15 (NASB) says, "For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin."

Tempted in all things as we are.

Jesus knows what it's like to be hungry, tired, rejected, misunderstood, betrayed, abandoned. He knows what it's like to face temptation. He knows what it's like to suffer. He knows what it's like to die.

He didn't stay distant and aloof. He got close. He got involved. He entered into our mess.

LEARN FROM ME

And His teaching flows from that incarnational reality. He doesn't teach us as if He's above us, looking down with disdain on our struggles. He teaches us as One who has walked where we walk, faced what we face, and overcome.

Moreover, His teaching is profoundly relational. He doesn't just disseminate information. He builds relationships. He invests in people. He knows them by name. He eats with them. He weeps with them. He rejoices with them.

In John 15:15 (NASB), Jesus says to His disciples, "No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you."

I have called you friends.

Not servants. Not students. Not subordinates. But friends.

This is revolutionary. Rabbis didn't call their disciples friends. Masters didn't call their apprentices friends. There was a clear hierarchy, a distance, a formality.

But Jesus says, "You're my friends. I'm letting you in on what the Father is doing. I'm not keeping you at arm's length. I'm drawing you close."

Learning from Jesus is not just about acquiring knowledge. It's about entering into relationship with the living God who knows us, loves us, and invites us to know and love Him in return.

III. The Content of Christ's Curriculum

So what does Jesus actually teach us? What's the content of this apprenticeship?

If you're expecting a curriculum like "Introduction to Theology, followed by Intermediate Prayer Techniques, followed by Advanced Evangelism Strategies," you're going to be disappointed.

LEARN FROM ME

Jesus doesn't teach in modules. He doesn't hand out syllabi. He doesn't break down spiritual growth into measurable competencies.

Instead, He offers us something far more profound and far more challenging: He offers us His life.

Not Rules to Follow, But a Life to Share

Here's what many of us miss: Jesus didn't come primarily to give us a new set of rules to follow. He came to give us a new life to live.

Religion gives us rules. Jesus gives us relationship.

Religion says, "Do these things and you'll be acceptable to God." Jesus says, "You're already acceptable to God; now learn to live in that reality."

Religion says, "Follow these steps and you'll arrive at the destination." Jesus says, "I am the destination. Abide in Me."

Paul captures this in 2 Peter 1:3-4 (NASB): "His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust."

Partakers of the divine nature.

That's the goal. Not just behavior modification. Not just moral improvement. But actual participation in the life of God. Sharing in His nature. Being transformed from the inside out.

This is what Richard Foster, one of the great voices on spiritual formation, meant when he wrote: "The goal of Christian formation is not behavior modification but the transformation of the person."

LEARN FROM ME

Transformation of the person.

Jesus isn't trying to train us to act Christian. He's trying to transform us into people who actually are Christian—whose nature has been changed, whose desires have been reordered, whose identity has been rebuilt from the foundation up.

And that can't happen through rule-following. It can only happen through relationship. Through abiding. Through living in close connection with Jesus so that His life flows into ours.

The Curriculum of Relationship

So what does Jesus teach us in this apprenticeship?

He teaches us who God really is. Not the distant, angry deity we've imagined, but the loving Father who runs to embrace His returning prodigals (Luke 15:11-32). Not the cosmic judge waiting to condemn us, but the God who "did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him" (John 3:17, NASB).

He teaches us who we really are. Not the worthless failures that shame tells us we are, but beloved children of God (John 1:12). Not slaves trying to earn their keep, but sons and daughters who already have their inheritance (Galatians 4:7). Not our sin, but our new identity in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17).

He teaches us how to live. Not through a list of dos and don'ts, but through watching Him live. Through seeing love in action. Through witnessing faith under pressure. Through observing obedience even when it costs everything.

He teaches us how to pray. Not by giving us a formula, but by taking us into the Father's presence with Him (John 17). Not by explaining the mechanics, but by showing us what communion with God looks like.

He teaches us how to love. Not by defining love abstractly, but by loving us concretely, specifically, costly (John 13:34-35). By laying down His life so we can see what real love looks like (John 15:13).

LEARN FROM ME

He teaches us how to serve. Not by writing a treatise on servant leadership, but by wrapping a towel around His waist and washing dirty feet (John 13:1-17).

He teaches us how to suffer. Not by minimizing pain, but by walking through it Himself and showing us that suffering can be redemptive, purposeful, and ultimately overcome (1 Peter 2:21-24).

He teaches us how to die. Not by offering platitudes about death, but by dying Himself—and then conquering death so we can face it without fear (Hebrews 2:14-15).

And He teaches us how to live forever. Not by describing heaven in abstract terms, but by rising from the dead and promising, "Because I live, you will live also" (John 14:19, NASB).

This is the curriculum. Not information about God, but intimate knowledge of God. Not principles for living, but participation in the life of God Himself.

It's infinitely more challenging than following rules. But it's also infinitely more life-giving.

IV. The Prerequisites for Learning

Now, if we're going to learn from Jesus—if we're going to enter into this transformative apprenticeship—there are some things required of us. Not prerequisites in the sense of qualifications we have to meet before Jesus will accept us. But prerequisites in the sense of postures we need to adopt if learning is actually going to happen.

You can sit in a classroom with the world's greatest teacher and learn nothing if you're not in the right posture. And you can sit at Jesus's feet and learn nothing if you're not in the right posture.

So what does it take to learn from Jesus?

LEARN FROM ME

Humility

First and most fundamentally: humility.

In Matthew 18:3-4 (NASB), Jesus says, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Become like children.

What does that mean? Children are teachable. They don't think they already know everything. They ask questions without shame. They're willing to admit when they don't understand. They trust their teacher.

Pride is the great barrier to learning. When we think we already know, we stop asking. When we're committed to being right, we stop listening. When we're afraid to look foolish, we stop taking risks and trying new things.

But humility opens us to learning. Humility says, "I don't know, but I want to learn." Humility says, "I might be wrong about this." Humility says, "Teach me."

This is why the Pharisees couldn't learn from Jesus. They were too proud. They thought they had God figured out. They thought they knew how righteousness worked. They were the teachers, the experts, the ones with all the answers.

And they completely missed God standing right in front of them.

But the tax collectors and sinners—the ones who knew they were broken, who had no illusions about their own righteousness, who were desperate for help—they could learn from Jesus. Because they were humble enough to admit their need.

LEARN FROM ME

If you want to learn from Jesus, you have to be willing to say, "I don't have this figured out. I need help. I need a Teacher. I need You."

That's humility. And without it, learning is impossible.

Hunger

Second: hunger.

In Matthew 5:6 (NASB), Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."

Notice: those who *hunger and thirst*. Not those who have a mild preference for righteousness. Not those who think it would be nice to be a bit more spiritual. But those who hunger and thirst—who are desperate, who can't live without it, who ache for it.

You can only learn from Jesus if you actually want what He's offering. If you're content with your life as it is, if you're satisfied with religion as you know it, if you think you're doing fine on your own, why would you commit to an apprenticeship?

But if you're hungry—if you know there's more, if you're dissatisfied with shallow spirituality, if you're desperate for reality—then you'll come to Jesus and learn from Him.

This is why Jesus says, "All who are weary and burdened" can come. Because weariness creates hunger. Exhaustion creates desperation. And desperation creates the willingness to learn.

Some of us need to get hungry again. We've settled for fast food spirituality when Jesus is offering a feast. We've become numb to our spiritual emptiness. We've learned to function on fumes.

But Jesus is looking for people who hunger and thirst. People who are desperate enough to really learn. People who want transformation more than they want comfort.

LEARN FROM ME

Are you hungry?

Obedience

Third: obedience.

In John 7:17 (NASB), Jesus says, "If anyone is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching, whether it is of God or whether I speak from Myself."

If anyone is willing to do His will, he will know.

Obedience isn't just the result of learning. It's the prerequisite for learning. We learn by doing. We understand by obeying.

This is completely counter to our normal approach. We want to understand first, then obey. We want Jesus to explain everything, answer all our questions, resolve all our doubts—and then we'll consider obeying.

But Jesus says it works the other way. You obey first. You step out in faith. You do what He says even when you don't fully understand why. And in the doing, understanding comes.

Think about the disciples. They didn't understand everything Jesus taught them. They got confused. They misunderstood. They asked questions. But they kept following. They kept obeying. And gradually, piece by piece, they learned.

If you wait until you understand everything before you obey, you'll never learn anything. But if you're willing to obey what you do understand, Jesus will teach you more.

This is why James says, "Prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves" (James 1:22, NASB). Doing the word is how we learn the word. Obeying Jesus is how we learn from Jesus.

LEARN FROM ME

Are you willing to obey?

Time

Fourth and finally: time.

In Mark 3:14 (NASB), we read that Jesus appointed the twelve apostles "so that they would be with Him and that He could send them out to preach."

So that they would be with Him.

That's the first purpose. Before the mission. Before the ministry. Before the doing. Just being with Him.

Learning from Jesus takes time. Lots of time. Unhurried time. Time that feels unproductive. Time that doesn't seem to be accomplishing anything measurable.

We live in a culture that values efficiency, productivity, and results. We want quick fixes. Fast solutions. Rapid growth. We want to microwave our discipleship.

But you can't microwave a relationship. You can't cram for apprenticeship. You can't speed-read transformation.

It takes time to watch someone. It takes time to imitate them. It takes time to practice what they've shown you. It takes time to try, fail, get correction, and try again. It takes time to absorb not just their words but their way of being.

The disciples spent three years with Jesus. Day and night. Walking dusty roads together. Eating meals together. Facing challenges together. Celebrating together. Grieving together. Just being together.

That's how they learned.

LEARN FROM ME

And that's how we learn too. We have to spend time with Jesus. Not rushed time. Not distracted time. Not multi-tasking time. But focused, present, unhurried time.

Time in Scripture, where we hear His voice. Time in prayer, where we talk with Him and listen. Time in worship, where we fix our attention on Him. Time in community with other disciples, where we practice what He's teaching us. Time in service, where we join Him in His mission. Time in solitude, where we simply rest in His presence.

Are you willing to give Jesus your time?

The Path Forward

These four things—humility, hunger, obedience, and time—these are what it takes to learn from Jesus.

Not perfection. Not having it all together. Not being spiritually impressive. Not being qualified.

Just humility to admit you need Him. Hunger to pursue Him. Obedience to follow Him. And time to be with Him.

That's it.

And if you bring those things to Jesus, He will teach you. He will transform you. He will make you into something you could never make yourself.

Because that's His promise: "Follow Me, and I will make you become..."

He doesn't require that you already be. He just requires that you're willing to learn.

And that's the beauty of discipleship with Jesus. It's not about what you bring to the table—except your need, your hunger, your willingness.

LEARN FROM ME

It's about what He brings. And what He brings is everything you need.

A perfect Teacher who is what He teaches.

An authoritative Master who knows how life is meant to be lived.

An incarnational Rabbi who entered your world and understands your struggle.

A relational Savior who calls you friend and invites you into the very life of God.

That's who you're learning from.

That's what makes all the difference.

So come. Take His yoke. And learn from Him.

He's gentle and humble in heart.

He will give you rest for your souls.

And He will teach you what it means to live—really live—for the glory of God.

CHAPTER 4: Gentle and Humble in Heart—The Character of Our Rabbi

"For I am gentle and humble in heart"

— Matthew 11:29c (NASB)

Here's something you need to understand: The character of your teacher matters more than the content of your curriculum.

You can have the best information, the most accurate theology, the most comprehensive curriculum—but if your teacher is harsh, proud, and demanding, you'll learn to be harsh, proud, and demanding.

LEARN FROM ME

On the other hand, you can have a teacher whose content isn't as polished, whose methods aren't as sophisticated, whose credentials aren't as impressive—but if that teacher is gentle, humble, and loving, you'll learn gentleness, humility, and love.

Because we become like the one we follow.

This is why what Jesus says next in His invitation is so crucial. After telling us to take His yoke and learn from Him, Jesus does something extraordinary. He tells us what He's like. He describes His own inner character.

"For I am gentle and humble in heart."

And in that simple statement, Jesus reveals why learning from Him is different from learning from anyone else. Not just because of what He teaches, but because of who He is.

I. Jesus's Self-Description

The Only Place

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus makes stunning claims about Himself. He claims to be the Son of God (John 10:36). He claims to be one with the Father (John 10:30). He claims to have authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:10). He claims to be the resurrection and the life (John 11:25). He claims that anyone who has seen Him has seen the Father (John 14:9).

These are monumental claims about His identity, His authority, His deity.

But only once—in this single verse—does Jesus explicitly describe what His heart is like. Only here does He open up His inner world and let us see His emotional and relational character.

"I am gentle and humble in heart."

LEARN FROM ME

Not "I am powerful." Not "I am righteous." Not "I am holy." Not "I am wise."

All of those things are true. But that's not what Jesus chooses to emphasize.

He says, "I am gentle and humble in heart."

Think about that for a moment. If you could describe your inner character in two words—if you could tell people what you're really like at the core of your being—what would you say?

Jesus says, "Gentle and humble."

These are the two qualities that define His heart. These are the characteristics that shape how He relates to people. These are the attributes that determine how He teaches, how He corrects, how He leads, how He loves.

And He's telling us this so we'll know what kind of rabbi we're yoking ourselves to. So we'll understand what kind of teacher we're learning from.

The Meaning of the Words

The Greek word translated "gentle" is *praus*. It's the same word used in the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the gentle (*praus*), for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5, NASB).

Prarus doesn't mean weak or passive. It means strength under control. It's the word used to describe a powerful horse that has been trained and is now responsive to its rider. The horse still has all its strength, but that strength is now channeled, directed, submitted to purpose rather than wild and uncontrolled.

That's gentleness. It's not weakness. It's power harnessed for good. It's strength used to protect and nurture rather than to dominate and destroy.

LEARN FROM ME

The second word, "humble," is *tapeinos* in Greek. It means lowly, unpretentious, not focused on status or position. In the culture of Jesus's day, *tapeinos* was not generally seen as a virtue. The Greeks despised humility. They valued honor, status, power, achievement. To be *tapeinos* was to be insignificant, beneath notice, without worth.

But Jesus reclaims the word. He says, "I am *tapeinos* in heart." He's saying, "I don't stand on My status. I don't demand recognition. I don't lord My position over you. I am accessible. Approachable. I make Myself small so you can come close."

Together, these two words—*praus* and *tapeinos*—paint a picture of a leader unlike any other. Powerful but gentle. Authoritative but humble. Worthy of all honor but not demanding it. Capable of judgment but characterized by mercy.

This is the heart of Jesus.

And this is the heart of the One who invites us to learn from Him.

A King on a Donkey

We see this combination of gentleness and humility perfectly illustrated in Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

Matthew 21:5 (NASB) quotes the prophecy from Zechariah: "Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Behold your King is coming to you, gentle, and mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'"

Picture this scene. Jesus is entering Jerusalem for the final time before His crucifixion. The crowds are gathering. The city is buzzing with anticipation. This is the moment when a king would typically assert his power, demonstrate his strength, make his authority unmistakably clear.

A Roman emperor would enter the city on a war horse, leading his conquering army, with defeated enemies in chains behind him. That's how power enters a city. That's how authority makes itself known.

LEARN FROM ME

But Jesus rides in on a donkey. A young donkey, at that—a colt that had never been ridden before (Mark 11:2).

It's almost comical. It's certainly humble. And it's deliberately so.

Because this is who Jesus is. Even in His moment of royal recognition, even when the crowds are shouting "Hosanna!" and spreading their cloaks on the road before Him, even when He's being acknowledged as King... He comes gently. Humbly. Riding on a donkey.

C.S. Lewis once wrote: "Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it's thinking of yourself less."

That's what we see in Jesus. He doesn't think less of Himself—He knows exactly who He is. He's the Son of God, the King of Kings, the Creator of the universe. But He doesn't focus on Himself. He doesn't demand that everyone recognize His status. He doesn't need to prove His importance.

Instead, He makes Himself approachable. Accessible. Small enough that ordinary people—sinners, outcasts, children—can come close without fear.

That's humility. And that's the heart of the One we're learning from.

II. Gentleness in Teaching

Now, you might be thinking, "That's a nice picture, but what does it actually mean for us? How does Jesus's gentleness affect how He teaches us?"

Everything. It affects everything.

Because gentleness determines how Jesus handles our weakness, our failure, our slowness to learn, our repeated mistakes. And that's crucial, because if we're honest, most of us are weak, failing, slow learners who make the same mistakes over and over again.

LEARN FROM ME

If Jesus were harsh, demanding, impatient—if He had zero tolerance for failure—none of us would last long in His apprenticeship.

But He's not. He's gentle. And that changes everything.

The Battered Reed

In Matthew 12:20 (NASB), quoting Isaiah's prophecy about the Messiah, Matthew writes: "A battered reed He will not break off, and a smoldering wick He will not put out, until He leads justice to victory."

A battered reed He will not break off.

Think about that image. A reed—a thin, fragile plant that grows by the water—has been damaged. Maybe someone stepped on it. Maybe the wind bent it. Maybe it's just old and brittle. It's barely hanging on. One more hard blow and it would snap completely.

A smoldering wick is the same idea. The lamp's flame has gone out. All that's left is a bit of smoke, a tiny ember. One puff of breath could extinguish it completely.

These are images of weakness. Fragility. Things on the verge of complete failure.

And Jesus says, "I will not break the reed. I will not snuff out the wick."

Instead, He'll tend to the reed until it's strong again. He'll coax the wick back into flame. He'll nurture what's weak. He'll restore what's damaged. He'll be patient with what's fragile.

This is gentleness in action.

The fuller context in Isaiah 42:2-3 (NASB) adds even more: "He will not cry out or raise His voice, nor make His voice heard in the street. A bruised reed He will not break and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish; He will faithfully bring forth justice."

LEARN FROM ME

Jesus doesn't yell. He doesn't shame. He doesn't humiliate. He doesn't give up on the weak and wounded.

He faithfully, gently, patiently brings restoration.

Peter's Restoration

We see this gentleness perfectly demonstrated in how Jesus deals with Peter after Peter's spectacular failure.

Remember the story. On the night Jesus is arrested, Peter—bold, impulsive Peter, who just hours earlier had sworn he'd die with Jesus (Matthew 26:35)—denies Jesus three times. Not to the authorities. To servants. To random people who ask if he's associated with Jesus.

And the third time, Peter doesn't just deny knowing Jesus. He calls down curses and swears, "I do not know the man!" (Matthew 26:74, NASB).

It's a complete collapse. Peter has failed utterly. He's broken his promise. He's betrayed his Rabbi at Jesus's moment of greatest need.

And then—this is what breaks my heart every time I read it—Jesus turns and looks at Peter (Luke 22:61). And Peter remembers Jesus's prediction that he would deny Him three times. And Peter goes out and weeps bitterly.

That could be the end of Peter's story. That could be his exit from the apprenticeship. "Sorry, Peter. You had your chance. You blew it. I'm moving on to more reliable disciples."

But it's not.

After the resurrection, Jesus seeks Peter out. And in John 21:15-17, Jesus restores him. But notice how He does it.

LEARN FROM ME

Three times, Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love Me?" Once for each denial. Giving Peter the opportunity to reaffirm his love three times, just as he denied it three times.

And each time Peter says yes, Jesus responds not with "Prove it" or "I'll believe it when I see it," but with a commission: "Feed My lambs. Shepherd My sheep. Feed My sheep."

Jesus doesn't shame Peter. He doesn't hold the failure over his head. He doesn't make Peter grovel or beg or work his way back into good standing.

He gently, lovingly restores Peter to relationship and to purpose.

That's the heart of Jesus. That's gentleness in action. That's what it means that Jesus is *praus*.

The Woman Caught in Adultery

Or consider the woman caught in adultery in John 8:1-11.

The scribes and Pharisees drag this woman before Jesus. They've caught her "in the very act" of adultery (verse 4)—humiliating her, exposing her sin publicly, using her as a pawn in their attempt to trap Jesus.

The Law of Moses, they remind Jesus, says such a woman should be stoned to death. "What do You say?" they ask, testing Him.

Jesus could have responded with righteous indignation against her sin. He could have launched into a sermon about the dangers of sexual immorality. He could have condemned her as harshly as the Law allowed.

Instead, He bends down and starts writing in the dust.

When they keep pressing Him, He straightens up and says, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (verse 7, NASB).

LEARN FROM ME

And then He bends down again and continues writing.

One by one, the accusers leave. From the oldest to the youngest, they all walk away. And Jesus is left alone with the woman.

Now watch His gentleness:

"Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more" (verses 10-11, NASB).

I do not condemn you.

Not "Your sin isn't that bad." Not "I'll overlook it this time." But "I do not condemn you."

He acknowledges her sin—"sin no more"—but He doesn't condemn her. He doesn't shame her. He doesn't humiliate her further. He doesn't make her earn her way back into dignity.

He treats her gently. He gives her a path forward. He sends her away with both truth and grace.

This is how Jesus teaches us. With gentleness. With patience. With a refusal to break the battered reed or snuff out the smoldering wick.

When we fail—and we will fail—He doesn't give up on us. He gently restores us. He patiently corrects us. He lovingly redirects us.

Because He's *praus*. Because gentleness is at the core of who He is.

III. Humility as Divine Method

Now let's turn to the second quality Jesus mentions: humility.

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"I am... humble in heart."

If gentleness describes how Jesus treats us, humility describes how Jesus positions Himself in relation to us.

And this is where things get really radical. Because we're talking about God being humble. The Creator of the universe. The One who spoke galaxies into existence. The One who holds all things together by the word of His power.

And He says, "I am humble in heart."

How do we make sense of that?

The Kenosis

Philippians 2:5-8 (NASB) gives us the theological framework:

"Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

This is called the *kenosis*—the self-emptying of Christ. It's the theological term for what Jesus did when He became human.

He "did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped." In other words, He didn't cling to His divine privileges. He didn't insist on staying in the glory and honor and comfort of heaven. He didn't say, "I'm God; I shouldn't have to lower Myself."

Instead, He "emptied Himself." He laid aside His divine privileges. He took on the limitations of humanity. He became vulnerable. Dependent. Weak.

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He took "the form of a bond-servant"—literally, a slave. The lowest position in society. No status. No rights. No recognition.

And then—this is the stunning part—"He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

He humbled Himself. It wasn't something that was done to Him. It was something He chose. An act of will. A deliberate decision to descend, to lower Himself, to make Himself nothing so He could lift us up.

A.W. Tozer wrote: "The Incarnation is the ultimate act of humility: God becomes what He created."

Think about that. God becomes what He created. The Potter becomes the clay. The Creator becomes the creature. The Infinite becomes finite. The Eternal enters time. The All-Powerful becomes helpless.

That's humility on a scale we can barely comprehend.

And this humble God invites us to learn from Him.

The Towel and Basin

But Jesus's humility isn't just a theological concept. It's something He lived out in concrete, practical ways.

John 13:1-17 gives us one of the most powerful demonstrations of humility in all of Scripture.

It's the night before Jesus's crucifixion. The disciples are gathered for the Passover meal. They've been walking dusty roads, and according to custom, someone should wash their feet when they arrive. But there are no servants present. And none of the disciples volunteer to take on this lowly task.

So they all recline at the table with dirty feet, each one too proud to serve the others.

And then Jesus gets up from the meal.

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"And so He got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself. Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded" (John 13:4-5, NASB).

Read that slowly. Let it sink in.

The Son of God. The King of Kings. The One through whom all things were created. The One who will one day judge the living and the dead.

Gets up. Lays aside His garments. Takes a towel. Kneels down. And begins washing dirty feet.

Peter's reaction is telling: "Lord, do You wash my feet?" (verse 6). He's shocked. Scandalized. This is backwards. This is wrong. Masters don't wash disciples' feet. Teachers don't serve students. This violates every social norm, every expectation, every understanding of hierarchy and honor.

But Jesus says, "What I do you do not realize now, but you will understand hereafter" (verse 7, NASB).

And after He's finished—after He's washed the feet of all twelve disciples, including Judas, who He knows is about to betray Him—Jesus says:

"Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them" (John 13:12-17, NASB).

This is the curriculum. This is what Jesus is teaching. This is what we learn from our humble Rabbi.

Not how to be served, but how to serve. Not how to protect our dignity, but how to lay it down for others. Not how to demand recognition, but how to stoop low enough that we can lift others up.

LEARN FROM ME

What We Learn from a Humble God

Here's why Jesus's humility matters so much for us as His apprentices:

First, **it makes Him accessible**. If Jesus had remained in heaven, if He had stayed in His glory, if He had insisted on being treated according to His status, we could never approach Him. We could never come close. We would be too intimidated, too ashamed, too aware of the gulf between His holiness and our sinfulness.

But because He humbled Himself—because He made Himself small, lowly, approachable—we can come to Him. The invitation "Come to Me, all who are weary and burdened" is only possible because of His humility.

Second, **it gives us a model**. Jesus doesn't just tell us to be humble. He shows us what humility looks like. We see it lived out perfectly in Him. And when He says, "Learn from Me," He's inviting us to imitate His humility.

Third, **it redefines greatness**. In the Kingdom of God, greatness doesn't look like the world's greatness. It's not about power, position, prestige, or recognition. Greatness in God's Kingdom looks like Jesus with a towel and a basin. It looks like serving. Like lowering yourself. Like making yourself nothing so others can be lifted up.

Fourth, **it gives us security**. Because Jesus is humble, we don't have to be anxious about impressing Him. We don't have to pretend to be more than we are. We don't have to hide our weaknesses or cover up our failures. He's already lowered Himself to our level. He's already met us where we are. We don't have to climb up to reach Him.

And fifth, **it shows us God's heart**. If you want to know what God is really like—if you want to know how He feels about you, how He relates to you, what His heart is toward you—look at Jesus kneeling with that towel. Look at Jesus washing feet. Look at Jesus making Himself nothing so He could lift you up.

That's God's heart. Humble. Self-giving. Oriented toward your good, not His own glory.

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Well, that's not quite right. His glory is revealed precisely in His humility. His greatness is made known in His willingness to become small. His power is displayed in His gentleness.

This is the upside-down Kingdom. This is the God we serve. This is the Rabbi we're learning from.

And if we really grasp this—if we really understand that the God of the universe is humble in heart—it changes everything.

IV. Why Character Matters More Than Competence

Let me bring this full circle to where we started: The character of your teacher matters more than the content of your curriculum.

Why? Because we become like the one we follow.

Without Love, Knowledge Is Nothing

Paul makes this devastatingly clear in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 (NASB):

"If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing."

If I... know all mysteries and all knowledge... but do not have love, I am nothing.

You can have perfect theology. You can understand all the mysteries. You can have encyclopedic knowledge of Scripture. You can be brilliant, articulate, impressively competent.

But if you don't have love—if your heart is harsh, if you're proud, if you're demanding, if you're impatient with people's weakness—then you're nothing. Your knowledge profits nothing. Your competence means nothing.

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Because knowledge without love puffs up (1 Corinthians 8:1). It makes you arrogant. It makes you judgmental. It makes you harsh.

And if that's what characterizes your teacher, that's what will characterize you.

The Failure of the Pharisees

The Pharisees are the perfect example of this.

They knew Scripture. They had the content down cold. They could quote Torah forwards and backwards. They understood the fine points of theological debate. They were competent, knowledgeable, impressively educated.

But they were harsh. Proud. Demanding. Quick to judge. Slow to show mercy.

And Jesus had devastating words for them:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves" (Matthew 23:15, NASB).

Think about that. They were making disciples. They were teaching. They were passing on their knowledge and their interpretation of Torah.

But they were making their disciples worse, not better. Why? Because they were teaching them to be like them—harsh, proud, judgmental, hypocritical.

The Pharisees had the right content. But they had the wrong character. And character trumps content every time.

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We Become Like Our Teacher

Jesus makes this principle explicit in Luke 6:40 (NASB): "A pupil is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher."

Will be like his teacher.

Not "will know what his teacher knows." But "will be *like* his teacher."

Apprenticeship is about formation, not just information. It's about transformation, not just education. It's about becoming, not just learning.

And you become like the person you're apprenticed to.

This is why it matters so much that Jesus is gentle and humble in heart. Because if we're going to become like Him—if His character is going to be formed in us—then we need a teacher whose character is worth emulating.

We need a teacher who is patient with our slowness. Gentle with our weakness. Humble enough to get down on our level. Loving enough to stick with us through our repeated failures.

We need Jesus.

Not a harsh taskmaster. Not a proud professor. Not a demanding boss. Not a distant deity who stays in heaven and shouts commands down to us.

But Jesus. Gentle and humble in heart.

Because when we learn from Him—when we spend time with Him, watch Him, imitate Him, practice what He shows us—we gradually become like Him.

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We become gentler. More patient. More humble. More loving.

Not through trying harder to be those things. But through being with the One who is those things. Through abiding in Him. Through letting His character seep into ours.

This is the miracle of discipleship. This is what happens when we yoke ourselves to Jesus and learn from Him.

We become like Him.

Gentle and humble in heart.

Full of grace and truth.

Patient with others' weakness because we've experienced His patience with ours.

Quick to serve because we've watched Him serve.

Free from the need to prove ourselves because we've learned from the One who didn't need to prove Himself.

The Only Teacher Worth Following

Here's the bottom line: Jesus is the only teacher whose character is worth replicating.

Every other teacher—no matter how brilliant, how insightful, how helpful—is flawed. Every other teacher will pass on not just their wisdom but also their brokenness. Their insights and their issues. Their truth and their toxicity.

But Jesus is perfect. His character is flawless. His heart is pure. His gentleness is never weakness. His humility is never self-hatred. His love is never manipulative. His patience is never enabling.

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He is the perfect teacher. And His character is the character we need formed in us.

So when He says, "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart," He's telling us:

"This is who you'll become if you follow Me. This is what will be formed in you if you apprentice yourself to Me. This is the character that will emerge as you spend time with Me and let Me shape you."

And that—that promise of transformation, that hope of becoming like Him—that's what makes the invitation irresistible.

We don't just need information. We need transformation.

We don't just need to know more. We need to become more.

And Jesus, gentle and humble in heart, is the only One who can make that happen.

So come. Take His yoke. Learn from Him.

Not from a distance. Not through books about Him (though those can help). Not through secondhand reports of what He's like.

But directly. Personally. Intimately.

Spend time with Him. Watch Him in the Gospels. Listen to His words. Observe how He treats people. Notice His priorities. See His heart.

And as you do—as you yoke yourself to Him and let Him teach you—you'll find something happening inside you.

You'll find yourself becoming a little gentler. A little humbler. A little more like Him.

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Not because you're trying hard to change yourself.

But because you're spending time with the One whose very nature is gentle and humble.

And His nature is contagious.

His character is formative.

His heart shapes your heart.

That's the promise. That's the invitation.

Learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart.

And as you learn, you'll become.

Like Him.

LEARN FROM ME

CHAPTER 5: The Curriculum of the Kingdom—What Jesus Actually Teaches

"Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me"

— Matthew 11:29 (NASB)

We've talked about coming to Him, taking His yoke, learning from Him. We've explored His character—gentle and humble in heart. But now we need to get specific. When we yoke ourselves to Jesus and commit to this apprenticeship, what exactly is He teaching us? What's the curriculum?

So what does Jesus actually teach us?

If you're expecting "Ten Easy Steps to Spiritual Maturity" or "Five Principles for a Better Christian Life," you're going to be disappointed. Jesus doesn't teach in neat, systematic categories. He doesn't hand out workbooks or assign homework. He doesn't break discipleship down into measurable learning objectives.

Instead, He does something far more challenging and far more transformative: He teaches us how to live in a completely different reality. He teaches us how to see the world through new eyes. He introduces us to a Kingdom that's both here and not yet, both invisible and more real than anything we can see.

And at the center of it all, He teaches us about the Father. About who God really is. About how God sees us. About what it means to be God's children.

This is the curriculum of the Kingdom. And it changes everything.

I. The Kingdom of God

The Central Message

Jesus begins His public ministry with a simple announcement. After His baptism, after His temptation in the wilderness, after John the Baptist is arrested, Jesus comes into Galilee and begins to preach.

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And this is what He says: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15, NASB).

The kingdom of God is at hand.

Not "The kingdom of God will come someday, far in the future." Not "The kingdom of God is waiting in heaven for when you die." But "The kingdom of God is at hand"—here, now, available, breaking into this present reality.

This is Jesus's central message. The Kingdom of God. It's what He preaches about in the synagogues (Mark 1:39). It's what He sends His disciples out to proclaim (Matthew 10:7). It's the subject of His parables (Matthew 13). It's the focus of His prayer (Matthew 6:10). It's what He announces to Pilate even as He's about to be crucified: "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36, NASB).

The Kingdom of God is not one topic among many that Jesus teaches about. It's THE topic. It's the organizing center of everything He says and does.

And if we're going to learn from Jesus, we need to understand what He means by "the Kingdom of God."

What Is the Kingdom?

When Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God (or "Kingdom of Heaven"—Matthew uses this phrase, but they mean the same thing), He's not talking about a place. He's talking about a reign. A rule. A way of ordering reality.

The Kingdom of God is wherever God's will is done. It's wherever God's rule is recognized and submitted to. It's wherever things work the way God designed them to work.

George Eldon Ladd, one of the most important biblical scholars on the Kingdom of God, wrote: "The kingdom of God is God's power breaking into the world to confront Satan and his kingdom."

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That's a helpful definition. The Kingdom is God's power breaking in. It's God's rule being established. It's God's way replacing the world's way. It's God's values overthrowing the devil's values. It's God's reign pushing back against the darkness.

And Jesus is the King of this Kingdom. He's not just announcing that the Kingdom is coming—He's inaugurating it. He's establishing it. He's demonstrating what it looks like when God's rule breaks into a broken world.

Every time Jesus heals someone, that's the Kingdom breaking in—God's power pushing back against sickness and death. Every time Jesus casts out a demon, that's the Kingdom breaking in—God's authority crushing Satan's hold. Every time Jesus forgives sins, that's the Kingdom breaking in—God's mercy triumphing over judgment. Every time Jesus welcomes an outcast, that's the Kingdom breaking in—God's love defying society's hierarchies.

The Kingdom of God is not just a future hope. It's a present reality. It's here. Now. Available. And Jesus is teaching us how to live in it.

The Parables of the Kingdom

In Matthew 13, Jesus tells a series of parables specifically about the Kingdom. And what's striking is how many different images He uses to describe it.

The Kingdom is like a man sowing seed (Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23). Some seed falls on hard ground and doesn't grow. Some falls on rocky ground and springs up quickly but withers when trouble comes. Some falls among thorns and gets choked out. But some falls on good soil and produces an incredible harvest—thirty, sixty, even a hundred times what was sown.

The Kingdom is like a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while everyone slept, his enemy came and sowed weeds (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43). The good seed and the weeds grow together until harvest time, when they'll be separated.

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The Kingdom is like a mustard seed—the smallest of seeds—which grows into a large tree where birds can nest (Matthew 13:31-32).

The Kingdom is like leaven that a woman mixes into flour until the whole batch of dough is leavened (Matthew 13:33).

The Kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man finds and then joyfully sells everything he has to buy that field (Matthew 13:44).

The Kingdom is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, who finds one pearl of great value and sells everything to buy it (Matthew 13:45-46).

The Kingdom is like a net cast into the sea that gathers fish of every kind, which are then sorted—the good kept, the bad thrown away (Matthew 13:47-50).

Why so many different images? Because the Kingdom is multifaceted. It can't be captured in one simple definition or one tidy explanation. It has to be approached from multiple angles.

But here's what all these parables have in common: They all describe something that starts small and hidden but grows. Something that requires a response. Something that's incredibly valuable—worth giving up everything else to obtain. Something that separates people—some receive it, some reject it. Something that will ultimately be consummated at a future time, but is already at work now.

That's the Kingdom. Small beginnings. Hidden work. Incredible value. Current reality. Future consummation.

And Jesus is teaching us how to live in this Kingdom. How to recognize it. How to enter it. How to participate in it. How to advance it.

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Living Under God's Reign Now

Here's what learning from Jesus about the Kingdom means practically:

First, it means recognizing that there's a different way to live. The world operates according to certain rules: Might makes right. Get what you can while you can. Look out for number one. Whoever dies with the most toys wins. Power, pleasure, prestige—those are what matter.

But the Kingdom operates according to completely different rules: The last shall be first. Whoever loses his life will find it. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Love your enemies. Give without expecting anything in return. Store up treasures in heaven, not on earth.

These aren't just nice ideals. They're the actual operating principles of reality as God designed it. And when we live according to Kingdom principles, we're aligning ourselves with how things really work, even when the world tells us we're crazy.

Second, it means submitting to God's rule in every area of our lives. The Kingdom isn't just about our "spiritual life"—our prayer time, our church attendance, our religious activities. The Kingdom is about all of life. Our work. Our money. Our relationships. Our entertainment. Our politics. Our sexuality. Our ambitions. Everything.

To live in the Kingdom means to say, "God, You're the King. Your will matters more than my preferences. Your way matters more than my comfort. Your glory matters more than my success."

It's a comprehensive surrender. A total realignment. A complete reordering of priorities.

Third, it means participating in Kingdom work. We're not just passive recipients of the Kingdom. We're active participants. We're Kingdom citizens with Kingdom responsibilities.

LEARN FROM ME

Jesus teaches us to pray, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10, NASB). And when we pray that prayer, we're volunteering for the answer. We're saying, "God, use me to bring Your Kingdom to earth. Let Your rule be established through me. Make me an agent of Your Kingdom purposes."

That means we do Kingdom things: We heal the sick (when God gives us that gift). We cast out demons (when God calls us to that ministry). We proclaim good news to the poor. We set captives free. We give sight to the blind. We release the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19).

We do these things not in our own power, but in the power of the King. We're ambassadors representing His reign. We're outposts of heaven operating in enemy territory.

And fourth, it means living with future hope while engaging present reality. The Kingdom is here. But it's also not yet fully here. We live in the overlap of the ages—the age to come has broken into this present evil age, but this present age hasn't ended yet.

So we experience the Kingdom now—we taste it, we participate in it, we see glimpses of it. But we also long for it to come in fullness. We groan for the day when God's will is done on earth as perfectly as it's done in heaven. We wait for the King to return and establish His reign completely.

This tension—the already/not yet of the Kingdom—shapes how we live. We're not so heavenly minded that we're no earthly good. But we're also not so focused on this world that we forget there's a better world coming.

We work for justice now, knowing that perfect justice is coming. We pursue peace now, knowing that the Prince of Peace will establish ultimate peace. We love and serve now, knowing that love will be all that remains when everything else passes away.

This is what Jesus teaches us about the Kingdom. And it changes everything about how we live.

LEARN FROM ME

II. The Father's Heart

But Jesus doesn't just teach us about the Kingdom as a system or a set of principles. He teaches us about the King. About who God really is. About what God's heart is like toward us.

And this—more than anything else—is the revolutionary core of Jesus's teaching.

Seeing the Father

In John 14:9 (NASB), Jesus makes this stunning statement to Philip: "He who has seen Me has seen the Father."

Let that sink in. To see Jesus is to see the Father. To know Jesus is to know God. To understand what Jesus is like is to understand what God is like.

This is the incarnation's purpose. God didn't just send a message about Himself. He came Himself. He showed us what He's like. He revealed His heart.

And what we see in Jesus is not what we expected.

We see God touching lepers. God eating with tax collectors and sinners. God welcoming prostitutes. God defending the accused. God healing on the Sabbath. God washing feet. God weeping at graves. God dying on a cross.

We see a God who is not distant but intimate. Not harsh but gentle. Not demanding but giving. Not condemning but forgiving. Not waiting for us to come to Him but seeking us out when we're lost.

Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15). And when we look at Jesus, we see what God's heart really looks like.

LEARN FROM ME

The Three Parables of Luke 15

Nowhere is this more clear than in Luke 15, where Jesus tells three consecutive parables that reveal God's heart.

The context matters. The Pharisees and scribes are grumbling because Jesus is welcoming tax collectors and sinners and eating with them (Luke 15:1-2). They can't understand why a holy teacher would associate with unholy people. It violates everything they believe about God and righteousness.

So Jesus tells them three stories.

The Lost Sheep (Luke 15:3-7): A shepherd has a hundred sheep. One wanders off and gets lost. What does the shepherd do? Leave it? Say, "Well, I have ninety-nine others, that's good enough"? No. He leaves the ninety-nine in the open pasture and goes after the one that's lost. He searches until he finds it. And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and brings it home. He calls his friends and neighbors together and says, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!" And Jesus says, "I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7, NASB).

God is the shepherd. We're the sheep. And when we wander off, God doesn't write us off. He comes looking for us. He seeks us. He pursues us. And when He finds us, He rejoices.

The Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10): A woman has ten silver coins. She loses one. What does she do? She lights a lamp, sweeps the whole house, searches carefully until she finds it. And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!" And Jesus says, "In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10, NASB).

Again, the same theme. God is like the woman who won't rest until she finds what's lost. She searches diligently. She doesn't give up. And when she finds it, there's celebration.

LEARN FROM ME

The Lost Son (Luke 15:11-32): This is the most famous of the three parables. A man has two sons. The younger son asks for his inheritance early (essentially saying, "Dad, I wish you were dead so I could have your money"), takes his share, and goes to a distant country where he squanders everything in wild living. He ends up broke, starving, feeding pigs—about as low as a Jewish boy could go.

And then he comes to his senses. He decides to go home, confess his sin, and ask to be treated as a hired servant—not as a son, because he knows he's forfeited that right.

But here's what happens: "So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him" (Luke 15:20, NASB).

While he was still a long way off, his father saw him.

The father was watching. Waiting. Hoping. Longing for his son to come home.

And felt compassion for him, and ran.

In that culture, dignified older men didn't run. It was undignified. Shameful. But the father doesn't care about dignity. He hikes up his robe and runs to his son.

And embraced him and kissed him.

The son starts his rehearsed speech: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son" (verse 21). But the father doesn't even let him finish. He doesn't say, "You're right, you're not worthy." He doesn't make the son grovel or earn his way back.

Instead, he calls to the servants: "Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found" (verses 22-24, NASB).

LEARN FROM ME

Celebration. Joy. Complete restoration. Not because the son earned it, but because the father loves him.

This is what God is like. This is His heart toward us. Not waiting for us to clean ourselves up before He'll accept us. But running to meet us while we're still far off. Embracing us in our filth. Restoring us to full sonship. Throwing a party because we've come home.

That's the Father's heart. And Jesus came to show it to us.

The Lord's Prayer

Jesus doesn't just tell us about the Father. He teaches us to relate to the Father. He gives us a model for prayer that begins with two simple words: "Our Father" (Matthew 6:9, NASB).

Not "O Distant Deity." Not "Supreme Being." Not "Judge of the Universe." But "Father."

And later, Paul tells us that the Spirit within us cries out, "Abba! Father!" (Romans 8:15, NASB). *Abba*—the Aramaic word for father, an intimate term, something like "Papa" or "Daddy."

This is revolutionary. The Jews of Jesus's day didn't address God this way. God was holy, transcendent, separate. You didn't presume to call Him "Father" in this intimate, familiar way.

But Jesus does. And He teaches us to do the same.

Because God is not just Creator, Judge, King, Lord. He's also Father. Loving Father. Good Father. Father who delights in His children. Father who gives good gifts to those who ask Him (Matthew 7:11). Father who knows what we need before we ask (Matthew 6:8). Father who cares for us more than He cares for the birds of the air or the flowers of the field (Matthew 6:26-30).

This is the heart of Jesus's teaching about God. Not rules and regulations. Not demands and requirements. But relationship. Father and child. Love and trust. Intimacy and security.

LEARN FROM ME

When we learn from Jesus, we learn to see God as Father. And that changes everything about how we pray, how we obey, how we live.

We're not slaves trying to please a harsh master. We're children learning to trust a loving Father.

III. Identity Before Activity

Here's one of the most important things Jesus teaches us—something that runs completely counter to how most of us approach the Christian life:

Our identity comes before our activity. Who we are matters more than what we do. Being precedes doing.

The Father's Declaration

Look at the beginning of Jesus's ministry. He's just been baptized by John in the Jordan River. He comes up out of the water, and "the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased'" (Matthew 3:16-17, NASB).

This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.

Notice the timing. Jesus hasn't done anything yet. He hasn't preached a sermon. He hasn't healed anyone. He hasn't cast out any demons. He hasn't performed any miracles. He hasn't done a single thing to prove Himself or earn approval.

And yet the Father declares: *This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.*

The pleasure comes before the performance. The love comes before the achievement. The identity is established before the ministry begins.

Jesus is the beloved Son not because of what He does, but because of who He is.

LEARN FROM ME

And if that's true for Jesus—if the Father's declaration of love and pleasure comes before any ministry or accomplishment—how much more is it true for us?

Our Identity as Children

When we come to Jesus, when we believe in Him, something fundamental changes about our identity.

John 1:12 (NASB) tells us: "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name."

Children of God.

Not servants. Not employees. Not subjects. Not slaves. But children.

This is our core identity. This is who we are at the deepest level. Before we do anything, before we accomplish anything, before we prove anything—we are God's children.

Paul emphasizes this in Galatians 3:26 (NASB): "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus."

You ARE. Present tense. Already. Now. Not "you will become" or "you can be if you work hard enough." But "you ARE."

Your identity is settled. It's established. It's secure.

You are a child of God. That's who you are.

The Ragamuffin's Question

Brennan Manning, whose voice echoes throughout this book because he understood grace better than almost anyone, once wrote: "Before you tell me what I should do, tell me who I am."

LEARN FROM ME

Tell me who I am before you tell me what I should do.

This is the order that matters. Identity before activity. Being before doing. Who we are before what we accomplish.

Because if we don't get our identity right—if we don't know who we are as God's beloved children—then everything we do will be an attempt to earn that identity. We'll serve to try to become worthy. We'll obey to try to make ourselves acceptable. We'll perform to try to prove our value.

And we'll be exhausted. Because we're trying to earn what's already been given. We're working for what we already have.

But when we know who we are—when we rest in our identity as God's beloved children—then our activity flows from a completely different place.

We serve not to earn love, but because we're loved. We obey not to prove our worth, but because we know we're worthy. We give not to get approval, but because we've already been approved.

Everything changes when identity comes before activity.

Living from Identity

Jesus is teaching us to live from our identity rather than for our identity.

The world says, "Prove yourself. Achieve something. Accomplish great things. Then you'll be somebody. Then you'll have value. Then you'll be worthy of love."

But Jesus says, "You're already somebody. You're My Father's child. You already have value—infinite value. You're already worthy of love—not because of anything you've done, but because of who I am and what I've done."

LEARN FROM ME

This is the gospel. This is the good news. Not "Try harder and maybe God will accept you." But "God has already accepted you in Christ. You're His child. Now live like it."

Paul puts it this way in Ephesians 1:4-6 (NASB): "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved."

He chose us. Before the foundation of the world. *In love He predestined us to adoption.* Not based on our performance. Not contingent on our goodness. But *according to the kind intention of His will, which He freely bestowed on us.*

This is grace. This is identity. This is who you are—not because of what you've done, but because of what Christ has done.

And when we learn this from Jesus—when we really grasp that our identity is secure, that we're already loved, that we're already accepted, that we're already children of God—it sets us free.

Free to obey out of joy, not obligation. Free to serve out of love, not fear. Free to risk, knowing that our worth doesn't depend on our success. Free to fail, knowing that our identity doesn't depend on our performance.

This is what Jesus teaches us. Identity before activity. Being before doing. Sonship before service.

And it changes everything.

IV. The Way of the Cross

Now, all of this—the Kingdom, the Father's heart, our identity as children—might sound comfortable. Nice. Easy.

LEARN FROM ME

But Jesus doesn't let us stay comfortable.

Because there's one more essential element to His teaching. One more non-negotiable part of the curriculum. And it's the hardest one.

The way of the cross.

The Call to Self-Denial

In Mark 8:34 (NASB), after Peter has confessed that Jesus is the Christ and Jesus has revealed that He must suffer and die, Jesus calls the crowd together and says:

"If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me."

He must deny himself.

Not "he should consider denying himself" or "it would be nice if he denied himself." But "he **MUST** deny himself."

This is non-negotiable. This is the entrance requirement. This is what it means to follow Jesus.

You must deny yourself. You must say no to yourself. You must reject the tyranny of your own desires, your own plans, your own agenda, your own kingdom.

And take up his cross.

In the first century, when Jesus said this, everyone knew what a cross was. It was a Roman instrument of execution. It was what happened to criminals, rebels, enemies of the state. If you saw someone carrying a cross, you knew they were on their way to die.

LEARN FROM ME

So when Jesus says, "Take up your cross," He's not talking about enduring minor inconveniences. He's not talking about putting up with a difficult boss or dealing with your annoying neighbor.

He's talking about death. Choosing death. Embracing death. Dying to yourself.

And follow Me.

Notice: The cross comes before the following. The dying comes before the living. The surrender comes before the service.

This is the way of discipleship. This is what it means to learn from Jesus.

Crucified with Christ

Paul understood this. In Galatians 2:20 (NASB), he writes: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me."

I have been crucified with Christ.

Past tense. It's already happened. Paul's old self—his identity as a persecutor of Christians, his pride in his religious accomplishments, his confidence in his own righteousness—that self has been crucified. Put to death. Nailed to the cross with Jesus.

And it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.

A new self has emerged. A new identity has taken over. It's not Paul living according to his own desires and ambitions anymore. It's Christ living in Paul. Christ's desires. Christ's ambitions. Christ's life flowing through Paul's body.

LEARN FROM ME

This is what the way of the cross leads to. Death to self-glory so we can live for God's glory. Death to our kingdom so we can live for His Kingdom. Death to our agenda so we can embrace His agenda.

It's a complete exchange. Our life for His life. Our will for His will. Our glory for His glory.

The Death of Self-Glory for the Life of God's Glory

And this brings us full circle to the core theme of this entire book: We were created for God's glory (Isaiah 43:7). But we can't live for God's glory while we're still chasing our own glory.

Self-glory and God's glory are incompatible. We can't serve both. We can't pursue both. We have to choose.

And the way of the cross is the choice. It's the death of self-glory. It's the crucifixion of our ego, our pride, our need to be recognized and praised and honored.

It's saying, with John the Baptist, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30, NASB).

It's praying, with Jesus in Gethsemane, "Not My will, but Yours be done" (Luke 22:42, NASB).

It's declaring, with Paul, "Far be it from me to boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Galatians 6:14, NASB).

This is hard. This is costly. This goes against everything our flesh wants.

Our flesh wants to be someone. To be recognized. To be important. To make a name for ourselves. To build our own kingdom. To achieve our own glory.

But Jesus says, "Take up your cross." Die to all of that. Let it go. Nail it to the cross. Watch it die.

LEARN FROM ME

And in the dying, find life. Real life. Life for God's glory instead of your own. Life in God's Kingdom instead of your own. Life that flows from being a child of God instead of trying to prove yourself.

Suffering as Pathway to Glorification

Here's the paradox: The way to glory is through the cross. The path to exaltation is through humiliation. The road to life is through death.

Romans 8:17 (NASB) makes this explicit: "And if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him."

If indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.

Suffering with Christ is the pathway to being glorified with Christ. The cross comes before the crown. The dying comes before the rising. The crucifixion comes before the resurrection.

This is the pattern Jesus established. Philippians 2:8-9 (NASB): "Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name."

For this reason—because He humbled Himself, because He went to the cross—God highly exalted Him.

The humiliation led to exaltation. The death led to resurrection. The cross led to glory.

And Jesus says, "Follow Me."

Walk the same path. Take up your cross. Die to yourself. And discover that on the other side of death is resurrection. On the other side of the cross is glory. On the other side of self-denial is the life you were always meant to live.

LEARN FROM ME

The Curriculum in Summary

So this is what Jesus teaches us:

The Kingdom of God is here and now, breaking into this present reality. We're called to live in it, participate in it, advance it.

The Father's heart is loving, compassionate, pursuing, forgiving. He's not a harsh judge waiting to condemn us, but a good Father who runs to embrace us when we come home.

Our identity as children of God comes before our activity. We are beloved before we do anything to earn it. We serve from security, not for security.

The way of the cross is the path we must walk. Death to self-glory so we can live for God's glory. Death to our kingdom so we can live for His. Death to our will so we can embrace His.

This is the curriculum. This is what we learn when we take Jesus's yoke upon us.

It's not comfortable. It's not easy. It's not what we expect.

But it's real. It's true. And it's the only path to the life we were created for.

The life of the Kingdom. The life of relationship with the Father. The life of secure identity. The life that flows from death to self and resurrection to new life in Christ.

This is what Jesus teaches. This is what we learn when we yoke ourselves to Him.

And it changes everything.

LEARN FROM ME

ART THREE: LEARNING TO LIVE FOR GOD'S GLORY

CHAPTER 6: Created for His Glory—Understanding Our Purpose

"Everyone who is called by My name, and whom I have created for My glory, whom I have formed, even whom I have made."

— Isaiah 43:7 (NASB)

We've spent five chapters exploring Jesus's invitation to take His yoke and learn from Him. We've looked at His character, His teaching, His curriculum. Now we need to ask the fundamental question: What's the point? What are we learning all of this for? What's the ultimate purpose?

The answer is stunningly simple and profoundly comprehensive: We were created for God's glory.

Not as an afterthought. Not as one option among many. Not as a nice ideal for especially spiritual people. But as the fundamental reason we exist.

Isaiah 43:7 couldn't be more clear. God says He created us, formed us, made us... for His glory.

This is our purpose. This is what we're for. This is why we're here.

And everything Jesus teaches us—everything He shows us, everything He does in us—is aimed at this one goal: teaching us how to live the life we were created to live. A life that displays the glory of God.

But before we can live for God's glory, we need to understand what that means. We need to go back to the beginning and see what God intended when He made us. We need to understand what went wrong. And we need to grasp what Jesus is doing to restore us to our original purpose.

This is the story of glory. And it's our story.

LEARN FROM ME

I. The Foundation: Made in God's Image

In the Beginning

Genesis 1:26-27 (NASB) records the creation of humanity:

"Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them."

In Our image, according to Our likeness.

This is unique. God didn't create the fish in His image. He didn't create the birds or the cattle in His image. Only humanity. Only us.

We are image-bearers. We are living representations of God. We were designed to reflect what God is like, to display His character, to manifest His nature in a way that nothing else in creation does.

Think about what an image does. When you look at a photograph of someone, you see what they look like. The photograph represents them. It makes visible something about them. It's not the person themselves, but it shows you the person.

That's what we were created to be. Living images of God. Walking, breathing, acting representations of what God is like. When the rest of creation looks at humanity, they're supposed to see something of God reflected there.

This is our design. This is our fundamental identity. This is what it means to be human.

We are image-bearers. Glory-reflectors. Living displays of the invisible God.

LEARN FROM ME

Glory as the Visible Manifestation of God's Character

So what exactly is "glory"?

In Scripture, the word "glory" (Hebrew: *kabod*, Greek: *doxa*) carries the idea of weight, substance, worthiness, brightness, radiance. It's the visible manifestation of God's character. It's God's nature made known. It's the revelation of who God is.

When Moses asks to see God's glory in Exodus 33:18, God responds by passing before him and proclaiming His name: "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth" (Exodus 34:6, NASB). God's glory is His character revealed. It's who He is made visible.

When Isaiah sees the Lord in the temple in Isaiah 6, he sees seraphim crying out, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory" (Isaiah 6:3, NASB). The glory fills the earth. God's holiness, His otherness, His perfection—it's everywhere, manifested in creation.

Glory is not just about brightness or light (though it often involves that). Glory is about the manifestation of God's nature. It's God revealing Himself. It's the invisible God becoming visible.

And we—humanity—were created to be part of that revelation. We were designed to display God's glory. To reflect His character. To make visible something of what God is like.

When we love sacrificially, we display God's glory. When we show mercy, we reveal God's character. When we pursue justice, we manifest God's nature. When we create beauty, we reflect the Creator. When we forgive those who've wronged us, we make visible God's heart.

This is what it means to be made in God's image. We are glory-bearers. We were designed to reflect the glory of God.

LEARN FROM ME

We Are Glory-Bearers by Design

This is not something we achieve. It's not something we earn. It's built into our very design.

You don't have to work to be an image-bearer. You *are* an image-bearer. That's what you are, not what you do.

But—and this is crucial—being an image-bearer and actually reflecting God's glory are two different things. We have the capacity. We have the design. But whether we actually function according to our design is another question.

Think of it like a mirror. A mirror is designed to reflect. That's its purpose. That's what it's for. But a dirty mirror, a cracked mirror, a mirror turned to face the wall—it's still a mirror by design, but it's not functioning as a mirror. It's not doing what it was made to do.

That's us. We're designed to reflect God's glory. That's our purpose, our function, our reason for existing. But whether we're actually reflecting His glory—whether we're functioning according to our design—that depends on our orientation, our condition, our relationship to God.

This is what Irenaeus, one of the early church fathers, meant when he wrote: "The glory of God is man fully alive."

Man fully alive.

When we're functioning as we were designed to function—when we're living in right relationship with God, reflecting His character, displaying His nature, living for His purposes—that's when we're fully alive. That's when we're most human. That's when we're doing what we were created to do.

And paradoxically, when we're living most fully for God's glory, we're also experiencing the deepest satisfaction, the most profound joy, the truest fulfillment. Because we're finally living according to our design. We're finally being what we were meant to be.

LEARN FROM ME

This is the foundation. We were made in God's image. We were created to be glory-bearers. To reflect God. To display His character. To make the invisible God visible through our lives.

This is our purpose. This is what we're for.

And everything else—all of Jesus's teaching, all of the Christian life, all of discipleship—is about learning to live according to this purpose.

II. The Fall: Glory Exchanged

But something went wrong.

Catastrophically, cosmically wrong.

We didn't stay in right relationship with God. We didn't continue reflecting His glory. We didn't remain oriented toward Him.

Instead, we turned away. We rebelled. We exchanged God's glory for something else.

And in the exchange, we lost everything.

All Have Sinned and Fall Short

Romans 3:23 (NASB) is one of the most familiar verses in the Bible: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

We usually focus on the first part—"all have sinned." And that's true and important. But notice what sin results in: we "fall short of the glory of God."

Sin isn't just breaking rules. Sin is failing to fulfill our purpose. It's falling short of what we were created for. It's missing the mark of our design.

LEARN FROM ME

We were made to reflect God's glory. Sin means we're not doing that. We're not displaying God's character. We're not manifesting His nature. We're not functioning as we were designed to function.

The image is still there—we're still image-bearers by design. But the image is distorted. Cracked. Dirty. Turned away from the Source. We're mirrors that have been damaged, covered with grime, facing the wrong direction.

And the result is that instead of reflecting God's glory, we're failing to do so. We're falling short. We're not being what we were made to be.

Exchanging God's Glory for Created Things

Paul describes what happened in Romans 1:21-23 (NASB):

"For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures."

They exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image.

This is the tragedy. We were created to reflect God's glory. But instead of reflecting it, we tried to replace it. We exchanged the glory of God for images of created things. We turned away from the Source and started worshiping the created rather than the Creator.

We looked for glory in all the wrong places. We sought it in ourselves—our achievements, our reputations, our success. We sought it in other people—their approval, their praise, their admiration. We sought it in things—possessions, wealth, status, power.

LEARN FROM ME

We were designed to find our satisfaction in God's glory—in reflecting Him, in displaying His character, in living for His purposes. But we rejected that. We said, "No, I want my own glory. I want to be recognized. I want to be praised. I want to make a name for myself."

And in that exchange, we lost everything. Because nothing created can satisfy the longing that was designed to be satisfied by the Creator. Nothing finite can fill the void meant for the infinite. Nothing temporal can fulfill the need meant for the eternal.

We exchanged God's glory for substitutes. And the substitutes never satisfy.

The Quest for Self-Glory as the Root Sin

Here's what we need to understand: The root of all sin is the quest for self-glory.

It started in the Garden. The serpent tempted Eve by saying, "You will be like God" (Genesis 3:5, NASB). The temptation wasn't just to disobey. It was to be like God—to have God's glory, God's knowledge, God's authority. To not need God. To be self-sufficient. To be our own gods.

And we fell for it. We're still falling for it.

Every sin, at its core, is an attempt to get glory for ourselves rather than giving glory to God. Every act of pride is saying, "Look at me. I'm impressive. I deserve recognition." Every act of greed is saying, "I need more for myself. My satisfaction is what matters." Every act of lust is saying, "I'll use this person for my pleasure. My desires are supreme." Every act of anger is saying, "I've been wronged. My honor must be defended."

It all comes back to self. To our glory. To making ourselves central rather than making God central.

This is what Jesus diagnosed in the religious leaders of His day. In John 5:44 (NASB), He asks them: "How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God?"

LEARN FROM ME

You receive glory from one another.

They were more concerned with what people thought of them than with what God thought of them. They performed their religious duties to be seen by others (Matthew 6:1). They loved the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues (Matthew 23:6). They did everything to be noticed by people (Matthew 23:5).

They were seeking glory—but they were seeking it from the wrong source. They wanted human glory rather than God's glory. They wanted recognition from people rather than relationship with God.

And Jesus says this is the root of unbelief. *How can you believe* when you're seeking glory from one another?

When we're obsessed with our own glory—with our reputation, our status, our recognition—we can't truly believe. We can't truly trust God. We can't truly live for His glory. Because we're too busy living for our own.

This is the fall. This is what went wrong. We exchanged God's glory for our own glory. We turned away from our purpose—reflecting Him—and tried to establish our own purpose—glorifying ourselves.

And we've been falling short ever since.

III. The Restoration: Glory Regained

But here's the good news—the stunningly beautiful, almost-too-good-to-be-true news:

God didn't leave us in our fallen state. He didn't abandon us to our self-glorifying futility. He didn't say, "Well, they've exchanged My glory for their own. I'm done with them."

Instead, He initiated a rescue mission. A restoration project. A plan to bring us back to our original purpose, to restore us to our design, to make us glory-reflectors again.

LEARN FROM ME

And the name of that plan is Jesus.

Beholding and Becoming

In 2 Corinthians 3:18 (NASB), Paul describes what's happening to us as followers of Jesus:

"But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit."

Let's unpack this verse because it's packed with meaning.

First: *We all, with unveiled face.* In the previous verses, Paul has been talking about Moses, who had to put a veil over his face after encountering God because his face shone with reflected glory and the people couldn't bear to look at it (Exodus 34:29-35). The veil covered the glory. But Paul says we have unveiled faces. Nothing between us and God. Direct access. Unhindered relationship.

Second: *Beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord.* We're looking at Jesus—the perfect image of God, the radiance of His glory (Hebrews 1:3). We're seeing in Him what God is like. We're beholding His glory.

Third: *Are being transformed into the same image.* This is present passive continuous. It's happening right now. It's ongoing. It's a process. And it's not something we're doing to ourselves—it's something being done to us. We're being transformed. God is doing the transforming.

Fourth: *From glory to glory.* It's progressive. Incremental. We're not instantly transformed into Christ's image (though that will happen one day—1 John 3:2). But we're being transformed gradually, from one degree of glory to another, becoming more and more like Christ.

Fifth: *Just as from the Lord, the Spirit.* The Holy Spirit is the agent of this transformation. He's the One doing the work in us, conforming us to Christ's image.

LEARN FROM ME

This is restoration. This is how God is fixing what went wrong. This is how He's bringing us back to our purpose as glory-reflectors.

We behold Jesus—we look at Him, study Him, spend time with Him, let Him teach us—and as we behold Him, we're transformed. We become like Him. We start reflecting His glory. We begin functioning according to our design again.

It's not instant. It's not automatic. It's a process. But it's a process that God Himself is orchestrating through His Spirit.

Putting On the New Self

Paul gives us another angle on this restoration in Colossians 3:9-10 (NASB):

"Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him."

The new self who is being renewed... according to the image of the One who created him.

There it is again. The image. The original design. We're being renewed according to that image. We're being restored to what we were supposed to be.

The old self—the self that was oriented toward self-glory, that lived for its own purposes, that exchanged God's glory for created things—that self has been laid aside. It was crucified with Christ (Galatians 2:20). It died.

And a new self has emerged. A self that's being renewed. A self that's oriented toward God's glory again. A self that's learning to reflect His character, to display His nature, to live for His purposes.

This is what Jesus is teaching us. This is what we're learning in this apprenticeship. How to be this new self. How to live according to the image we were created in. How to reflect God's glory again.

LEARN FROM ME

The Process of Glorification

Theologians call this process "glorification," and Paul describes it beautifully in Romans 8:29-30 (NASB):

"For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified."

Notice the sequence:

- Foreknew
- Predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son
- Called
- Justified
- Glorified

Glorified. Past tense. As if it's already done. Even though we're still in process, even though we're not yet fully conformed to Christ's image, even though we still fall short—God speaks of our glorification as if it's already accomplished. That's how certain it is. That's how secure the outcome is.

We are being conformed to the image of Christ. We are being restored to our purpose as glory-reflectors. We are being glorified.

Not in the sense of getting glory for ourselves. But in the sense of being made glorious—being restored to our design, being transformed into the image we were created in, being fitted for the purpose we were made for.

God is making us glory-bearers again. That's the restoration project. That's what's happening to us as we learn from Jesus.

And one day—one glorious day—the process will be complete.

LEARN FROM ME

IV. The Consummation: Glory Revealed

We live in the tension. The already and the not yet. We've been justified—that's past tense, done, complete. We're being sanctified—that's present tense, ongoing, in process. And we will be glorified—that's future tense, certain but not yet fully realized.

We taste glory now. We see glimpses of it. We experience moments when we're living according to our design, reflecting God's character, functioning as we were created to function. And in those moments, we catch a preview of what's coming.

But we haven't arrived. Not yet. We're still in process. Still being transformed. Still learning. Still growing. Still falling short more often than we'd like to admit.

But there's a day coming. A day when the process will be complete. A day when our restoration will be finished. A day when we'll fully reflect the glory we were designed to reflect.

The Sufferings and the Glory

Paul helps us keep perspective in Romans 8:18 (NASB): "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

Not worthy to be compared.

Right now, the Christian life is hard. Following Jesus is costly. Taking up your cross daily means actual death to self, actual suffering, actual difficulty. The way is narrow. The gate is small. Not many find it (Matthew 7:13-14).

We face persecution. We face trials. We face suffering. We live in a world that's still broken, still fallen, still groaning under the weight of sin and death.

LEARN FROM ME

But Paul says all of that—all the suffering, all the difficulty, all the cost—is *not worthy to be compared* with the glory that's coming.

The glory that will be revealed *to us* and *in us*.

The glory we were created for. The glory we lost in the fall. The glory that's being restored through Christ. That glory will one day be fully revealed.

And when it is, we'll look back on our present sufferings and see them as "momentary light affliction" (2 Corinthians 4:17, NASB) compared to "an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison."

This is our hope. This is what keeps us going. This is what makes the daily dying worth it.

Glory is coming.

When He Appears, We Will Be Like Him

First John 3:2 (NASB) gives us one of the most hope-filled promises in all of Scripture:

"Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is."

When He appears, we will be like Him.

The transformation that's happening now—gradually, slowly, incrementally—will one day be complete. Instant. Total.

When Jesus returns, when we see Him face to face, when we behold Him in His full glory—in that moment, we will be fully transformed. Completely conformed to His image. Perfectly reflecting His glory.

LEARN FROM ME

The image that was distorted will be restored. The mirror that was dirty and cracked will be made perfect. The glory-bearers will finally function fully according to their design.

We will be like Him.

Not divine—we'll still be creatures, not the Creator. But like Him in character. In holiness. In love. In purity. In every quality that reflects God's nature.

The image will be complete. The restoration will be finished. The glorification will be realized.

This is our destiny. This is where we're headed. This is what God is working toward in us right now through all the teaching, all the discipline, all the transformation, all the daily dying and rising.

He's making us like Jesus. And one day, the work will be done.

The Glory of God as Eternal Light

The final picture we get of this consummated glory is in Revelation 21:22-23 (NASB):

"I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb."

The glory of God has illumined it.

In the new creation, in the eternal state, there will be no need for created light—no sun, no moon—because the glory of God will be the light. God's glory will illuminate everything. His presence will fill everything. His character will be manifested in everything.

And we—redeemed humanity, restored image-bearers, perfected glory-reflectors—we will live in that glory. We will reflect that glory. We will display that glory forever.

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This is the end of the story. This is where it's all heading. This is the consummation of God's purpose for us.

We were created for His glory. We fell and exchanged His glory for our own. He sent Jesus to restore us.

The Spirit is transforming us. And one day, we will be fully conformed to Christ's image and will reflect God's glory perfectly for all eternity.

That's the arc of the story. That's the big picture. That's what it's all about.

Living in Light of Our Purpose

So what does all of this mean for us right now, today, as we're taking Jesus's yoke and learning from Him?

It means we finally understand what we're learning *for*. We're not just learning to be better people or to have happier lives or to be more successful Christians. We're learning to fulfill our purpose. We're learning to be what we were created to be. We're learning to live for God's glory.

Every lesson Jesus teaches us, every aspect of His curriculum, every transformation the Spirit works in us —it's all aimed at this one goal: conforming us to Christ's image so we can reflect God's glory.

When Jesus teaches us to be humble, He's teaching us to reflect God's character. When He teaches us to love sacrificially, He's teaching us to display God's nature. When He teaches us to forgive freely, He's teaching us to manifest God's heart. When He teaches us to serve without seeking recognition, He's teaching us to live for God's glory instead of our own.

This is what it means to learn from Jesus. This is the curriculum of the Kingdom. This is what we're being trained for.

Not self-improvement. Not self-actualization. Not self-glorification.

But God-glorification. Living for His glory. Reflecting His character. Displaying His nature. Being what we were created to be.

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And here's the beautiful irony: When we finally stop seeking our own glory and start living for God's glory, we find what we were always looking for. We find satisfaction. Fulfillment. Joy. Peace. Purpose. Meaning.

Because we're finally living according to our design. We're finally functioning as we were created to function. We're finally being what we were meant to be.

Irenaeus was right: "The glory of God is man fully alive."

When we live for God's glory, we're most fully alive. When we reflect His character, we're most fully human. When we fulfill our purpose, we find what our souls have been longing for all along.

This is what Jesus came to teach us. This is what we learn when we take His yoke. This is where the apprenticeship leads.

To a life lived for God's glory. To becoming what we were created to be. To reflecting the One in whose image we were made.

That's our purpose. That's our destiny. That's what we're learning from Jesus.

And it changes everything.

Because once you understand why you were made—once you grasp that you were created for God's glory, that this is your purpose, your design, your reason for existing—then suddenly all of Jesus's teaching makes sense.

Suddenly the call to die to self isn't arbitrary or harsh—it's necessary, because self-glory has to die before God-glory can live.

Suddenly the invitation to humility isn't demeaning—it's liberating, because we're free from the exhausting quest to prove our worth.

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Suddenly the command to love isn't burdensome—it's natural, because we're finally living according to our design.

Suddenly the way of the cross isn't punishment—it's the path to becoming who we were always meant to be.

We were created for God's glory. That's not a religious obligation. That's not a heavy burden. That's not an impossible demand.

That's our purpose. That's what we're for. That's where we find life.

And Jesus—gentle and humble in heart—is teaching us how to live it.

One lesson at a time. One transformation at a time. One step at a time.

From glory to glory. Until the day when the process is complete and we reflect His glory perfectly.

That's the destination. That's where we're headed. That's what we're learning from Jesus.

How to live for God's glory. How to be what we were created to be. How to finally, fully, eternally come alive.

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CHAPTER 7: Abiding in the Vine—The Source of Fruitful Glory

"I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing... My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples."

— John 15:5, 8 (NASB)

Here's the question that haunts everyone who takes Jesus seriously: How do we actually do this? How do we live for God's glory? How do we become the people Jesus is calling us to be? How do we produce the kind of fruit that displays God's character?

If you're like me, your first instinct is to try harder. To make a list. To create a plan. To set goals. To implement strategies. To work at becoming more loving, more patient, more humble, more holy.

And if you're like me, you've discovered that trying harder doesn't work. You might manage to modify your behavior for a while—you might succeed at being more patient for a few days, or more loving for a few weeks—but it doesn't last. Eventually you snap. Eventually the real you comes out. Eventually you fail.

And then you feel worse than before, because now you've added failure to your resume. Now you know you can't do it. Now you're convinced you're not cut out for this whole "living for God's glory" thing.

I've been there more times than I can count. I've made the lists. I've created the plans. I've tried to manufacture spiritual fruit through sheer force of will. And I've failed. Repeatedly. Spectacularly.

Until I finally heard what Jesus was actually saying in John 15.

He wasn't giving me a to-do list. He wasn't outlining a program for self-improvement. He wasn't telling me to try harder.

He was telling me where fruit comes from. And it doesn't come from trying. It comes from abiding.

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This changes everything.

I. The Metaphor of the Vine

Jesus begins this teaching with a simple declaration: "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser" (John 15:1, NASB).

I am the true vine.

This isn't the first time Jesus has used "I am" language to describe Himself. Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus has been making these stunning claims: I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the door. I am the good shepherd. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the way, the truth, and the life.

And now: I am the true vine.

Each of these "I am" statements reveals something essential about who Jesus is and what He does. And this one—the vine—is particularly significant because of its deep roots in Israel's history.

Israel as the Failed Vine

In the Old Testament, the vine was a common metaphor for Israel. God planted Israel like a vine in the land of Canaan, expecting it to produce good fruit. But it didn't.

Isaiah 5:1-7 is the most extended treatment of this image. It's a song about a vineyard:

"Let me sing now for my well-beloved a song of my beloved concerning His vineyard. My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill. He dug it all around, removed its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. And He built a tower in the middle of it and also hewed out a wine vat in it; then He expected it to produce good grapes, but it produced only worthless ones" (Isaiah 5:1-2, NASB).

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God did everything right. He chose fertile ground. He removed the obstacles. He planted the choicest vine. He protected it. He provided everything it needed. He expected good fruit.

But the vine produced worthless grapes.

And then God asks: "What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones?" (Isaiah 5:4, NASB).

The answer comes in verse 7: "For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel and the men of Judah His delightful plant. Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress."

Israel was supposed to produce fruit. They were supposed to display God's character—justice, righteousness, love, mercy. They were supposed to be a light to the nations, showing the world what it looks like when God's people live for His glory.

But they failed. They produced bloodshed instead of justice. They produced oppression instead of righteousness. They became like the nations around them instead of showing the nations what God is like.

The vine failed to produce good fruit.

And so God says, "I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed; I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground" (Isaiah 5:5, NASB). Judgment comes. The vineyard is destroyed. The vine is cut down.

Israel, the vine, failed.

Jesus as the True and Perfect Vine

But now Jesus says, "I am the *true* vine."

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The word "true" is important. The Greek word is *alethinos*, which means genuine, authentic, real. Not false. Not failed. Not counterfeit. But true.

Israel was a vine, but it failed. Jesus is the *true* vine—the one who actually does what a vine is supposed to do, the one who produces the fruit that God is looking for, the one who perfectly fulfills God's intention.

Jesus is what Israel was supposed to be but wasn't. He's the faithful Son where Israel was an unfaithful son (see Hosea 11:1 and Matthew 2:15). He's the righteous Branch where Israel was an unfruitful branch. He's the true vine that produces good fruit where Israel produced worthless grapes.

And here's what matters for us: We can't produce fruit on our own any more than Israel could. Left to ourselves, we're failed vines. Worthless branches. Unfruitful plants.

But if we're connected to Jesus—if we're grafted into the true vine—then we can bear fruit. Not because we're capable of producing it ourselves, but because we're connected to the One who is fruitful by nature.

This is the key to everything. We don't produce fruit by trying harder. We produce fruit by being connected to Jesus.

Apart from Me You Can Do Nothing

Jesus makes this devastatingly clear in verse 5: "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5, NASB).

Apart from Me you can do nothing.

Not "you can do a little." Not "you can do some things but not others." Not "it will be harder but you can still manage."

Nothing.

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Dallas Willard called this "the most liberating words Jesus ever spoke."

Liberating.

How can "you can do nothing" be liberating? Because it ends the exhausting, futile quest to produce spiritual fruit through our own effort. It ends the endless cycle of trying and failing. It ends the crushing weight of thinking it all depends on us.

If we can do nothing apart from Christ, then we can stop trying to do everything on our own. We can stop striving. We can stop performing. We can stop pretending we have what it takes.

Instead, we can simply connect to the Vine. We can abide. We can remain. We can stay attached.

And the fruit will come. Not because we produced it. But because we're connected to the One who produces it naturally, effortlessly, continuously.

This is grace. This is rest. This is the easy yoke and the light burden Jesus promised.

We don't have to produce fruit. We just have to stay connected to the Vine. And the Vine produces the fruit through us.

II. What Abiding Means

So what does it mean to "abide"?

The Greek word is *menō*, and it means to remain, to stay, to dwell, to continue, to not leave. It's a word that suggests permanence, stability, ongoing connection.

Jesus isn't talking about occasional visits to the vine. He's not describing a weekly check-in or a daily devotional time where we connect for a few minutes and then disconnect.

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He's talking about constant, continuous, unbroken connection. Remaining. Dwelling. Staying put.

Think about a branch on a vine. The branch doesn't disconnect from the vine at night and reconnect in the morning. It doesn't take breaks from the vine. It doesn't go off on its own for a while and then come back when it needs nourishment.

The branch *stays* connected. All the time. Continuously. Without interruption.

That's abiding.

Remaining, Dwelling, Staying Connected

But here's what we need to understand: Abiding isn't work. It's not one more thing we have to do. It's not striving or performing or achieving.

Abiding is rest. It's being. It's staying.

A branch doesn't work at being connected to the vine. A branch simply *is* connected to the vine. The connection is its natural state. And as long as it maintains that natural state—as long as it doesn't break off, doesn't disconnect, doesn't separate itself—the life of the vine flows into it naturally, effortlessly.

The sap flows. The nutrients transfer. The life of the vine becomes the life of the branch. And fruit grows.

Not because the branch is working hard. But because the branch is staying connected.

This is what Jesus is inviting us into. Not more work. Not harder trying. But remaining. Dwelling. Staying connected.

It's a posture, not a program. It's a relationship, not a regimen. It's being, not doing.

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And yet—and this is crucial—it does require intentionality. Branches can break off. Branches can become diseased. Branches can die if they're not properly cared for.

So abiding requires something from us. Not striving, but choice. Not earning, but cultivating. Not achieving, but maintaining.

Abiding in Love Through Obedience

Jesus explains what abiding looks like practically in verses 9-10: "Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love" (John 15:9-10, NASB).

Abide in My love.

That's the invitation. That's the environment. That's the atmosphere in which we live.

We abide in His love. We remain in it. We dwell in it. We don't leave it. We don't disconnect from it. We stay there, continuously, constantly.

And how do we do that? "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love."

Now wait a minute. I thought we just said this wasn't about works? I thought we said abiding was rest, not striving?

But notice what Jesus says. He doesn't say, "Keep My commandments so you can earn My love." He says, "Keep My commandments and you will abide in My love."

There's a huge difference.

Obedience isn't how we earn the love. Obedience is how we stay in the love. It's how we maintain the connection. It's how we cultivate the relationship.

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Think about it this way: If I love my wife but I'm constantly unfaithful to her, constantly dishonoring her, constantly ignoring her wishes and doing whatever I want—am I abiding in her love? No. I'm disconnecting from it. I'm breaking the relationship. I'm severing the bond.

But if I honor her, if I'm faithful to her, if I consider her wishes and her heart, if I live in a way that protects and nurtures our relationship—then I'm abiding in her love. I'm staying in the relationship. I'm maintaining the connection.

The obedience doesn't earn the love. But the obedience keeps us in the love we've already been given.

It's the same with Jesus. His love for us is unconditional. We don't earn it. We don't deserve it. We can't lose it through our failure.

But we can disconnect from it through persistent disobedience. We can break the fellowship. We can sever the connection. We can walk away from the relationship.

Obedience is how we stay. It's how we remain. It's how we abide.

And Jesus models this perfectly. He says, "I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love." Jesus's obedience to the Father kept Him in constant, unbroken fellowship with the Father. It maintained the connection. It sustained the relationship.

And He invites us to do the same. To keep His commandments—not as a way of earning His love, but as a way of staying in His love. Of maintaining the connection. Of abiding.

The Rhythm of Word, Prayer, and Presence

So practically, what does abiding look like? How do we maintain this connection with Jesus?

The classic spiritual disciplines are the means of abiding. Not the means of earning. Not the means of performing. But the means of staying connected.

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The Word. We abide in Jesus by dwelling in His Word. By reading Scripture not as a duty to check off but as a way of hearing His voice. By meditating on His teachings, letting them sink deep into our hearts and minds. By allowing the Word to shape our thinking, our desires, our perspectives.

When we're regularly in the Word, we're maintaining our connection to Jesus. We're hearing from Him. We're being reminded of His love, His promises, His character, His ways. We're staying in fellowship with Him.

Prayer. We abide in Jesus by talking with Him. By bringing everything to Him—our joys, our sorrows, our questions, our struggles, our needs, our gratitude. By maintaining ongoing conversation with Him throughout the day, not just during designated "prayer times."

Prayer is the language of relationship. It's how we stay connected. It's how we keep the lines of communication open. It's how we remain in fellowship.

Presence. We abide in Jesus by practicing His presence. By cultivating awareness of the fact that He's with us, always, everywhere. By learning to recognize His voice, His leading, His work in our lives. By pausing throughout the day to consciously acknowledge that we're not alone, that we're yoked to Him, that He's right here with us.

Brother Lawrence, the 17th-century monk who wrote *The Practice of the Presence of God*, learned to maintain constant awareness of God's presence even while doing mundane tasks like washing dishes in the monastery kitchen. He learned to abide. To remain. To stay connected.

These aren't works we perform to earn God's favor. They're means we use to maintain our connection with Him. They're the ways we stay plugged into the Vine so His life can flow into us.

The Branch That Rests

Hudson Taylor, the great missionary to China, understood abiding better than most. He wrote:

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"The branch of the vine does not worry, and toil, and rush here to seek for sunshine, and there to find rain. No; it rests in union and communion with the vine; and at the right time, and in the right way, is the right fruit found on it. Let us so abide in the Lord Jesus."

The branch does not worry, and toil, and rush.

That's the key. Abiding is not anxious. It's not frantic. It's not exhausting.

The branch rests. It remains. It stays connected. And the fruit comes naturally, spontaneously, effortlessly.

Not because the branch is trying hard to produce fruit. But because the branch is resting in union with the vine, and the vine's life is flowing through it.

This is what Jesus is offering us. Rest. Not idleness, but rest. Active abiding, but peaceful abiding. Intentional connection, but restful connection.

We don't have to manufacture fruit. We just have to stay attached to the One who produces it.

III. The Process of Pruning

But here's where the teaching gets uncomfortable. Because abiding isn't just about staying connected so fruit will grow. It's also about being pruned so more fruit will grow.

Jesus says in verse 2: "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit" (John 15:2, NASB).

Every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it.

Notice: This isn't about branches that aren't bearing fruit. Those get removed. This is about branches that ARE bearing fruit. And those get pruned.

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If you're bearing fruit—if your life is displaying God's character, if you're reflecting His glory, if you're growing in Christlikeness—don't think the pruning is over. It's just beginning.

Because God is never satisfied with the amount of fruit we're bearing now. He always wants more. Not because He's a harsh taskmaster who's never pleased. But because He's a loving Father who knows we're capable of more, who sees what we can become, who wants us to reach our full potential as image-bearers.

And so He prunes.

What Is Pruning?

If you've ever worked with grapevines or fruit trees, you know what pruning is. It's cutting back. Removing branches. Taking away parts of the plant that look perfectly healthy.

Why? Because those branches—even though they're alive and growing—are taking energy from the plant that could be going into fruit production. They're not necessarily bad branches. They're just not the most fruitful branches. They're good branches that need to be cut away so the best branches can flourish.

Pruning always looks like loss in the moment. You're cutting away living tissue. You're removing growth. You're making the plant smaller, not larger.

But pruning is actually an investment. You're removing lesser growth so greater growth can happen. You're cutting away good things so the best things can flourish. You're choosing temporary loss for long-term gain.

And God does this in our lives.

The Discipline of the Lord

Hebrews 12:5-11 (NASB) helps us understand what's happening when God prunes us:

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"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reproved by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives... All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (verses 5-6, 11).

Those whom the Lord loves He disciplines.

This is pruning. This is God's loving work of cutting away things in our lives that are hindering greater fruitfulness. And it happens precisely because He loves us, because He's invested in our growth, because He wants us to bear more fruit.

The passage is honest about what this feels like: "All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful." Pruning hurts. It feels like loss. It feels like something valuable is being taken away.

But look at the result: "Afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness."

Afterwards.

Not during. Not in the moment. But afterwards. After the pruning. After the pain. After what felt like loss turns out to have been preparation for gain.

The pruning produces fruit. That's the promise. That's what makes it bearable. That's why we can trust the Vinedresser even when His shears are cutting into our lives.

What God Prunes

So what does God prune? What does He cut away?

Sometimes He prunes sin. Obvious, blatant sin that's clearly hindering our relationship with Him and preventing fruit. The Holy Spirit convicts us, circumstances bring consequences, and the sin is exposed and removed. That's pruning.

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But often, God prunes things that aren't sinful at all. Good things. Legitimate things. Things we enjoy, things we value, things that have been part of our lives for years.

He prunes relationships that are keeping us from deeper relationship with Him. He prunes activities that are consuming time and energy that should be going into Kingdom work. He prunes ambitions that are orienting our hearts toward our glory instead of His. He prunes comforts that are making us too settled in this world instead of longing for the next.

He prunes whatever is competing with our connection to the Vine. Whatever is drawing life from us instead of channeling life to us. Whatever is good but not best.

And this is hard. Because the things God prunes often feel necessary. We can't imagine life without them. We're convinced we need them. We argue with God about why He shouldn't take them away.

But the Vinedresser knows what He's doing. He sees what we can't see. He knows which branches need to be cut so the remaining branches can flourish.

And He loves us too much to leave us less fruitful than we could be.

The Pain That Produces Glory

Here's the connection to our purpose: Pruning is painful, but it produces glory.

Remember Romans 8:17? "If indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him" (NASB). And 2 Corinthians 4:17: "For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (NASB).

Pruning is one form of suffering with Christ. It's the pain of having things cut away. It's the sorrow of loss. It's the discomfort of change. It's the vulnerability of being exposed.

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But it's producing glory. Not our glory—God's glory. It's making us more fruitful. It's conforming us more fully to Christ's image. It's removing the obstacles to our purpose as glory-reflectors.

The pruning hurts. But it's worth it. Because on the other side of the pruning is fruit. And the fruit glorifies God.

How Suffering Teaches Us Dependence

There's one more crucial thing the pruning does: It teaches us dependence.

When God cuts away the things we were relying on—our abilities, our relationships, our resources, our comforts, our securities—we're forced to rely on Him. We're driven back to the Vine. We're reminded that apart from Him we can do nothing.

Pruning strips away our self-sufficiency. It exposes our neediness. It shows us how weak we really are, how much we really need Jesus.

And in that place of acknowledged weakness and dependence, we discover something amazing: His grace is sufficient. His power is perfected in our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). When we're weak, then we're strong—because we're no longer relying on ourselves but on Him.

The pruning that feels like it's taking something away is actually giving us something better: Greater dependence on Christ. Deeper connection to the Vine. More complete reliance on His life flowing through us.

And that dependence, that connection, that reliance—that's what produces fruit. Not our strength, but His strength working through our acknowledged weakness. Not our resources, but His life flowing through our emptiness. Not our sufficiency, but His all-sufficiency channeled through our insufficiency.

The pruning teaches us to abide. And abiding produces fruit.

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IV. The Product: Fruit for God's Glory

So what is this fruit we keep talking about? What does it look like? How do we recognize it?

The Fruit of the Spirit

Paul gives us the clearest description in Galatians 5:22-23 (NASB):

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law."

The fruit of the Spirit.

Not the fruit of the branch. Not the fruit of our effort. But the fruit of the Spirit.

This is what grows when we're connected to the Vine, when the Spirit is flowing through us, when we're abiding in Christ.

Love. Not the sentimental, feeling-based kind, but the self-giving, others-oriented, sacrificial kind that reflects God's love for us.

Joy. Not happiness that depends on circumstances, but deep contentment and gladness that comes from knowing God, regardless of what's happening around us.

Peace. Not the absence of conflict, but the settled confidence that comes from trusting God even in the midst of chaos.

Patience. Not just waiting without complaining, but enduring difficulty with grace, trusting God's timing, refusing to demand our way on our timeline.

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Kindness. Active goodness toward others, going out of our way to help, showing compassion and generosity.

Goodness. Moral uprightness, integrity, doing what's right not because someone's watching but because it's who we are.

Faithfulness. Reliability, trustworthiness, steadfastness, keeping our commitments even when it's hard.

Gentleness. Strength under control, meekness, humility in how we treat others.

Self-control. Mastery over our desires, the ability to say no to ourselves, disciplined living.

This is the fruit. This is what grows when we're connected to Jesus. This is what appears in our lives when we're abiding in the Vine.

And notice: It's singular. "The fruit of the Spirit" is one thing with nine manifestations. It's the character of Christ—all of it—being formed in us. Not one quality here and another there, but the whole package, the complete character transformation.

We don't choose which fruit we want to produce. We don't get to say, "I'll take love and joy, but you can keep that patience and self-control." It's all or nothing. It's the whole fruit. It's the complete character of Christ being formed in us.

And it all comes from one source: The Spirit. The life of Christ flowing through us. The Vine's life becoming the branch's life.

My Father Is Glorified by This

Now here's why this matters so much. Jesus says in verse 8: "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples" (John 15:8, NASB).

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My Father is glorified by this.

This is it. This is the connection between abiding and glory. This is why fruit matters. This is what we were created for.

When we bear fruit—when love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are evident in our lives—God is glorified. His character is displayed. His nature is revealed. His glory is manifested.

People see the fruit and they see God. They see love and they understand something about God's love. They see joy and they glimpse something of God's satisfaction. They see peace and they get a picture of God's sovereignty. They see patience and they learn something about God's longsuffering. They see kindness and they experience something of God's goodness.

The fruit makes God visible. It displays His glory. It fulfills our purpose as image-bearers.

And notice: It proves we're disciples. Not our claims. Not our words. Not our religious activities. But our fruit.

"You will know them by their fruits," Jesus said (Matthew 7:16, NASB). The fruit proves what's real. The fruit reveals who's connected to the Vine and who's just pretending.

This is what God cares about. This is what brings Him glory. Not how impressive we look or how spiritual we sound or how many religious things we do. But fruit. The character of Christ formed in us and displayed through us.

That's what glorifies the Father.

Fruitfulness Flows from Union, Not Striving

And here's what we need to understand—really understand, deep in our bones: This fruit doesn't come from striving. It comes from abiding.

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We don't produce it by trying harder to be loving or forcing ourselves to be patient or working up feelings of joy. We produce it by staying connected to Jesus. By abiding in Him. By remaining in the Vine.

When we're connected, the fruit grows naturally. Not easily—there's still the pruning, still the discipline, still the process of growth. But naturally, organically, as the inevitable result of being connected to the source of life.

A branch doesn't strain to produce grapes. It just needs to stay connected to the vine. The life of the vine flows into it, and grapes appear. Not because the branch worked hard, but because the branch stayed connected.

That's us. We stay connected to Jesus—through His Word, through prayer, through obedience, through worship, through fellowship with His body—and fruit appears. Not perfectly. Not instantly. Not without setbacks and failures. But gradually, progressively, inevitably.

The fruit of the Spirit grows when we abide in the Spirit. The character of Christ is formed in us when we remain in Christ. God's glory is displayed through our lives when we stay connected to the source of God's life.

It's union, not striving. It's connection, not performance. It's abiding, not achieving.

This is grace. This is rest. This is the light burden and the easy yoke.

Fruit Reveals Our True Connection

Jesus makes this point explicitly in Matthew 7:16-20 (NASB):

"You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits."

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You will know them by their fruits.

The fruit is the evidence. It's the proof. It's the revelation of what's really going on inside, what's really connected, what's really real.

You can claim to be connected to Jesus. You can say all the right things. You can look spiritual. You can perform religious activities. But the fruit—or lack of it—will reveal the truth.

If you're truly connected to the Vine, fruit will appear. Maybe slowly. Maybe imperfectly. Maybe with setbacks and seasons of barrenness. But fruit will come. Because that's what happens when a branch is connected to a fruitful vine.

And if there's no fruit—if there's no evidence of the Spirit's character being formed in you, if there's no love or joy or peace or patience or kindness, if there's no change, no growth, no transformation—then something's wrong with the connection. Either you're not truly connected to Christ, or you're blocking the flow somehow, or you're not abiding, not remaining, not staying attached.

The fruit reveals the connection. The fruit proves the relationship. The fruit glorifies God.

The Invitation to Abide

So here's where we land: If we want to live for God's glory—if we want to fulfill our purpose as image-bearers, if we want to display God's character, if we want to bear fruit that makes God visible—we need to abide.

Not strive. Not perform. Not try harder. Not manufacture spiritual fruit through sheer willpower.

But abide. Remain. Stay connected. Dwell in Christ.

This is the source of everything. This is where fruitful glory comes from. This is how we become what we were created to be.

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We can't do it on our own. Apart from Him we can do nothing. But connected to Him, remaining in Him, abiding in Him—we can bear much fruit. Not because of our strength but because of His. Not because of our effort but because of His life. Not because of what we produce but because of what flows through us from Him.

This is the invitation. This is the way. This is how we learn to live for God's glory.

We take Jesus's yoke. We learn from Him. We abide in Him. We stay connected. We let His life flow through us. We allow the Vinedresser to prune what needs pruning. We trust the process. We rest in the union.

And fruit grows. The character of Christ is formed in us. The glory of God is displayed through us. And we discover that we're finally living the life we were created to live.

Not through striving. But through abiding.

Not through performing. But through remaining.

Not through achieving. But through staying connected.

The branch doesn't worry or toil or rush. It simply rests in union with the vine. And at the right time, in the right way, the right fruit appears.

That's the invitation. That's the promise. That's the way.

Abide in Him. And you will bear much fruit. And the Father will be glorified.

That's what we were made for. That's what Jesus is teaching us. That's what we learn when we take His yoke.

How to abide. How to remain. How to stay connected to the source of all life and all fruit and all glory.

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And in the abiding, we find everything we've been looking for.

Rest. Purpose. Transformation. Fruitfulness. Glory.

All of it flows from one source: Jesus, the true Vine.

Stay connected to Him. And everything else follows.

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CHAPTER 8: Humility—The Pathway to Glorifying God

"Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted."

— Matthew 23:12 (NASB)

I have to be honest with you: This is the chapter I'm least qualified to write.

Because humility is the one thing you can't claim to have. The moment you think you've achieved it, you've lost it. The second you congratulate yourself on being humble, you've become proud.

It's the virtue that evaporates under self-examination. The quality that disappears when you notice it. The characteristic that only really exists when you're not thinking about it.

And yet, it's essential. Non-negotiable. Central to everything Jesus teaches us. Because you simply cannot live for God's glory while you're still chasing your own glory. And pride—the opposite of humility—is all about chasing our own glory.

Pride says, "Look at me. Notice me. Praise me. Recognize me. Honor me. I deserve it. I've earned it. I'm worth it."

Humility says, "Look at Him. Notice Him. Praise Him. Recognize Him. Honor Him. He deserves it. He's earned it. He's worth it."

Pride turns the spotlight on ourselves. Humility turns the spotlight on God.

Pride seeks self-glory. Humility seeks God's glory.

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And there's no middle ground. No compromise position. No way to pursue both. We're either living for our glory or God's glory. We're either humble or proud. We're either self-focused or God-focused.

The choice is absolute. And it's a choice we make every single day, in a thousand small decisions about whose glory we're really living for.

This is the struggle. This is the battle. This is where the way of the cross becomes intensely personal and painfully practical.

Because humility doesn't come naturally. It's not our default setting. It has to be learned. Practiced. Chosen. Again and again and again.

So let's learn from Jesus. Let's see what humility looks like. Let's understand why it's the pathway—the only pathway—to glorifying God.

I. The Paradox of Glory Through Humility

Here's the paradox that upends everything our culture tells us: The way to glory is through humility. The path to being lifted up is first going down. The road to exaltation begins with humiliation.

This makes no sense to our natural thinking. The world says, "If you want to be great, promote yourself. If you want to be recognized, make yourself visible. If you want to get ahead, push yourself forward. If you want honor, demand it."

But Jesus says exactly the opposite.

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God's Opposition to Pride

James 4:6 (NASB) gives us a terrifying statement: "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

God is opposed to the proud.

Let that sink in. If you're proud—if you're seeking your own glory, promoting yourself, exalting yourself—God is opposed to you. Not neutral. Not indifferent. Not waiting to see how things play out. But actively opposed.

The Greek word is *antitassetai*, which is a military term. It means to set oneself against, to array oneself in battle formation against an enemy. God takes up a position of opposition against the proud person.

That should terrify us. Because if God is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31). But if God is against us, what hope do we have? If the Almighty arrays Himself in battle formation against us, we're finished.

Pride doesn't just displease God. It puts us at war with God.

Why? Because pride is the fundamental sin. It's the root of all other sins. It's the essence of rebellion against God.

C.S. Lewis wrote: "Pride is the complete anti-God state of mind."

The complete anti-God state of mind.

Pride says, "I don't need God. I can do this myself. I'm the center of my universe. My will, my way, my glory."

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It's the original sin—Lucifer's sin, when he said, "I will make myself like the Most High" (Isaiah 14:14, NASB). It's Adam and Eve's sin, when they believed the serpent's promise, "You will be like God" (Genesis 3:5, NASB).

Pride is the attempt to dethrone God and enthrone ourselves. It's cosmic treason. It's rebellion at the deepest level.

And God cannot—will not—tolerate it. Because if He did, He would be denying His own nature. He would be saying that creatures can be their own gods, that created things can claim glory that belongs only to the Creator.

So God opposes the proud. He resists them. He sets Himself against them.

But look at the second half of that verse: "But gives grace to the humble."

If you're humble—if you acknowledge your need, if you recognize your dependence, if you give glory to God rather than claiming it for yourself—then God gives you grace. Unmerited favor. Undeserved blessing. Unearned help.

The proud get opposition. The humble get grace.

The choice is ours.

The Great Reversal

Jesus makes this principle explicit in Matthew 23:12 (NASB): "Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted."

This is the great reversal. The upside-down Kingdom. The completely counterintuitive way God works.

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If you exalt yourself—if you promote yourself, push yourself forward, seek recognition and honor for yourself—you will be humbled. God will bring you down. He'll knock you off your self-made pedestal. He'll expose your pride and show you your true condition.

But if you humble yourself—if you voluntarily lower yourself, if you choose to serve rather than be served, if you give honor rather than seeking it—you will be exalted. God will lift you up. He'll give you the honor you weren't seeking. He'll promote you in His timing and His way.

The one who seeks exaltation gets humiliation. The one who chooses humiliation gets exaltation.

It's completely backwards from how the world works. But it's exactly how the Kingdom works.

And Jesus lived it. He modeled it perfectly.

Christ's Pattern: Humiliation Then Exaltation

Philippians 2:5-11 (NASB) gives us the pattern:

"Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Look at the sequence:

Humiliation: He existed in the form of God, but He didn't grasp at equality with God. He emptied Himself. He took the form of a servant. He became a man. He humbled Himself. He became obedient to death—death on a cross.

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Exaltation: *For this reason*—because of His humiliation, because of His obedience, because He went all the way down—*God highly exalted Him*. Gave Him the name above every name. Made Him the object of universal worship. Established Him as Lord to the glory of God the Father.

The humiliation came first. The exaltation followed.

He descended before He ascended. He died before He rose. He was humiliated before He was glorified.

And this is the pattern for us. "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus." Follow His path. Walk His way. Go down so you can be lifted up.

But here's what we need to understand: Jesus didn't humble Himself in order to be exalted. He humbled Himself in obedience to the Father, in service to humanity, in fulfillment of His mission. The exaltation was the Father's response to His obedience, not the goal of His humiliation.

If Jesus had humbled Himself *in order to get* exaltation, it wouldn't have been humility. It would have been strategy. Manipulation. A means to an end.

True humility doesn't calculate the payoff. It doesn't humble itself to get something in return. It humbles itself because that's the right posture before God. Because God is high and we are low. Because God is worthy of all glory and we are not.

The exaltation comes. Jesus promises it. But it comes as God's gift, not as our achievement. It comes in His timing, not ours. It comes in ways we don't expect and couldn't orchestrate.

We humble ourselves. And God exalts us. But we humble ourselves because it's right, not because we're angling for exaltation.

That's the paradox. That's the pattern. That's the pathway to glory.

Down, then up. Humiliation, then exaltation. Death, then resurrection.

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The way of the cross. The way of Jesus. The only way that glorifies God.

II. Learning Humility from Jesus

So how do we learn humility? Not by reading about it or thinking about it or trying to work up feelings of humility. But by watching Jesus. By observing how He lived. By seeing humility in action and learning to imitate it.

Greatness Through Service

In Matthew 20, James and John's mother comes to Jesus with a request. She wants her sons to sit at Jesus's right and left hand in His kingdom—positions of honor, power, authority. She's ambitious for them. They want greatness.

And the other ten disciples are indignant when they hear about it (Matthew 20:24). Not because they're above such ambition. But because they want the same thing and now James and John have beaten them to it.

So Jesus gathers them all and teaches them about Kingdom greatness:

"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:25-28, NASB).

It is not this way among you.

In the world's system, greatness means power over others. It means being served, being recognized, being in charge, having people beneath you who do your bidding.

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But in the Kingdom, it's completely different. Greatness means serving. Being first means being last. Leadership means lowering yourself, not elevating yourself.

Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant.

Notice: Jesus doesn't rebuke the desire for greatness. He redirects it. He says, "You want to be great? Fine. Here's how: Become a servant. You want to be first? Here's the path: Become a slave."

Kingdom greatness is measured by service, not by status. By how low you'll go, not how high you can climb. By how many you serve, not how many serve you.

And Jesus models this perfectly: "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

He's the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and He came to serve. He came to give His life. He came to be the slave of all so that all could be free.

That's humility. That's greatness. That's the pattern we're called to follow.

The Towel and the Basin

We've already looked at John 13 in an earlier chapter, but we need to come back to it here because it's the ultimate demonstration of Jesus's humility.

Jesus knows He's about to die. This is His last night with His disciples. He has limited time to teach them the most important lessons.

So what does He do?

He washes their feet.

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John 13:3-5 (NASB): "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself. Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded."

Notice what John emphasizes: Jesus knew who He was. He knew the Father had given all things into His hands. He knew He had come from God and was going back to God. He knew His identity, His authority, His position, His power.

And knowing all that—knowing that He was God incarnate, knowing that He had all authority, knowing that He deserved to be served—He got up and served.

He laid aside His garments. He took a towel. He knelt down. He washed feet.

This is humility. Not ignorance of who you are. Not lack of confidence in your abilities. But knowing who you are and choosing to serve anyway. Having power and choosing to use it for others rather than for yourself. Possessing authority and choosing to lower yourself rather than exalt yourself.

Jesus had every right to be served. Instead, He served.

And then He makes it explicit in verses 13-15: "You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you" (NASB).

I gave you an example.

This isn't just a nice story to admire. It's a pattern to follow. An example to imitate. A command to obey.

"As I did to you, you also should do." Take the towel. Kneel down. Wash feet. Serve. Humble yourself. Lower yourself. Give honor rather than seeking it.

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That's the lesson. That's what humility looks like. That's what we're learning from Jesus.

I Am Among You as the One Who Serves

Even on the night of His betrayal, even at the Last Supper, the disciples are arguing about which of them is the greatest (Luke 22:24). They still don't get it. They're still jockeying for position. They're still seeking honor.

And Jesus says to them: "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called 'Benefactors.' But it is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant. For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves" (Luke 22:25-27, NASB).

I am among you as the one who serves.

Present tense. Continuous action. This is who Jesus is. This is how He lives. This is His posture, His orientation, His way of being.

He doesn't just serve occasionally. He doesn't just perform acts of service when He's trying to make a point. He IS the one who serves. It's His identity. It's who He is at the core.

And He invites us to be the same. To become servants. To make service our identity, not just something we do. To be characterized by humility, not just practice it occasionally.

How Jesus Handled Honor and Recognition

Here's another aspect of Jesus's humility that we often miss: How He handled honor and recognition when it came His way.

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After Jesus heals someone, He often says, "Don't tell anyone" (Matthew 8:4; Mark 1:44; Mark 7:36). When crowds gather, He often withdraws (Matthew 14:13; Mark 1:45; Luke 5:16). When people try to make Him king, He hides (John 6:15). When people praise Him, He redirects the glory to the Father (John 5:30, 41; John 7:18).

Jesus doesn't seek recognition. He doesn't crave applause. He doesn't need people to know who He is or what He's done.

Why? Because He's not living for human glory. He's living for the Father's glory. His satisfaction comes from doing the Father's will, not from receiving human praise.

This is critical for us. Because we live in a culture that's obsessed with recognition. With being noticed. With building a platform. With getting followers and likes and shares and views. With making a name for ourselves.

And it's so easy to baptize that with Christian language. "I'm building a platform for the Kingdom." "I'm using social media for God's glory." "I'm trying to have influence so I can reach more people for Christ."

Maybe. Or maybe we're just seeking recognition and calling it ministry. Maybe we're chasing our own glory and using God's name to justify it. Maybe we're feeding our pride and telling ourselves it's all for Jesus.

Jesus didn't need a platform. He didn't need followers (in the modern sense). He didn't need to be famous. He was content to be unknown by most of the world, to be rejected by the religious establishment, to be misunderstood even by His closest disciples.

Because He wasn't living for human recognition. He was living for the Father's approval. And that was enough.

Can we say the same?

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III. Humility in Practice

So what does humility actually look like in daily life? How do we practice it? How do we live it out?

Paul gives us some practical guidance.

Not Thinking Too Highly of Ourselves

Romans 12:3 (NASB): "For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith."

Not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think.

Notice: Paul doesn't say, "Don't think of yourself at all." He doesn't say, "Think of yourself as worthless." He doesn't promote self-hatred or self-deprecation.

He says, "Don't think more highly of yourself than you ought to think." In other words, have an accurate assessment of yourself. See yourself as you really are. Not inflated. Not deflated. But realistic.

But to think so as to have sound judgment.

Sound judgment. Sober thinking. Realistic self-assessment.

Here's what this means practically: We acknowledge both our gifts and our limitations. We recognize both our strengths and our weaknesses. We're honest about both what God has given us and what we lack.

We don't pretend to be more than we are. But we also don't pretend to be less than we are. Both are forms of pride—one is obvious pride, the other is false humility.

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True humility is honest self-assessment. It's knowing who you are—gifts and flaws, strengths and weaknesses, calling and limitations—and being at peace with that. Not needing to be more than you are. Not pretending to be less than you are. Just being who God made you to be.

Considering Others as More Important

Philippians 2:3-4 (NASB): "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others."

Regard one another as more important than yourselves.

This is radical. This goes against every instinct we have. Our natural bent is to regard ourselves as more important than others. To put our needs first. To prioritize our interests. To make sure we're taken care of before we worry about anyone else.

But Paul says, "Regard others as more important." Consider their needs above your own. Value their interests above yours. Put them first.

Not because they're actually more valuable than you—we're all equally valuable as image-bearers of God. But because this is the posture of humility. This is what love looks like. This is how we imitate Christ, who "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28, NASB).

Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

Notice: "Also." Paul isn't saying we should never consider our own needs. We're not supposed to completely neglect ourselves. But we're not supposed to be *merely* focused on ourselves.

Look out for others' interests also. In addition to. Alongside. Not instead of, but in addition to.

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This is the daily practice of humility. In every interaction, every decision, every choice, we ask: "How does this affect the other person? What do they need? How can I serve them? How can I put their interests alongside—or even above—my own?"

It's exhausting to live this way if you're doing it in your own strength. But remember: We're abiding in the Vine. We're learning from Jesus. We're being transformed by the Spirit. The humility we practice is the humility Christ is forming in us.

We're not manufacturing it. We're expressing what's being worked in us.

Clothing Ourselves with Humility

First Peter 5:5-6 (NASB): "You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time."

Clothe yourselves with humility.

The Greek word here is vivid. It literally means to tie something around yourself like an apron or a servant's garment. It's what Jesus did when He tied the towel around Himself before washing the disciples' feet.

We're to put on humility like we put on clothes. Deliberately. Intentionally. Consciously. Every day.

It's not automatic. It's not natural. We have to choose it. We have to dress ourselves in it. We have to tie it around ourselves.

And we do it "toward one another"—in our relationships, our interactions, our dealings with other people. We clothe ourselves with humility in how we speak, how we listen, how we respond, how we serve.

Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God.

LEARN FROM ME

Active voice. We humble ourselves. We choose it. We do it voluntarily. We submit to God's authority, God's timing, God's way.

That He may exalt you at the proper time.

There it is again. The pattern. The paradox. The promise.

We humble ourselves. And God exalts us. But He does it at the proper time—His time, not ours. In His way, not ours. For His glory, not ours.

We don't humble ourselves to manipulate God into exalting us. We humble ourselves because it's the right posture before God. And God, in His grace, lifts us up when the time is right.

The Daily Death to Self-Promotion

Here's where it gets intensely practical and painfully personal.

Humility requires the daily death of self-promotion. The daily crucifixion of our need to be noticed, recognized, praised, honored.

Every day, we face opportunities to promote ourselves. To make sure people know what we've done. To angle for recognition. To drop hints about our accomplishments. To position ourselves favorably. To take credit. To seek honor.

And every day, we have to choose to die to that. To let the moment pass without self-promotion. To give credit to others. To deflect praise. To serve without seeking recognition. To do good without needing anyone to know.

This is hard. Because we want to be noticed. We want our efforts to be recognized. We want people to know we're valuable, we're capable, we're doing good work.

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But that's pride talking. That's our flesh demanding its due. That's self-glory trying to assert itself.

And we have to nail it to the cross. Again. And again. And again.

Every time we're tempted to promote ourselves, we have to choose humility instead. Every time we want recognition, we have to choose to remain hidden. Every time we feel slighted because someone else got credit we deserved, we have to choose to rejoice in their honor rather than demand our own.

It's a daily death. A daily choice. A daily crucifixion of self-glory so that God's glory can be what matters.

And some days we fail. Some days we succumb to the temptation. Some days we promote ourselves, seek recognition, demand honor. Some days pride wins.

And when it does, we confess it. We repent. We ask for forgiveness. We acknowledge that we're still ragamuffins who need grace. And we get back up and try again the next day.

This is the path. This is the practice. This is humility in real life.

Not perfection. But progress. Not arrival. But direction. Not achievement. But daily choice.

Dying to self-promotion. Choosing God's glory over our own. Practicing humility even when—especially when—it costs us recognition.

IV. The Freedom of Humility

Now here's the irony: The thing we think will diminish us—humility—actually sets us free. The posture we think will make us small actually makes us whole.

Because pride is a prison. And humility is the key that unlocks the door.

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Liberation from Comparison and Competition

When you're proud, you're always comparing yourself to others. Always measuring. Always competing. Always needing to know where you stand in the hierarchy. Always anxious about whether you're ahead or behind, better or worse, more or less successful.

It's exhausting.

You can never rest. You can never be satisfied. Because there's always someone smarter, more gifted, more successful, more recognized than you. And even if you manage to be on top in one area, you're behind in another. And even if you're ahead today, someone might pass you tomorrow.

The comparison game is unwinnable. And it's miserable.

But humility frees you from all of that.

When you're humble, you're not comparing yourself to others because you're not competing with them. You're not measuring yourself against them because you're measuring yourself against Christ—and you know you fall short, and you're okay with that because you're being transformed by grace.

You're not worried about where you rank because you're not trying to rank. You're not anxious about your status because you're not seeking status. You're not threatened by others' success because their success doesn't diminish yours.

Humility liberates you from the exhausting treadmill of comparison and competition.

The Folly of Measuring Ourselves

Paul addresses this directly in 2 Corinthians 10:12 (NASB): "For we are not bold to class or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves; but when they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are without understanding."

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They are without understanding.

When we measure ourselves by ourselves—when we compare ourselves to other people, when we use human standards to evaluate our worth—we're being foolish. We lack understanding.

Why? Because we're using the wrong measuring stick. We're comparing ourselves to the wrong standard.

The only comparison that matters is: Am I becoming more like Christ? Am I being conformed to His image? Am I displaying more of His character? Am I living more for God's glory and less for my own?

That's the question. And the answer isn't found by looking at other people and seeing how we stack up. The answer is found by looking at Jesus and honestly assessing how far we still have to go.

And when we do that—when we measure ourselves against Christ instead of against each other—we all fall short. We're all inadequate. We're all in desperate need of grace.

And that's liberating. Because it puts us all on level ground. It removes the hierarchy. It eliminates the competition. We're all beggars telling other beggars where to find bread.

Resting in God's Assessment vs. Others' Opinions

Here's another freedom humility brings: You stop being controlled by others' opinions.

When you're proud, you desperately need people's approval. You need them to think well of you. You need them to recognize your worth. You need their praise, their affirmation, their validation.

And so you're constantly performing for them. Constantly managing their impressions. Constantly anxious about what they think.

It's slavery. You're enslaved to their opinions. Your sense of worth rises and falls based on whether they approve or disapprove, praise or criticize, honor or ignore.

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But when you're humble, you find your worth in God's assessment, not theirs.

God says you're His beloved child. That's your identity. That's your worth. And it doesn't change based on what anyone else thinks.

God says He's pleased with you—not because of your performance, but because of Christ's performance on your behalf. And that's settled. Secure. Unchanging.

So you're free from the tyranny of others' opinions. You can let them think what they want. You can receive their praise without being inflated by it. You can receive their criticism without being devastated by it.

Because your worth doesn't come from them. It comes from God. And His assessment is all that matters.

This is incredibly freeing. You can finally be yourself—your authentic, flawed, still-being-transformed self—without pretending, without performing, without needing everyone to be impressed.

You can serve without needing recognition. You can give without needing appreciation. You can do good without needing anyone to know.

Because you're not doing it for them. You're doing it for God. And His "well done" is all you need.

The Mother of All Virtues

Thomas Aquinas wrote: "Humility is the mother of all virtues because it makes us receptive to truth."

It makes us receptive to truth.

That's the key. Pride makes us defensive. It makes us unteachable. It makes us resistant to correction, to feedback, to anything that might suggest we're wrong or inadequate or in need of change.

Pride says, "I already know. I've got this figured out. Don't tell me what to do."

LEARN FROM ME

But humility says, "I don't know everything. I'm still learning. I need help. Teach me. Correct me. Show me what I'm missing."

Humility makes us teachable. And if we're not teachable, we can't learn from Jesus. We can't take His yoke and learn from Him if we think we already know it all.

This is why humility is essential for discipleship. This is why it's the pathway to glorifying God. This is why we can't live for God's glory while we're still seeking our own.

Because pride closes us off to transformation. It hardens us. It makes us rigid, defensive, unteachable.

But humility opens us up. It makes us soft, receptive, willing to change. It makes us students again. Learners. Disciples.

And when we're humble—when we're teachable, moldable, receptive to truth—then Jesus can actually teach us. The Spirit can actually transform us. God can actually work in us.

Humility is the mother of all virtues because it's the prerequisite for all growth. It's the soil in which every other virtue grows. It's the foundation on which transformation is built.

Without humility, we're stuck. Unchanging. Unteachable. Unable to become what God created us to be.

But with humility, everything becomes possible. Because we're finally open to the One who can change us. We're finally receptive to the One who wants to transform us. We're finally teachable by the One who knows how to teach us.

The Paradox Completed

So here's where we land: Humility is the pathway to glorifying God because it's the death of self-glory.

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As long as we're seeking our own glory, we can't give glory to God. As long as we're promoting ourselves, we can't promote Christ. As long as we're living for our recognition, we can't live for God's.

The two are incompatible. Mutually exclusive. We can't serve both.

But when we humble ourselves—when we voluntarily lower ourselves, when we choose to serve rather than be served, when we give honor rather than seeking it, when we make God's glory our goal instead of our own—then God is glorified through us.

Not because of anything impressive we've done. But because we've finally gotten out of the way. We've finally stopped blocking the light. We've finally stopped trying to steal glory that belongs to God alone.

Humility doesn't diminish us. It perfects us. It makes us what we were created to be—glory-reflectors, not glory-hoarders. Mirrors that point to God, not monuments that point to ourselves.

And in the humbling, we find freedom. Freedom from comparison. Freedom from competition. Freedom from the endless, exhausting quest for recognition. Freedom from the tyranny of others' opinions. Freedom from pride's prison.

We find rest. We find peace. We find joy. We find ourselves.

Because humility is not self-hatred. It's not thinking less of yourself. It's thinking of yourself less. It's getting the focus off yourself and onto God. It's living for His glory instead of your own.

And when we do that—when we humble ourselves, when we choose the way down instead of the way up, when we take the path of service instead of the path of status—we discover something amazing.

We discover that God lifts us up. Not because we manipulated Him into it. Not because we earned it. But because that's His nature. That's His promise. That's how He works.

LEARN FROM ME

He opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. He brings down the exalted but lifts up the lowly. He humbles those who exalt themselves but exalts those who humble themselves.

It's the great reversal. It's the upside-down Kingdom. It's the paradox of glory through humility.

And it's the only way that works. The only path that leads to God's glory. The only road that gets us where we actually want to go.

So we humble ourselves. Daily. Continuously. In a thousand small choices.

We take the towel. We kneel down. We wash feet. We serve. We give honor. We deflect praise. We promote others. We decrease so He can increase.

And in the decreasing, we find what we were looking for all along.

Not our glory. But His glory reflected through us.

Not our name made great. But His name made great through our lives.

Not recognition for ourselves. But recognition of Him because of how we serve.

That's the pathway. That's the paradox. That's the promise.

Humility leads to glory. Not our glory. But God's glory.

And that's what we were made for.

LEARN FROM ME

CHAPTER 9: Love—The Primary Expression of God's Glory

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

— John 13:34-35 (NASB)

If you've been tracking with me through this book, you might be thinking, "Okay, I get it. Humility is important. Dying to self-glory makes sense. Living for God's glory instead of my own—I'm on board with all of that."

"But what does it actually look like? What does a life lived for God's glory actually produce? How does God's glory get displayed through ordinary, broken people like me?"

The answer is simple and impossibly difficult: Love.

Real love. Costly love. Self-giving love. The kind of love that Jesus modeled and commanded and somehow, miraculously, produces in us through His Spirit.

Love is not one virtue among many. It's not an optional add-on to the Christian life. It's not something we get to once we've mastered all the other spiritual disciplines.

Love is the whole point. It's the core curriculum. It's the primary expression of God's glory. It's how people see what God is like. It's the proof that we're Jesus's disciples. It's the greatest commandment. It's what remains when everything else passes away.

Without love, everything else is worthless. First Corinthians 13 makes that devastatingly clear. You can have faith that moves mountains, you can have prophetic powers, you can have perfect knowledge, you can give everything you own to the poor, you can even sacrifice your body to be burned—but without love, you are nothing. You gain nothing. It profits nothing.

Nothing.

LEARN FROM ME

Love is not optional. It's essential. It's the beating heart of the Christian life. It's what makes us recognizable as Jesus's followers. It's how God's invisible character becomes visible in the world.

And it's hard. Incredibly, painfully, impossibly hard.

Because real love—the kind Jesus calls us to—requires everything. It costs everything. It demands everything.

But it's also the most glorious thing we could ever do. Because when we love like Jesus loves, we look like Jesus. And when we look like Jesus, people see God.

That's glory. That's what we were made for. That's the life Jesus is teaching us to live.

So let's learn about love. Not the sentimental, feeling-based, greeting-card version. But the real thing. The costly thing. The Jesus thing.

The kind of love that changes everything.

I. Love as the Core Curriculum

When a lawyer asks Jesus which commandment is the greatest, Jesus doesn't hesitate. He doesn't say, "Well, they're all important." He doesn't give a diplomatic answer that avoids choosing.

He goes straight to the heart of everything.

The Greatest Commandments

Matthew 22:37-40 (NASB): "And He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."

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On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.

Everything hangs on these two commands. Every other commandment, every other instruction, every other teaching—it all flows from these two.

Love God. Love people.

That's it. That's the core. That's what it all comes down to.

Notice the comprehensiveness of the first command: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."

All your heart. Not part of it. Not most of it. Not the portion left over after you've given the rest to other things. But all of it.

All your soul. Your inner life, your emotions, your will, your deepest self.

All your mind. Your thoughts, your intellect, your reasoning, your imagination.

God doesn't want a piece of us. He wants all of us. Total love. Complete devotion. Undivided allegiance.

This is what it means to live for God's glory instead of our own. We give Him everything. We love Him with everything. We orient our entire being—heart, soul, mind—toward Him.

And then the second command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

As yourself. The same way you love yourself. With the same intensity, the same concern, the same prioritization.

This is radical. Because the natural order is to love ourselves first and most. To prioritize our own needs, our own interests, our own welfare. And then, if there's anything left over, to maybe consider others.

LEARN FROM ME

But Jesus says, "Love your neighbor *as yourself*." Put them on the same level. Give them the same consideration. Value them as highly as you value yourself.

And here's the connection between the two commands: When we love God supremely—when we make Him our highest priority, when we orient everything toward Him—then loving others becomes possible. Because we're not trying to get from others what only God can give us. We're not using them to fill the void only God can fill. We're not demanding from them what only God can provide.

Instead, we love them freely. Generously. Without needing anything back. Because we're already loved by God. We're already filled by God. We're already secure in God.

The vertical relationship with God enables the horizontal relationships with people.

Love God. Love people. Everything else flows from these two.

Love as the Supremacy

Paul makes love's supremacy even more explicit in 1 Corinthians 13.

The chapter is famous. It's read at weddings. It's quoted on greeting cards. It's been sentimentalized and romanticized and turned into pretty wall art.

But in context, it's devastating. It's a rebuke to the Corinthian church, who were so proud of their spiritual gifts, so impressed with their own abilities, so focused on who had the most spectacular gifts.

And Paul says, essentially, "None of that matters if you don't have love."

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First Corinthians 13:1-3 (NASB): "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing."

I am nothing. It profits me nothing.

You can have impressive spiritual gifts—speaking in tongues, prophesying, possessing supernatural knowledge. You can have miracle-working faith—faith that literally moves mountains. You can be incredibly generous—giving away everything you own. You can even be a martyr—surrendering your body to be burned for your beliefs.

But without love, it all amounts to nothing. Zero. Worthless. Meaningless noise.

Because love is what matters. Love is what God cares about. Love is what makes everything else meaningful.

Gifts without love are just showing off. Knowledge without love is just arrogance (1 Corinthians 8:1). Generosity without love is just a transaction. Sacrifice without love is just performance.

But love—love makes everything else meaningful. Love transforms gifts into service. Love turns knowledge into wisdom. Love converts generosity into grace. Love makes sacrifice into worship.

Love is supreme. Love is essential. Love is what lasts.

Verse 13: "But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love" (NASB).

Faith is crucial. Hope is vital. But love is the greatest. Love is the pinnacle. Love is the goal.

LEARN FROM ME

God IS Love

But why? Why is love supreme? Why is it the greatest commandment? Why does everything depend on it?

Because of who God is.

First John 4:8 (NASB): "The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love."

God is love.

Not "God loves" (though that's true). Not "God is loving" (though that's also true). But "God IS love."

Love is not just something God does. It's what God is. It's His nature. It's His essence. It's the fundamental reality of His being.

When we love, we're reflecting God's nature. We're displaying His character. We're manifesting what He's like.

And when we don't love—when we're harsh, cold, selfish, indifferent—we're misrepresenting God. We're giving people a false picture of what He's like. We're failing to reflect His glory.

This is why love is the core curriculum. This is why Jesus emphasizes it above everything else. This is why it's the primary expression of God's glory.

Because God is love. And when we love, we show the world what God is like.

The Beginning and the End

Brennan Manning, that beautiful, broken saint who understood grace better than most, wrote: "The beginning and the end of the Bible says, 'Love.'"

LEARN FROM ME

The beginning and the end.

In the beginning, God creates out of love. He makes humanity in His image because He wants to share His love, to have creatures who can receive it and reflect it and participate in it.

And at the end, in Revelation, the culmination of all things is the marriage supper of the Lamb—the ultimate picture of love, of union, of intimacy between Christ and His bride.

From beginning to end, it's about love. God's love for us. Our love for Him. Our love for each other. Love is the thread that runs through the entire story.

And Jesus came to show us what that love looks like. To embody it. To model it. To make it tangible and visible and real.

So that we could learn it. So that we could live it. So that we could become people of love who display God's glory through how we love.

That's the core curriculum. That's what Jesus is teaching us. That's what we're learning from Him.

How to love. Really love. The way He loves.

II. Jesus's Model of Love

But what does that love actually look like? How do we know if we're loving the way Jesus loves?

We watch Him. We study Him. We see how He loved in real situations with real people. And we learn from His example.

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Greater Love Has No One Than This

Jesus defines the highest expression of love in John 15:13 (NASB): "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends."

That one lay down his life.

The ultimate love is sacrificial. Self-giving. Costly. It's not about feelings or sentiments or warm emotions. It's about sacrifice. About giving up your life for someone else.

And Jesus didn't just teach this. He lived it. He demonstrated it. He went to the cross and literally laid down His life for us.

Romans 5:8 (NASB): "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

While we were yet sinners.

Not after we cleaned ourselves up. Not after we proved ourselves worthy. Not after we earned it or deserved it.

While we were still sinners. While we were still rebels. While we were still enemies of God.

That's when Christ died for us. That's when He demonstrated God's love. That's what love looks like.

It's not based on the worthiness of the beloved. It's based on the nature of the lover. God loves us not because we're lovable but because He is love.

And Jesus showed us what that love looks like in action. He didn't just die for the righteous or the good or the deserving. He died for sinners. For rebels. For people who didn't want Him, didn't appreciate Him, didn't even recognize what He was doing.

LEARN FROM ME

That's love. Real, costly, sacrificial love.

Love for Enemies

But Jesus takes it even further. He doesn't just love His friends. He loves His enemies.

Matthew 5:43-48 (NASB): "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Love your enemies.

This is insane. This goes against every natural instinct we have. Our natural response to enemies is to hate them, fight them, defeat them, destroy them. Or at least avoid them.

But Jesus says, "Love them. Pray for them."

Why? "So that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven."

When we love our enemies, we show that we're God's children. We display family resemblance. We act like our Father.

Because God doesn't just love people who love Him back. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good. He sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. He blesses people who don't acknowledge Him, don't thank Him, don't even believe in Him.

That's indiscriminate love. Unconditional love. Love that doesn't depend on the response of the beloved.

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And Jesus modeled this perfectly. On the cross, while they were driving nails through His hands and feet, while they were mocking Him and spitting on Him, while they were killing Him—He prayed, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34, NASB).

Forgive them.

That's love for enemies. That's the love Jesus calls us to. That's the love that displays God's glory.

Anyone can love people who love them back. Even tax collectors and Gentiles do that. There's nothing remarkable about it. There's nothing distinctly Christian about it. There's no display of God's character in it.

But loving your enemies? Praying for those who persecute you? Forgiving those who hurt you? That's supernatural. That's divine. That's God's nature being manifested through human lives.

That's glory.

Christ's Love for the Church

Paul gives us another angle on Christ's love in Ephesians 5:25 (NASB): "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her."

Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her.

The church—that's us. Broken, sinful, messy, flawed us. And Christ loved us so much that He gave Himself up for us.

Not grudgingly. Not resentfully. Not because He had to. But willingly. Joyfully. Completely.

He gave Himself. All of Himself. Everything He had. Everything He was. His comfort, His safety, His dignity, His rights, His very life.

LEARN FROM ME

He gave it all up for us.

That's the model. That's what love looks like. That's what we're learning from Jesus.

Love that gives. Love that sacrifices. Love that puts the beloved first, even when it costs us everything.

The Self-Giving Nature of Divine Love

Do you see the pattern? Jesus's love is consistently, relentlessly self-giving.

He doesn't love in order to get. He doesn't love to manipulate or control or use. He doesn't love with strings attached or conditions applied.

He loves freely. Generously. Lavishly. Without reservation. Without calculation. Without keeping score.

He gives Himself. That's what love does. That's what love is.

And this is completely foreign to our natural way of thinking. Because we're used to transactional relationships. We're used to keeping score. We're used to love that's based on what we get in return.

"I'll love you if you love me back." "I'll be kind to you if you're kind to me." "I'll help you if you help me." "I'll give to you if you give to me."

That's not love. That's trade. That's exchange. That's transaction.

Real love—Jesus's love—is self-giving without expectation of return. It's loving because that's who God is, not because of what we'll get out of it. It's giving because we've been given to, not because we're trying to earn something.

This is the love Jesus models. This is the love He teaches us. This is the love He's forming in us through His Spirit.

LEARN FROM ME

And it's the only kind of love that displays God's glory. Because it's the only kind of love that looks like God.

III. Learning to Love Like Jesus

So how do we do this? How do we learn to love like Jesus loves? How do we develop this kind of sacrificial, self-giving, enemy-loving, unconditional love?

The short answer: We can't. Not on our own. Not in our own strength. Not by trying harder.

But—and this is crucial—God can. The Spirit can. Christ living in us can.

We Love Because He First Loved Us

First John 4:19 (NASB): "We love, because He first loved us."

We love, because He first loved us.

That's the source. That's the power. That's the secret.

We don't generate love out of our own hearts. We don't manufacture it through effort. We don't work it up through willpower.

We receive it first. We experience it first. We're loved first. And then—only then—we're able to love others.

The love we give is the overflow of the love we've received. The love we show is the reflection of the love that's been shown to us. The love we extend is the outworking of the love that's been poured into us.

This is why abiding in Christ is so crucial. This is why staying connected to the Vine matters so much. This is why we have to start with receiving before we can move to giving.

LEARN FROM ME

If we try to love others without first being filled with God's love for us, we'll run dry. We'll burn out. We'll become resentful and exhausted and bitter.

But if we start by receiving—by dwelling in God's love, by letting it sink deep into our souls, by allowing ourselves to be fully convinced that we are loved completely and unconditionally—then we have something to give. Then love can flow out of us naturally, spontaneously, because we're connected to the Source of all love.

We love because He first loved us. Not the other way around.

Loving as We Have Been Loved

Jesus makes this explicit in John 13:34 (NASB): "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another."

Even as I have loved you.

That's the standard. That's the model. That's the pattern.

We're not called to love others in some vague, generic way. We're called to love them *as Jesus has loved us*. With the same kind of love. In the same way. To the same degree.

How has Jesus loved us? Sacrificially. Unconditionally. Patiently. Generously. Forgivingly. Completely.

That's how we're supposed to love others.

Not perfectly—we're not Jesus, and we won't love perfectly this side of heaven. But increasingly. Progressively. More and more as we're transformed into His image.

The love Jesus has for us becomes the template for the love we have for others. We give what we've received. We show what's been shown to us. We extend what's been extended to us.

LEARN FROM ME

This is learning to love like Jesus. Not by reading a manual or following a formula. But by experiencing His love and then sharing it. By being loved and then loving others in the same way.

The Cost and Commitment of Love

But let's be clear: This kind of love is costly. It requires commitment. It demands sacrifice.

Real love—Jesus's kind of love—isn't easy. It's not convenient. It doesn't fit neatly into our schedules or align perfectly with our preferences.

Real love means putting someone else's needs before your own comfort. It means forgiving when you'd rather hold a grudge. It means serving when you'd rather be served. It means staying when you'd rather leave. It means giving when you'd rather keep. It means suffering when you'd rather avoid pain.

Real love costs something. It costs everything.

Luke 10:25-37 tells the story of the Good Samaritan. A man is beaten, robbed, and left for dead on the roadside. A priest passes by. A Levite passes by. Both see him. Both avoid him. Both prioritize their own concerns over his need.

But a Samaritan—an outsider, an enemy of the Jews—stops. He tends to the man's wounds. He puts him on his own animal. He takes him to an inn. He pays for his care. He commits to covering whatever additional cost might arise.

That's love. Costly love. Inconvenient love. Love that interrupts your plans and demands your resources and requires your involvement.

And Jesus says, "Go and do the same" (Luke 10:37, NASB).

Not "Admire the Samaritan." Not "Appreciate the nice story." But "Go and do the same."

LEARN FROM ME

Love like that. Sacrificially. Costly. Committed. Even when it's inconvenient. Even when it costs you. Even when the person in need is different from you, or difficult, or doesn't deserve it.

That's the love Jesus teaches. That's the love He models. That's the love we're learning from Him.

And it's hard. I won't lie to you. It's incredibly hard.

There are days when I don't want to love like this. Days when I'd rather protect myself than sacrifice for someone else. Days when I'd rather nurse my grievance than extend forgiveness. Days when I'd rather be comfortable than be inconvenienced.

And on those days, I fail. I choose selfishness over love. I choose comfort over sacrifice. I choose my way over Jesus's way.

And then I have to come back to the Source. I have to return to the Vine. I have to receive His love again so I can give it again. I have to be filled again so I can pour out again.

This is the rhythm. Receive, give. Be loved, love. Abide, bear fruit. It's continuous. It's daily. It's a lifelong process.

We're learning to love like Jesus. And we'll be learning until the day we see Him face to face.

IV. Love as Glory Display

Now here's where everything comes together. Here's the connection between love and glory. Here's why love is the primary expression of God's glory.

Because when we love like Jesus loves, people see what God is like.

LEARN FROM ME

Unity in Love Reveals God's Glory

Jesus prays for us in John 17:22-23 (NASB): "The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me."

That they may be one... that the world may know.

The unity of believers—the love we have for one another, the way we treat each other, the bond that holds us together—that's how the world knows that God sent Jesus. That's how they see God's love. That's how God's glory is displayed.

When the church loves well—when we're unified despite our differences, when we serve one another sacrificially, when we forgive each other repeatedly, when we bear one another's burdens, when we celebrate together and weep together and do life together—the world sees something supernatural. Something that can't be explained by natural means. Something that points beyond ourselves to God.

That's glory. That's God's character being made visible. That's the invisible God becoming visible through the love of His people.

But when the church doesn't love well—when we're divided, when we're fighting, when we're gossiping about each other, when we're judging and criticizing and excluding—we obscure God's glory. We give the world a false picture of what God is like. We misrepresent Him.

This is why Jesus emphasizes love so much. This is why it's the new commandment He gives. This is why it's the mark by which people will know we're His disciples.

Because love displays glory. Love reveals God. Love makes the invisible visible.

LEARN FROM ME

Above All, Love

First Peter 4:8 (NASB): "Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins."

Above all.

Not "in addition to everything else." Not "when you have time." Not "if it's convenient." But *above all*. As the priority. As the most important thing.

Keep fervent in your love. Keep it intense. Keep it active. Keep it alive. Don't let it grow cold or lukewarm or passive.

Why? "Because love covers a multitude of sins."

Love doesn't ignore sin. It doesn't pretend sin doesn't exist. It doesn't enable or excuse or minimize wrongdoing.

But love covers. Love forgives. Love gives grace. Love extends mercy. Love chooses to not keep a record of wrongs. Love believes the best. Love hopes. Love endures.

When we love like this—fervently, actively, persistently—we display God's character. Because this is how God loves us. He doesn't ignore our sin. But He covers it with Christ's blood. He forgives it. He removes it as far as the east is from the west. He remembers it no more.

And when we love each other this way—when we cover each other's sins with grace and forgiveness and mercy—we show the world what God is like. We make His love visible. We display His glory.

LEARN FROM ME

How Our Love Makes the Invisible God Visible

Here's the beautiful mystery: God is invisible. No one has seen God at any time (1 John 4:12). He's spirit. He's infinite. He's beyond our comprehension.

But when we love—when we love like Jesus loves—God becomes visible.

First John 4:12 (NASB): "No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us."

If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us.

God's love is made complete, made perfect, made fully mature in us when we love each other. And when God's love is perfected in us, He becomes visible. People see Him. They experience Him. They encounter Him.

Not directly. Not in His full glory—we couldn't handle that. But indirectly. Through us. Through our love.

When you forgive someone who's wronged you, they see something of God's forgiveness. When you serve someone without expecting anything in return, they experience something of God's grace. When you're patient with someone who's difficult, they encounter something of God's longsuffering. When you sacrifice for someone who doesn't deserve it, they glimpse something of God's love.

The invisible God becomes visible through our love.

This is what we were created for. This is how we fulfill our purpose as image-bearers. This is how we display God's glory.

We love. Really love. Sacrificially love. Costly love. The way Jesus loves.

LEARN FROM ME

And in the loving, God becomes visible. His character is displayed. His nature is revealed. His glory shines through us.

The Evangelistic Power of Genuine Love

Jesus says something stunning in John 13:35 (NASB): "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

By this all men will know.

Not by our correct doctrine. Not by our impressive programs. Not by our large buildings or our eloquent preaching or our spectacular worship services.

By our love for one another.

That's the mark. That's the sign. That's how people will recognize us as Jesus's followers.

Do we love each other? Really love each other? Sacrificially, patiently, forgivingly, genuinely?

If we do, people will know we belong to Jesus. They'll see something different. Something supernatural. Something that can't be explained except by the presence of God.

And they'll be drawn to it. Because everyone is hungry for real love. Everyone longs to be truly loved. Everyone wants to belong to a community characterized by genuine, self-giving love.

The world is full of counterfeits. Relationships based on what you can get from the other person. Communities that only accept you if you're useful. Love that's conditional on your performance.

But when the church loves genuinely—when we accept people as they are, when we serve without expecting return, when we forgive freely, when we stick with each other through difficulty, when we sacrificially give to meet each other's needs—that's different. That's compelling. That's attractive.

LEARN FROM ME

Not in a manipulative, "we're doing this to get people to join us" way. But in an authentic, "this is who God has made us to be and His love is irresistible" way.

When we love like Jesus loves, people encounter God. And encountering God changes everything.

That's the evangelistic power of genuine love. That's how the gospel becomes believable. That's how people come to faith.

Not through clever arguments. Not through slick marketing. Not through emotional manipulation.

But through love. Real, costly, sacrificial, Jesus-shaped love.

Love that displays God's glory. Love that makes the invisible God visible. Love that draws people to the Source of all love.

The Challenge and the Promise

So here's where we land: Love is not optional. It's not a nice addition to the Christian life. It's not something for especially spiritual people.

Love is the core. Love is the test. Love is the proof. Love is the primary expression of God's glory.

And it's hard. It costs. It requires everything.

But here's the promise: We're not alone in this. We're not expected to generate this love out of our own hearts. We're not relying on our own resources.

We're abiding in the Vine. We're learning from Jesus. We're being transformed by the Spirit. We're receiving God's love so we can give it away.

LEARN FROM ME

The love we're called to show is the love that's being formed in us. The love we're commanded to express is the love that's being poured into us. The love that displays God's glory is the love that flows from our connection to the God who is love.

This is grace. This is the easy yoke and the light burden. Not because love is easy. But because we're not doing it alone. We're yoked to Jesus. And His love flows through us when we abide in Him.

So here's the invitation: Don't try to manufacture love through willpower. Don't strain to force yourself to feel loving. Don't work up emotions that aren't there.

Instead, receive love. Dwell in God's love for you. Let it sink deep. Let it convince you. Let it fill you.

And then—naturally, organically, as the fruit of abiding—love will flow out of you. Not perfectly. Not without struggle. Not without failure and need for repentance and starting over.

But increasingly. Progressively. More and more as you're transformed into the image of the One who is love.

And as you love—as you forgive, serve, sacrifice, give, extend grace, show mercy, bear with, endure, hope, believe the best—God's glory is displayed through you.

People see what God is like. They encounter His love. They experience His grace. They glimpse His nature.

And in that glimpse, that encounter, that experience—they see glory. Real glory. The glory of the invisible God made visible through ordinary people who have learned to love like Jesus loves.

That's what we were made for. That's the life Jesus is teaching us to live. That's the curriculum of the Kingdom.

Learning to love. Really love. The way He loves.

It's the hardest thing you'll ever do.

LEARN FROM ME

And it's the most glorious.

Because when you love like Jesus, you look like Jesus. And when you look like Jesus, people see God.

That's glory. That's purpose. That's the life we were created to live.

A life of love. For God's glory.

CHAPTER 10: Sacrifice—Dying to Self-Glory, Living for God's Glory

"For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it."

— Mark 8:35 (NASB)

I'm going to be straight with you: This is the chapter I've been dreading.

Not because I don't believe what I'm about to write. Not because it's not true. Not because it's not central to everything Jesus teaches.

But because it's hard. Because I don't do it well. Because every time I write about sacrifice, I'm confronted with how much I still cling to my own comfort, my own agenda, my own glory.

I'm a ragamuffin pastor who knows more about failing at sacrifice than succeeding at it. I know more about holding on when I should let go than about joyfully releasing what God's asking me to release. I know more about calculating the cost and deciding it's too high than about freely, gladly giving up everything for Jesus.

But that's exactly why I have to write this chapter. Not because I've mastered it. But because I desperately need to learn it. And maybe you do too.

LEARN FROM ME

Because here's the truth we keep circling back to: You cannot live for God's glory while you're still living for your own glory. You cannot serve two masters. You cannot have divided allegiance. You cannot keep one foot in self-promotion and one foot in Christ-exaltation.

Something has to die. Someone has to decrease. The old self has to be crucified so the new self can live.

This is sacrifice. This is the cost of discipleship. This is what Jesus means when He says, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me" (Mark 8:34, NASB).

It's not optional. It's not for super-Christians. It's not an advanced level of discipleship that only a few people reach.

It's the entrance requirement. It's the baseline. It's what it means to follow Jesus.

And it's the hardest thing you'll ever do.

So let's be honest about it. Let's look squarely at what Jesus is asking. Let's count the cost. And let's understand why—despite the cost—it's worth it.

I. The Call to Lose Our Life

Jesus doesn't ease us into this. He doesn't soften it. He doesn't give us the comfortable parts first and then spring the hard stuff on us later.

He puts it right up front. He makes it crystal clear from the beginning. Following Him means losing your life.

The Great Paradox

Mark 8:35 (NASB): "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it."

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This is one of those Jesus statements that sounds completely backwards. Upside-down. Counterintuitive.

If you want to save your life, you'll lose it. If you want to lose your life, you'll save it.

It makes no sense. Until it makes perfect sense.

Because Jesus is talking about two different kinds of life. The life you're trying to save—the self-directed life, the self-promoting life, the life centered on your comfort and your goals and your glory—that life is actually death. It's empty. It's futile. It's a life that ultimately amounts to nothing.

But the life you gain when you lose your life for Jesus's sake—that's real life. Abundant life. Eternal life. Life that's truly life.

The person who clings to their own life—who refuses to let go of control, who demands their own way, who lives for their own satisfaction and success—that person loses everything that matters. They gain the whole world and forfeit their soul (Mark 8:36).

But the person who lets go—who releases control, who surrenders their agenda, who loses their life for Jesus's sake—that person finds what they were looking for all along. They find real life. True life. Life in the Kingdom. Life for God's glory.

The paradox is this: You have to let go to truly have. You have to die to truly live. You have to lose to truly gain.

And there's no way around it. No shortcut. No alternative path. If you want to follow Jesus, this is the way. The only way.

Lose your life. For His sake. For the gospel's sake. And in the losing, find everything.

LEARN FROM ME

The Grain of Wheat Must Die

Jesus uses another image to make the same point. In John 12:24-25 (NASB), He says:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal."

Unless a grain of wheat... dies.

A seed has tremendous potential. Inside that tiny grain is everything needed to produce a plant that will bear a harvest. But as long as it remains a seed—as long as it stays intact, protected, preserved—it remains alone. Solitary. Unfruitful.

The seed has to die. It has to fall into the ground. It has to be broken open. It has to release what's inside. It has to lose its form, its identity, its self-contained existence.

Only then can it become what it was meant to be. Only then can it bear fruit. Only then can it multiply and produce a harvest.

We are that seed. We have tremendous potential. We were created for God's glory. We were designed to bear fruit. We were made to reflect God's character and multiply His Kingdom.

But as long as we remain intact—as long as we protect ourselves, preserve ourselves, keep ourselves safe and comfortable and in control—we remain alone. Unfruitful. We never become what we were meant to be.

We have to die. We have to fall into the ground. We have to be broken open. We have to let go of our self-contained, self-directed, self-glorifying existence.

And that's terrifying. Because dying feels like ending. Letting go feels like losing. Being broken feels like destruction.

LEARN FROM ME

But Jesus says it's actually the beginning. It's the only way to truly live. It's the path to fruitfulness.

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

The death is not the end. It's the doorway. It's the transition from potential to actuality. From solitary to fruitful. From self-contained to Kingdom-expanding.

But you have to be willing to die. To fall. To be broken. To let go.

I Have Been Crucified with Christ

Paul understood this. He lived it. And he describes it beautifully in Galatians 2:20 (NASB):

"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me."

I have been crucified with Christ.

Past tense. Done. Finished. The old Paul—Saul of Tarsus, the Pharisee, the persecutor of Christians, the self-righteous, law-keeping, achievement-oriented religious professional—that Paul was crucified. Put to death. Nailed to the cross with Christ.

And it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.

A new self has emerged. A new identity. A new life. But it's not Paul's life anymore. It's Christ's life. Christ living in Paul. Christ's desires becoming Paul's desires. Christ's agenda becoming Paul's agenda. Christ's glory becoming Paul's goal.

And the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith.

LEARN FROM ME

Paul is still alive in the body. He's still walking around, doing ministry, writing letters, planting churches. But it's not his life anymore. It's Christ's life being lived through him.

This is what sacrifice looks like. Not just giving up things. Not just making religious gestures. But actually dying. The old self dying. The self-directed, self-promoting, self-glorifying self dying.

So that Christ can live. So that a new self can emerge. So that our life can become His life, lived for His purposes, oriented toward His glory.

This is the call. This is what Jesus is asking. This is what it means to lose your life for His sake.

Crucifixion. Death to the old self. And resurrection to a new life—a life that's no longer ours but His.

II. What We Sacrifice

So what does this actually mean practically? What does it look like to die to self-glory? What do we actually give up? What gets nailed to the cross?

Jesus is specific about this. He doesn't leave it vague or abstract. He tells us exactly what we're called to sacrifice.

Self-Promotion

Matthew 6:1-4 (NASB): "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you."

Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them.

LEARN FROM ME

This is the heart of self-promotion: Doing good things so that people will notice. So that they'll think well of us. So that they'll recognize our spirituality, our generosity, our goodness.

We want people to know what we've done. We want them to see how much we've given. We want them to recognize how spiritual we are, how committed we are, how sacrificial we are.

And Jesus says: Beware. This is dangerous. This is the path to losing your reward.

If you're doing your righteous acts to be noticed by people, then people's notice is your reward. That's it. That's all you get. They see you, they think well of you, they praise you—and that's the end of it.

But if you do your righteous acts in secret—if you give without broadcasting it, if you serve without seeking recognition, if you practice your faith without needing an audience—then your Father sees. And He rewards.

This is sacrifice. Giving up the immediate gratification of human recognition for the eternal reward of God's approval. Releasing the need to be seen, noticed, praised, honored by people.

And this is hard. Because we crave recognition. We want people to know what we've done. We want affirmation. We want applause.

But Jesus says, "Let it go. Do your good works in secret. Trust that your Father sees. And wait for His reward, not theirs."

This is dying to self-promotion. This is sacrificing our need for recognition. This is choosing God's glory over our own.

Comfort and Security

Luke 9:58 (NASB): "And Jesus said to him, 'The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.'"

LEARN FROM ME

Someone comes to Jesus and says, "I will follow You wherever You go" (Luke 9:57, NASB). And Jesus essentially responds, "Do you understand what you're saying? Do you know what you're signing up for? Following Me means giving up comfort. Giving up security. Giving up the settled life with a place to call your own."

The Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.

Jesus is describing His own life. He's itinerant. Homeless. Constantly moving. No permanent residence. No secure base. No comfortable refuge.

And He's saying, "This is what it means to follow Me. This is the life I'm calling you to. Are you sure you want this?"

Most of us, if we're honest, don't. We want to follow Jesus as long as we can maintain our comfort. As long as we don't have to give up our security. As long as we can keep our nice homes and our stable jobs and our predictable lives.

We want Jesus and comfort. Jesus and security. Jesus and the American dream.

But Jesus says, "It doesn't work that way. Following Me might cost you your comfort. It might cost you your security. It might mean going where I call you even when it's not safe, not comfortable, not what you planned."

This is sacrifice. Releasing our grip on comfort and security. Holding loosely to the things we think we need. Being willing to go where Jesus leads even when it costs us the settled life we crave.

And I need to be honest with you: This is one of the areas where I struggle most. I like comfort. I want security. The idea of releasing those things, of being truly willing to go wherever Jesus calls regardless of cost—that terrifies me.

But it's what He asks. It's what sacrifice means. It's what we give up when we follow Him.

LEARN FROM ME

Not necessarily literally—Jesus doesn't call all of us to be homeless or nomadic. But the willingness to be. The open-handedness. The readiness to release our comfort if that's what following Him requires.

Reputation and Recognition

Philippians 3:7-8 (NASB): "But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ."

Whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss.

Paul had an impressive résumé. Circumcised on the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless (Philippians 3:5-6, NASB).

That's a list of credentials that would impress anyone in Paul's culture. He was the elite of the elite. The best of the best. His reputation was impeccable. His recognition was assured.

And he says, "I counted it all as loss. I threw it all away. I consider it rubbish—garbage, dung, worthless trash—compared to knowing Christ."

This is sacrifice. Giving up your reputation. Releasing your credentials. Letting go of the recognition you've earned, the status you've achieved, the respect you've commanded.

For what? For Christ. For knowing Him. For gaining Him. For being found in Him.

Paul traded his impressive reputation for identification with a crucified criminal. He traded his status as a respected religious leader for being considered a heretic, a troublemaker, an enemy of the state. He traded his comfortable position for beatings, imprisonments, shipwrecks, and eventual martyrdom.

LEARN FROM ME

And he says it was worth it. More than worth it. Because what he gained—Christ—was infinitely more valuable than what he lost.

This is the sacrifice Jesus calls us to. Releasing our grip on reputation. Letting go of our need for recognition. Being willing to be misunderstood, criticized, rejected, even hated—if that's what following Jesus requires.

Not seeking those things. Not courting controversy for its own sake. But being willing to endure them. Being willing to let go of our good name if choosing Christ means losing it.

The Crucified Life

A.W. Tozer wrote: "The crucified life is the only life that matters."

The crucified life.

Not the comfortable life. Not the successful life. Not the impressive life. Not the life where we get to keep our reputation and our comfort and our security and our glory.

But the crucified life. The life that's been nailed to the cross. The life where self has died and Christ lives. The life of sacrifice.

That's the only life that matters. That's the only life that glorifies God. That's the only life that fulfills our purpose.

Everything else—all the comfort, all the security, all the reputation, all the self-glory—it's rubbish. It's loss. It's worthless compared to knowing Christ and living for His glory.

This is what we sacrifice. This is what we give up. This is what gets nailed to the cross when we take up our cross and follow Jesus.

LEARN FROM ME

Not because God is harsh or demanding or cruel. But because these things—self-promotion, comfort, security, reputation—these things keep us from Him. They compete for our allegiance. They pull our hearts away from single-minded devotion to Christ.

We can't serve two masters. We can't seek our glory and God's glory simultaneously. We can't cling to our comfort and follow Jesus wherever He leads. We can't protect our reputation and identify with a crucified Savior.

Something has to go. Someone has to die. The old self has to be sacrificed so the new self can live.

That's the call. That's the cost. That's what Jesus is asking when He says, "Take up your cross and follow Me."

III. The Greater Glory We Gain

But here's what we need to understand: The sacrifice is not the end of the story. The cross is not the destination. Death is not the final word.

Because on the other side of sacrifice is glory. On the other side of death is resurrection. On the other side of loss is gain—gain that far exceeds anything we gave up.

An Eternal Weight of Glory

Second Corinthians 4:17-18 (NASB): "For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal."

Momentary, light affliction.

Paul is writing this after being beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, imprisoned, rejected, slandered, and hounded from city to city. His life has been anything but light and momentary in terms of suffering.

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But compared to the glory that's coming? Compared to the eternal weight of glory? His afflictions are momentary. Light. Not worthy of comparison.

An eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.

The Greek word for "weight" here is *baros*, which literally means a heavy weight, a burden, a mass. Glory isn't described as wispy or ethereal or insubstantial. It's described as heavy. Weighty. Substantial. Real.

And it's eternal. Not temporary. Not fleeting. Not here today and gone tomorrow. But eternal. Forever. Unending.

This is what we gain. This is what we're trading for. We give up temporary comfort for eternal glory. We sacrifice momentary recognition for everlasting honor. We let go of earthly security for heavenly reward.

And it's not even close. The exchange is so lopsided in our favor that Paul can barely find words to express it. *Far beyond all comparison.* There's no adequate comparison. The glory so exceeds the sacrifice that you can't even put them on the same scale.

This is not about earning the glory through our sacrifice. We don't earn anything—salvation is by grace through faith, not by works. But there is a connection between present suffering and future glory. Our willingness to sacrifice now is linked to the glory we'll experience then.

Not causally—we don't cause the glory. But preparatorily—the sacrifice prepares us for the glory. It shapes us. It transforms us. It conforms us to Christ's image. And being conformed to Christ's image is what qualifies us to share in Christ's glory.

Suffering with Him, Glorified with Him

Romans 8:17 (NASB): "And if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him."

LEARN FROM ME

If indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.

The suffering and the glorifying are linked. They're connected. They're part of the same package.

If we're willing to suffer with Christ—to share in His rejection, His humiliation, His sacrifice, His cross—then we will also share in His glorification. In His resurrection. In His exaltation. In His reign.

This is the pattern. This is how it works. The path to glory runs through suffering. The road to resurrection goes through death. The way to exaltation begins with humiliation.

Jesus walked this path. And He invites us to walk it with Him. Not because He's sadistic. Not because He enjoys watching us suffer. But because this is the only way to glory. The only way to transformation. The only way to become what we were created to be.

And the glory that awaits us—the glorification we'll experience when we're fully conformed to Christ's image, when we're perfected, when we see Him face to face and become like Him—that glory makes every sacrifice worth it.

Not barely worth it. Not just worth it. But *far beyond all comparison* worth it.

The Treasure in Earthen Vessels

Second Corinthians 4:7 (NASB): "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves."

This treasure in earthen vessels.

We're clay pots. Fragile. Breakable. Ordinary. Common. Unimpressive.

But inside these clay pots is treasure. The light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6). The life of Jesus. The power of the resurrection. The presence of the Holy Spirit.

LEARN FROM ME

We're cracked, broken, ordinary vessels carrying extraordinary treasure.

And God designed it this way intentionally. *So that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves.*

If we were impressive vessels—strong, beautiful, ornate, valuable in ourselves—people might be impressed with the vessels and miss the treasure. They might admire us and overlook God.

But when the vessels are clearly ordinary—when we're obviously weak, broken, inadequate—then the treasure stands out. The power is clearly not ours. The glory is clearly not ours. It's God's. All God's.

This is why sacrifice matters. This is why we have to die to self-glory. Because if we're trying to promote ourselves, trying to make ourselves look good, trying to claim glory for ourselves—we're drawing attention to the vessel instead of the treasure.

But when we sacrifice our self-glory, when we decrease so He can increase, when we're content to be the broken clay pot that displays the treasure—then God gets the glory. Then the surpassing greatness of the power is clearly from Him.

And that's what we were made for. That's what brings us joy. That's what satisfies our deepest longings.

Not being impressive vessels. But being vessels that display the treasure. Not receiving glory for ourselves. But reflecting glory to God.

Trading Temporary Glory for Eternal

This is the trade. This is the exchange. This is what we're doing when we sacrifice.

We're trading temporary glory for eternal glory. Earthly recognition for heavenly reward. Human applause for God's "well done." Self-promotion for Christ-exaltation. Our comfort for His purposes. Our agenda for His mission.

LEARN FROM ME

And it's always worth it. Always. Because what we gain infinitely exceeds what we give up.

The person who holds onto their life loses it. The person who protects their comfort misses the adventure.

The person who guards their reputation never experiences the freedom of living for an audience of One.

The person who promotes themselves never knows the joy of decreasing so Christ can increase.

But the person who loses their life finds it. The person who releases comfort discovers purpose. The person who lets go of reputation experiences liberation. The person who sacrifices self-glory tastes the glory of God.

It's not easy. It's not comfortable. It's not what our flesh wants.

But it's worth it. More than worth it. Far beyond all comparison worth it.

Because on the other side of sacrifice is glory. Real glory. Eternal glory. The glory we were created for.

IV. Living Sacrifices

So how do we live this? How do we actually practice sacrifice? How do we make it a daily reality rather than just a nice theological concept?

Paul gives us the answer in Romans 12:1.

Present Your Bodies as Living Sacrifices

Romans 12:1 (NASB): "Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship."

Present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice.

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This is fascinating language. In the Old Testament sacrificial system, the sacrifice was killed. Dead. Placed on the altar and consumed by fire.

But Paul calls us to be *living* sacrifices. Not dead, but alive. Not killed once and for all, but daily, continuously offered.

This means sacrifice is not a one-time decision. It's a daily choice. A continuous act. An ongoing presentation of ourselves to God.

Every morning, we wake up and we have to choose: Will I present myself as a living sacrifice today? Will I offer my body—my time, my energy, my abilities, my resources—to God? Will I live for His glory rather than my own?

And then tomorrow, we wake up and make the same choice again. And the day after that. And the day after that.

It's daily. Continuous. Ongoing.

Which is your spiritual service of worship.

This is worship. Not just singing songs on Sunday. Not just raising our hands in a worship service. But offering our entire lives—our bodies, our choices, our daily activities—as worship to God.

Every act of service is worship. Every choice to sacrifice comfort for obedience is worship. Every decision to promote Christ rather than ourselves is worship. Every moment we spend living for God's glory rather than our own is worship.

This is the life of sacrifice. Not dramatic, once-in-a-lifetime acts of martyrdom (though it might include that). But daily, ordinary, continuous offering of ourselves to God.

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The Daily Altar of Surrender

Here's what this looks like practically:

You wake up in the morning. Before your feet hit the floor, before you check your phone, before you start planning your day—you make a choice. You present yourself as a living sacrifice. You say, "God, today is Yours. My time is Yours. My energy is Yours. My abilities are Yours. My agenda is Yours. I'm here to serve Your purposes, not my own. Use me for Your glory."

And then throughout the day, you keep returning to that altar. You keep re-offering yourself. You keep choosing sacrifice over comfort, obedience over convenience, God's glory over your own.

Someone cuts you off in traffic. You have a choice: React in anger (which is about vindicating yourself, protecting your dignity, asserting your rights). Or respond with patience and grace (which is about releasing your rights, choosing humility, reflecting Christ). You choose the sacrifice. You return to the altar.

You're in a meeting and someone else gets credit for your idea. You have a choice: Speak up and make sure everyone knows it was your idea (self-promotion). Or let it go, knowing that God sees and His approval is enough (sacrifice). You choose the sacrifice. You return to the altar.

You're exhausted and someone asks for help. You have a choice: Protect your comfort and say no (legitimate self-care can be part of this). Or sacrifice your rest to serve (when God's calling you to it). You seek God's wisdom. And when He calls you to serve, you choose the sacrifice. You return to the altar.

This is the daily altar of surrender. This is the continuous life of sacrifice. This is what it means to be a living sacrifice.

Not once and for all. But daily. Hourly. Moment by moment.

Choosing to die to self-glory so Christ can be glorified. Choosing to lose our life so we can find it. Choosing to sacrifice what's temporary for what's eternal.

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Sacrifices of Praise and Good Works

Hebrews 13:15-16 (NASB): "Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased."

Sacrifice isn't just about giving up bad things or even good things. It's also about actively offering good things.

A sacrifice of praise. Giving thanks even when circumstances are difficult. Worshiping even when we don't feel like it. Praising God even when life is hard. That's sacrifice.

Doing good and sharing. Using our resources to help others. Sharing what we have. Serving those in need. That's sacrifice.

These are the sacrifices God is pleased with. Not just what we give up, but what we give. Not just what we release, but what we offer.

Praise when we'd rather complain. Thanksgiving when we'd rather grumble. Generosity when we'd rather hoard. Service when we'd rather be served.

These are sacrifices. And they glorify God. They display His character. They show the world what He's like.

A Holy Priesthood

First Peter 2:5 (NASB): "You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

We are priests. All of us. Not just pastors or religious professionals. But every believer. A holy priesthood.

And what do priests do? They offer sacrifices.

LEARN FROM ME

But not animal sacrifices. Not the blood of bulls and goats. But spiritual sacrifices. The sacrifice of ourselves. Our lives. Our choices. Our daily obedience. Our worship. Our service.

We're being built into a spiritual house—a temple where God dwells, where His presence is manifested, where His glory is displayed.

And in that temple, we serve as priests. We offer ourselves. We present our bodies as living sacrifices. We give God the glory that belongs to Him alone.

This is our calling. This is our purpose. This is what we were saved for.

Not to live comfortable lives focused on our own happiness. Not to pursue our own glory and call it Christian. Not to use God to bless our plans.

But to be priests. To offer sacrifices. To live for God's glory rather than our own.

To die daily so Christ can live. To lose our lives so we can find them. To sacrifice what's temporary for what's eternal.

The Cost and the Glory

So here's where we land: Sacrifice is costly. It's real. It demands everything. It's not a metaphor or a nice sentiment or a spiritual-sounding platitude.

It's actual death. To self-promotion. To comfort. To security. To reputation. To our own glory.

It's daily crucifixion. Continuous surrender. Ongoing offering of ourselves to God.

And it's hard. I won't lie to you. There are days when I don't want to die to self. Days when I want to protect my comfort, promote myself, guard my reputation, seek my own glory. Days when I want to save my life rather than lose it.

LEARN FROM ME

And on those days, I fail. I choose self over sacrifice. I choose comfort over cross. I choose my glory over God's glory.

And then I have to come back to the altar. I have to confess. I have to repent. I have to choose again.

Because this is the path. This is the only way. This is what Jesus calls us to.

And here's what keeps me coming back to the altar, what keeps me choosing sacrifice even when it costs: The glory. The promise. The certain hope that on the other side of sacrifice is something infinitely better than anything I'm giving up.

An eternal weight of glory. Far beyond all comparison. Worth every sacrifice. Worth every cost. Worth everything.

Trading temporary glory for eternal glory. Earthly comfort for heavenly reward. Self-promotion for Christ-exaltation. Our lives for His life.

It's the best trade ever made. It's the only trade worth making. It's the trade Jesus invites us to make every single day.

Lose your life. For My sake. For the gospel's sake. And in the losing, find everything.

Die to self-glory. Live for God's glory. Present yourself as a living sacrifice.

And discover that the crucified life—the life of continuous sacrifice, daily death, ongoing surrender—is the only life that matters.

Not because it's easy. But because it's true. Because it's real. Because it's what we were made for.

Because on the other side of sacrifice is glory. And the glory makes every sacrifice worth it.

LEARN FROM ME

More than worth it.

Far beyond all comparison worth it.

That's the promise. That's the hope. That's what sustains us when the cost is high and the sacrifice is real.

We're trading up. We're exchanging what's temporary for what's eternal. We're investing in what lasts.

And one day—one glorious day—we'll see that every sacrifice was worth it. Every cost was small compared to the gain. Every loss led to something infinitely better.

Until then, we live as living sacrifices. We die daily. We present ourselves on the altar. We choose God's glory over our own.

Not perfectly. Not without struggle. Not without failure and repentance and starting over.

But increasingly. Progressively. More and more as we're transformed into the image of the One who sacrificed everything for us.

The One who lost His life so we could find ours. The One who died so we could live. The One who gave up His glory so we could share in it.

Jesus. Our model. Our teacher. Our Savior. Our sacrifice.

We're learning from Him. How to die. How to sacrifice. How to lose our lives so we can find them.

And in the learning, in the dying, in the sacrificing—we discover that this is what we were made for.

A life of sacrifice. For God's glory.

The crucified life. The only life that matters.

LEARN FROM ME

PART FOUR: THE PRACTICES OF APPRENTICESHIP

CHAPTER 11: Prayer—Communing with the Father for His Glory

"Father, glorify Your name."

— John 12:28 (NASB)

I need to confess something right at the beginning: I'm terrible at prayer.

Not terrible in the sense that I don't do it. I pray. Daily. Multiple times a day. I've been a pastor and a chaplain for years. Prayer is part of my job description.

But I'm terrible at it in the sense that it never feels like enough. I'm constantly distracted. My mind wanders. I fall asleep during prayer. I forget what I was going to pray for halfway through a sentence. I struggle to stay focused for more than a few minutes at a time.

And I'm haunted by the gap between what I know prayer should be and what my prayer life actually is.

I know prayer is supposed to be intimate communion with the Father. Mine often feels like a one-sided conversation where I'm not sure anyone's listening.

I know prayer is supposed to be powerful. Mine often feels impotent, like words disappearing into a void.

I know prayer is supposed to be the Christian's highest privilege. Mine often feels like a duty I'm failing to perform adequately.

So why am I writing a chapter on prayer? Because I desperately need to learn it. Because Jesus has so much to teach me about it. Because despite my failures and struggles and inadequacies, prayer is essential to living for God's glory.

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And maybe—just maybe—if we're honest about our struggles with prayer, if we stop pretending we've got it all figured out, if we approach this as fellow ragamuffins learning from Jesus—we can actually grow in this together.

Because here's what I'm learning: Prayer is not about performing perfectly. It's not about saying the right words or praying for the right amount of time or using the right formula.

Prayer is about relationship. It's about communion with the Father. It's about dependence on God rather than self-sufficiency. It's about aligning our will with His. It's about participating in His work.

And Jesus—who prayed better than anyone has ever prayed—wants to teach us how.

So let's learn. Together. As apprentices who are still very much in process.

I. Jesus's Prayer Life

If we want to learn to pray, we need to watch how Jesus prayed. Because His prayer life wasn't an add-on to His ministry. It wasn't a religious duty He performed out of obligation. It was the source of His ministry. The foundation. The power supply.

Everything Jesus did flowed from His communion with the Father. And if that was true for Jesus—the Son of God, perfect in every way—how much more must it be true for us?

Early Morning Solitude with the Father

Mark 1:35 (NASB): "In the early morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went away to a secluded place, and was praying there."

In the early morning, while it was still dark.

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This is the day after Jesus has had an incredibly busy ministry day in Capernaum. He's been teaching in the synagogue. He's cast out an unclean spirit. He's healed Peter's mother-in-law. And then, after sunset, the whole city has gathered at the door bringing all their sick and demon-possessed, and Jesus has healed many of them (Mark 1:21-34).

It's been an exhausting day. A late night. Jesus has every reason to sleep in. To rest. To recover His strength.

But He doesn't.

While it's still dark—before dawn, before anyone else is awake—Jesus gets up. He leaves the house. He goes to a solitary place. And He prays.

This wasn't a one-time thing. Luke 5:16 (NASB) tells us it was His pattern: "But Jesus Himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray."

Often.

Not occasionally. Not when He felt like it. Not just when He was facing a crisis. But regularly. Habitually. Consistently.

Jesus prioritized time alone with the Father. He made it happen even when He was exhausted. Even when there were demands on His time. Even when people were looking for Him (Mark 1:36-37). Even when ministry opportunities were everywhere.

He withdrew. He found solitude. He prayed.

Why? Because this is where His power came from. This is where His direction came from. This is where His intimacy with the Father was maintained.

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Jesus didn't operate out of His own strength. He didn't rely on His own wisdom. He didn't make decisions based on His own assessment of the situation.

He drew His strength from the Father. He received His direction from the Father. He maintained constant communion with the Father.

And that communion required time. Unhurried time. Solitary time. Time away from the demands and distractions, time alone with God.

This is the first thing we learn from Jesus about prayer: It requires intentionality. We have to make it happen. We have to create space for it. We have to prioritize it even when—especially when—we're busy and exhausted and there are a thousand other demands on our time.

Prayer doesn't just happen. We have to choose it.

All-Night Prayer Before Crucial Decisions

Luke 6:12 (NASB): "It was at this time that He went off to the mountain to pray, and He spent the whole night in prayer to God."

The whole night.

This is the night before Jesus chooses the twelve apostles. He's about to make one of the most important decisions of His ministry. He's going to select the men who will be His closest disciples, who will carry on His mission after He's gone, who will become the foundation of the church.

And one of them—Judas—will betray Him.

So what does Jesus do before making this crucial decision? He prays. Not for a few minutes. Not for an hour. But all night. The whole night.

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This tells us something important: Jesus took prayer seriously. He didn't treat it as a quick check-in with God before doing what He was going to do anyway. He spent extended time in prayer, especially before major decisions.

He sought the Father's will. He listened. He waited. He invested the time necessary to discern God's direction.

And if Jesus—who was perfectly in tune with the Father, who knew the Father's will better than anyone—if He needed all-night prayer sessions before crucial decisions, how much more do we?

But here's where I struggle. All-night prayer? I can barely make it through fifteen minutes without my mind wandering or falling asleep. The idea of praying for an entire night feels impossible.

And yet Jesus did it. Regularly. Not because He was superhuman. But because He understood that communion with the Father was worth the investment. That time in prayer was not time away from ministry but the very heart of ministry.

Oswald Chambers wrote: "Prayer does not fit us for the greater work; prayer is the greater work."

Prayer is the greater work.

Not the preparation for work. Not the thing we do so we can go do the real work. But the work itself. The primary work. The most important work.

Jesus understood this. His prayer life wasn't incidental to His ministry. It was central to it. The hours He spent in prayer weren't hours taken away from ministry. They were hours invested in the most important ministry of all—communion with the Father.

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The High Priestly Prayer

John 17 gives us the most extended record of Jesus praying. It's His prayer on the night before His crucifixion. And it's breathtaking.

He prays for Himself: "Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You" (John 17:1, NASB). Notice: Even in praying for Himself, Jesus's focus is on the Father's glory. Not His own escape from suffering. Not His own comfort. But the Father's glory.

He prays for His disciples: "I am no longer in the world; and yet they themselves are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep them in Your name" (John 17:11, NASB). He prays for their protection, their sanctification, their unity, their mission. He's about to go to the cross, and He's thinking about them. Praying for them. Interceding for them.

And He prays for us: "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word" (John 17:20, NASB). That's us. We're included in this prayer. Jesus prayed for us two thousand years ago. He prayed that we would be one, that we would be sanctified in truth, that the world would know that the Father sent Him.

This prayer reveals Jesus's heart. His priorities. His concerns. And they're all oriented toward the Father's glory and the good of God's people.

This is what prayer looks like when it's fully aligned with God's purposes. This is what it means to pray for God's glory. This is the kind of prayer Jesus models for us.

Not self-focused prayer. Not "give me what I want" prayer. Not "make my life comfortable" prayer.

But "glorify Your name" prayer. "Your will be done" prayer. "For the sake of Your people and Your mission" prayer.

This is what we're learning. This is the pattern. This is what Jesus shows us.

LEARN FROM ME

II. Learning to Pray from Jesus

So how do we actually pray? What do we say? How do we structure our prayers? How do we avoid just rambling or repeating ourselves or saying empty words?

Jesus teaches us. And His teaching on prayer is both simple and profound.

The Lord's Prayer as Pattern

Matthew 6:9-13 (NASB): "Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.'"

This is the Lord's Prayer. Not in the sense that it's Jesus's prayer for Himself, but in the sense that it's the prayer Jesus gave us. The pattern He taught us to follow.

Notice the structure:

It starts with God. "Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name." Before we ask for anything, before we bring our needs, before we focus on ourselves at all—we focus on God. Who He is. His character. His holiness. His name.

Prayer begins with worship. With recognizing who God is. With hallowing—honoring, reverencing, setting apart as holy—His name.

It moves to God's purposes. "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." We're aligning ourselves with God's agenda. We're praying for what He wants, not just what we want. We're asking for His kingdom to advance, for His will to be accomplished.

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This is crucial. Because if our prayers are all about our will being done—"God, here's what I want You to do"—then we're treating God like a cosmic vending machine. We're trying to get Him to serve our purposes instead of aligning ourselves with His.

But when we pray "Your kingdom come, Your will be done," we're submitting to His purposes. We're saying, "God, I want what You want. I'm orienting my life around Your agenda, not mine."

Then it addresses our needs. "Give us this day our daily bread." Notice: It's daily bread. Not a lifetime supply. Not wealth or luxury or abundance. Just what we need for today.

This teaches us dependence. We don't pray for self-sufficiency. We don't ask God to give us enough that we won't need Him anymore. We ask for daily provision, which keeps us coming back daily, dependent on Him.

It includes confession and forgiveness. "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." We acknowledge our sin. We ask for forgiveness. And we commit to extending that same forgiveness to others.

This is radical. Our willingness to forgive others is linked to our receiving forgiveness from God. Not that we earn God's forgiveness by forgiving others. But that receiving God's forgiveness transforms us into forgiving people. If we're harboring unforgiveness, holding grudges, refusing to extend grace—it suggests we haven't truly grasped the forgiveness we've received.

It ends with protection and perspective. "Do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever." We ask for God's protection from temptation and evil. And we end where we began—with God. His kingdom, His power, His glory.

This is the pattern. This is the structure. This is how Jesus teaches us to pray.

Not as a formula to be repeated verbatim (though there's nothing wrong with praying the Lord's Prayer itself). But as a template. A guide. A structure for our prayers.

LEARN FROM ME

Start with God. Align with His purposes. Bring our needs. Confess and forgive. Ask for protection. End with God.

That's the pattern. That's what Jesus teaches.

Persistence in Prayer

Luke 18:1-8 tells the parable of the persistent widow. She keeps coming to a judge, asking for justice against her adversary. The judge doesn't fear God or respect people. He's unjust. But the widow keeps pestering him. And eventually, just to get rid of her, he grants her justice.

Jesus's point: "Now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly" (Luke 18:7-8, NASB).

If an unjust judge will eventually respond to persistent asking, how much more will a just and loving God respond to His children who persistently seek Him?

This teaches us persistence. We don't give up after one prayer. We don't stop asking just because we haven't seen the answer yet. We keep praying. Keep asking. Keep seeking. Keep knocking.

Not because God needs to be worn down. Not because He's reluctant to answer. But because persistent prayer is an expression of faith. It's saying, "I believe You hear me. I believe You care. I believe You will answer. So I'm going to keep asking until I see the answer."

And in the asking—in the persistent, ongoing, repeated asking—we're drawn deeper into dependence on God. We're reminded that we need Him. We're kept in a posture of seeking rather than self-sufficiency.

Abiding Leads to Answered Prayer

John 15:7 (NASB): "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."

LEARN FROM ME

Ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

That's an incredible promise. But notice the condition: "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you."

Abiding. Remaining. Staying connected to Jesus. Dwelling in His words. Letting His teaching shape our thinking, our desires, our requests.

When we're abiding in Christ, our wishes change. Our desires are transformed. We start wanting what He wants. We start asking for what aligns with His will.

So when Jesus says, "Ask whatever you wish," He's not giving us a blank check to demand anything we want. He's saying, "When you're abiding in Me, your wishes will align with Mine. And when you ask for what I want, I'll give it to you."

This is why abiding is so crucial to prayer. When we're disconnected from Jesus—when we're not spending time in His Word, when we're not maintaining communion with Him—our prayers become all about us. Our comfort. Our desires. Our agendas.

But when we're abiding in Him, our prayers become about Him. His glory. His purposes. His kingdom.

And those prayers get answered. Because they're aligned with God's will.

The Priority of God's Glory in Our Asking

Here's what ties all of this together: In Jesus's prayer life, in His teaching on prayer, in the pattern He gives us—the consistent priority is God's glory.

Not our comfort. Not our success. Not our happiness. But God's glory.

"Father, glorify Your name" (John 12:28).

LEARN FROM ME

"Your kingdom come. Your will be done" (Matthew 6:10).

"That the Son may glorify You" (John 17:1).

God's glory is the North Star of prayer. It's what orients everything. It's what determines what we ask for and how we pray.

This transforms prayer. Because when we pray for God's glory rather than our own comfort, our prayers change. We stop demanding that God make our lives easy. We start asking that He accomplish His purposes through us, whatever the cost.

We stop praying, "God, remove this difficulty." We start praying, "God, use this difficulty to display Your glory. Give me the strength to endure it in a way that honors You."

We stop praying, "God, make me successful." We start praying, "God, make me faithful. Use my life for Your purposes, whether that leads to success or failure by the world's standards."

We stop praying, "God, give me what I want." We start praying, "God, align my wants with Yours. Transform my desires so I want what You want."

This is learning to pray from Jesus. This is what changes everything.

III. Prayer as Dependence

Now here's something crucial that we need to understand: Prayer is not primarily about getting things from God. It's about acknowledging our dependence on God.

This is a massive shift in how most of us think about prayer.

LEARN FROM ME

The Son Can Do Nothing of Himself

John 5:19 (NASB): "Therefore Jesus answered and was saying to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.'"

The Son can do nothing of Himself.

This is Jesus talking about Himself. The Son of God. God incarnate. The One through whom all things were created. The One who holds all things together by the word of His power.

And He says, "I can do nothing of Myself."

He's completely dependent on the Father. He doesn't act independently. He doesn't do His own thing. He watches what the Father is doing, and He does the same.

This is astonishing. If Jesus—the Son of God—lived in complete dependence on the Father, how much more should we?

And how did Jesus maintain that dependence? Through prayer. Through constant communion with the Father. Through regular withdrawal to solitary places where He could listen, receive direction, draw strength.

Prayer is the expression of dependence. It's saying, "I can't do this on my own. I need You. I'm relying on You, not on myself."

And this runs completely counter to our culture. We value independence. Self-sufficiency. The ability to handle things on our own. We admire people who don't need anyone's help.

But the Kingdom operates on different values. In the Kingdom, dependence is strength. Acknowledging need is wisdom. Relying on God is the path to power.

LEARN FROM ME

Prayer is how we live in that reality.

The Confession of Need vs. The Illusion of Self-Sufficiency

Here's the truth: We're needy. Desperately needy. We can't save ourselves. We can't transform ourselves. We can't make ourselves holy. We can't produce spiritual fruit on our own. We can't live for God's glory in our own strength.

We need God. For everything. Every moment. Every breath. Every step.

Prayer is the admission of that need. It's the confession that we're dependent. It's the acknowledgment that apart from Christ we can do nothing (John 15:5).

But our flesh hates this. Our pride rebels against it. We want to be self-sufficient. We want to be capable. We want to be able to handle things on our own.

So we treat prayer like a backup plan. We try to handle things ourselves, and when that doesn't work, we pray. We rely on our own wisdom, our own strength, our own resources—and then, when we run out, we finally turn to God.

But that's backwards. Prayer should be the first resort, not the last. We should start with dependence, not end with it.

Martin Luther wrote: "To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing."

No more possible than to be alive without breathing.

Prayer isn't optional. It's not a nice addition to the Christian life. It's essential. As essential as breathing is to physical life.

LEARN FROM ME

Because prayer is how we acknowledge our dependence on God. It's how we maintain our connection to the Source of all life. It's how we draw the strength we need to live for God's glory.

When we don't pray, we're essentially saying, "I can do this on my own. I don't need God's help. I'm self-sufficient."

And that's the lie of the serpent from the very beginning. "You will be like God" (Genesis 3:5). You don't need God. You can be your own god. You're sufficient in yourself.

But we're not. We're not sufficient. We're not capable on our own. We're not self-sustaining.

We need God. And prayer is how we live in the truth of that need.

Anxiety Transformed Through Prayer

Philippians 4:6-7 (NASB): "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Be anxious for nothing.

That's the command. Don't be anxious. Don't worry. Don't be consumed by fear or stress or concern.

But how? How do we do that? How do we not be anxious when there's so much to be anxious about?

But in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

Prayer is the antidote to anxiety. Not because prayer magically makes our problems disappear. But because prayer transfers the burden from our shoulders to God's.

LEARN FROM ME

When we pray—when we actually bring our concerns to God, when we lay out our requests before Him, when we give Him the weight we've been carrying—something shifts. The burden is no longer solely ours to bear. We're not facing this alone. We're not responsible for figuring it all out by ourselves.

We've given it to God. We've asked for His help. We've acknowledged our dependence. And in that acknowledgment, anxiety loosens its grip.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds.

Notice: The peace doesn't necessarily come from getting what we asked for. It comes from having prayed. From having given the concern to God. From resting in His care rather than trying to control everything ourselves.

This is prayer as dependence. This is what it looks like to live in reliance on God rather than self-sufficiency.

We bring our anxieties to Him. We make our requests known. We give Him the burdens. And we receive His peace—peace that doesn't make logical sense, peace that surpasses comprehension, peace that guards our hearts and minds even when circumstances haven't changed.

That's the gift of prayer. Not always the answer we wanted. But the peace we needed. The reminder that we're not alone. The reassurance that God hears, God cares, God is working.

And that's enough.

IV. Praying for God's Glory

So we circle back to where we started: Prayer is ultimately about God's glory.

Not our comfort. Not our success. Not our happiness. But God's glory.

LEARN FROM ME

And when we pray with this as our priority—when we seek God's glory above our own satisfaction—everything changes.

Father, Glorify Your Name

John 12:27-28 (NASB): "Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify Your name."

Jesus is approaching the cross. His soul is troubled. He's facing the horror of crucifixion, the weight of the world's sin, the separation from the Father.

And He considers praying, "Father, save Me from this hour."

That would be a legitimate prayer. A human prayer. A prayer any of us would pray in His situation.

But He doesn't pray it. Instead, He prays, "Father, glorify Your name."

Not "save Me from suffering." But "glorify Your name through this suffering."

Not "make this easy for Me." But "use this to display Your glory."

This is the ultimate model of praying for God's glory. Even when it costs everything. Even when it means suffering. Even when it leads to death.

"Father, glorify Your name."

Then the Father answers: "I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again" (John 12:28, NASB).

God's glory was displayed in Jesus's life. And it will be displayed again in His death and resurrection. The cross—that instrument of shame and torture—will become the ultimate display of God's glory. The place where His love, His justice, His wisdom, His power all converge.

LEARN FROM ME

This is what happens when we pray for God's glory. He works in ways we don't expect. He displays His character through circumstances we wouldn't choose. He glorifies Himself through our weakness, our suffering, our surrender.

To Him Be the Glory in the Church

Ephesians 3:20-21 (NASB): "Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen."

To Him be the glory.

That's the goal. That's the purpose. That's what all our prayers should be aimed at.

God gets the glory. In the church. In Christ Jesus. To all generations. Forever.

When we pray, we're not trying to manipulate God into giving us what we want. We're not trying to convince Him to bless our plans. We're not trying to get Him to serve our purposes.

We're aligning ourselves with His purposes. We're asking Him to work in ways that display His glory. We're inviting Him to do "far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think"—not for our glory, but for His.

This transforms how we pray. We stop making demands. We start making requests with open hands, trusting that God will answer in ways that glorify Him.

We stop insisting on specific outcomes. We start asking for God's will to be done, however that looks.

We stop treating prayer like a shopping list. We start treating it like worship—offering ourselves to God, submitting to His purposes, seeking His glory above all else.

LEARN FROM ME

The Alignment of Our Will with His

Here's what happens when we pray for God's glory: Our will begins to align with His will.

At first, we might pray, "God, I want this. But I want Your glory more. So if You have something different in mind, I'll trust You."

That's good. That's progress. That's moving in the right direction.

But as we continue to pray for God's glory, as we keep submitting our will to His, as we persistently seek His kingdom first—something shifts.

We start wanting what He wants. Our desires begin to align with His desires. What we ask for starts to match what He wants to give.

This is what Jesus means in John 15:7: "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."

When we're abiding in Him, our wishes change. We're no longer asking for things that oppose His will. We're asking for things that align with it. And those prayers get answered because they're in harmony with what God wants to do.

This is the goal of prayer. Not getting God to do what we want. But aligning ourselves with what He wants. Not changing God's mind. But having our minds changed. Not bending God to our will. But having our will bent to His.

And when that happens—when our prayers flow from hearts that want what God wants, when our requests align with His purposes, when our deepest desire is His glory—then prayer becomes powerful. Effective. World-changing.

LEARN FROM ME

Because we're no longer fighting against God's purposes. We're partnering with them. We're participating in what He's already doing.

Prayer as Participation in God's Work

This is the beautiful mystery: God invites us to participate in His work through prayer.

He doesn't need our prayers. He could accomplish His purposes without us. He's sovereign. He's all-powerful. He's perfectly capable of doing whatever He wants without our input.

But He chooses to work through prayer. He invites us to partner with Him. He makes our prayers part of how He accomplishes His will in the world.

This is an incredible privilege. This is what makes prayer so powerful. Not that we're manipulating God. But that God is graciously including us in His work.

When we pray for someone to come to faith, we're partnering with the Holy Spirit who is already working in their heart. When we pray for healing, we're joining with the God who cares more about that person's wholeness than we do. When we pray for God's kingdom to come, we're aligning ourselves with what God is already doing to advance His kingdom.

Prayer doesn't change God's mind. Prayer changes us. It aligns us with God's purposes. It positions us to participate in what He's doing. It transforms us from observers into partners.

And in that partnership, God's glory is displayed. Through our prayers. Through His answers. Through the work He does in us and through us as we pray.

This is why prayer matters. This is why it's essential. This is why we can't live for God's glory without it.

Because prayer is how we maintain dependence on God. Prayer is how we align our will with His. Prayer is how we participate in His work. Prayer is how we seek His glory above all else.

LEARN FROM ME

Without prayer, we drift into self-sufficiency. We start relying on ourselves instead of God. We pursue our own agendas instead of His. We live for our own glory instead of His.

But with prayer—consistent, persistent, God-glorifying prayer—we stay connected to the Source. We remain dependent. We keep our focus on what matters. We live for His glory.

The Practice We Need Most

So here's where we land: Prayer is not optional. It's not just for the super-spiritual. It's not something we do when we have time left over after everything else.

Prayer is essential. It's the primary work. It's the practice that enables every other practice.

Without prayer, our Bible reading becomes academic. Our service becomes self-reliant. Our love becomes self-generated. Our sacrifice becomes self-glorifying.

But with prayer, everything changes. Bible reading becomes communion. Service becomes partnership with God. Love becomes the overflow of being loved by God. Sacrifice becomes worship.

Prayer is the hinge. The connection point. The place where we meet with God and everything else flows from that meeting.

And the beautiful thing is this: We don't have to be good at prayer to start praying. We don't have to master it before we begin. We don't have to wait until we can pray like Jesus to start learning from Jesus.

We start where we are. With our distracted minds and our wandering thoughts and our struggles to stay focused. With our short prayers and our simple requests and our honest confessions of need.

We come as we are. And Jesus teaches us. He shows us His pattern. He invites us into the Father's presence. He helps us pray when we don't know what to pray.

LEARN FROM ME

And gradually, slowly, over time, prayer becomes more natural. More central. More essential to our lives.

Not because we've mastered it. But because we've met with God in it. We've experienced His presence.

We've known His peace. We've participated in His work.

And we've discovered that prayer—this simple practice of talking with God, listening to God, aligning ourselves with God—is the pathway to living for His glory.

Not the only practice. But the essential one. The one that undergirds everything else.

So pray. However imperfectly. However haltingly. However inadequately you feel.

Just pray.

Meet with God. Seek His face. Acknowledge your dependence. Align your will with His. Ask for His glory to be displayed.

And discover that prayer is not a burden to bear but a gift to receive. Not a duty to perform but a privilege to enjoy. Not something we do for God but something we do with God.

The greatest work. The essential practice. The pathway to living for His glory.

LEARN FROM ME

CHAPTER 12: Scripture—The Mind of Christ for God's Glory

"Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You."

— Psalm 119:11 (NASB)

I grew up in a church culture that talked a lot about the Bible. We believed it was God's Word. We affirmed it was true, authoritative, sufficient. We memorized verses. We had Bible studies. We preached from it every Sunday.

But somewhere along the way, the Bible became a weapon instead of a treasure. A club to beat people with instead of bread to feed them. A source of ammunition for arguments instead of a source of life for the soul.

I watched people use Scripture to justify their cruelty. To defend their prejudices. To condemn people who didn't fit their narrow definitions of acceptable. To build walls instead of bridges. To wound instead of heal.

And I became cynical. Tired. Suspicious of anyone who quoted Bible verses at me, because too often it was accompanied by judgment, manipulation, or spiritual abuse.

It took me years to recover. Years to discover that the problem wasn't the Bible. The problem was how people were using it. Years to understand that Scripture is not a weapon to wield against people but a mirror to see ourselves, a lamp to guide our steps, a sword to cut through our own defenses, and bread to sustain our souls.

The Bible is a gift. A treasure. A revelation of who God is and what He's like and how we're supposed to live.

But like any gift, it can be misused. It can be turned into something it was never meant to be.

So as we talk about Scripture in this chapter, I need to be clear: We're not talking about using the Bible to prove we're right and everyone else is wrong. We're not talking about weaponizing verses to control people. We're not talking about cherry-picking passages to justify what we already want to do.

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We're talking about encountering God in His Word. We're talking about being transformed by truth. We're talking about having our minds renewed, our hearts shaped, our lives reoriented around what God has revealed.

We're talking about learning from Jesus—who loved Scripture, lived Scripture, fulfilled Scripture—how to treasure God's Word in our hearts so we can live for God's glory.

And that changes everything.

I. Jesus and the Word

If we want to understand the Bible's role in living for God's glory, we need to look at Jesus's relationship with Scripture. Because Jesus is the Word made flesh (John 1:14). He's the fulfillment of all Scripture. And He shows us what it looks like to live in alignment with God's revealed truth.

Defeating Temptation with Scripture

Luke 4:1-13 records Jesus's temptation in the wilderness. He's been fasting for forty days. He's physically weak, hungry, vulnerable. And Satan comes to tempt Him.

Three times, Satan tempts Jesus. And three times, Jesus responds the same way—with Scripture.

First temptation: "If You are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread" (Luke 4:3, NASB).

Jesus's response: "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone'" (Luke 4:4, NASB). He quotes Deuteronomy 8:3.

Second temptation: Satan shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and offers them to Him if He'll worship Satan (Luke 4:5-7).

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Jesus's response: "It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only'" (Luke 4:8, NASB). He quotes Deuteronomy 6:13.

Third temptation: Satan takes Jesus to Jerusalem, to the pinnacle of the temple, and challenges Him to throw Himself down, quoting Psalm 91:11-12 to suggest that God will protect Him (Luke 4:9-11).

Jesus's response: "It is said, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test'" (Luke 4:12, NASB). He quotes Deuteronomy 6:16.

Notice the pattern: "It is written." "It is written." "It is said."

Jesus doesn't rely on His own wisdom. He doesn't come up with clever arguments. He doesn't trust His own reasoning.

He goes to Scripture. He stands on God's revealed truth. He defeats temptation with the Word of God.

And this is significant because Jesus is God. He doesn't need Scripture to know truth—He is truth (John 14:6). But He uses Scripture anyway. He models for us what it means to live according to God's Word rather than our own wisdom.

If Jesus—the Son of God, perfect in every way—relied on Scripture to defeat temptation, how much more do we need to?

Our own wisdom isn't enough. Our own reasoning will lead us astray. Our own thoughts and feelings and instincts will deceive us.

But God's Word is truth. It's reliable. It's sufficient. It's the weapon we need to fight spiritual battles.

Ephesians 6:17 calls it "the sword of the Spirit." Not our sword. The Spirit's sword. The weapon God has given us to fight against temptation, lies, deception, and the schemes of the enemy.

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Jesus shows us how to use it. Not as a club to beat others with. But as a sword to defend ourselves with. A truth to stand on when everything else is shifting.

All Scripture Points to Christ

After His resurrection, Jesus meets two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They're discouraged, confused, trying to make sense of what's happened.

And Jesus does something remarkable: "Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures" (Luke 24:27, NASB).

All the Scriptures.

Every part of the Old Testament—the Law, the Prophets, the Writings—all of it points to Jesus. All of it finds its fulfillment in Him. All of it is ultimately about Him.

This is how Jesus read Scripture. Not as a collection of disconnected stories and rules and prophecies. But as one unified story with Him at the center.

The sacrificial system? It points to Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The Passover? It points to Jesus, whose blood protects us from judgment.

The exodus from Egypt? It points to Jesus, who delivers us from slavery to sin.

The tabernacle and temple? They point to Jesus, God dwelling with His people.

The prophets' promises of a coming Messiah? They all find their yes in Jesus (2 Corinthians 1:20).

All Scripture points to Christ. All of it testifies to Him. All of it is ultimately about Him.

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And this transforms how we read the Bible. We're not just reading ancient history or collecting moral lessons or finding life principles. We're encountering Christ. We're seeing Him revealed. We're coming to know Him more deeply.

This is why Bible reading is essential to living for God's glory. Because God's glory is supremely revealed in Jesus (John 1:14; Hebrews 1:3). And Scripture is how we come to know Jesus more fully.

Fulfilling, Not Abolishing

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes this statement: "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17, NASB).

To fulfill.

Jesus didn't come to get rid of the Old Testament. He didn't come to say, "Forget all that. Here's something completely different."

He came to fulfill it. To complete it. To bring it to its intended goal. To be what it was always pointing toward.

Every commandment finds its fulfillment in Him. Every prophecy comes to completion in Him. Every promise reaches its yes in Him.

And then Jesus goes on to give a series of "You have heard it said... but I say to you" statements (Matthew 5:21-48). He takes the commandments—don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't break your oaths—and He shows their deeper meaning, their fuller application, their heart-level reality.

He's not contradicting Scripture. He's revealing its true intent. He's showing what it looks like when the Law is written on hearts instead of just stone tablets. He's demonstrating what it means to fulfill the Law, not just keep it externally.

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This is important for us. Because we can be tempted to treat the Old Testament as irrelevant now that we're in the New Covenant. "That was then, this is now. We're under grace, not law."

But Jesus says the Old Testament still matters. It's still God's Word. It's still true. It's still instructive.

We just read it through the lens of Christ. We see how it all points to Him. We understand it in light of His fulfillment. We apply it through the Spirit rather than external rule-keeping.

All Scripture is profitable. All of it is God-breathed. All of it is useful for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

We don't discard any of it. We see all of it fulfilled in Christ.

The Scriptures Testify of Him

In John 5:39-40 (NASB), Jesus confronts the religious leaders with these words:

"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life."

You search the Scriptures... but you are unwilling to come to Me.

This is tragic. These were people who knew Scripture inside and out. They had it memorized. They studied it. They debated it. They built their entire lives around it.

But they missed the point.

Scripture is meant to lead us to Jesus. It testifies about Him. It points to Him. It's supposed to bring us to Him.

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But you can study Scripture without encountering Jesus. You can know the Bible intellectually without knowing Christ personally. You can have your head full of biblical knowledge without having your heart full of love for God.

And when that happens, Scripture becomes an end in itself rather than a means to the end. It becomes something we master rather than something that masters us. It becomes information we possess rather than truth that transforms us.

Jesus is warning us: Don't make that mistake. Don't search the Scriptures as if they contain life in themselves. Search the Scriptures to find Me. Because I am the life. I am the truth. I am the way.

The Scriptures are the signpost. Jesus is the destination.

The Scriptures are the lamp. Jesus is the light.

The Scriptures are the testimony. Jesus is the reality.

We treasure Scripture because it reveals Jesus. We study Scripture to know Jesus better. We meditate on Scripture to encounter Jesus more fully.

That's the goal. That's the point. That's what Jesus shows us.

II. Renewing Our Minds

So how does Scripture actually transform us? How does reading words on a page lead to changed lives? How do we move from information to transformation?

The answer is: through the renewing of our minds.

Be Transformed by the Renewing of Your Mind

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Romans 12:2 (NASB): "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."

Do not be conformed to this world.

The world has a pattern. A way of thinking. A set of values. A definition of what matters. And it's constantly pressing us into its mold.

The world says seek your own happiness. Pursue your own pleasure. Protect your own interests. Promote yourself. Get what you can. Look out for number one. Your glory is what matters.

And if we're not careful, we absorb those messages. We start thinking like the world thinks. We adopt its values. We conform to its pattern.

But be transformed.

The Greek word is *metamorphoō*—the word we get "metamorphosis" from. It's the word used to describe a caterpillar becoming a butterfly. A complete transformation. A radical change from one form to another.

That's what God wants to do in us. Not just modify our behavior. Not just adjust our habits. But completely transform us from the inside out.

By the renewing of your mind.

This is how transformation happens. Through the mind. Through how we think. Through what we believe. Through the mental patterns and assumptions and worldviews that shape everything else.

If we want to be transformed, we need our minds renewed. We need to think differently. We need new mental categories. We need truth to replace the lies we've believed.

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And this is where Scripture comes in. Because Scripture is God's truth. It's the reliable, authoritative revelation of reality as God sees it. It's the counternarrative to the world's lies.

When we read Scripture, when we meditate on it, when we let it sink deep into our minds and hearts—it renews our thinking. It replaces the world's pattern with God's pattern. It gives us the mind of Christ.

And as our minds are renewed, we're transformed. Not through willpower. Not through trying harder. But through seeing truth, believing truth, and having that truth reshape us from the inside out.

Taking Every Thought Captive

Second Corinthians 10:5 (NASB): "We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ."

Taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.

Our thoughts are not neutral. They're not passive. They shape our emotions, our desires, our actions, our entire lives.

And many of our thoughts are lies. Deceptions. Speculations that contradict what God has revealed. Lofty arguments raised up against the knowledge of God.

We think: "I'm not good enough." That's a lie. God says we're His beloved children, chosen before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4-5).

We think: "I need to earn God's love." That's a lie. God says He loved us while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8).

We think: "My worth depends on my performance." That's a lie. God says we're valuable because we're made in His image (Genesis 1:27).

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We think: "I have to make myself acceptable to God." That's a lie. God says we're already accepted in Christ (Ephesians 1:6).

These lies—and countless others—run through our minds constantly. And they shape how we live. They drive us to strive, perform, prove ourselves, seek our own glory.

But Scripture gives us truth to replace the lies. And when we take our thoughts captive—when we identify the lies, reject them, and replace them with God's truth—transformation happens.

This is active. Intentional. We're not passive recipients of whatever thoughts float through our minds. We're soldiers in a battle, fighting against lies, destroying speculations, taking thoughts captive.

And our weapon is Scripture. God's truth. The sword of the Spirit that cuts through deception and reveals reality.

Your Word I Have Treasured in My Heart

Psalm 119:11 (NASB): "Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You."

I have treasured.

The psalmist isn't just reading Scripture. He's treasuring it. Valuing it. Hiding it in his heart. Making it part of himself.

This is more than intellectual knowledge. This is internalization. This is letting Scripture sink so deep that it becomes part of how we think, how we feel, how we respond.

And the purpose: "That I may not sin against You."

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Scripture in the heart is protection against sin. Not because we're memorizing rules to follow. But because we're filling our minds with truth that crowds out lies, with God's voice that drowns out temptation's whisper, with reality that exposes deception.

When Scripture is treasured in the heart, it's available when we need it. When temptation comes, we have truth to stand on. When lies assault us, we have God's Word to counter them. When we're confused about direction, we have God's wisdom to guide us.

George Müller, that man of faith who trusted God to provide for thousands of orphans without ever asking anyone for money, wrote: "The vigor of our spiritual life will be in exact proportion to the place held by the Bible in our life and thoughts."

In exact proportion.

That's a sobering statement. Our spiritual vitality—our strength, our growth, our effectiveness, our transformation—is directly proportional to how much we treasure God's Word.

If Scripture has a small place in our lives and thoughts, our spiritual life will be weak. If Scripture has a large place, our spiritual life will be strong.

It's that simple. And that challenging.

So the question is: How much do we treasure God's Word? How central is it to our lives? How deeply have we hidden it in our hearts?

III. The Word as Glory Transformer

Now here's the connection to our purpose: Scripture is one of the primary means by which God transforms us into people who display His glory.

LEARN FROM ME

Remember 2 Corinthians 3:18? "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory" (NASB).

We behold God's glory, and we're transformed. We see what He's like, and we become like what we see.

But how do we behold God's glory? One of the primary ways is through Scripture. Because Scripture reveals God. It shows us what He's like. It displays His character, His nature, His heart.

Transformed by Beholding Glory

When we read Scripture with eyes to see Jesus, with hearts open to encounter God, with minds ready to be shaped by truth—we're beholding glory.

We see God's holiness in His law. We see God's mercy in His patience with Israel. We see God's justice in His judgments. We see God's love in His promises. We see God's faithfulness in how He keeps His word.

And supremely, we see God's glory in Jesus. In the Gospels, we watch Jesus live. We hear Him teach. We see Him love. We witness Him serve. We behold Him die and rise again.

And as we behold—as we fix our attention on Jesus revealed in Scripture—we're transformed. We become like what we see. We're changed from one degree of glory to another.

This is not automatic. It's not magic. We can read Scripture without being transformed if we're reading it wrong—if we're reading to judge others, or to prove we're right, or to collect information, or out of mere duty.

But when we read to encounter God, to know Christ, to be shaped by truth—transformation happens. The Spirit takes the Word and applies it to our hearts. The living God meets us in the written Word. And we're changed.

LEARN FROM ME

Doers of the Word

James 1:22-25 (NASB): "But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does."

Doers of the word, and not merely hearers.

Here's where many of us get stuck. We hear the Word. We read the Word. We study the Word. We accumulate knowledge about the Word.

But we don't do it. We don't let it change how we live. We don't obey what we've learned.

And James says this is self-deception. We're fooling ourselves if we think hearing is enough. We're like someone who looks in a mirror, sees what they look like, and then immediately forgets.

What's the point of looking in a mirror if you don't do anything about what you see? If you notice your hair is messy but don't fix it? If you see dirt on your face but don't wash it?

Scripture is a mirror. It shows us what we're really like. It reveals our sin, our selfishness, our need for transformation. It also shows us who we are in Christ, what we're called to be, how we're supposed to live.

But if we just look and walk away—if we say, "Interesting," and then go on living the same way—we've missed the point. We've wasted the mirror.

The transformation comes when we do what the Word says. When we obey. When we apply. When we let truth reshape our actions, not just inform our minds.

LEARN FROM ME

This is how Scripture transforms us into people who display God's glory. Not through knowledge alone. But through obedient action based on that knowledge.

The Living and Active Word

Hebrews 4:12 (NASB): "For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

Living and active.

Scripture is not a dead book. It's not just ancient words on a page. It's living. It's active. It's God's Word, and God speaks through it.

When we read Scripture, we're not just reading what God said. We're hearing what God is saying. Present tense. Now. To us.

Sharper than any two-edged sword.

The Word cuts. It pierces. It gets beneath our defenses. It divides soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It reaches the deepest parts of us that we hide from everyone else—and even from ourselves.

Able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Scripture exposes us. It reveals our true motives. It shows us the intentions we're hiding, the thoughts we're entertaining, the attitudes we're harboring.

And this is uncomfortable. Because we don't like being exposed. We don't want our hearts laid bare. We prefer to maintain our self-deception, our carefully constructed self-image, our justifications and rationalizations.

LEARN FROM ME

But this exposure is grace. Because we can't be healed of diseases we don't know we have. We can't repent of sins we don't recognize. We can't be transformed from patterns we're not aware of.

The Word exposes so it can heal. It reveals so it can transform. It cuts so it can make us whole.

This is how Scripture works as a glory transformer. It shows us the truth about ourselves—our sin, our need, our brokenness. And it shows us the truth about God—His love, His grace, His power to transform us.

And in that dual revelation—seeing ourselves rightly and seeing God rightly—we're changed. We're conformed more and more to Christ's image. We're transformed from people living for our own glory to people living for God's glory.

IV. Meditating on Truth

But here's the question: How do we actually let Scripture transform us? How do we move from reading words on a page to having our lives changed by those words?

The answer, throughout Scripture itself, is meditation.

Not meditation as emptying the mind. But meditation as filling the mind. Dwelling on truth. Chewing on it. Letting it sink deep. Returning to it again and again.

Meditate Day and Night

Joshua 1:8 (NASB): "This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success."

You shall meditate on it day and night.

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Meditation is not a one-time activity. It's not reading a verse in the morning and checking it off your list. It's continuous. Ongoing. Day and night.

The Hebrew word for meditate (*hagah*) means to murmur, to speak, to mutter, to think about repeatedly. It's the image of someone chewing cud—taking something in, processing it, bringing it back up, processing it again, over and over.

This is how Scripture is meant to be approached. Not speed-reading through chapters to meet a quota. But taking a verse, a passage, a truth—and dwelling on it. Thinking about it. Turning it over in your mind. Considering its implications. Applying it to your life. Letting it shape your thoughts.

And the purpose: "So that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it."

Meditation leads to obedience. When we dwell on God's Word, when we let it saturate our minds, when we think about it throughout the day—we're more likely to actually do it. To live it. To let it shape our actions.

And that leads to prosperity and success. Not necessarily material prosperity. But true success—living according to God's design, fulfilling His purposes, becoming what we were created to be.

This is the promise. This is the pathway. Meditate on God's Word, day and night, and it will transform you into someone who lives for God's glory.

The Tree Planted by Water

Psalm 1:2-3 (NASB) gives us a beautiful picture of what this looks like:

"But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night. He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers."

His delight is in the law of the LORD.

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Notice: It's not just duty. It's delight. The person who meditates on God's Word day and night isn't grinding through it reluctantly. They're delighting in it. Enjoying it. Finding pleasure in it.

This is what happens when we encounter God in His Word. When we meet Jesus in Scripture. When we experience transformation through truth. We start to delight in it. We want more of it. We crave it.

He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water.

This is the result. This is what meditation produces. Not a dried-up, withered, struggling plant. But a flourishing tree.

Firmly planted. Deep roots. Stable. Secure. Not easily shaken.

By streams of water. Constant access to life-giving nourishment. Always fed. Always sustained.

Which yields its fruit in its season.

Fruitfulness. Not barrenness. Not empty productivity. But actual fruit—the character of Christ, the fruit of the Spirit, a life that displays God's glory.

And its leaf does not wither.

Vitality. Life. Ongoing health. Not wilting under pressure. Not dying in drought. But remaining green, vibrant, alive.

This is what meditation on God's Word produces. This is what happens when we treasure Scripture in our hearts, when we dwell on it day and night, when we let it sink deep and transform us.

We become trees planted by water. Fruitful. Flourishing. Displaying God's glory through our lives.

LEARN FROM ME

Dwelling on What Is True and Noble

Philippians 4:8 (NASB): "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things."

Dwell on these things.

What we think about matters. What we allow our minds to dwell on shapes us. What we meditate on becomes part of us.

If we dwell on lies, we'll live in deception. If we dwell on impurity, we'll become defiled. If we dwell on bitterness, we'll become bitter.

But if we dwell on what is true, honorable, right, pure, lovely—if we fill our minds with excellence and things worthy of praise—we'll become like what we think about.

And where do we find these things most reliably? In Scripture. In God's Word. In the truth He's revealed.

The world offers us a constant stream of lies, impurity, corruption, and worthless things to think about. Our culture wants to fill our minds with messages that pull us away from God, that promote self-glory, that encourage sin.

But Scripture offers us truth. God's truth. Reality as He sees it. And when we dwell on that truth, when we meditate on it, when we fill our minds with it—we're transformed.

This is the battle for our minds. And it's a daily battle. Will we dwell on the world's lies or God's truth? Will we meditate on what drags us down or what lifts us up? Will we fill our minds with garbage or with glory?

The choice is ours. And it shapes everything.

LEARN FROM ME

From Information to Transformation

Here's the key distinction: We're not just trying to accumulate biblical information. We're seeking transformation.

We can know the Bible inside and out and still be unchanged. We can memorize verses and still be living for our own glory. We can be biblical scholars and still be strangers to the God the Bible reveals.

Information without transformation is worthless. Knowledge without change is empty. Bible study without life impact is missing the point.

So how do we move from information to transformation?

First, we read to encounter God, not just to learn about God. We approach Scripture as a meeting place, not just a textbook. We come expecting to hear God's voice, not just collect data.

Second, we read with humility, ready to be challenged. We don't come to Scripture to confirm what we already think. We come ready to have our minds changed, our assumptions challenged, our hearts exposed.

Third, we read with application in mind. We ask, "What does this mean for my life? How should this change me? What do I need to do in response to this truth?"

Fourth, we meditate, not just read. We take time to dwell on what we've read. We think about it throughout the day. We let it sink deep. We return to it again and again.

Fifth, we obey what we learn. We don't just hear and forget. We do. We apply. We let truth reshape our actions.

This is how information becomes transformation. This is how the Word transforms us into people who display God's glory.

LEARN FROM ME

Not through mere knowledge. But through encounter, humility, application, meditation, and obedience.

The Treasure That Transforms

So here's where we land: Scripture is not just a book to read. It's a treasure to mine. A lamp to guide us. A mirror to show us truth. A sword to defend us. Bread to sustain us. A revelation of God to transform us.

When we treasure God's Word—when we meditate on it day and night, when we let it renew our minds, when we take our thoughts captive to its truth, when we obey what we learn—we're transformed from glory to glory.

We become people who think like Christ thinks. Who see like Christ sees. Who value what Christ values. Who live for what Christ lived for.

We become people who display God's glory. Not because we've accumulated biblical knowledge. But because we've encountered God in His Word and been changed by that encounter.

This is why Scripture is essential to living for God's glory. Not as a weapon to wield. Not as a source of pride. Not as a way to prove we're right.

But as the means by which God reveals Himself. The truth that renews our minds. The Word that transforms us into the image of Christ.

And the beautiful thing is this: The same Spirit who inspired Scripture is the One who illuminates it for us. The same God who breathed out the Word is the One who speaks through it to us today.

We're not alone in this. We're not left to figure it out by ourselves. God meets us in His Word. Jesus is revealed in Scripture. The Spirit teaches us and guides us into all truth.

So open the Book. Read it. Treasure it. Meditate on it. Let it examine you. Let it challenge you. Let it transform you.

LEARN FROM ME

And discover that the Word of God is living and active. That it has power to change you from the inside out. That it reveals the glory of God in the face of Christ.

And as you behold that glory—as you see Jesus in Scripture, as you encounter God in His Word, as you let truth renew your mind—you'll be transformed.

From glory to glory. Into the same image. For God's glory.

That's the promise. That's the power. That's what Scripture does in those who treasure it.

CHAPTER 13: Service—Working for the Audience of One

"Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men."

— Colossians 3:23 (NASB)

I need to tell you about one of my biggest failures.

A few years ago, I was invited to speak at a conference. A real conference, not just a Sunday morning service or a small group gathering. A conference with hundreds of people, professional production, respected speakers on the lineup. And they asked me.

I should have been honored. Grateful. Humbled by the opportunity to serve.

Instead, I spent weeks obsessing over my talk. Not because I wanted to serve people well. Not because I wanted to honor God. But because I wanted to be impressive. I wanted people to walk away thinking, "Wow, that Jeff guy really knows his stuff." I wanted the other speakers to respect me. I wanted to prove I belonged on that stage.

I crafted every sentence. Practiced my delivery. Timed my pauses for maximum effect. Planned where to raise my voice and where to lower it. I wasn't preparing to serve. I was preparing to perform.

LEARN FROM ME

And it went well. People said nice things afterward. I got positive feedback. Other speakers complimented my talk. By all external measures, it was a success.

But inside, I felt hollow. Empty. Because I knew the truth. I hadn't served anyone. I'd used the opportunity to glorify myself. I'd stood on that stage playing to the audience, seeking their approval, craving their recognition.

I'd worked for the wrong audience. And even though people were blessed (God is gracious enough to use us despite our motives), I knew I'd missed it. I'd traded the opportunity to serve for God's glory for the cheap thrill of human applause.

And the worst part? The applause faded within days. The recognition meant nothing. The impressive reputation I was trying to build turned out to be as substantial as vapor.

I'd worked for the wrong rewards. I'd served the wrong master. I'd performed for the wrong audience.

And I hated that I'd done it. Even more, I hated that I knew I'd be tempted to do it again.

This is the struggle with service. It's supposed to be about giving ourselves for others' good and God's glory. But it's so easy to turn it into a platform for ourselves. A way to get recognition. A means of building our reputation. A source of glory for us instead of God.

We serve, but we serve for the wrong reasons. We work, but we work for the wrong audience. We give, but we're hoping to get something in return—praise, recognition, status, appreciation.

And Jesus calls us to something radically different. He calls us to serve for an audience of One. To work as unto the Lord. To give without needing anyone to notice. To serve in secret and trust that the Father who sees in secret will reward us.

This is hard. This goes against every instinct we have. This requires a complete reorientation of why we do what we do.

LEARN FROM ME

But it's the only kind of service that glorifies God. It's the only kind of work that's free from the tyranny of human opinion. It's the only kind of giving that brings true joy.

So let's learn from Jesus. Let's see what it looks like to work for the audience of One. Let's discover the freedom of hidden service.

I. Jesus the Servant

If we want to learn to serve for God's glory, we need to look at Jesus. Because Jesus—the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, the Creator of the universe—came to serve.

This is revolutionary. This turns everything upside down. This redefines what greatness looks like.

He Did Not Come to Be Served

Mark 10:45 (NASB): "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

The Son of Man did not come to be served.

Think about what Jesus is saying. He's the Second Person of the Trinity. He's God incarnate. He deserves to be served. Angels worship Him. All creation owes Him allegiance. If anyone has the right to be served, it's Jesus.

But He didn't come to be served. He came to serve.

He washed feet. He healed the sick. He fed the hungry. He taught the crowds. He welcomed children. He touched lepers. He ate with sinners. He gave Himself for others at every turn.

And the ultimate service: "To give His life a ransom for many."

LEARN FROM ME

He didn't just serve in convenient ways. He didn't just help when it was comfortable. He gave His life. He laid down everything. He sacrificed Himself completely.

This is the model. This is what service looks like in the Kingdom. Not demanding to be served, but choosing to serve. Not insisting on our rights, but giving ourselves away. Not seeking our own comfort, but pouring out our lives for others.

And if Jesus—who deserved to be served—chose to serve, how much more should we?

Taking the Form of a Bond-Servant

Philippians 2:7 (NASB): "But emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men."

Taking the form of a bond-servant.

A bond-servant was the lowest position in society. No status. No rights. No recognition. Complete submission to a master. Total availability for service.

And Jesus—God Himself—took that form. He didn't just act like a servant occasionally. He took the form of a servant. He became one. He embodied it completely.

This is staggering. The God who made the universe, who spoke galaxies into existence, who holds all things together by the word of His power—He became a servant.

Not reluctantly. Not resentfully. Not because He had to. But voluntarily. Willingly. As an act of love.

And this reveals something profound about God's character: Greatness in God's Kingdom looks like servanthood. Power is demonstrated through giving, not grasping. Glory is displayed through humility, not self-promotion.

LEARN FROM ME

God is not like the rulers of the Gentiles who lord it over people (Matthew 20:25). God is like Jesus with a towel, washing dirty feet. God is like the Servant who gives His life for the sheep.

This is who God is. And if we're going to reflect God's glory, we need to be servants too.

The Ultimate Service Demonstration

John 13:1-17. We've looked at this passage before, but we need to come back to it here because it's the ultimate demonstration of serving for God's glory rather than our own.

It's the night before the crucifixion. Jesus knows what's coming. He knows He has hours left with His disciples. He knows this is His last chance to teach them the most important lessons.

So what does He do? He washes their feet.

He gets up from the meal. He lays aside His garments. He ties a towel around Himself. He pours water into a basin. And He begins to wash the disciples' feet—dirty, dusty, road-worn feet—and to wipe them with the towel.

This is servant's work. Slave's work. The lowest job in the house. And Jesus does it.

Peter protests: "Lord, do You wash my feet?" (John 13:6, NASB). He's scandalized. This is wrong. This violates the proper order. Masters don't wash disciples' feet.

But Jesus says, "What I do you do not realize now, but you will understand hereafter" (John 13:7, NASB).

And after He's finished, He explains: "Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you" (John 13:12-15, NASB).

LEARN FROM ME

I gave you an example.

This isn't just a nice story. It's a pattern to follow. A command to obey. A way of life to embrace.

If Jesus—the Lord and the Teacher—washed feet, we should wash feet. If He served, we should serve. If He made Himself nothing, we should make ourselves nothing.

This is the example. This is what service looks like. This is how we display God's glory—by serving like Jesus served.

II. Serving for God's Glory, Not Our Own

So how do we actually do this? How do we serve in ways that glorify God rather than ourselves? How do we work for the right audience?

Jesus is clear about this: The motivation matters. The heart matters. Why we serve matters as much as what we do.

Beware of Practicing Righteousness to Be Noticed

Matthew 6:1 (NASB): "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven."

Beware.

That's a warning. Jesus is telling us to be careful. To watch out. To guard against something dangerous.

And what's the danger? Practicing our righteousness before men to be noticed by them.

LEARN FROM ME

The religious leaders of Jesus's day were experts at this. They prayed on street corners where everyone could see them. They gave to the poor with trumpets announcing their generosity. They fasted with faces deliberately marred so people would know how spiritual they were.

They did good things. But they did them to be noticed. To be praised. To be thought of as righteous. To gain a reputation for spirituality.

And Jesus says: If you do that, you've already received your reward. People noticed you. People praised you. People thought you were spiritual. That's it. That's all you get.

But if you're seeking God's reward—if you want the "well done" from the Father, if you want eternal reward, if you want to glorify God rather than yourself—then you can't do your righteous acts to be noticed by people.

The motivation matters. The audience matters. Why you're serving matters.

Are you serving to be noticed? To be praised? To build a reputation? To prove you're valuable? To earn people's approval?

Or are you serving because God has called you to serve? Because you love Him? Because you want His glory to be displayed? Because you're working for an audience of One?

The external action might look the same. But the internal motivation makes all the difference.

Whatever You Do, As for the Lord

Colossians 3:23-24 (NASB): "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve."

Whatever you do.

LEARN FROM ME

Not just "church work." Not just "ministry activities." Not just the obviously spiritual stuff. But *whatever you do.*

Your job. Your housework. Your parenting. Your studying. Your hobbies. Your relationships. Everything.

Do your work heartily.

From the heart. With your whole being. With excellence. With energy. Not half-heartedly. Not reluctantly. Not just going through the motions.

As for the Lord rather than for men.

This is the key. This is what transforms everything.

You're not ultimately working for your boss. You're working for the Lord. You're not ultimately serving to please people. You're serving to please God. You're not ultimately performing for human approval. You're performing for divine recognition.

The Lord is your audience. The Lord is your master. The Lord is the one you're working for.

And when you grasp this—when you really internalize that every task, every job, every act of service is ultimately for the Lord—it changes everything.

You can wash dishes for God's glory. You can change diapers for God's glory. You can answer emails for God's glory. You can mow the lawn for God's glory.

The task doesn't have to be "spiritual" for it to be done for God's glory. It just has to be done as unto the Lord.

Knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance.

LEARN FROM ME

This is the promise. This is what sustains us when our work goes unnoticed, when our service is unappreciated, when people don't recognize what we're doing.

The Lord sees. The Lord knows. The Lord will reward. Maybe not here. Maybe not now. Maybe not in ways we expect. But the reward is coming. The inheritance is certain. The "well done" will be spoken.

It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.

That's the perspective we need. That's the truth that sets us free. We're not serving people ultimately. We're serving Christ. Through serving people, we're serving Him.

And that changes everything.

Do All to the Glory of God

First Corinthians 10:31 (NASB): "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

Whether you eat or drink.

Even the most mundane activities. Even eating and drinking—things we do multiple times every day without thinking about them—can be done to the glory of God.

Or whatever you do.

There's that phrase again. *Whatever you do.* Everything. All of it. No exceptions. No categories of "spiritual" work vs. "secular" work. All work done for God's glory is sacred.

Do all to the glory of God.

That's the goal. That's the standard. That's what transforms ordinary activities into acts of worship.

LEARN FROM ME

Not "do some things for God's glory and other things for yourself." Not "glorify God on Sundays and glorify yourself the rest of the week." But *do all*—everything, always, in every sphere of life—*to the glory of God*.

This is the life we're called to. This is what it means to live for God's glory. Every action, every word, every thought, every motive—all oriented toward glorifying God.

And when we do this—when we really live this way—our whole life becomes worship. Our work becomes service to God. Our ordinary daily activities become opportunities to display God's character.

We're not just trying to survive the week so we can worship on Sunday. We're worshiping through the week by doing everything—eating, drinking, working, resting, playing, serving—to the glory of God.

This is the transformation of ordinary work. This is what it means to work for the audience of One.

III. The Freedom of Hidden Service

Now here's where this gets really liberating: When we serve for God's glory rather than our own, when we work for the Lord rather than for human approval, we're free to serve in secret. We're free to do good works that no one else sees. We're free from the need for recognition.

And that freedom is incredible.

Do Not Let Your Left Hand Know

Matthew 6:3-4 (NASB): "But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you."

Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.

LEARN FROM ME

This is hyperbole, obviously. Jesus is making a point through exaggeration. But the point is powerful: Keep your giving so secret that even you almost don't notice it. Don't dwell on it. Don't congratulate yourself. Don't keep a mental tally of how generous you've been.

Just give. Quietly. Secretly. Without fanfare.

So that your giving will be in secret.

Hidden. Not announced. Not publicized. Not shared on social media. Not mentioned in conversation so people will think well of you.

Secret. Between you and God.

And your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

This is the promise. This is what makes hidden service worth it.

Your Father sees. He knows what you've done even when no one else does. He notices the service that goes unrecognized. He sees the giving that's not applauded. He knows the work you do in secret.

And He will reward you. Not necessarily with earthly recognition. Not necessarily with human praise. But with His reward. His approval. His "well done."

And that's better than any human applause could ever be.

The Danger of Platform and Applause

Miroslav Volf wrote: "The glory of God is the glory of self-giving, other-centered love."

Self-giving, other-centered love.

LEARN FROM ME

That's God's glory. Not self-promoting, recognition-seeking, platform-building glory. But self-giving, other-centered love.

And that kind of love doesn't need a platform. It doesn't require applause. It doesn't demand recognition.

In fact, platform and applause are dangerous to this kind of love. Because they tempt us to serve for the wrong reasons. They make it about us instead of about God and others. They turn service into performance.

I've seen this happen in ministry over and over. Someone starts serving with pure motives—they genuinely want to help people, they love God, they're giving themselves away. But then they get recognized. People praise them. They develop a reputation for being a great servant.

And slowly, subtly, the motivation shifts. They start serving to maintain that reputation. They start doing things that will be noticed rather than things that need to be done. They start positioning themselves for recognition rather than simply meeting needs.

The platform corrupts the service. The applause poisons the motive. What started as genuine ministry becomes performance.

This is why hidden service is so important. It protects us from this corruption. When we serve in secret, when no one knows what we're doing, when there's no applause to tempt us—we can keep our motives pure. We can serve for God's glory alone.

Serving Those Who Cannot Repay

Luke 14:12-14 (NASB): "And He also went on to say to the one who had invited Him, 'When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, otherwise they may also invite you in return and that will be your repayment. But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'"

LEARN FROM ME

Do not invite... those who may invite you in return.

Jesus is attacking our natural tendency to serve people who can serve us back. To give to people who can give to us. To help people who can help us.

That's not service. That's trade. That's exchange. That's "I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine."

Real service—service for God's glory—gives without expecting return. It serves people who can't repay. It helps those who have nothing to offer back.

Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.

People who can't host you in return. People who can't enhance your reputation. People who can't advance your career. People who can't give you anything back.

Serve them. Give to them. Help them.

Why? Not because they can repay you. But because *you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.*

God will repay. Not them. God.

This is the freedom of hidden service. We don't need people to repay us. We don't need recognition. We don't need applause. We don't need anything back.

Because we're working for an audience of One. And He sees. He knows. He will reward.

The True Saint Remains Hidden

Brother Lawrence, that 17th-century monk who practiced the presence of God while washing dishes and mending sandals, understood this. He wrote: "The true saint is one who knows how to remain hidden."

LEARN FROM ME

Knows how to remain hidden.

Not someone who accidentally ends up hidden. Not someone who's bitter about being unrecognized. But someone who *knows how to* remain hidden. Who chooses it. Who is content with it. Who actually prefers it.

Because the true saint isn't serving for recognition. The true saint is serving for God's glory. And God's glory is best displayed when we're not seeking our own.

When we remain hidden, when we serve in secret, when we work without recognition—people can't praise us. They can't applaud us. They can't make much of us.

But they can make much of God. They can see His love expressed through our service. They can witness His grace in action. They can encounter His kindness through our giving.

And that's what we want. Not credit for ourselves. But glory for God.

This is the freedom of hidden service. We're free to serve without needing anyone to know. Free to give without requiring appreciation. Free to work without demanding recognition.

Because we're working for an audience of One. And His approval is all we need.

IV. Spiritual Gifts for God's Glory

Now, God doesn't just call us to serve in general. He equips us to serve in specific ways. He gives us spiritual gifts—abilities, capacities, graces—that enable us to serve effectively.

But here's the critical point: These gifts are not for our glory. They're for God's glory. They're not given to make us impressive. They're given to make God's grace visible.

LEARN FROM ME

As Each One Has Received a Special Gift

First Peter 4:10-11 (NASB): "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."

As each one has received a special gift.

Every believer has received at least one spiritual gift. Not just pastors. Not just ministry professionals. Not just the obviously spiritual people. Every single believer.

You have a gift. A special ability. A particular grace that God has given you to serve others.

Employ it in serving one another.

The gift isn't for you. It's for others. You don't receive a gift to make yourself impressive. You receive it to serve.

As good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

You're a steward, not an owner. The gift isn't yours to use however you want. It's God's, entrusted to you, to be used for His purposes.

And you're a steward of God's *grace*. Your gift is an expression of God's grace. When you use your gift to serve, people experience God's grace through you.

Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God.

LEARN FROM ME

If your gift is speaking—teaching, preaching, prophesying, encouraging—you speak God's words, not your own. You're His mouthpiece. His representative. His messenger.

The focus isn't on your eloquence. It's on His truth.

Whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies.

If your gift is serving—helping, giving, showing mercy, administering—you serve in God's strength, not your own. You're His hands. His feet. His compassion made visible.

The focus isn't on your capability. It's on His power.

So that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.

That's the goal. That's the purpose. That's why gifts are given.

Not so we'll be glorified. Not so we'll be recognized. Not so we'll be impressive.

But so that in all things—in every act of service, in every use of our gifts, in every expression of grace—*God may be glorified.*

When you use your gifts properly—speaking God's utterances, serving in God's strength, functioning as a steward of God's grace—people see God. They experience God's grace. They encounter God's power. They witness God's love.

And God gets the glory. Which is exactly how it should be. Because to Him belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever.

LEARN FROM ME

Diversity in the Body

Romans 12:4-8 (NASB): "For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness."

All the members do not have the same function.

We're not all gifted the same way. We don't all have the same abilities. We don't all serve in the same capacity.

And that's good. That's how God designed it. Because the body needs diversity. We need different gifts, different functions, different roles.

The eye can't say to the hand, "I don't need you" (1 Corinthians 12:21). The teacher can't say to the mercy-shower, "Your gift doesn't matter." The leader can't say to the giver, "Your contribution isn't important."

We need each other. And we need each other's different gifts.

Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly.

Use the gift you've been given. Don't compare it to someone else's gift. Don't wish you had a different gift. Don't despise the gift you have because it seems less impressive than someone else's.

Exercise your gift. Develop it. Use it. Serve with it.

LEARN FROM ME

If you're a prophet, prophesy. If you're a server, serve. If you're a teacher, teach. If you're an encourager, encourage. If you're a giver, give liberally. If you're a leader, lead diligently. If you're a mercy-shower, show mercy cheerfully.

Do what you're gifted to do. And do it for God's glory.

Gifts for the Common Good

First Corinthians 12:7 (NASB): "But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

To each one.

Again, every believer. No exceptions. You're included.

Is given the manifestation of the Spirit.

Your gift is a manifestation—a visible expression, a tangible demonstration—of the Spirit. When you use your gift, the Spirit becomes visible. People see the Spirit at work. They experience the Spirit's power. They witness the Spirit's grace.

Your gift makes the invisible Spirit visible.

For the common good.

Not for your personal benefit. Not for your own glory. Not to make you look impressive.

For the common good. For the benefit of others. For the building up of the body. For the advance of the Kingdom.

LEARN FROM ME

This is crucial. Because spiritual gifts can become a source of pride. We can use them to build our own platform. We can exercise them to get recognition. We can deploy them to make ourselves look spiritual.

But that's a perversion of their purpose. Gifts are given for the common good, not our personal glory. They're meant to serve others, not promote ourselves. They're designed to display God's grace, not our giftedness.

When we use our gifts properly—humbly, sacrificially, for others' benefit and God's glory—the Spirit is manifested. God is glorified. The body is built up. The Kingdom advances.

And we get to participate in something far greater than our own recognition could ever provide.

Stewardship vs. Ownership

Here's the fundamental shift we need to make: We don't own our gifts. We steward them.

An owner has rights. An owner can use what they own however they want. An owner gets the credit for what their possessions produce.

But a steward has responsibilities. A steward uses what's been entrusted to them for the owner's purposes. A steward gives credit to the owner, not themselves.

We're stewards of God's gifts. Not owners.

This means:

We can't use our gifts however we want. We use them according to God's purposes. We serve where He calls us to serve. We give what He calls us to give. We speak what He gives us to speak.

LEARN FROM ME

We can't take credit for what our gifts produce. When someone is blessed by our teaching, God gets the credit—He gave us the gift and the message. When someone is helped by our service, God gets the credit—He gave us the strength and the opportunity. When someone is encouraged by our generosity, God gets the credit—He gave us the resources and the heart to give.

We're accountable for how we use our gifts. We'll give an account to the Owner. Did we use what He entrusted to us? Did we invest it wisely? Did we serve faithfully? Did we glorify Him with what He gave us?

This perspective transforms how we view and use our gifts. They're not ours to showcase. They're God's to steward. They're not ours to build our reputation with. They're God's to display His glory through.

And when we get this right—when we really embrace our role as stewards rather than owners—we're free. Free from the pressure to perform. Free from the need to impress. Free from the anxiety about whether we're good enough.

Because it's not about us. It's about Him. It's His gift. His strength. His grace. His glory.

We just get to participate. We just get to serve. We just get to be channels through which His grace flows to others.

And that's a far better role than trying to be the source.

Working for the Audience of One

So here's where we land: Service is not about us. It's not about our reputation. It's not about our recognition. It's not about our glory.

Service is about God's glory. It's about working for the audience of One. It's about doing everything—eating, drinking, working, serving, giving, speaking—as unto the Lord.

LEARN FROM ME

And when we get this right, when we really internalize that we're working for God rather than for human approval, everything changes.

We're free to serve in secret because God sees. We're free to give without recognition because God knows. We're free to work without applause because God rewards.

We're free from the tyranny of human opinion. Free from the pressure to perform. Free from the anxiety of constantly trying to prove ourselves.

Because we're working for an audience of One. And His opinion is the only one that matters.

This is the liberation of Kingdom service. This is what transforms work from drudgery into worship. This is what makes even the most mundane task meaningful.

When you wash dishes as unto the Lord, you're worshiping. When you change diapers for God's glory, you're serving in the Kingdom. When you answer emails with excellence because you're working for Christ, you're displaying His character.

No task is too small. No service is insignificant. No work is meaningless.

If it's done as unto the Lord, it matters. If it's done for God's glory, it counts. If it's done by the strength God supplies, it displays His grace.

So serve. Work. Give. Use your gifts. Meet needs. Help people. Build the Kingdom.

But do it all for the audience of One. Do it all as unto the Lord. Do it all for God's glory.

And discover that the work you thought was insignificant is actually sacred. The service you thought went unnoticed is actually seen by the Father. The gifts you thought were inadequate are actually sufficient when God supplies the strength.

LEARN FROM ME

You're working for the King. You're serving the Lord. You're laboring for eternal reward.

And one day—one glorious day—you'll hear what you've been longing to hear: "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Not because you were impressive. Not because you had a platform. Not because you got recognized.

But because you served faithfully. Because you worked heartily. Because you did it all for the audience of One.

For His glory. Not yours.

That's the goal. That's the freedom. That's the life of service in the Kingdom.

CHAPTER 14: Suffering—Refined for Glory Through Fire

"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

— Romans 8:18 (NASB)

I'm going to be completely honest with you: I didn't want to write this chapter.

I've been putting it off. Finding reasons to work on other chapters first. Telling myself I needed more time to think about it, to pray about it, to prepare.

But the truth is simpler and uglier: I don't want to write about suffering because I don't handle it well.

Because I'm in the middle of suffering right now and I don't have tidy answers. Because I know what the Bible says about suffering producing glory, but I'm not sure I believe it when I'm in the middle of the fire.

LEARN FROM ME

My relationship with my daughters is broken. Years of ministry mistakes, of prioritizing church over family, of being emotionally unavailable while I was being spiritually "available" to everyone else—it all came home to roost. And now there's distance. Hurt. Wounds that I don't know how to heal.

I burned out in ministry. Tried to do too much. Tried to be too much for too many people. Tried to save people I had no business trying to save. And I crashed. Hard. The kind of crash that makes you question whether you should ever step foot in a church again.

I've faced my own darkness. My own inadequacy. My own brokenness. And some days, the suffering feels pointless. Meaningless. Just pain with no purpose.

So when I write about suffering producing glory, when I quote verses about being refined by fire, when I talk about how God uses pain to transform us—I'm not writing from a place of having figured it out. I'm writing from the middle of the mess, trying to believe what God says is true even when it doesn't feel true.

And maybe that's exactly where we all are. Maybe we're all in various stages of suffering, various depths of pain, various fires of refinement. Maybe none of us have this figured out.

But God's Word is still true. Whether we feel it or not. Whether we understand it or not. Whether we like it or not.

Suffering is part of the Christian life. Not an unfortunate detour. Not a sign that something's gone wrong. Not evidence that we lack faith or have sinned grievously.

Suffering is the pathway to glory. It's how we're refined. It's where we learn what we can't learn anywhere else. It's the fire that burns away the dross and reveals what's real.

I don't like it. You probably don't either. But it's true.

LEARN FROM ME

So let's be honest about suffering. Let's look at what Jesus promises, what He models, and what He teaches about pain. And let's trust that even when we can't see it, even when we don't feel it, even when we don't understand it—God is using our suffering for His glory and our good.

I. The Promise and Pattern of Suffering

Here's what we need to understand right from the start: Suffering is not an if. It's a when. Jesus doesn't say "if you suffer." He says "when you suffer."

It's promised. Expected. Normal for the Christian life.

And that's hard to accept in a culture that tells us we deserve comfort, that promises us our best life now, that treats suffering as something to be avoided at all costs.

But Jesus is clear: If you follow Him, you will suffer.

In the World You Have Tribulation

John 16:33 (NASB): "These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world."

In the world you have tribulation.

Not "you might have tribulation." Not "if you're unfaithful you'll have tribulation." Not "tribulation comes to those who deserve it."

But *you have* tribulation. Present tense. Certain. Guaranteed.

If you're in the world, you will experience tribulation. Trouble. Affliction. Difficulty. Pain.

LEARN FROM ME

This is Jesus speaking. The night before His crucifixion. He's giving His disciples final instructions, final encouragements, final truths they need to know.

And one of those truths is this: Following Me doesn't exempt you from suffering. In fact, it might increase it.

So that in Me you may have peace.

The peace doesn't come from avoiding tribulation. The peace comes from being in Christ while experiencing tribulation. It's peace in the midst of suffering, not peace instead of suffering.

But take courage; I have overcome the world.

The tribulation is real. But so is the victory. The suffering is certain. But so is the overcoming. The pain is promised. But so is the triumph.

We will suffer. But we don't suffer alone. We don't suffer without hope. We don't suffer without knowing that the outcome is already decided.

Jesus has overcome the world. And that means our suffering—whatever it is, however long it lasts, however intense it becomes—is temporary. Limited. Not the final word.

But it's still real. And Jesus doesn't minimize it.

All Who Desire to Live Godly Will Be Persecuted

Second Timothy 3:12 (NASB): "Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."

All who desire to live godly.

Not some. Not a few. Not only those in dangerous countries or difficult circumstances. But *all*. Every single person who desires to live a godly life in Christ Jesus.

LEARN FROM ME

Will be persecuted.

Future tense. Certain. It's going to happen. Not might happen. Not could happen. But will happen.

Persecution. Opposition. Resistance. Suffering for the sake of righteousness.

This comes in different forms for different people. For some, it's physical persecution—imprisonment, beatings, martyrdom. For others, it's social persecution—rejection, mockery, loss of relationships. For still others, it's professional persecution—career limitations, job loss, discrimination.

But in some form, it will come. If you're serious about following Jesus, if you're committed to living for God's glory rather than your own, if you're willing to obey God rather than conform to the world—you will face opposition.

The world doesn't like people who refuse to worship at its altars. The culture doesn't appreciate those who won't bow to its values. The systems of this age resist those who live for the age to come.

And so we suffer. Not because we're doing something wrong. But because we're doing something right.

Through Many Tribulations We Must Enter the Kingdom

Acts 14:22 (NASB): "Strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, 'Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.'"

Through many tribulations we must enter.

Notice that word: *through*. Not around. Not avoiding. Not bypassing. But *through*.

The path to the Kingdom goes through tribulation. There's no detour. No shortcut. No easier way.

Many tribulations. Not one. Not a few. But many. Multiple. Varied. Ongoing.

LEARN FROM ME

And the word *must*. This isn't optional. This isn't for the especially spiritual or the particularly unfortunate. This is the path. For everyone.

This is Paul and Barnabas speaking to new believers. They're not sugarcoating the Christian life. They're not giving the sales pitch that says, "Follow Jesus and all your problems will disappear."

They're being honest: If you continue in the faith, you will face tribulations. Many of them. And you must go through them to enter the Kingdom.

This is sobering. This is hard. This is not what we want to hear.

But it's true. And knowing it's true—knowing that suffering is normal, expected, part of the path—actually helps us endure it. Because when suffering comes, we don't have to wonder if we've done something wrong. We don't have to question whether God has abandoned us. We don't have to think we're being punished.

We can recognize it for what it is: The normal Christian experience. The path Jesus walked. The road all His followers walk.

Through many tribulations. To the Kingdom. To glory.

C.S. Lewis on God's Megaphone

C.S. Lewis, who knew something about suffering (he lost his mother as a child, fought in World War I, cared for an alcoholic abusive woman for years, and watched his wife die of cancer), wrote: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

God shouts in our pains.

LEARN FROM ME

Suffering gets our attention like nothing else. When life is comfortable, when everything's going well, when we're healthy and prosperous and successful—it's easy to ignore God. Easy to forget we need Him. Easy to drift into self-sufficiency.

But suffering shatters the illusion of self-sufficiency. It exposes our weakness. It reveals our need. It forces us to face realities we've been avoiding.

And in that exposure, in that need, in that forced confrontation with reality—God speaks. Loudly. Clearly. In ways we can't ignore.

Not because He's cruel. Not because He enjoys watching us suffer. But because He loves us too much to let us continue living in the comfortable lies that keep us from Him.

Suffering is His megaphone. His wake-up call. His way of getting through to us when nothing else will.

And while we might wish for a gentler method, the truth is: Sometimes we need to be shaken. Sometimes we need the megaphone. Sometimes we need the pain that drives us to our knees.

Because on our knees—broken, desperate, without the strength to pretend anymore—that's where we finally encounter God. That's where transformation begins. That's where we learn what we couldn't learn any other way.

II. Jesus's Suffering and Glory

If we're going to understand Christian suffering, we need to look at Jesus. Because He suffered more than any of us ever will. And His suffering led to glory. And He tells us our path is the same as His.

Perfecting the Author of Their Salvation Through Sufferings

Hebrews 2:10 (NASB): "For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings."

LEARN FROM ME

To perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings.

This is remarkable. Jesus is the author of our salvation. He's the Son of God. He's perfect. And yet God perfects Him through sufferings.

Not that Jesus was imperfect and needed improvement. But that the role He was fulfilling—the work He was accomplishing—was brought to completion through suffering.

He couldn't be our Savior without experiencing what we experience. He couldn't be our High Priest without being tempted as we're tempted. He couldn't bring many sons to glory without Himself walking the path of suffering that leads to glory.

So He suffered. Not as punishment. Not as correction. But as the necessary pathway to accomplish His mission.

And if suffering was necessary for Jesus—if God perfected His own Son through suffering—then we shouldn't be surprised that suffering is necessary for us too.

The Fellowship of His Sufferings

Philippians 3:10 (NASB): "That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death."

The fellowship of His sufferings.

Paul wants to know Christ. Not just know about Him. Not just believe correct things about Him. But actually know Him. Intimately. Deeply. Personally.

And part of knowing Christ is sharing in His sufferings. Experiencing what He experienced. Walking where He walked. Suffering as He suffered.

LEARN FROM ME

There's a fellowship—a partnership, a sharing, a communion—in suffering. When we suffer for Christ's sake, we're joining Him in something. We're participating in His experience. We're walking the path He walked.

And in that fellowship, we know Him in ways we couldn't know Him otherwise. We understand His heart. We experience His comfort. We encounter His presence in the darkness.

This isn't masochism. This isn't seeking suffering for its own sake. This is recognizing that if we want to know Christ fully, we need to know Him in His sufferings as well as in His glory.

We want the resurrection power. We want the victory. We want the triumph. But those come through the cross. Through the suffering. Through the dying.

If we want resurrection, we have to go through crucifixion. If we want glory, we have to walk through suffering. If we want to know Christ fully, we have to know Him in the fellowship of His sufferings.

Was It Not Necessary for the Christ to Suffer?

Luke 24:26 (NASB): "Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?"

Was it not necessary?

Jesus is speaking to the disciples on the road to Emmaus after His resurrection. They're confused, discouraged, trying to make sense of what happened.

And Jesus essentially says, "Why are you surprised? Didn't you understand? It was *necessary* for the Christ to suffer. There was no other way to glory."

The cross wasn't Plan B. It wasn't a tragic accident. It wasn't a failure that God somehow redeemed. It was the plan all along. The necessary pathway. The only way to glory.

LEARN FROM ME

God could have accomplished redemption differently, perhaps. But He chose the way of suffering. He chose the cross. He chose death leading to resurrection.

And if that was the path for Jesus—if it was necessary for Him to suffer before entering glory—then it's the path for us too.

We're following in His footsteps. We're walking the road He walked. We're taking up our cross, just as He took up His.

And if His cross led to resurrection, if His suffering led to glory, if His death led to life—then our suffering will lead to the same. Our cross will end in resurrection. Our dying will result in living.

But we have to walk the path. We have to go through the suffering. We have to endure the cross.

There's no shortcut to glory. Not for Jesus. Not for us.

III. How Suffering Produces Glory

So how does this work? How does suffering actually produce glory? What's the mechanism? What's happening in the fire that results in transformation?

Scripture gives us several answers. And they're all rooted in this truth: God uses suffering to shape us, to refine us, to conform us to Christ's image.

Tribulation Produces Perseverance

Romans 5:3-5 (NASB): "And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us."

LEARN FROM ME

Tribulation brings about perseverance.

This is a process. A progression. A chain of transformation.

Tribulation—suffering, affliction, trouble—produces perseverance. The Greek word is *hypomonē*, which means endurance, steadfastness, patient endurance. It's the ability to stay under the weight, to keep going, to not give up.

You don't develop perseverance in comfort. You don't build endurance when everything's easy. You develop these qualities by enduring difficulty. By staying under the weight. By not quitting when things get hard.

And perseverance, proven character.

As we persevere through suffering, our character is proven. Tested. Refined. The dross is burned away. What's fake falls off. What's real remains.

The Greek word for "proven character" is *dokimē*, which means the quality of being approved through testing. Like metal that's been put through fire and proven to be genuine.

Suffering exposes what we're really made of. It reveals what we truly believe, what we really value, what we're actually trusting in. And as we endure, as we keep going, as we trust God through the pain—our character is proven. We become people of substance, depth, reality.

And proven character, hope.

This is counterintuitive. We'd expect suffering to produce despair. But Paul says proven character produces hope.

Why? Because when you've been through the fire and come out the other side—when you've suffered and persevered and had your character proven—you know something. You know God is faithful. You know He sustains. You know He doesn't abandon. You know He keeps His promises.

LEARN FROM ME

And that knowledge produces hope. Not wishful thinking. But confident expectation. You've seen God come through before. You trust He'll come through again.

And hope does not disappoint.

This hope—this confident expectation based on proven faithfulness—doesn't disappoint. It doesn't let us down. It doesn't leave us empty.

Why? "Because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit."

At the foundation of everything—underneath the tribulation and the perseverance and the proven character and the hope—is the love of God. Poured out. Abundantly. Lavishly. Into our hearts. By the Holy Spirit.

This is what sustains us. This is what we discover in the suffering. This is what the fire reveals: We are loved. Deeply. Completely. Eternally.

And that love—that unshakeable, unfailing, poured-out love—is what carries us through the tribulation, produces perseverance, proves character, and generates hope.

Suffering doesn't feel like love in the moment. But when we come through it and look back, we see: God was there. God was working. God was loving us even in the pain. Especially in the pain.

The Testing of Faith Produces Endurance

James 1:2-4 (NASB): "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

Consider it all joy... when you encounter various trials.

LEARN FROM ME

James doesn't say "if you encounter trials." He says *when*. It's going to happen. Trials are coming. Count on it.

And he says consider it *all* joy. Not some joy mixed with sorrow. Not a little bit of joy on the side. But *all* joy. Complete joy. Full joy.

This seems impossible. How can we consider trials to be all joy? How can suffering be something we rejoice in?

Knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.

The key is in the knowing. When we understand what trials are accomplishing, when we see what's being produced, when we grasp the purpose—we can have joy even in the difficulty.

Trials test our faith. They put it under pressure. They reveal whether our faith is real or fake, deep or shallow, tested or untested.

And that testing produces endurance. The same word Paul uses in Romans 5—*hypomonē*. Patient endurance. Steadfastness. The ability to keep going.

Let endurance have its perfect result.

Don't short-circuit the process. Don't bail out halfway through. Don't give up when it gets hard. Let the endurance do its complete work.

So that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

This is the goal. This is what God is producing through the trials. Not perfection in the sense of sinlessness. But maturity. Wholeness. Completeness. Lacking in nothing.

LEARN FROM ME

God is making us complete through the trials. He's filling in what's missing. He's developing what's undeveloped. He's maturing what's immature.

And the pathway to that completeness is through the fire of testing. Through trials. Through suffering.

We don't like it. We'd prefer an easier way. But there isn't one. This is how we grow. This is how we're completed. This is how we become what God created us to be.

Tested by Fire for Praise, Glory and Honor

First Peter 1:6-7 (NASB): "In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

Even though tested by fire.

Peter uses the metaphor of refining metal. Gold is tested by fire to remove impurities, to burn away the dross, to prove its genuineness.

Our faith is like that. It's tested by fire. By trials. By suffering. And the fire burns away what's fake, exposes what's weak, and proves what's real.

Being more precious than gold.

Our tested, proven, refined faith is more precious than gold. Because gold perishes. It's temporary. It won't last into eternity.

But faith—genuine, tested, fire-proven faith—is eternal. It lasts. It matters. It's of infinite value.

May be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

LEARN FROM ME

This is the goal. This is what the testing produces. Not just stronger faith for our benefit. But praise and glory and honor for Christ when He's revealed.

When Jesus returns, when we see Him face to face, when all is made known—our tested faith will result in praise to Him. Glory to Him. Honor to Him.

The suffering wasn't pointless. The trials weren't meaningless. The fire wasn't random. It was all working toward this: Proven faith that brings glory to Christ.

This is how suffering produces glory. Not our glory. But Christ's glory. Our tested, refined, fire-proven faith becomes a testimony to His faithfulness, His sustaining power, His keeping grace.

And that brings Him glory. Which is what we were made for.

Momentary, Light Affliction Producing Glory

Second Corinthians 4:16-17 (NASB): "Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison."

Momentary, light affliction.

Paul is writing this after being beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, imprisoned, rejected, and hounded from city to city. His suffering has been anything but light or momentary by human standards.

But compared to eternity? Compared to the weight of glory that's coming? It's momentary. It's light. It's not even worth comparing.

Is producing for us an eternal weight of glory.

LEARN FROM ME

Present tense. Active. Ongoing. The affliction is currently producing glory. Not will produce someday. But is producing now. In the midst of the suffering. Through the suffering. Because of the suffering.

Far beyond all comparison.

Paul can't find adequate words. The glory is so much greater than the suffering that there's no comparison. No scale that can measure both. No language that can capture the disproportion.

The suffering is real. But the glory is infinitely greater. The affliction is heavy. But the glory outweighs it beyond all measure. The pain is intense. But the glory makes it worth it in ways we can't even imagine.

This is the promise. This is the hope. This is what sustains us when the suffering feels unbearable.

It's producing something. It's working toward something. It's accomplishing something far beyond what we can see or imagine or comprehend.

An eternal weight of glory. For us. Through the momentary, light affliction.

We don't see it yet. We don't feel it yet. But it's coming. And it will be worth it.

Far beyond all comparison.

IV. Learning in the Furnace

So what do we actually learn in suffering? What lessons can only be taught in the fire? What truths become real to us through the trials?

Refined Like Silver

Malachi 3:3 (NASB): "He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the LORD offerings in righteousness."

LEARN FROM ME

He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver.

God is the refiner. He's the one who controls the fire. He's the one who watches the process. He's the one who determines when it's done.

A silversmith doesn't just throw silver into a fire and walk away. He sits. He watches. He monitors the temperature. He pays attention to what's happening in the crucible.

And he knows the silver is refined when he can see his reflection in it. When the impurities are burned away and the metal is pure, the silversmith sees himself reflected clearly.

That's what God is doing. He's refining us until He can see His reflection in us. Until His image is clear. Until His character is displayed. Until His glory is reflected.

And He will purify... and refine.

Two different words. Two different processes. Both necessary. Both painful. Both producing purity.

Purification removes the impurities. Refinement proves what's genuine. Together, they produce something pure, tested, proven, valuable.

So that they may present to the LORD offerings in righteousness.

This is the purpose. This is why the refining is necessary. So we can offer ourselves—our lives, our service, our worship—in righteousness. In purity. In genuineness.

The fire isn't punishment. It's preparation. God is making us into people who can offer ourselves rightly. Who can serve purely. Who can worship in spirit and truth.

And that requires refining. That requires the fire. That requires the painful process of having impurities burned away.

LEARN FROM ME

Sharing in Christ's Sufferings

First Peter 4:12-13 (NASB): "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation."

Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal.

Don't be shocked. Don't be caught off guard. Don't act like this is unexpected or unusual.

The fiery ordeal is normal. It's part of the Christian experience. It's not a strange thing. It's not evidence that something's wrong.

Which comes upon you for your testing.

The fire is a test. It's revealing what's real. It's proving what's genuine. It's exposing what needs to be exposed and strengthening what needs to be strengthened.

To the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing.

There's a proportion here. The more we share in Christ's sufferings, the more we have reason to rejoice. Not because suffering itself is joyful. But because suffering with Christ means we'll be glorified with Christ.

So that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation.

The rejoicing now—in the midst of suffering—is a foretaste of the exultant rejoicing that's coming when Christ's glory is revealed.

If we share His sufferings, we'll share His glory. If we endure the cross with Him, we'll experience the resurrection with Him. If we walk through the fire with Him, we'll shine with Him when He's revealed.

LEARN FROM ME

This is what we learn in the furnace: We're not alone. Christ is with us. He's walking through the fire with us. He's sharing our suffering. He's present in the pain.

And His presence transforms the suffering. It doesn't remove it. But it makes it bearable. It gives it meaning. It fills it with hope.

Conformed to His Image Through All Things

Romans 8:28-29 (NASB): "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren."

God causes all things to work together for good.

All things. Not just the good things. Not just the easy things. Not just the pleasant things. But *all* things.

Including suffering. Including trials. Including the fiery ordeal.

God works all of it together for good. He takes everything—the beautiful and the ugly, the joyful and the painful, the victories and the defeats—and He weaves it all together into something good.

Not that all things are good in themselves. Some things are evil. Some things are destructive. Some things are terrible.

But God works even those things—even the suffering, even the evil done to us, even the trials we face—into something good. He redeems. He transforms. He brings beauty from ashes.

To those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

This promise is for those who love God. Those who are called. Those who are walking in His purpose.

LEARN FROM ME

It's not a universal promise for everyone. It's a specific promise for God's children. For those who are in relationship with Him. For those who trust Him.

For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son.

And here's the "good" that God is working toward: Conforming us to Christ's image. Making us like Jesus. Transforming us into people who reflect His character, display His glory, bear His likeness.

This is the goal of all God's working. This is the good He's producing. This is what He's accomplishing through all things—including suffering.

He's making us like Jesus. And that process requires refining. It requires testing. It requires the fire.

Because we don't become like Jesus through comfort. We become like Jesus through the same pathway Jesus walked: Suffering leading to glory. Cross leading to resurrection. Death leading to life.

The Glory Revealed Through Our Scars

Here's something profound: Our scars tell a story. The wounds we've endured, the suffering we've survived, the fire we've come through—all of it leaves marks. Scars. Evidence of what we've been through.

And those scars display glory. Not our glory. God's glory. The glory of the One who sustained us, who healed us, who brought us through.

Think about Jesus after His resurrection. He still had His scars. The nail prints in His hands and feet. The wound in His side. He could have eliminated them. He could have appeared in a perfect, unmarred body.

But He didn't. He kept His scars. And He showed them to His disciples (John 20:20, 27).

Why? Because the scars testified to what He'd endured. They proved He'd really died. They demonstrated His love. They displayed the cost of redemption.

LEARN FROM ME

And they revealed glory. The glory of resurrection. The glory of victory. The glory of a Savior who went through death and came out the other side.

Our scars do the same. They testify to what we've endured. They prove God's faithfulness. They demonstrate His sustaining power. They show that He doesn't just deliver us from suffering, but sustains us through it and brings us out the other side.

And when people see our scars—when they hear our stories of suffering and survival, when they witness how God carried us through the fire—they see glory. God's glory. The glory of the One who redeems, who restores, who brings life from death.

This is why we don't waste our suffering. This is why we share our stories. This is why we testify to God's faithfulness in our trials.

Not to make much of ourselves. Not to gain sympathy. Not to play the victim. But to make much of God. To give testimony to His sustaining grace. To show the world what He's like through the scars He's healed.

Suffering for His Glory

So here's where we land: Suffering is real. It's painful. It's difficult. And we don't minimize it. We don't pretend it's easy. We don't slap a Christian bumper sticker on it and call it good.

But we also don't let suffering have the final word. We don't let it define us. We don't let it steal our hope or our joy or our trust in God.

Because suffering is producing something. It's working toward something. It's accomplishing something far greater than the pain it's causing.

It's producing glory. Eternal glory. Glory far beyond all comparison. Glory that will make every moment of suffering worth it.

LEARN FROM ME

It's refining us. Testing us. Proving us. Conforming us to Christ's image. Making us into people who can truly display God's character.

It's teaching us what we can't learn anywhere else. About God's faithfulness. About His sustaining power. About His presence in the darkness. About His ability to bring life from death.

And it's preparing us for glory. For resurrection. For the day when all suffering ends and all glory begins. For the moment when we see Jesus face to face and are fully transformed into His image.

Until then, we endure. We persevere. We trust. We hope. We cling to the promises even when we can't see them fulfilled. We believe even when we don't understand. We keep going even when we want to quit.

Not because we're strong. But because He's strong. Not because we're brave. But because He's faithful. Not because we've got this figured out. But because He's got us.

And one day—one glorious day—we'll look back and see that every moment of suffering was worth it. Every trial had a purpose. Every fire was refining. Every tear was seen. Every prayer was heard. Every wound was healed.

And we'll see glory. His glory reflected in us. His image formed in us. His character displayed through us.

And we'll know: The suffering was worth it. The refining accomplished its purpose. The fire produced gold.

To Him be the glory. Forever and ever.

Because in the end, that's what it's all about. Not our comfort. Not our happiness. Not our ease. But His glory. His purposes. His kingdom.

And if suffering is the pathway to that glory—if the fire is necessary to refine us—then we'll walk through it. Not alone. Not without hope. Not without purpose.

LEARN FROM ME

But with Christ. Sharing His sufferings. Being conformed to His death. Knowing that if we share His sufferings, we'll also share His glory.

That's the promise. That's the hope. That's what sustains us in the fire.

And it's enough.

LEARN FROM ME

PART FIVE: THE DESTINATION

CHAPTER 15: Rest for Your Souls—The Goal of Learning

"And you will find rest for your souls."

— Matthew 11:29d (NASB)

I remember the exact moment I realized I was exhausted.

Not just tired. Not just needing a good night's sleep or a day off. But soul-exhausted. Depleted. Running on fumes and fumes alone.

I was sitting in my office at the church. It was a Tuesday afternoon. I'd just finished a counseling session with a couple whose marriage was falling apart. Before that, I'd been at the hospital visiting someone who was dying. That morning, I'd led a staff meeting where we'd argued about budgets and building projects and why attendance was down. And my calendar showed three more appointments that afternoon, a deacons' meeting that evening, and a sermon I hadn't even started to prepare for Sunday.

And I just... couldn't. I couldn't do one more thing. I couldn't fix one more marriage. I couldn't comfort one more dying person. I couldn't solve one more church problem. I couldn't preach one more sermon.

I was empty. Done. Finished.

I sat there staring at the wall, and the only thought in my head was: *There has to be more than this. This can't be what Jesus meant when He said His yoke is easy and His burden is light.*

LEARN FROM ME

Because nothing about my life felt easy. Nothing felt light. I was carrying weight I was never meant to carry. Burdens that were crushing me. Expectations that were killing me.

And the worst part? I'd done it to myself. Nobody forced me into this exhaustion. I'd volunteered for it. I'd said yes to every need, every request, every opportunity to prove I was a good pastor, a faithful servant, a man worth respecting.

I'd been working for the wrong master. Serving the wrong kingdom. Seeking approval from the wrong source. And I'd nearly destroyed myself in the process.

That Tuesday afternoon, I knew something had to change. I couldn't keep living like this. I couldn't keep serving like this. I couldn't keep pretending I had strength I didn't have.

I needed rest. Real rest. Soul rest. The kind Jesus promises to those who take His yoke and learn from Him.

But I didn't know how to find it. I'd been a Christian my whole life. I'd been in ministry for years. I knew the Bible. I knew the theology. I knew what I was supposed to believe.

But I didn't know how to rest.

And maybe you don't either. Maybe you're exhausted too. Maybe you've been carrying burdens you were never meant to carry. Maybe you've been working for approval you already have. Maybe you've been striving to earn rest instead of receiving it as a gift.

If so, this chapter is for us. For the weary. For the burdened. For those of us who desperately need to find rest for our souls.

LEARN FROM ME

Because Jesus promises it. And Jesus keeps His promises.

I. The Nature of Soul Rest

When Jesus says, "You will find rest for your souls," He's not talking about taking a nap. He's not promising us vacation days or sabbaticals or early retirement.

He's talking about something deeper. Something more essential. Something our souls desperately need but most of us have never experienced.

Soul rest. The kind of rest that goes all the way down to the core of who we are.

Hebrews 4:9-10 - The Sabbath Rest

Hebrews 4:9-10 (NASB): "So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His."

There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God.

The word here for "Sabbath rest" is *sabbatismos* in Greek. It's not just generic rest. It's specifically Sabbath rest. The kind of rest God took after creation. The kind of rest God commanded His people to enter into weekly. The kind of rest that's woven into the fabric of how God designed reality.

This rest remains. It's still available. It's still being offered. It hasn't been withdrawn or canceled or made obsolete.

For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works.

Notice what happens when we enter God's rest: We rest from our works. We stop striving. We cease our laboring to earn what's already been given. We quit trying to make ourselves acceptable through our performance.

LEARN FROM ME

As God did from His.

God rested on the seventh day not because He was tired. God doesn't get tired (Isaiah 40:28). He rested because the work was finished. Complete. Done.

"And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good" (Genesis 1:31, NASB). The work was finished. Perfect. Exactly as it should be. So God rested.

And that's the rest He invites us into. Not the rest of exhaustion. But the rest of completion. The rest that comes from knowing the work is finished. The rest that flows from trusting that what's been done is sufficient.

Jesus said it on the cross: "It is finished" (John 19:30, NASB). The work of redemption is complete. The payment for sin is made. The way to God is opened. Nothing needs to be added. Nothing can be added.

It's finished.

And when we truly grasp that—when we really believe that the work is done, that we don't have to earn our salvation, that we're not working to make ourselves acceptable—we can rest. We can stop striving. We can cease our desperate attempts to prove ourselves.

We can enter His rest.

Jeremiah 6:16 - The Ancient Paths

Jeremiah 6:16 (NASB): "Thus says the LORD, 'Stand by the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; and you will find rest for your souls.'"

Ask for the ancient paths.

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There's an old way. A path that's been there all along. A road that leads to rest. And God invites us to ask for it, to seek it, to find it.

Not a new method. Not a contemporary strategy. Not the latest spiritual technique. But the ancient paths. The way things have always been meant to work. The design God built into reality from the beginning.

Where the good way is.

There's a good way to live. A way that's aligned with how we were made. A way that works with our design instead of against it. A way that leads to flourishing instead of exhaustion.

And walk in it.

It requires action. Decision. Choice. We have to actually walk in the good way, not just admire it from a distance or acknowledge it intellectually.

And you will find rest for your souls.

This is the promise. When we walk in the good way—when we live according to God's design, when we align ourselves with His purposes, when we stop striving and start trusting—we find rest. Soul rest. The deep, abiding rest that our souls were made for.

The Rest That Comes from Right Alignment

Here's what I've discovered about soul rest: It's not the absence of work. It's the presence of right alignment.

When my life is aligned with God's purposes, when I'm doing what He's called me to do in the way He's called me to do it, when I'm working from rest instead of working for rest—there's a peace. A settledness. A sense of rightness even in the midst of hard work.

LEARN FROM ME

But when I'm misaligned—when I'm doing things God hasn't called me to do, when I'm working to earn approval I already have, when I'm striving to prove worth that's already been established—there's no rest. No matter how much I sleep. No matter how many vacations I take. No matter how often I try to "recharge."

Because the problem isn't lack of physical rest. The problem is misalignment. I'm working against my design. I'm living for purposes God never intended. I'm carrying yokes He never asked me to carry.

And no amount of physical rest will fix that. Only realignment will. Only getting back on the ancient paths. Only returning to the good way.

Soul rest comes from right alignment. From living according to our design. From working in partnership with God instead of trying to earn His approval. From accepting His yoke instead of creating our own.

Frederick Buechner wrote: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

That's alignment. That's the sweet spot. That's where soul rest is found.

Not in avoiding work. But in doing the right work. Not in escaping responsibility. But in embracing the responsibilities God has given us and releasing the ones He hasn't. Not in being passive. But in being active in the ways God designed us to be active.

When we're aligned with God's purposes, when we're living in the place He's called us to, when we're doing what He's equipped us to do—there's rest. Even in the midst of hard work. Even when we're tired physically. Even when the tasks are demanding.

Because we're aligned. We're in the good way. We're walking the ancient paths.

And our souls find rest.

LEARN FROM ME

II. Rest in Identity

One of the biggest sources of exhaustion in my life has been the constant attempt to prove my worth. To establish my value. To earn my place. To demonstrate that I'm good enough, capable enough, spiritual enough.

And it's exhausting. Because you can never prove enough. Never achieve enough. Never do enough to silence the voice that says, "You're not quite there yet."

But soul rest comes when we stop trying to prove our worth and start resting in our identity.

No Longer Proving, Just Being

Think about Jesus at His baptism. Matthew 3:16-17 (NASB): "After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.'"

This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.

Jesus hasn't done anything yet. He hasn't preached a sermon. He hasn't healed anyone. He hasn't performed any miracles. He hasn't accomplished anything that would make the Father pleased with Him.

And yet the Father declares: *I am well-pleased.*

Not "I will be pleased if You do this" or "I'll be pleased after You accomplish that." But "I am pleased." Present tense. Already. Now. Before any ministry, before any achievement, before any proof.

The Father is pleased with Jesus because of who He is, not because of what He does. Because He's the beloved Son. Because of relationship. Because of identity.

LEARN FROM ME

And if we're in Christ—if we've been adopted into God's family, if we've been made children of God—then the same is true for us.

God is pleased with us. Not because of what we've done. Not because we've proven ourselves. Not because we've earned it. But because we're His beloved children. Because of who we are in Christ.

This is rest. This is freedom. This is what sets us free from the treadmill of performance.

We don't have to prove ourselves. We just have to be who we are. Beloved children. Accepted. Approved. Pleasing to God not because of our works but because of Christ's work on our behalf.

Ephesians 2:8-10 - Saved by Grace, Created for Good Works

Ephesians 2:8-10 (NASB): "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them."

By grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.

This is foundation. This is bedrock. This is where rest begins.

We're saved by grace. Not by works. Not by earning. Not by proving ourselves worthy. But by grace. Unmerited. Undeserved. Unearned.

It's a gift. We didn't achieve it. We didn't accomplish it. We didn't make it happen. God gave it. Jesus accomplished it. The Spirit applies it.

Not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

This removes all grounds for boasting. All claims to credit. All attempts to take glory for ourselves.

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We didn't save ourselves. We can't take credit for our salvation. We have nothing to boast about except Christ.

And that's incredibly freeing. Because if we didn't earn it, we can't lose it through failure. If we didn't accomplish it, we can't undo it through sin. If it's God's work and not ours, it's as secure as God Himself.

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand.

But—and this is crucial—being saved by grace doesn't mean we do nothing. It means we do works from a different place. From rest instead of striving. From acceptance instead of trying to earn acceptance.

We are His workmanship—His masterpiece, His creation, His work of art. Created in Christ Jesus for good works. Works that God prepared beforehand for us to walk in.

We don't do good works to become His workmanship. We are already His workmanship, and therefore we do good works. We don't work to be created in Christ Jesus. We have been created in Christ Jesus, and therefore we work.

The order matters. Identity first, then activity. Being before doing. Who we are, then what we do.

And when we get that order right—when we work from our identity instead of working for our identity—there's rest. Because we're not trying to earn what we already have. We're expressing what's already true. We're living out who we already are.

The End of Performance-Based Acceptance

Here's what exhausts us: Living as if our acceptance depends on our performance. As if God's love is conditional on our behavior. As if we have to keep earning what we've already been given.

But soul rest comes when we finally believe—really believe, deep down—that we're already accepted. Already loved. Already approved.

LEARN FROM ME

Not because we're good enough. But because Christ is good enough. Not because we've performed well. But because Christ performed perfectly on our behalf.

Romans 5:1-2 (NASB): "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God."

Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God.

Past tense. Done. Accomplished. We have been justified. Not we're trying to be justified. Not we're working toward justification. But we have been justified.

And the result? Peace with God. Not striving toward peace. Not hoping for peace someday. But we have peace. Now. Already.

Through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Not through our efforts. Not through our righteousness. Not through our performance. But through Jesus. His work. His righteousness. His performance on our behalf.

Into this grace in which we stand.

We stand in grace. We're positioned in grace. We live in grace. We're surrounded by grace. We're immersed in grace.

And grace is the end of performance-based acceptance. Grace says, "You're accepted not because of what you've done but because of what Christ has done. You're loved not because you're lovable but because God is love. You're approved not because you've proven yourself but because you're in Christ."

This is rest. This is the end of exhausting yourself trying to earn what's already yours. This is freedom from the tyranny of performance.

LEARN FROM ME

We're accepted. Period. Not because of our performance. Despite our failures. Through Christ's work. By grace alone.

And when we really believe that, when we rest in that, when we stop trying to earn what's already been given—we find rest for our souls.

Resting in "It Is Finished"

John 19:30 (NASB): "Therefore when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, 'It is finished!' And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit."

It is finished.

In Greek, it's one word: *tetelestai*. And it means: It is finished. It is accomplished. It is complete. It is paid in full.

The work of redemption is done. The price for sin is paid. The way to God is opened. The barrier is removed. The debt is satisfied.

It's finished.

Not "it will be finished if you do your part." Not "it's almost finished, now you complete it." But "it is finished." Completely. Totally. Finally.

This is the foundation of soul rest. The work is done. We don't have to finish it. We don't have to add to it. We don't have to complete it.

Jesus finished it. On the cross. Two thousand years ago. And there's nothing left for us to do to earn our salvation.

So we can rest. We can cease striving. We can stop trying to finish what's already finished.

LEARN FROM ME

This doesn't mean we do nothing. As we've already seen, we're created in Christ Jesus for good works. We serve, we love, we obey, we grow, we pursue holiness.

But we do it all from a place of rest. From the security of knowing the work is finished. From the confidence that we're already accepted. From the peace of knowing we're not working to earn God's love but working because we already have it.

We rest in "it is finished." And from that rest, we live. We serve. We work. We pursue God's purposes.

But we do it all from rest, not for rest. From acceptance, not for acceptance. From a place of security, not from a place of striving.

And that makes all the difference.

III. Rest in Purpose

Another source of exhaustion is purpose confusion. Not knowing why we're here. Not understanding what we're supposed to be doing. Not being clear about what matters.

We scatter our energy in a thousand different directions. We say yes to every opportunity. We try to be everything to everyone. We pursue goals that aren't ours to pursue.

And we exhaust ourselves in the process.

But soul rest comes when we're clear about our purpose. When we know what we're called to do and what we're not called to do. When we understand our mission and stay focused on it.

Finding Our Place in God's Glory Story

We've spent this entire book exploring the truth that we were created for God's glory (Isaiah 43:7). That's our purpose. That's what we're here for. That's the organizing principle of our lives.

LEARN FROM ME

But here's what brings rest: When we find our specific place in that larger story. When we discover our unique role in displaying God's glory. When we understand what particular part of God's character we're meant to reflect.

Not all of us are called to the same things. We don't all have the same gifts. We don't all serve in the same ways. We don't all reflect the same aspects of God's character.

Some of us display God's mercy through compassionate service. Some of us display God's wisdom through insightful teaching. Some of us display God's creativity through artistic expression. Some of us display God's provision through generous giving. Some of us display God's love through patient care for those who are suffering.

The specifics vary. But the purpose is the same: To display God's glory. To reflect His character. To make the invisible God visible through our unique lives and gifts and callings.

And when we find our place—when we discover what we're specifically called to do, when we embrace our unique design, when we step into the role God prepared for us—there's rest.

Because we're not trying to be someone we're not. We're not trying to do something we weren't made for. We're not carrying yokes God never asked us to carry.

We're in our lane. We're doing our part. We're fulfilling our purpose.

And there's profound rest in that.

The Freedom from Self-Made Kingdoms

One reason we're exhausted is we're trying to build our own kingdoms. Make our own names. Establish our own legacies. Create our own significance.

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And it's crushing work. Because kingdoms are heavy. Legacies require constant maintenance. Significance is an impossible burden to carry.

But when we let go of our self-made kingdoms and embrace God's Kingdom—when we stop trying to make our own name great and start living for God's name to be glorified—there's incredible freedom.

Because God's Kingdom doesn't depend on us. We're participants, not builders. We're servants, not kings. We're contributors, not creators.

The pressure is off. We don't have to make it all happen. We don't have to hold it all together. We don't have to be indispensable.

God's building His Kingdom. We get to participate. We get to serve. We get to be part of something infinitely bigger than ourselves.

And that's freeing. That's restful. That's what we were made for.

Not to build our own kingdoms that will crumble and fade. But to serve in God's Kingdom that will never end.

Matthew 6:33 - Seeking First His Kingdom

Matthew 6:33 (NASB): "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

Seek first His kingdom.

First. Not after everything else. Not when we have time. Not if it's convenient. But first. As the priority. As the organizing principle of our lives.

What does it mean to seek God's Kingdom first? It means making God's purposes our purposes. Making His agenda our agenda. Making His glory our goal. Orienting everything around His reign and His will.

LEARN FROM ME

And His righteousness.

Seeking His righteousness means living according to His standards, pursuing His way of being right with Him and with others, conforming to His character.

And all these things will be added to you.

What things? The context is food, clothing, provision—all the things we worry about, all the things we strive for, all the things we exhaust ourselves pursuing.

And Jesus says: Seek God's Kingdom first, and all those things will be taken care of. You don't have to anxiously pursue them. You don't have to strive for them. You don't have to make them your priority.

God will add them. He'll provide. He'll take care of you.

This is rest. This is freedom from the anxiety of trying to provide for ourselves, protect ourselves, secure our own future.

We seek His Kingdom. He takes care of the rest.

We pursue His purposes. He handles our needs.

We make His glory our priority. He makes our provision His responsibility.

And we can rest. Because we're not carrying burdens we were never meant to carry. We're not pursuing goals that God never asked us to pursue. We're not trying to be our own provider, our own security, our own source.

We're seeking first His Kingdom. And trusting Him with everything else.

LEARN FROM ME

First Corinthians 15:58 - Labor Is Not in Vain

First Corinthians 15:58 (NASB): "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord."

Always abounding in the work of the Lord.

Notice: Paul is calling for abundant work. Constant work. Devoted work. This isn't about doing nothing. This isn't about passivity.

But there's a crucial qualifier: *In the Lord*. The work that matters is the work done in the Lord. Work that's aligned with His purposes. Work that's for His glory. Work that's part of His Kingdom.

Knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.

This is what gives rest in the midst of work: The knowledge that it's not in vain. It's not meaningless. It's not wasted. It's not pointless.

When we're working for our own glory, our own kingdom, our own purposes—there's always the haunting question: Is this going to matter? Is this going to last? Am I spending my life on things that will endure or things that will evaporate?

But when we're working in the Lord—when our toil is for His purposes, when our labor is advancing His Kingdom, when our work is displaying His glory—we know it's not in vain. It matters. It lasts. It's contributing to something eternal.

And that knowledge brings rest. Even in the midst of hard work. Even when we're tired. Even when the task is demanding.

Because we're not spinning our wheels. We're not wasting our lives. We're not laboring for nothing.

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We're working in the Lord. And our toil is not in vain.

That's rest. That's purpose. That's what makes work sustainable instead of exhausting.

IV. The Paradox: Rest That Energizes

Here's the paradox of Jesus's rest: It's not the rest of inactivity. It's not the rest of retirement. It's not the rest of checking out.

It's the rest of right alignment. The rest of working from acceptance instead of for acceptance. The rest of laboring in our purpose instead of against our design.

And paradoxically, this kind of rest actually energizes us. It sustains us. It makes work sustainable instead of exhausting.

Isaiah 40:31 - Those Who Wait for the Lord

Isaiah 40:31 (NASB): "Yet those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary."

Those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength.

Waiting doesn't mean being passive. The Hebrew word (*qavah*) means to wait with expectation, to hope, to look for eagerly. It means staying connected to God, depending on Him, drawing strength from Him.

And those who do this—those who wait for the Lord, who depend on Him, who draw their strength from Him—they gain new strength. They're renewed. They're energized. They're sustained.

They will mount up with wings like eagles.

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There are moments of soaring. Moments of inspiration. Moments when the strength God gives enables us to rise above the circumstances, to see from His perspective, to experience His power in remarkable ways.

They will run and not get tired.

There are seasons of running. Seasons of intense activity. Seasons of hard work. And in those seasons, when we're drawing strength from the Lord, we can run without getting exhausted. We can work hard without burning out.

They will walk and not become weary.

And there are long stretches of walking. Day after day. Ordinary faithfulness. Steady obedience. And even in those long stretches, when we're waiting on the Lord, we don't become weary. We're sustained. We keep going.

This is the promise. This is what rest in the Lord provides. Not an escape from work. But the strength to do the work God calls us to do. Not retirement from service. But the energy to serve sustainably.

The Yoke That Is Easy, the Burden That Is Light

We come back full circle to where we started. Matthew 11:28-30.

Jesus says, "Come to Me, all 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. For My yoke is comfortable, and My burden is light."

My yoke is comfortable, and My burden is light.

This is paradoxical. How can a yoke be comfortable? How can a burden be light? Yokes are for work. Burdens are heavy. That's the whole point.

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But Jesus's yoke is different. It's comfortable—it fits us, it's suited to our design, it works with how we're made instead of against it. And His burden is light—not because it requires nothing, but because He carries it with us, and because it's the burden we were designed to carry.

When we're carrying yokes we created ourselves—yokes of performance, of earning approval, of building our own kingdoms, of proving our worth—those yokes are unbearably heavy. They chafe. They wound. They crush.

But when we take Jesus's yoke—when we align ourselves with His purposes, when we work for His glory, when we draw our strength from Him—that yoke is easy. That burden is light.

Not because it requires no effort. But because we're finally working with our design instead of against it. We're finally pulling in the direction we were made to pull. We're finally carrying the weight we were designed to carry.

And that makes all the difference.

Working from Rest, Not for Rest

This is the key distinction: Are we working from rest or for rest?

If we're working for rest—trying to do enough, achieve enough, prove enough so that we can finally rest—we'll never get there. There's always one more thing to do. One more goal to reach. One more standard to meet. Rest is always just around the corner, always just out of reach.

But if we're working from rest—if we've already received God's acceptance, if we're already secure in our identity, if we're already clear about our purpose—then work becomes sustainable. We can work hard without burning out. We can serve extensively without exhausting ourselves. We can give generously without depleting ourselves.

Because we're not trying to earn rest. We already have rest. We're working from that rest, not toward it.

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This is what Jesus offers. Not a life of ease. Not a path of least resistance. Not avoidance of hard work.

But a yoke that fits. A burden that's bearable. Work that flows from rest instead of work that's striving for rest.

And when we live this way—when we work from rest instead of for rest, when we serve from acceptance instead of for acceptance, when we labor from our identity instead of for our identity—we discover something amazing.

Work becomes worship. Service becomes joy. The yoke becomes easy. The burden becomes light.

Not because the work is easy. But because we're finally aligned. We're finally in the good way. We're finally walking the ancient paths.

And our souls find rest.

Sustainable Ministry Through Soul-Rest

Here's what I've learned the hard way: Ministry is only sustainable when it flows from soul-rest.

When I'm trying to prove myself through ministry, when I'm using service to earn approval, when I'm working to establish my worth—I burn out. Every time. Without exception.

But when I'm ministering from soul-rest—when I'm secure in my identity, when I'm clear about my purpose, when I'm drawing my strength from God—I can serve for the long haul. I can give extensively without depleting myself. I can work hard without destroying myself.

Because I'm not working to fill a void. I'm working from fullness. I'm not serving to earn love. I'm serving because I'm loved. I'm not striving to prove my worth. I'm resting in my worth and serving from that secure place.

LEARN FROM ME

And this applies to all of life, not just "ministry" in the professional sense. Whether you're parenting or working a job or caring for aging parents or serving in your community—it's only sustainable if it flows from soul-rest.

If you're trying to earn worth through your parenting, you'll exhaust yourself. If you're trying to prove yourself through your job, you'll burn out. If you're using your service to fill the void in your soul, you'll deplete yourself.

But if you parent from soul-rest, if you work from acceptance, if you serve from fullness—it's sustainable. You can do it for the long haul. You can keep going without destroying yourself.

Because you're working from rest, not for rest. From acceptance, not for acceptance. From a filled soul, not from an empty one trying to fill itself through service.

This is the goal. This is what Jesus offers. This is what we find when we take His yoke and learn from Him.

Rest for our souls. Deep, abiding, sustainable rest. Not the absence of work. But the presence of right alignment. Not avoidance of service. But service that flows from fullness instead of emptiness.

And when we find that rest—when we really experience it, when we learn to live from it instead of striving for it—everything changes.

We can finally breathe. We can finally be who we were created to be. We can finally do what we were called to do.

Without exhausting ourselves. Without destroying ourselves. Without burning out.

Because we've found rest for our souls. The rest Jesus promised. The rest that comes from taking His yoke and learning from Him.

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The rest that energizes instead of depletes. The rest that sustains instead of exhausts. The rest that makes the long obedience in the same direction actually possible.

This is the destination. This is what we're learning from Jesus. This is what His yoke leads to.

Rest for our souls. Real rest. Deep rest. The kind of rest that transforms how we live, how we work, how we serve, how we love.

Not someday. Not in the distant future. Not after we die.

But now. Today. Available. Offered. Promised.

"Come to Me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

It's still the invitation. It's still the promise. It's still what Jesus offers to anyone willing to take His yoke and learn from Him.

Rest for your soul. Come and find it.

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CHAPTER 16: For My Yoke Is Comfortable—Living the Easy Burden

"For My yoke is comfortable, and My burden is light."

— Matthew 11:30 (NASB)

Let me tell you what I used to think when I heard Jesus say, "My yoke is comfortable, and My burden is light."

I thought He was lying.

Or at least exaggerating. Or maybe speaking to some elite group of super-Christians who had achieved a level of spiritual maturity I would never reach. Because nothing about the Christian life felt easy to me. Nothing about following Jesus felt comfortable. The yoke felt crushing, and the burden felt impossibly heavy.

I was exhausted from trying to be holy. Worn out from trying to overcome sin. Depleted from trying to be a good Christian, a faithful servant, an effective minister. I was carrying guilt over failures, shame over weaknesses, anxiety over whether I was doing enough, fear that I was letting God down.

And Jesus said His yoke is comfortable and His burden is light?

It didn't match my experience. At all.

But here's what I've learned: The problem wasn't with Jesus's promise. The problem was with what I was carrying. I wasn't carrying Jesus's yoke. I was carrying yokes I'd made myself. I was carrying burdens Jesus never asked me to carry. I was dragging around weight that wasn't His burden—it was mine, self-imposed, self-created, self-maintained.

And those yokes? They were anything but comfortable. Those burdens? They were crushing.

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But when I finally started to understand what Jesus's yoke actually is—when I began to let go of the yokes I'd created and take up His instead—something shifted. Not all at once. Not perfectly. Not without struggle. But gradually, slowly, I started to experience what He promised.

A yoke that fits. A burden that's bearable. Work that flows from rest instead of striving. Service that brings joy instead of depletion. Obedience that's empowered by grace instead of driven by guilt.

His yoke really is comfortable. His burden really is light.

Not because it requires nothing. Not because it's effortless. Not because there's no cost.

But because it's the right yoke. The yoke we were designed for. The burden that fits our shoulders. The weight we were made to carry.

And when you're finally carrying what you were designed to carry, in partnership with the One who bears the weight with you, everything changes.

The yoke that seemed impossible becomes bearable. The burden that seemed crushing becomes light. The Christian life that seemed like endless striving becomes something else entirely.

Not easy in the sense of requiring no effort. But easy in the sense of fitting right. Of working with our design instead of against it. Of being yoked to the right Master who carries the weight with us.

This is what Jesus promises. This is what He offers. This is what we find when we take His yoke and learn from Him.

So let's explore this together. Let's understand what makes His yoke comfortable and His burden light. And let's learn to actually live it, not just admire it from a distance.

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I. The Shocking Claim

Let's be honest about how shocking Jesus's claim actually is.

He's not saying, "If you try really hard and achieve a high level of spiritual maturity, you might find that the Christian life becomes somewhat manageable." He's not saying, "After years of discipline and growth, the yoke will feel a bit less heavy."

He's saying, "My yoke is comfortable, and My burden is light." Present tense. For everyone who takes it. Right from the beginning.

This is either completely false or completely revolutionary. There's no middle ground.

The Greek Words Matter

The Greek word translated "comfortable" is *chrēstos*. It can mean good, kind, easy, pleasant, or well-fitting. Some translations use "easy." The NASB uses "comfortable." The NIV uses "easy."

But the core idea is this: The yoke is *chrēstos*—it's good for you, it fits you, it's suited to you, it works with you instead of against you.

It's like a well-made shoe versus one that's the wrong size. Both are shoes. Both can technically be worn. But one fits and one doesn't. One you can walk in all day without pain. The other gives you blisters after an hour.

Jesus's yoke is *chrēstos*. It fits. It's well-made. It's suited to our design.

The second word—"light"—is *elaphros* in Greek. It means not heavy, not burdensome, not crushing. It's used in 2 Corinthians 4:17 where Paul calls his afflictions "light" (*elaphros*) compared to the eternal weight of glory.

LEARN FROM ME

Light. Not heavy. Not crushing. Not unbearable.

Contrasted with the Pharisees' Burdens

Remember the context. Jesus has been confronting the Pharisees throughout His ministry. And one of His main criticisms is how they load people down with unbearable burdens.

Matthew 23:4 (NASB): "They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger."

Heavy burdens. The opposite of light. Crushing. Impossible to carry. And the Pharisees won't even help carry them. They just pile them on and walk away.

This is what religion does. It creates systems of rules and expectations and requirements that crush people. It promises that if you just try hard enough, if you just keep all the rules, if you just perform well enough—then you'll be acceptable to God.

But you never quite get there. There's always more to do. Always another level to reach. Always another requirement to meet. And the burden just keeps getting heavier.

Jesus offers something radically different. Not more burdens. But a yoke that fits. Not heavier requirements. But a burden that's light.

Not because He has lower standards. Jesus's standards are actually higher than the Pharisees'. He calls us to perfection (Matthew 5:48). He demands heart-level righteousness, not just external rule-keeping (Matthew 5:21-48).

But His yoke is still comfortable and His burden is still light. Because He provides what He requires. He gives us what He asks for. He doesn't just tell us to be holy—He makes us holy. He doesn't just command us to love—He pours His love into our hearts. He doesn't just demand obedience—He empowers obedience through His Spirit.

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This is the difference. This is why His yoke is easy and His burden is light while the Pharisees' burdens were crushing.

First John 5:3 - His Commandments Are Not Burdensome

First John 5:3 (NASB): "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome."

His commandments are not burdensome.

Not "they become less burdensome over time." Not "they're burdensome but we bear them anyway." But "they are not burdensome."

How can this be? How can God's commands—which are high and holy and demanding—not be burdensome?

Because of what comes before: "This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments."

Keeping His commandments is how we love God. It's the expression of our love. It's our response to being loved. It flows from relationship, not duty. From devotion, not obligation. From love, not law.

When you love someone, doing things for them doesn't feel like a burden. When you're devoted to someone, serving them doesn't feel crushing. When you're in a healthy relationship, the "requirements" of that relationship don't feel oppressive.

A husband who loves his wife doesn't see caring for her as a burden. A mother who loves her child doesn't see providing for that child as oppressive. A friend who loves a friend doesn't see helping them as an imposition.

Love changes everything. What would be a burden without love becomes a joy with love. What would be oppressive as duty becomes delightful as devotion.

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And that's what Jesus offers. Not just commands to keep. But a relationship of love in which keeping those commands becomes the natural expression of that love.

His commandments are not burdensome—not because they're easy in themselves, but because they're the language of love. They're how we express our devotion to the One who loved us first.

Brennan Manning on Vulgar Grace

Brennan Manning, that ragamuffin prophet who understood grace better than most, wrote:

"My life is a witness to vulgar grace—a grace that amazes as it offends... a grace that pays the eager beaver who works all day long the same wages as the grinning drunk who shows up at ten 'til five... a grace that hikes up the robe and runs breakneck toward the prodigal reeking of sin and wraps him up and decides to throw a party no ifs, ands, or buts... This vulgar grace is indiscriminate compassion. It works without asking anything of us... Grace is sufficient even though we huff and puff with all our might to try to find something or someone it cannot cover. Grace is enough..."

Grace is enough.

This is why the yoke is comfortable and the burden is light. Not because grace demands nothing. But because grace provides everything. Not because grace has low standards. But because grace meets us where we are and empowers us to become what we're not yet.

Grace is the difference between a crushing burden and a light one. Between an unbearable yoke and a comfortable one. Between religious striving and joyful obedience.

Grace changes everything.

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II. Why Jesus's Yoke Is Different

So what makes Jesus's yoke different from every other yoke? What makes His burden light when every other burden is heavy?

Several things. And they all matter.

He Carries the Weight with Us

First and most importantly: When we take Jesus's yoke, we're not pulling alone.

Remember the image of a yoke. It's designed for two animals to pull together. The weight is distributed between them. They share the load. They work in partnership.

That's what Jesus offers. We're not carrying His yoke by ourselves. We're yoked to Him. He's pulling with us. He's bearing the weight with us.

Matthew 28:20 (NASB): "I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

I am with you always.

Not "I'll check in occasionally." Not "I'll be there when you really need Me." But "always." Every moment. Every day. Every step.

Jesus doesn't give us a yoke and walk away. He doesn't assign us work and then leave us to do it alone. He yokes Himself to us. He stays with us. He carries the weight with us.

And that changes everything. Because when you're pulling with someone who's infinitely stronger than you, when you're yoked to someone who never gets tired, when you're partnered with someone who knows exactly where you're going and how to get there—the burden becomes light.

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Not because the weight disappears. But because it's distributed. Shared. Carried together.

You're not alone in this. You're not doing it by yourself. You're yoked to Jesus. And He's strong enough to carry whatever needs to be carried.

His Commands Flow from Love, Not Law

Second: Jesus's commands are different in nature from the Law's commands.

The Law said, "Do this and live. Fail and die. Your righteousness depends on your performance."

Jesus says, "You are already righteous in Me. Now live out of that reality. Let My love flow through you. Express in your actions what's already true in your identity."

The difference is fundamental. Law says, "Obey to become acceptable." Grace says, "You're already acceptable; now obey out of love."

Law says, "Keep these rules or you're out." Grace says, "You're in; now keep these commands as the expression of being in."

Law says, "Your standing with God depends on your performance." Grace says, "Your standing with God is secure in Christ; now let your performance flow from that security."

This changes everything about how we relate to God's commands. They're no longer a crushing burden we have to bear to earn acceptance. They're the pathway to flourishing now that we already have acceptance.

It's like the difference between a job you hate that you're only doing for the paycheck, and work you love that you'd do even without the paycheck. Same amount of effort. Maybe even the same tasks. But one is drudgery and the other is joy.

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When God's commands flow from love instead of law, when we obey from relationship instead of duty, when we keep His commandments as the expression of our love for Him—they're not burdensome. They're the language of devotion. They're how we live out the love relationship we have with God.

The Spirit's Empowerment

Third: We're not trying to keep God's commands in our own strength. The Holy Spirit empowers our obedience.

Romans 8:13 (NASB): "For if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

If by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body.

Notice the combination: We are putting to death. It's our action. Our participation. Our choice. But we do it *by the Spirit*. By His power. By His enablement. By His work in us.

This is the mystery of Christian living. It's both us and God. We work. But we work by the Spirit's power. We obey. But we obey by the Spirit's enablement. We put sin to death. But we do it by the Spirit's strength.

Philippians 2:12-13 (NASB): "So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure."

Work out your salvation... for it is God who is at work in you.

Both are true. We work. God works in us. We're responsible. God's empowering. We make choices. God's enabling those choices.

This is why the burden is light. Because we're not doing it in our own strength. We're not trying to produce holiness through sheer willpower. We're not attempting to overcome sin through our own resources.

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We're working by the Spirit. We're drawing on divine strength. We're being empowered by God Himself.

And when you're empowered by God, when you're enabled by the Spirit, when you're drawing on divine resources instead of merely human ones—the burden that would be crushing in your own strength becomes bearable in His.

The Yoke Custom-Fitted to Each Disciple

Fourth: Jesus's yoke is custom-fitted to each of us.

Remember, Jesus was a carpenter (Mark 6:3). He knew how to make yokes. And a good carpenter doesn't make one-size-fits-all yokes. He makes yokes that fit the specific animals who will wear them.

He measures. He adjusts. He shapes the wood to fit the shoulders. He ensures the weight is distributed properly. He makes sure it won't chafe or rub raw places.

That's what Jesus does for us. He doesn't give us a generic yoke that might or might not fit. He gives us a yoke custom-fitted to us. Designed for our specific shoulders. Shaped to our particular design. Suited to our unique calling.

The yoke He gives me is different from the yoke He gives you. Not in essence—we're both called to follow Jesus, to live for God's glory, to display His character. But in specifics. In the particular ways we're called to serve. In the unique gifts we're given. In the specific burdens we're asked to bear.

My yoke fits me. Your yoke fits you. And because they fit—because they're custom-designed for our shoulders—they're comfortable. They're bearable. They don't crush us.

This is grace. This is wisdom. This is Jesus knowing exactly what each of us can carry and fitting the yoke accordingly.

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First Corinthians 10:13 (NASB): "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it."

God... will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able.

He knows our capacity. He knows our limits. He knows exactly how much we can bear. And He doesn't give us more than that.

The yoke is fitted to us. The burden is measured for our shoulders. The weight is what we can carry—not easily, perhaps, but bearably—when we're yoked to Him.

III. The Lightness of Grace

Now let's talk about what makes the burden light. Because this is where so many of us get stuck. We understand intellectually that grace is supposed to make things lighter. But we don't experience that lightness. We still feel crushed. We still feel like we're barely surviving under the weight.

Why?

Usually, it's because we're still trying to carry burdens grace already removed. We're still living under law when we've been set free by grace. We're still trying to earn what's already been given.

Ephesians 2:8-9 - Not by Works

Ephesians 2:8-9 (NASB): "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast."

Not as a result of works.

LEARN FROM ME

This is the foundation. This is what makes the burden light. We're not saved by works. We don't earn our salvation. We don't achieve our righteousness. We don't make ourselves acceptable to God through our performance.

It's all gift. All grace. All God's work on our behalf.

And if we're not saved by works, then we can't lose our salvation through failure to work. If we didn't earn it, we can't un-earn it. If it's God's gift and not our achievement, then it's as secure as God Himself.

This should remove an enormous burden. The burden of trying to earn God's love. The burden of working to maintain our salvation. The burden of performing to stay acceptable to God.

All of that is gone. Removed. Not our burden to carry.

We're saved by grace through faith. Period. The work is done. The price is paid. We're accepted. We're loved. We're secure.

And from that security, we work. We obey. We serve. But not to earn acceptance. We already have it. Not to become God's children. We already are. Not to make ourselves righteous. We're already declared righteous in Christ.

We work because we're saved, not to be saved. We obey because we're accepted, not to be accepted. We serve because we're loved, not to earn love.

And that changes everything about the weight of obedience. It's still real work. It's still costly service. It's still demanding obedience. But it's not crushing. Because we're not trying to earn what we already have.

Romans 7:6 - Serving in Newness of the Spirit

Romans 7:6 (NASB): "But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter."

LEARN FROM ME

We have been released from the Law.

The Law was a heavy burden. Paul calls it a burden "which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear" (Acts 15:10, NASB). It was crushing. Impossible. No one could keep it perfectly.

But we've been released from it. We've died to it. We're no longer bound by it. We're no longer under its crushing weight.

So that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.

Notice: We're still serving. We're still obeying. We're still following God's commands. But we're doing it differently. Not in the oldness of the letter—not according to external rules we're trying to keep through willpower. But in newness of the Spirit—by the Spirit's power, through the Spirit's enablement, with the Spirit's help.

The difference is night and day. Serving in the oldness of the letter is crushing. It's exhausting. It's a burden too heavy to bear. Because you're trying to do in your own strength what only God's Spirit can do.

But serving in newness of the Spirit is different. It's still work. It's still costly. It's still demanding. But it's bearable. It's sustainable. It's light.

Because you're not doing it alone. You're not relying on your own resources. You're being empowered by the Spirit, enabled by grace, strengthened by God.

And that makes the burden light.

Galatians 5:1 - Freedom from Slavery

Galatians 5:1 (NASB): "It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery."

LEARN FROM ME

It was for freedom that Christ set us free.

This is the purpose. This is why Christ died and rose again. To set us free. Not from obedience. Not from service. Not from holiness. But from slavery. From the crushing burden of trying to earn what can only be given. From the impossible weight of trying to make ourselves righteous.

We're free. Liberated. No longer slaves.

Therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.

But—and this is crucial—we can choose to go back into slavery. We can take off Christ's easy yoke and put back on the crushing yoke of law. We can abandon grace and go back to trying to earn what's already been given.

And many of us do this. We start with grace. We're saved by grace. We understand that we can't earn our salvation. But then we shift to law. We start thinking our ongoing relationship with God depends on our performance. We start trying to maintain our acceptance through our works.

And we end up crushed. Exhausted. Burdened.

Because we've taken off the easy yoke and put on the yoke of slavery.

Paul says: Don't do that. Keep standing firm in freedom. Don't go back to slavery. Don't trade Christ's easy yoke for the crushing burden of trying to earn what you already have.

Live in freedom. Serve in freedom. Obey in freedom. Not the freedom to sin—that's license, not liberty. But the freedom to obey from love instead of law, from acceptance instead of earning, from security instead of striving.

That's the freedom Christ died to give us. And in that freedom, His yoke is easy and His burden is light.

LEARN FROM ME

The Unbearable Lightness of Being Loved

Milan Kundera wrote a novel called *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. The title captures something profound: Sometimes lightness itself is unbearable. Sometimes freedom is terrifying. Sometimes grace is harder to accept than law.

Because law gives us clear rules to follow. Law tells us exactly what to do to earn acceptance. Law gives us a sense of control—if I just do x, y, and z, I'll be okay.

But grace? Grace says you can't earn it. You can't control it. You can't make yourself acceptable. You can only receive it as a gift.

And for those of us who are used to earning, who are used to performing, who are used to proving ourselves—that's unbearable. The lightness is too light. The freedom is too free. The burden of being simply loved—without earning it, without deserving it, without doing anything to merit it—is almost harder to bear than the burden of trying to earn it.

This is the unbearable lightness of being loved by God. We want to earn it. We want to deserve it. We want to feel like we've contributed something.

But grace won't let us. Grace insists that it's all gift. All God's work. All Christ's accomplishment. We bring nothing but our need. And God gives everything in response to that need.

And when we finally—finally—accept that unbearable lightness, when we stop trying to earn and start simply receiving, when we let ourselves be loved without doing anything to deserve it—something shifts.

The burden that was crushing becomes light. The yoke that was unbearable becomes easy. The Christian life that was exhausting becomes sustainable.

Not because the demands decreased. But because we're finally relating to God the right way. We're finally working from grace instead of for grace. We're finally serving from love instead of for acceptance.

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And in that shift—from earning to receiving, from striving to resting, from law to grace—we find what Jesus promised.

His yoke is easy. His burden is light.

Not because He asks little. But because He gives much. Not because the standards are low. But because He provides what He requires. Not because we can do it easily. But because He does it through us.

Grace. Unbearable, lavish, excessive grace. Grace that's enough. Grace that makes the burden light.

IV. Living the Yoked Life

So what does this look like practically? How do we actually live with Jesus's easy yoke? How do we experience His light burden on a daily basis?

Daily Surrender and Partnership

First: Daily surrender and partnership.

The yoke isn't a one-time decision. It's a daily choice. Every morning, we wake up and we have to choose: Will I take Jesus's yoke today? Will I surrender to His purposes? Will I partner with Him in what He's doing?

Or will I try to go my own way? Will I take off His yoke and create my own? Will I pursue my own agenda instead of His?

This is a daily choice. And it's not always easy. Because our flesh wants to be in control. Our pride wants to direct our own paths. Our self-will wants to build our own kingdom.

But when we surrender—when we daily, consciously, deliberately say, "Jesus, I'm taking Your yoke today. I'm partnering with You. I'm aligning myself with Your purposes"—we step into the easy yoke. We take up the light burden.

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And throughout the day, we keep returning to that surrender. When we're tempted to take control, we surrender again. When we start striving in our own strength, we remember we're yoked to Him. When we feel the weight becoming unbearable, we check: Am I carrying His yoke or mine?

This is living the yoked life. Daily surrender. Continuous partnership. Ongoing alignment with Jesus.

Finding the Rhythm of Grace

Second: Finding the rhythm of grace.

There's a rhythm to the Christian life. A pattern. A flow. Not rigid. Not formulaic. But a basic rhythm that sustains us.

Receive, then give. Be loved, then love. Rest, then work. Abide, then bear fruit.

When we get that rhythm right, the yoke is easy. When we reverse it—when we try to give before we've received, when we try to love before we've been loved, when we try to work without resting, when we try to bear fruit without abiding—the yoke becomes crushing.

The rhythm of grace is always: Receive first. Be filled first. Rest first. Then give. Then love. Then work. Then bear fruit.

This is what makes the burden light. We're not trying to produce from emptiness. We're not trying to give what we don't have. We're not trying to pour out when we haven't been filled.

We receive. Then we give from what we've received. We're loved. Then we love from the overflow of being loved. We rest in Christ. Then we work from that rest. We abide in the Vine. Then fruit grows naturally.

Finding this rhythm—and living in it consistently—is what makes Christian living sustainable. It's what keeps the yoke easy and the burden light.

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The Community of Fellow Learners

Third: The community of fellow learners.

We're not meant to walk this path alone. We're not meant to bear the yoke in isolation. We need other people who are also taking Jesus's yoke, also learning from Him, also experiencing the rhythm of grace.

We need encouragement when we're discouraged. We need correction when we're off track. We need examples of what it looks like to live the yoked life. We need companionship on the journey.

Hebrews 10:24-25 (NASB): "And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near."

Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds.

We need each other. We're meant to spur each other on. To encourage each other. To help each other live the yoked life.

Not forsaking our own assembling together.

This isn't optional. This isn't for extroverts only. This is essential. We need the community. We need the body. We need fellow disciples who are walking the same path.

When you're discouraged, they encourage you. When you're off track, they help you realign. When you're exhausted from carrying the wrong yoke, they remind you of the easy yoke Jesus offers. When you forget the rhythm of grace, they call you back to it.

And you do the same for them. You encourage. You correct. You remind. You help carry the load.

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This is what the body of Christ is for. Not just Sunday morning programs. But actual community. Real relationships. Fellow learners helping each other take Jesus's yoke and keep it on.

Without community, the yoke becomes harder than it needs to be. With community, the burden is shared and therefore lightened.

The Joy of Collaborative Mission

Fourth: The joy of collaborative mission.

When we're yoked to Jesus, we're not just wandering aimlessly. We're going somewhere. We have purpose. We have mission. We're part of God's Kingdom work in the world.

And there's joy in that. Deep, sustaining joy. Not happiness that depends on circumstances. But joy that comes from knowing you're part of something bigger than yourself. Joy that comes from seeing God work through you. Joy that comes from making a difference for things that matter eternally.

This is part of what makes the burden light. We're not just enduring. We're not just surviving. We're not just trying to make it through. We're actively participating in God's purposes. We're joining Him in what He's doing. We're being used to display His glory.

And that's energizing. That's motivating. That's what gives meaning to the struggle and purpose to the pain.

When you know why you're carrying the burden—when you understand that it's accomplishing something, that it's part of God's mission, that it's making a difference—it becomes lighter. Not in weight, perhaps. But in significance. In purpose. In value.

The burden is worth carrying because of what it's accomplishing. The yoke is bearable because of where it's taking you. The work is sustainable because it matters.

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This is living the yoked life. Yoked to Jesus. Part of His mission. Collaborating with Him and with other believers in Kingdom work. Finding joy in the purpose. Finding meaning in the mission. Finding lightness in the fact that it matters.

The Promise Kept

So here's where we land: Jesus's promise is true. His yoke really is easy. His burden really is light.

Not because following Him is effortless. Not because discipleship is comfortable in the worldly sense. Not because there's no cost or sacrifice or struggle.

But because we're not carrying it alone. Because we're empowered by grace. Because we're serving from love instead of law. Because the yoke is fitted to our shoulders. Because the burden is measured for our capacity. Because we're working in partnership with the One who bears the weight with us.

And when we live this way—when we daily take His yoke, when we find the rhythm of grace, when we do it in community, when we embrace the collaborative mission—we discover that Jesus wasn't exaggerating. He wasn't speaking to an elite few. He wasn't making an empty promise.

He was telling the truth.

His yoke is easy. His burden is light. Not compared to doing nothing. But compared to every other yoke, every other burden, every other way of trying to live the Christian life.

Compared to the crushing weight of law, His yoke is easy. Compared to the unbearable burden of trying to earn what can only be given, His burden is light. Compared to the exhausting treadmill of performance-based religion, His way is rest.

Come to Him, all who are weary and burdened. Take His yoke. Learn from Him. Find rest for your souls.

And discover that what He promises is true.

LEARN FROM ME

The yoke is easy. The burden is light. The way is life.

Not because it's effortless. But because it's right. Not because it's comfortable in every moment. But because it fits. Not because there's no cost. But because He's with us, carrying the weight, bearing the burden, making it bearable.

This is the Christian life as Jesus designed it. Not the crushing burden we've made it. Not the impossible weight we've added to it. But the easy yoke and light burden He offers.

And it's available. Right now. Today. To anyone willing to let go of the yokes they've created and take up the yoke Jesus offers.

His yoke. Easy. Comfortable. Well-fitted. Suited to your design. Measured for your shoulders. Carried in partnership with Him.

Take it. Wear it. Live in it.

And find what He promised: Rest for your soul. A yoke that fits. A burden that's bearable. A way that leads to life.

This is the invitation. This is the promise. This is what Jesus offers.

And it's enough. More than enough. Abundantly, lavishly, graciously enough.

His yoke is easy. His burden is light.

Not someday. Not in heaven. Not when you've achieved spiritual maturity.

But now. Today. For ragamuffins and broken people and those who are weary and burdened and desperate for something different.

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For all of us who are tired of carrying weights we were never meant to carry.

Come. Take His yoke. Learn from Him.

And find that what He promised is beautifully, gloriously, surprisingly true.

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PART SIX: GLORY TO GLORY

CHAPTER 17: Transformed into His Image—The Process of Glorification

"But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit."

— 2 Corinthians 3:18 (NASB)

I have a confession to make: I don't feel very transformed.

I've been a Christian for decades. I've read the Bible countless times. I've prayed thousands of prayers. I've served in ministry for years. I've studied theology. I've memorized Scripture. I've done all the things Christians are supposed to do to grow and mature.

And I'm still a mess.

I still struggle with the same sins I struggled with twenty years ago. I still have the same insecurities, the same anxieties, the same patterns of self-protection and self-promotion. I still get angry when I shouldn't. I still act selfishly when I should act generously. I still say things I regret. I still do things I swore I wouldn't do again.

And there are days—many days—when I wonder if any transformation is actually happening. Days when I feel like I'm exactly who I've always been, just with more biblical knowledge and a vocabulary of Christian language to disguise it. Days when I question whether all this talk about being transformed into Christ's image is just theological theory that doesn't actually work in real life.

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But then—and this is what keeps me going—there are moments when I catch a glimpse of something different. Something that wasn't there before. Something that can only be explained by God at work in me.

I respond with patience when I would have responded with anger. I choose generosity when I would have chosen self-protection. I extend grace when I would have extended judgment. I feel compassion when I would have felt contempt.

And in those moments, I realize: Something is changing. Slowly. Imperceptibly. Often two steps forward and one step back. But something is happening. I'm not who I was. I'm not yet who I'll be. But I'm somewhere in between, being transformed.

This is the Christian life. Not a dramatic, instantaneous makeover. But a slow, progressive, often frustrating process of transformation. From glory to glory. From one degree to another. Gradually. Persistently. Inevitably.

Paul says we're being transformed into Christ's image. Present tense. Continuous action. Ongoing process. Not transformed once and done. But being transformed. Right now. Still happening. Not finished yet.

And the goal? To reflect Christ's glory. To display God's character. To become like Jesus—not in His deity, but in His humanity. Not in His perfection, but in His orientation. Not in His sinlessness, but in His love, His humility, His dependence on the Father, His life lived for God's glory.

This is what God is doing in us. This is what the Christian life is all about. This is the process of glorification—being transformed from what we are into what we were always meant to be.

And it's messy. It's slow. It's often frustrating. But it's real. It's happening. And it's the most important work being done in us.

So let's talk honestly about transformation. About how it happens. About what it looks like. About why it's so slow. About how we cooperate with it without trying to control it. And about the hope that sustains us when we can't see the change we're longing for.

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Because transformation is the goal. And God is faithful to complete what He's started.

I. The Process: From Glory to Glory

Let's start with the central text. Second Corinthians 3:18 (NASB): "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit."

This verse is packed with truth about how transformation happens. Let's unpack it.

We All

We all.

Not just pastors. Not just spiritual giants. Not just the exceptionally mature or the particularly gifted. But *all* of us. Every believer. Without exception.

This is encouraging and terrifying at the same time. Encouraging because it means transformation isn't reserved for an elite few. It's not for super-Christians who have achieved some advanced level of spirituality. It's for everyone who's in Christ.

But it's also terrifying because it means there's no excuse. We can't say, "Well, transformation works for other people, but not for me." We can't opt out. We can't exempt ourselves. If we're in Christ, transformation is happening. Or should be happening. And if it's not, something's wrong.

We all are being transformed. That's the promise. That's the expectation. That's what God is doing in every believer.

LEARN FROM ME

With Unveiled Face

With unveiled face.

Paul is contrasting this with Moses in Exodus 34. When Moses came down from Mount Sinai after meeting with God, his face was glowing with God's glory. But the glory faded. And Paul says Moses put a veil over his face so the Israelites wouldn't see the glory fading (2 Corinthians 3:13).

The veil represented hiddenness. Separation. Inability to see clearly. The Israelites couldn't fully see God's glory because of the veil.

But we—followers of Jesus—have no veil. Nothing separating us from God's glory. Nothing preventing us from seeing. Nothing blocking our view.

The veil has been removed. Through Christ. Because of His death and resurrection. Because He tore the veil in the temple. Because He opened the way for us to approach God directly.

We have access. We can see. We can behold. With unveiled face—nothing blocking, nothing separating, nothing preventing us from seeing God's glory.

This is radical. This is what makes transformation possible. We're not trying to catch glimpses of God through a veil. We're not straining to see what we're mostly prevented from seeing. We have direct access. Unveiled. Unobstructed. Clear.

Beholding as in a Mirror the Glory of the Lord

Beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord.

This is how transformation happens. By beholding. By looking at. By fixing our attention on. By gazing upon the glory of the Lord.

LEARN FROM ME

The word "beholding" in Greek is *katoptrizomenoi*, which can mean either "beholding in a mirror" or "reflecting like a mirror." Most translations go with "beholding" or "gazing" or "contemplating." The idea is sustained attention. Focused looking. Deliberate gazing.

We're not glancing at God's glory occasionally. We're beholding it. Giving it our sustained attention. Making it the focus of our gaze.

As in a mirror.

Mirrors in Paul's day weren't like our modern mirrors. They were polished bronze or silver. The reflection wasn't perfect. It was somewhat dim, somewhat blurred. But you could see yourself in it.

So we behold God's glory as in a mirror. We see it. We reflect on it. We contemplate it. And as we do, something happens.

The glory of the Lord.

What are we beholding? The glory of the Lord. God's character. His nature. His attributes. His beauty. His holiness. His love. His grace.

And where do we behold this glory? Supremely, in the face of Jesus Christ. Second Corinthians 4:6 (NASB): "For God, who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness,' is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."

The glory of God in the face of Christ.

We see God's glory by looking at Jesus. By studying His life. By reading the Gospels. By contemplating His character. By meditating on His words. By observing how He lived, how He loved, how He served, how He suffered, how He died, how He rose.

LEARN FROM ME

Jesus is the exact representation of God's nature (Hebrews 1:3). The image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15). God made visible. Glory displayed.

And as we behold Him—as we fix our gaze on Jesus, as we study His life, as we contemplate His character—transformation happens.

Are Being Transformed

Are being transformed.

Present tense. Passive voice. Continuous action.

Present tense: It's happening now. Not happened in the past. Not will happen in the future. But happening now. Currently. Presently.

Passive voice: We're not transforming ourselves. We're being transformed. Something is being done to us. Someone is doing the transforming. We're the object of the action, not the subject.

Continuous action: It's ongoing. Not a one-time event. Not finished. But continuing. Progressive. Still in process.

This is crucial. Transformation is not something we accomplish. It's something God does in us. We participate—we'll talk about that. But we don't produce it. We don't manufacture it. We don't make it happen through willpower or effort.

God transforms us. The Spirit works in us. Christ is being formed in us (Galatians 4:19). We're being transformed—passive, ongoing, God's work.

But notice the connection: We behold, and we're transformed. The beholding and the transforming are linked. We don't behold in order to transform ourselves. But as we behold, God transforms us. The gazing leads to the changing. The contemplating produces the conforming.

LEARN FROM ME

We become like what we worship. We reflect what we gaze upon. We're transformed into what we behold.

If we behold the glory of the Lord—if we fix our attention on Jesus, if we study His character, if we contemplate His nature—we're transformed into His likeness.

But if we behold the glory of the world—if we fix our attention on what the culture values, if we study what the media presents, if we contemplate what our flesh desires—we're conformed to that instead.

What we behold determines what we become. So behold Christ. Gaze on His glory. Fix your attention on Him.

And transformation will happen.

Into the Same Image

Into the same image.

What are we being transformed into? The same image. Christ's image. The image of the glory we're beholding.

This goes back to Genesis 1:26-27. We were created in God's image. To reflect His character. To display His nature. To be image-bearers.

But the image was marred by sin. Distorted. Corrupted. We still bear the image, but it's twisted, broken, not functioning as it should.

And God is restoring the image. Renewing it. Repairing it. Conforming us to the image of Christ, who is the perfect image of God.

Romans 8:29 (NASB): "For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren."

LEARN FROM ME

Predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son.

This is God's plan for us. This is what He's doing. This is the goal of our salvation. Not just to get us into heaven. But to transform us into the image of Christ. To make us like Jesus.

Colossians 3:10 (NASB): "And have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him."

Being renewed... according to the image of the One who created him.

The image is being renewed. Restored. Repaired. We're being transformed back into what we were always meant to be. Image-bearers. Glory-reflectors. People who display God's character because we're conformed to Christ's image.

This is the goal. This is what's happening. This is the transformation that's in process.

From Glory to Glory

From glory to glory.

This is the progression. The movement. The trajectory. From one degree of glory to another. From one level to the next. From where we are to where we're going. Progressively. Incrementally. Continually.

Not from no glory to some glory—we already have some measure of glory as image-bearers, as people indwelt by the Spirit, as children of God. But from whatever degree of glory we currently have to a greater degree. From one stage of transformation to the next stage. From glory to glory.

This is encouraging. Because it means we don't have to be discouraged by how far we still have to go. We don't have to be crushed by the gap between where we are and where Christ is. We don't have to despair over our slowness to change.

LEARN FROM ME

We're moving. From glory to glory. From one degree to another. Making progress. Even if it's slow. Even if it's imperceptible. Even if we can't always see it.

From glory to glory. That's the direction. That's the movement. That's the trajectory God has us on.

Just as from the Lord, the Spirit

Just as from the Lord, the Spirit.

This is the agent. The one doing the transforming. The source of the power. The one making it happen.

The Lord, the Spirit. The Holy Spirit. The third person of the Trinity. God Himself, dwelling in us, working in us, transforming us.

We can't transform ourselves. We can't make ourselves into Christ's image through our own effort. We can't produce Christlikeness through willpower.

But the Spirit can. The Spirit does. The Spirit is actively, continuously, progressively transforming us from glory to glory.

This is His work. His ministry. His mission in our lives. To conform us to Christ's image. To renew us according to God's design. To transform us from what we are into what we were meant to be.

And He's faithful. He doesn't give up. He doesn't get frustrated with our slowness. He doesn't abandon the work halfway through.

Philippians 1:6 (NASB): "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus."

He who began a good work in you will perfect it.

LEARN FROM ME

God finishes what He starts. The Spirit completes what He begins. The transformation He's working in us will be completed. Guaranteed. Certain. Not dependent on our performance but on His faithfulness.

From glory to glory. By the Spirit. Until we're fully conformed to Christ's image. Until the transformation is complete. Until we see Him face to face and become like Him (1 John 3:2).

This is the process. This is how it happens. This is what God is doing in every believer.

From glory to glory. By beholding Christ. Through the Spirit's work. Progressively. Continuously. Inevitably.

II. The Already and the Not Yet

Here's where transformation gets complicated: We're already transformed, and we're not yet transformed. Both are true. At the same time.

This is what theologians call the "already/not yet" tension. And understanding it is crucial to navigating the frustration of the Christian life.

Already: Our New Identity in Christ

If you're in Christ, you've already been transformed in a fundamental way. You're not who you used to be. You're a new creation.

Second Corinthians 5:17 (NASB): "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come."

He is a new creature.

Present tense. Already true. Done. You are a new creation. Not becoming one. Not working toward it. But already are one.

LEARN FROM ME

The old has passed away. The new has come. You're not the same person you were before Christ. Your identity has been fundamentally changed. You're new.

This is the "already." This is what's true about you right now, regardless of how you feel or what you see in the mirror.

You're righteous in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21). You're holy (1 Corinthians 1:2). You're a saint (Ephesians 1:1). You're a child of God (1 John 3:1). You're seated with Christ in the heavenly places (Ephesians 2:6). You're blessed with every spiritual blessing (Ephesians 1:3).

All of this is already true. Not will be true someday. But is true now. Your position is secure. Your identity is established. Your status before God is settled.

This is crucial. Because if we don't grasp the "already," we'll spend our whole Christian life trying to become what we already are. We'll strive to earn what we've already been given. We'll work to achieve a status we already possess.

You're already transformed in your identity. Already new. Already righteous. Already holy. Already a child of God.

That's settled. That's done. That's the "already."

Not Yet: Our Ongoing Sanctification

But—and this is the tension—you're also not yet fully transformed. You're still being sanctified. Still being conformed to Christ's image. Still in process.

You still sin. You still struggle. You still have patterns of thought and behavior that don't reflect Christ. You still have a long way to go before you're fully conformed to His image.

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This is the "not yet." This is the reality of our ongoing sanctification. The progressive transformation from what we are into what we'll be.

Philippians 3:12 (NASB): "Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus."

Paul—the apostle Paul, the man who wrote most of the New Testament, the missionary who planted churches across the Roman Empire—says, "I haven't obtained it yet. I haven't become perfect yet. I'm still pressing on."

If Paul wasn't there yet, none of us are.

We're not yet fully transformed. Not yet perfected. Not yet completely conformed to Christ's image. We're in process. We're being transformed from glory to glory. But we haven't arrived yet.

This is the "not yet." And it's important we accept it. Because if we don't, we'll either fall into despair ("I'm not there yet, I must be failing") or self-deception ("I'm more mature than I actually am").

We need to hold both truths in tension: Already transformed in our identity. Not yet fully transformed in our experience. Already new creations. Not yet fully renewed. Already righteous in Christ. Not yet fully reflecting that righteousness in our behavior.

Both are true. Both matter. And living in the tension between them is what the Christian life is all about.

The Tension We Live In

This tension explains so much of the Christian experience. Why we can have moments of incredible victory and moments of stunning failure. Why we can feel close to God one day and distant the next. Why we can act like Christ in one situation and act selfishly in another.

LEARN FROM ME

Because we're living in the tension between the already and the not yet. We're new creations who still struggle with the old nature. We're righteous people who still commit sins. We're being transformed but aren't yet fully transformed.

And this tension won't be resolved in this life. Not fully. Not completely. We'll always live with it until we see Christ face to face and are fully conformed to His image.

This is frustrating. I wish it weren't true. I wish transformation were instant and complete. I wish we could just flip a switch and be done with sin and struggle. I wish the "already" were the whole story and the "not yet" didn't exist.

But it does exist. And pretending it doesn't—pretending we're more transformed than we are, claiming a perfection we don't have, denying the ongoing struggle—doesn't help. It just leads to hypocrisy and self-deception.

Better to be honest. To acknowledge the tension. To accept that we're simultaneously already transformed and not yet fully transformed. To live in the mess of the middle, trusting that God is at work even when we can't see it, believing that the "not yet" is moving toward "will be," hoping that what's begun will be completed.

This is the Christian life. Already and not yet. New creation still being renewed. Transformed and still being transformed. From glory to glory.

And the hope? That one day, the "not yet" will become "finally." The transformation will be complete. The image will be fully restored. We'll be like Christ because we'll see Him as He is (1 John 3:2).

Until then, we live in the tension. We press on. We keep beholding. We cooperate with the Spirit's transforming work. We trust the process. We believe the promise.

From glory to glory. Already and not yet. But moving. Always moving. Toward the glory that's coming.

LEARN FROM ME

III. How We Cooperate with Transformation

Now, if transformation is God's work—if the Spirit is the one doing the transforming, if it's passive voice, if we're being transformed rather than transforming ourselves—does that mean we do nothing? Do we just sit back and wait for God to change us?

No. We cooperate. We participate. We actively engage in the process. Not as the ones producing the transformation. But as the ones positioning ourselves to receive it.

The Disciplines of Beholding

Remember: Transformation happens through beholding. We're transformed by gazing on Christ's glory. By fixing our attention on Him. By contemplating His character.

So we cooperate by deliberately, intentionally, regularly engaging in practices that help us behold Christ.

Scripture. We read the Bible because that's where we encounter Jesus. The Word reveals Christ. It shows us His glory. It displays His character. When we read Scripture with eyes to see Jesus, when we study the Gospels, when we meditate on passages that reveal God's nature—we're beholding. And beholding leads to transformation.

Prayer. We pray not just to make requests but to commune with God. To be in His presence. To experience His character. Prayer is a form of beholding—we're turning our attention to God, focusing on Him, communing with Him. And in that communion, transformation happens.

Worship. We worship to fix our gaze on God's worth, to contemplate His beauty, to celebrate His character. Worship is deliberate beholding. We're choosing to look at God rather than at ourselves or our circumstances. And what we behold changes us.

LEARN FROM ME

Community. We gather with other believers because we need to see Christ in each other. We need reminders of His work. We need encouragement to keep beholding. We need help keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus when we're tempted to look elsewhere.

These aren't methods to produce transformation. They're means of positioning ourselves to receive transformation. They're how we behold. And beholding is how we're transformed.

Putting Off and Putting On

Ephesians 4:22-24 (NASB): "That, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth."

Lay aside the old self... put on the new self.

There's active participation here. Commands. Things we're told to do. We put off. We put on.

We actively choose to put off the old patterns. The old ways of thinking. The old behaviors. The old self that's being corrupted.

And we actively choose to put on the new. The new patterns. The new ways of thinking. The new behaviors. The new self that's been created in God's likeness.

This isn't us transforming ourselves. But it is us cooperating with the transformation God is working. We're removing obstacles. We're creating space. We're aligning ourselves with what God is doing.

It's like gardening. You can't make plants grow. But you can remove weeds. You can water. You can fertilize. You can create conditions conducive to growth. And then the plant does what plants do—it grows.

LEARN FROM ME

Same with transformation. We can't make ourselves grow spiritually. But we can remove obstacles—put off the old self, remove sin, eliminate what hinders. We can create conditions conducive to growth—put on the new self, practice righteousness, engage in the disciplines. And then the Spirit does what the Spirit does—He transforms us.

We cooperate. We participate. But we don't produce. God produces. We position ourselves. We remove hindrances. We create space. And God works.

The Role of Obedience

James 1:22 (NASB): "But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves."

Doers of the word, and not merely hearers.

Obedience matters. Doing matters. We don't just learn about transformation—we actually do what God says. We obey His commands. We practice what we learn.

And in the doing, in the obeying, in the practicing—transformation happens. Not because obedience produces transformation through some mechanical process. But because obedience positions us to receive transformation.

When we obey, we're aligning ourselves with God's design. We're living according to our new nature. We're practicing being who we already are in Christ. And as we practice, the Spirit works. As we obey, we're transformed.

This is crucial. We can't just read about transformation. We can't just think about it. We can't just agree with it intellectually. We have to do it. We have to actually obey. We have to practice living as new creations.

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And the beautiful thing is: Each act of obedience, however small, however imperfect, however much we feel like we're failing—each act is both an expression of the transformation already happening and a means of further transformation.

You choose patience when you want to respond in anger—that's transformation already at work in you, and it's also positioning you for further transformation as you practice patience. You choose to forgive when you want to hold a grudge—that's the new self acting, and it's also creating space for more of the new self to emerge.

Obedience cooperates with transformation. It doesn't produce it. But it positions us to receive it. It creates the conditions in which the Spirit's transforming work can flourish.

Yielding to the Spirit

Finally, we cooperate by yielding. By surrendering. By saying yes to the Spirit's promptings instead of resisting them.

The Spirit is always working. Always nudging. Always prompting. Always convicting. Always leading. And we can resist or we can yield.

We can say no—"I don't want to change that. I don't want to let go of that. I don't want to obey in that area." And when we resist, we hinder transformation. Not permanently. Not ultimately. But we slow it down. We create obstacles. We make it harder.

Or we can say yes—"Spirit, I feel Your conviction. I see what You're showing me. I don't like it, but I'm willing. Transform me. I yield." And when we yield, transformation happens. The Spirit's work proceeds. The change occurs.

This is daily. Moment by moment. Situation by situation. The Spirit prompts. We respond. He leads. We follow. He convicts. We repent. He empowers. We obey.

LEARN FROM ME

And in that ongoing yielding, in that continuous surrender, in that repeated saying yes to the Spirit—we cooperate with the transformation He's working in us.

We don't produce it. But we don't resist it either. We yield. We surrender. We say yes. And the Spirit transforms us from glory to glory.

IV. The Hope of Completed Transformation

Here's what keeps me going when transformation feels impossibly slow: The promise that it will be completed. The certainty that what's begun will be finished. The hope that the "not yet" will eventually become "finally."

Philippians 1:6 - He Will Complete It

Philippians 1:6 (NASB): "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus."

He who began a good work in you will perfect it.

This is certain. This is guaranteed. This is not dependent on our performance or our perseverance or our faithfulness. It's dependent on His faithfulness. And He is faithful.

God began the work. God will complete the work. God won't give up halfway. God won't abandon us when we fail. God won't say, "I tried to transform you, but you were too stubborn, so I'm giving up."

He started it. He'll finish it. Until the day of Christ Jesus. Until transformation is complete. Until we're fully conformed to Christ's image.

This is our hope. This is our confidence. Not in ourselves. But in Him. In His faithfulness. In His power. In His commitment to complete what He's started.

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First John 3:2 - We Will Be Like Him

First John 3:2 (NASB): "Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is."

When He appears, we will be like Him.

This is the promise. This is the destination. This is where the transformation is heading.

Right now, it hasn't appeared what we'll be. We don't fully see it yet. We're in the middle of the process. We're still being transformed. We're not there yet.

But when He appears—when we see Him face to face, when He returns, when we stand before Him—we will be like Him.

Not in His deity. We'll never be God. But in His humanity. In His character. In His holiness. In His love. We'll be fully conformed to His image. Completely transformed. Perfectly restored.

Because we will see Him just as He is.

The seeing and the becoming are linked. We behold and we're transformed. Now, we see dimly, as in a mirror (1 Corinthians 13:12). But then, we'll see clearly. We'll see Him just as He is. And in that perfect seeing, transformation will be completed.

We'll finally be what we were always meant to be. Image-bearers displaying God's glory without distortion. People fully conformed to Christ's image. New creations completely renewed.

This is the hope. This is the promise. This is what we're moving toward.

And it's certain. As certain as His return. As guaranteed as His faithfulness. As sure as His power to complete what He's started.

LEARN FROM ME

The Groaning and the Glory

Romans 8:22-23 (NASB): "For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body."

We ourselves groan within ourselves.

This is honest. This is real. Even though we have the Spirit, even though transformation is happening, even though we're moving from glory to glory—we still groan.

We groan at the slowness of transformation. We groan at our ongoing struggles. We groan at the gap between who we are and who we're meant to be. We groan at the "not yet" that still remains.

Waiting eagerly for... the redemption of our body.

But the groaning isn't hopeless. It's the groaning of anticipation. Like birth pangs—painful, but pointing to something being born. Like waiting—uncomfortable, but knowing what we're waiting for is coming.

We're waiting for the final redemption. The completed transformation. The resurrection body. The full restoration of God's image. The glory that's coming.

And verses 18-19: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God."

The glory that is to be revealed to us.

The glory is coming. The transformation will be completed. The image will be fully restored. We will be like Christ because we'll see Him as He is.

LEARN FROM ME

And that glory—that completed transformation, that perfect restoration, that final redemption—is worth all the groaning. Worth all the waiting. Worth all the slow, frustrating, incomplete transformation we're experiencing now.

Because it's coming. It's certain. It's promised. And it will far exceed anything we're suffering now.

Living in Hope

This hope changes how we live in the middle. How we handle the frustration of slow transformation. How we endure when we can't see the progress we long for.

We live in hope. Not wishful thinking. But confident expectation based on God's promises. Hope that what's begun will be completed. Hope that what's being worked will be finished. Hope that the glory to be revealed will far exceed the struggle we're experiencing.

And that hope sustains us. It keeps us going when we want to give up. It enables us to persevere when transformation feels impossibly slow. It gives us patience with ourselves when we're tempted to despair over our failures.

Because we know: God is faithful. What He's started, He'll finish. The transformation that's happening will be completed. From glory to glory. Until glory.

This is certain. This is promised. This is our hope.

And it's enough. More than enough. To keep us beholding. To keep us cooperating. To keep us trusting the process even when we can't see the progress.

From glory to glory. By the Spirit. Until we're fully transformed into Christ's image. Until transformation is complete. Until we see Him face to face and become like Him.

That's the promise. That's the hope. That's the destination of the transformation we're experiencing.

LEARN FROM ME

And it's worth it. All of it. Every slow day. Every frustrating failure. Every imperceptible change. Every small step forward.

It's all moving us from glory to glory. Toward the glory that's coming. The glory that will be revealed. The glory that's certain.

And when we finally see Him—when transformation is complete, when we're fully conformed to His image, when glory is revealed—we'll know it was worth it.

Every moment. Every struggle. Every slow step.

From glory to glory. Until glory.

That's the process. That's the promise. That's the hope that sustains us in the middle of the mess.

CHAPTER 18: Audience of One—Living for God's Approval Alone

"For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ."

— Galatians 1:10 (NASB)

I stood in the parking lot after the service, watching people file past me. Some smiled. Some nodded. Some avoided eye contact. A few stopped to shake my hand and say something polite. One woman told me it was the best sermon she'd ever heard. Another man said it was "interesting" in a tone that clearly meant the opposite.

And I felt my insides twist with every comment. The praise inflated me. The criticism deflated me. The indifference made me anxious. I was on an emotional roller coaster, rising and falling with every word, every expression, every response.

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And as I drove home, I realized something devastating: I had just preached a sermon about living for God's glory instead of our own. About seeking God's approval instead of human recognition. About working for an audience of One.

And I didn't believe a word of it. Not really. Not where it mattered.

Because if I believed it, I wouldn't be emotionally destroyed by one critical comment. I wouldn't be puffed up by one compliment. I wouldn't be obsessively replaying the service in my mind, analyzing every facial expression, wondering what people really thought.

I was preaching about living for an audience of One while I was performing for an audience of hundreds. I was talking about God's approval while desperately craving human approval. I was teaching truth I wasn't living.

And I hated it. I hated the slavery of it. The exhaustion of it. The way it made me into a people-pleaser, a performer, a man more concerned with what others thought than what God thought.

But I didn't know how to stop. I didn't know how to live for God's approval alone when human approval felt so tangible, so immediate, so powerful.

This is the struggle. This is what most of us battle every single day. We know we're supposed to live for God's approval. We know we're supposed to care more about what He thinks than what they think. We know we're supposed to be free from the opinions of others.

But we're not. We're enslaved to them. We're controlled by them. We rise and fall with the tide of human opinion like boats tossed on the waves.

And it's exhausting. It's crushing. It's making us into something we were never meant to be—performers instead of worshipers, people-pleasers instead of God-pleasers, slaves to human opinion instead of bond-servants of Christ.

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But there's another way. A better way. A way of freedom and joy and security that doesn't depend on what anyone else thinks.

The way of the audience of One. Living for God's approval alone. Working for His "well done" and letting everything else fade into background noise.

This is hard. This is countercultural. This goes against every instinct we have. But it's also liberating. It's freeing. It's the only way to live that doesn't destroy us in the process.

So let's explore this together. Let's look honestly at our slavery to human opinion. Let's see what the Bible says about living for God's approval. And let's learn—slowly, imperfectly, but truly—how to live for an audience of One.

I. The Tyranny of Human Approval

Before we can be free from something, we need to understand what we're enslaved to. So let's be honest about the tyranny of human approval and what it does to us.

The Addiction to Applause

Human approval is addictive. Like a drug. You get a little hit of it—someone praises you, someone recognizes you, someone makes you feel valued—and it feels good. Really good. For a moment.

But then it wears off. And you need more. Another compliment. Another recognition. Another affirmation. The dose that satisfied you yesterday doesn't satisfy you today. You need more. And more. And more.

And soon you're organizing your whole life around getting that next hit. You're making decisions based on what will get you noticed. You're choosing actions based on what will get you praised. You're performing constantly, exhaustingly, desperately trying to get the approval you crave.

This is slavery. This is addiction. This is the tyranny of human approval.

LEARN FROM ME

And it never satisfies. Because human approval is fickle. Today they love you. Tomorrow they're indifferent. Next week they hate you. You can never count on it. You can never rest in it. You can never build your life on it.

But you try anyway. Because the addiction is real. The craving is powerful. The need for approval is deep.

Proverbs 29:25 (NASB): "The fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in the LORD will be exalted."

The fear of man brings a snare.

A snare. A trap. Something that catches you and holds you and won't let you go. That's what the fear of man is. That's what living for human approval does to us.

It ensnares us. It traps us. It keeps us from being who we were meant to be because we're too busy trying to be who they want us to be.

The Exhaustion of Performance

Living for human approval is exhausting. Because you have to perform constantly. You can never rest. You can never let your guard down. You can never just be.

You're always on stage. Always aware of your audience. Always concerned about how you're coming across. Always managing your image. Always controlling the narrative. Always performing.

And it's crushing. Because performance is work. Hard work. Endless work. Work that never stops and never pays off because the approval you're seeking is always just out of reach.

You perform well and get praised—but what if next time you don't perform as well? You achieve something impressive—but what have you done lately? You gain someone's approval—but what if you lose it? What if they change their mind? What if someone else does something more impressive?

LEARN FROM ME

The treadmill never stops. The performance never ends. The exhaustion keeps building.

And eventually, you burn out. You can't keep it up. You can't maintain the performance. You can't keep pretending to be what you're not.

Or worse, you become the performance. You lose yourself in the role. You forget who you really are because you've been playing a part for so long. The mask becomes your face. The performance becomes your identity.

And you wake up one day and realize: You don't know who you are anymore. You've spent so long being what others wanted you to be that you've lost track of who God made you to be.

This is the tyranny. This is the slavery. This is what living for human approval does to us.

The Paralysis of People-Pleasing

Here's another effect: People-pleasing leads to paralysis. You can't make decisions because you're too worried about what people will think. You can't take risks because you might fail and people will see. You can't be authentic because authentic might not be acceptable.

So you freeze. You play it safe. You avoid anything that might draw criticism. You stick with what's familiar, what's approved, what won't rock the boat.

And you miss out. On opportunities. On growth. On the life God's calling you to live. Because you're too paralyzed by fear of disapproval to actually move forward.

You know God's calling you to do something—start a ministry, change careers, have a difficult conversation, take a stand on an issue—but you don't do it. Because what will people think? What will they say? What if they disapprove?

So you stay stuck. Safe. Acceptable. Approved by people. But not living the life God called you to live.

LEARN FROM ME

This is tragic. Because God's approval is all that matters. God's call is what we're supposed to follow. God's purposes are what we're supposed to pursue.

But we don't. Because we're enslaved to human opinion. Paralyzed by people-pleasing. Trapped in the tyranny of seeking approval from those who have no right to give or withhold it.

John 12:42-43 - They Loved the Approval of Men

John 12:42-43 (NASB): "Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God."

They loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.

This is devastating. These were people who believed in Jesus. Who recognized He was the Messiah. Who had been convinced by His teaching and His miracles.

But they wouldn't confess Him. Wouldn't acknowledge Him publicly. Wouldn't follow Him openly. Why? Because they loved the approval of men more than the approval of God.

They were more afraid of losing their position, their reputation, their standing with the Pharisees than they were concerned about God's opinion of them.

They chose human approval over divine approval. Earthly recognition over heavenly reward. Temporary acceptance over eternal significance.

And Jesus says this about them earlier in John 5:44 (NASB): "How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God?"

How can you believe?

LEARN FROM ME

Jesus is saying: If you're seeking glory from people instead of from God, your faith is questionable. Because real faith seeks God's approval. Real faith wants God's glory. Real faith doesn't care as much about human recognition.

But if you're addicted to human approval, if you're enslaved to people's opinions, if you love the approval of men more than the approval of God—can you really believe? Can you really follow Jesus? Can you really live for God's glory?

This is the question we all have to answer. Who are we really living for? Whose approval are we really seeking? Whose opinion really matters to us?

And if we're honest, for most of us the answer is: We're living for human approval. We're seeking people's recognition. We care desperately about what they think.

And it's killing us. It's enslaving us. It's keeping us from the freedom and joy and purpose God has for us.

II. The Freedom of One Audience

But there's another way. A way of freedom. A way that breaks the tyranny and ends the slavery and sets us free to be who God made us to be.

The way of the audience of One. Living for God's approval alone.

Galatians 1:10 - Not Seeking to Please Men

Galatians 1:10 (NASB): "For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ."

Am I seeking the favor of men, or of God?

LEARN FROM ME

It's one or the other. Not both. You can't seek the favor of men and the favor of God simultaneously. You can't try to please people and please God at the same time. You have to choose.

If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.

Paul makes it clear: Following Christ and pleasing people are incompatible goals. If you're still trying to please men, you're not really Christ's servant. Because Christ's servants serve Christ. They seek His approval. They care about His opinion. They work for His glory.

Not that we should deliberately offend people. Not that we should be rude or unkind or unnecessarily controversial. But that when there's a conflict—when pleasing God means displeasing people—we choose God. Every time. Without hesitation.

Paul chose God. And it cost him. People were angry with him. They criticized him. They questioned his authority. They opposed his ministry. They caused him trouble.

But Paul didn't care. Not because he was thick-skinned or indifferent to people. But because he cared more about God's approval than theirs. He was living for an audience of One.

And that made him free. Free to preach the gospel without compromise. Free to confront sin without fear. Free to follow God's call without being paralyzed by what people might think.

This is the freedom we need. The freedom to live for God's approval alone. The freedom to care more about what He thinks than what they think. The freedom to be Christ's bond-servant instead of people's slave.

Colossians 3:23-24 - Working for the Lord

Colossians 3:23-24 (NASB): "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve."

LEARN FROM ME

As for the Lord rather than for men.

This is the key. This is the shift. This is what sets us free.

Whatever you do—not just "spiritual" things, not just "ministry" activities, but whatever you do—do it as for the Lord. Not for men. Not for their approval. Not for their recognition. Not for their praise.

But for the Lord. For His approval. For His recognition. For His pleasure.

Knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward.

The reward is coming. From the Lord. Not from people. They might not recognize what you've done. They might not appreciate it. They might not even notice it.

But the Lord sees. The Lord knows. The Lord will reward. And His reward is all that matters.

It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.

This is the perspective shift that changes everything. You're not ultimately serving people. You're not ultimately working for them. You're not ultimately accountable to them.

You're serving Christ. You're working for Him. You're accountable to Him.

People are not your master. Christ is. People are not your judge. Christ is. People are not your reward-giver. Christ is.

When you internalize this—when you really grasp that you're serving Christ, not people—it sets you free. Free from the tyranny of their approval. Free from the slavery of their opinions. Free from the exhaustion of trying to please them.

You're working for an audience of One. And His approval is enough.

LEARN FROM ME

Acts 5:29 - We Must Obey God Rather Than Men

Acts 5:29 (NASB): "But Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than men.'"

We must obey God rather than men.

The religious authorities had commanded the apostles to stop teaching in Jesus's name. Stop preaching the gospel. Stop making trouble.

And the apostles could have complied. They could have said, "Well, we don't want to offend anyone. We don't want to cause problems. We should probably tone it down."

But they didn't. They said, "We must obey God rather than men."

Not "we might obey God" or "we prefer to obey God" or "we'll obey God when it's convenient." But "we must obey God."

It's not optional. It's not negotiable. It's not dependent on whether people approve or disapprove. We must obey God. Even when it costs us. Even when it makes people angry. Even when we lose their approval.

Because God's authority is absolute. God's commands are not suggestions. God's will is not negotiable. We obey God. Period. Regardless of what people think.

This is radical. This is countercultural. This goes against everything our people-pleasing hearts want to do.

But it's also liberating. Because when you settle the question of who you're obeying—when you decide that God's will is absolute and people's opinions are irrelevant to that decision—you're free.

Free to do what God says without worrying about what people will say. Free to follow where God leads without being paralyzed by fear of disapproval. Free to obey God rather than men.

LEARN FROM ME

And that freedom is worth everything you lose when people disapprove.

III. What God's Approval Looks Like

So what does it mean to have God's approval? How do we know if we have it? What are we actually seeking when we seek His favor?

Not Based on Performance

First and most importantly: God's approval is not based on your performance. You don't earn it. You don't achieve it. You don't work for it.

You already have it. In Christ. Because of what Christ has done.

Romans 5:1 (NASB): "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

We have peace with God.

Not "we're trying to get peace with God." Not "we're working toward peace with God." But "we have peace." Present tense. Already true. Settled.

You're already at peace with God. Already accepted. Already approved. Not because of what you've done. But because of what Christ has done on your behalf.

This is crucial. Because if we think God's approval is based on our performance, we'll never rest. We'll never be secure. We'll be just as enslaved to trying to please God as we were to trying to please people.

But God's approval is not performance-based. It's grace-based. It's Christ-based. It's gift-based.

You have it. Not because you earned it. But because Christ earned it for you and gave it to you as a gift.

LEARN FROM ME

This is the foundation. This is where we start. We're already approved. Already accepted. Already at peace with God through Jesus Christ.

Based on Identity, Not Activity

So if it's not based on performance, what is it based on? Identity. Who you are in Christ.

You're God's child. That's your identity. And God is pleased with His children. Not because they're perfect. But because they're His.

Remember Jesus at His baptism. Matthew 3:17 (NASB): "And behold, a voice out of the heavens said, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.'"

This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.

Jesus hasn't done any ministry yet. Hasn't preached. Hasn't healed. Hasn't performed miracles. Hasn't gone to the cross. And yet the Father says, "I am well-pleased."

Why? Because Jesus is the beloved Son. Because of relationship. Because of identity.

And if you're in Christ, you're also God's beloved child. Adopted into His family. Given His name. Made an heir of His Kingdom.

And God is pleased with you. Not because you've performed perfectly. But because you're His child.

This is what we're seeking when we seek God's approval. Not a performance review. Not a grade on our spiritual report card. But the assurance that we're His children and He's pleased with us because of who we are in Christ.

That approval is settled. Secure. Not dependent on our daily performance. Based on our identity in Christ.

LEARN FROM ME

Expressed Through "Well Done"

But—and this is important—while our acceptance is not based on performance, there is still a "well done" we can hear from God. Still a commendation. Still a reward for faithful service.

Matthew 25:21 (NASB): "His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'"

Well done, good and faithful slave.

This is what we long to hear. This is what we're working toward. This is the approval that matters.

Not "well done, you were perfect." Not "well done, you never failed." But "well done, you were faithful."

Faithful with what you were given. Faithful in serving where you were called. Faithful in using your gifts. Faithful in following God's leading. Faithful in doing what He asked you to do.

This is the approval we can work toward. Not to earn our salvation—that's settled. Not to become God's children—we already are. But to hear "well done" from our Master. To please Him with our faithfulness. To serve Him in ways that bring Him joy.

And the beautiful thing is: When you're living for this "well done"—when you're seeking God's approval through faithful service—you're free from needing anyone else's approval. Their "well done" is nice but not necessary. Their praise is pleasant but not essential. Their recognition is fine but not what you're living for.

You're living for an audience of One. And His "well done" is what you're seeking.

LEARN FROM ME

The Father's Pleasure as Enough

Here's the shift that changes everything: Learning to find God's approval enough. Learning to rest in His pleasure without needing anyone else's. Learning to be satisfied with His "well done" even if no one else notices or cares.

This is hard. Because human approval is tangible. Immediate. Concrete. You can see people's faces. Hear their words. Feel their recognition.

But God's approval? That's invisible. Quiet. Internal. You can't see God's face smile. You can't hear Him audibly say, "Well done." You can't physically feel His pleasure.

So we're tempted to discount it. To treat it as less real than human approval. To seek the tangible, immediate, concrete recognition from people instead of the invisible, quiet, internal approval from God.

But here's the truth: God's approval is more real than human approval. More lasting. More valuable. More meaningful.

Human approval fades. Today's hero is tomorrow's has-been. Today's praise is tomorrow's indifference. The recognition you get today will be forgotten next week.

But God's approval lasts. Forever. His "well done" echoes into eternity. His pleasure with you is not fickle or temporary or dependent on your latest performance.

When we grasp this—when we really internalize that God's approval is more real, more lasting, more valuable than human approval—we can finally be free. We can finally live for an audience of One. We can finally find His pleasure enough.

And that's when everything changes.

LEARN FROM ME

IV. Living Free from Human Opinion

So how do we actually do this? How do we live free from human opinion? How do we break the addiction to human approval and learn to live for God's approval alone?

The Daily Choice

First: It's a daily choice. Every morning. Every situation. Every decision. We have to choose: Whose approval am I seeking? Who am I trying to please? Who's my audience?

It's not a one-time decision. It's a continuous, ongoing, repeated choice.

Someone criticizes you. You feel the sting. You're tempted to defend yourself, explain yourself, fix their opinion of you. And you have to choose: Am I going to be controlled by their opinion? Or am I going to rest in God's approval and let their criticism go?

Someone praises you. You feel the rush. You're tempted to puff up, to replay the compliment in your mind, to fish for more affirmation. And you have to choose: Am I going to let this inflate me? Or am I going to receive it graciously and redirect the glory to God?

Someone ignores you. You feel invisible. You're tempted to do something to get noticed, to make them see you, to prove you're worth acknowledging. And you have to choose: Am I going to perform for their attention? Or am I going to rest in the fact that God sees me and that's enough?

Every day. Every situation. Every moment. We choose: Am I living for their approval or God's? Am I seeking to please people or to please God? Am I working for their recognition or His?

And we have to keep choosing. Because the default is always to seek human approval. The flesh always gravitates toward people-pleasing. We have to daily, deliberately, consciously choose to live for an audience of One.

LEARN FROM ME

Preaching the Gospel to Ourselves

Second: We preach the gospel to ourselves. Daily. Repeatedly. We remind ourselves of the truth that sets us free.

You are already approved. Already accepted. Already God's beloved child. Not because of what you've done. But because of what Christ has done.

You don't need their approval because you already have His. You don't need their recognition because you're already recognized by the One who matters. You don't need their validation because you're already validated by God Himself.

This is the truth that breaks the tyranny of human opinion. And we have to preach it to ourselves. Constantly. Because we forget. We default to performance. We slip back into people-pleasing.

So we remind ourselves: I'm already approved. I'm already accepted. I'm already loved. Not because I earned it. But because Christ earned it for me.

And that truth—that glorious, liberating, grace-filled truth—sets us free. Free from the need for human approval. Free from the slavery of people-pleasing. Free to live for God's approval alone.

Dying to Reputation

Third: We die to our reputation. We let go of our need to control what people think of us. We surrender our image management.

This is hard. Because we care deeply about our reputation. We want people to think well of us. We want to be respected, admired, well-regarded.

LEARN FROM ME

But when we're enslaved to protecting our reputation, we can't live for God's approval alone. We're constantly managing, controlling, defending. We're performing to maintain the image. We're living for the audience instead of for God.

Dying to reputation means: I let people think what they're going to think. I don't control the narrative. I don't defend myself against every criticism. I don't try to make everyone like me.

I do what God calls me to do, I serve where He calls me to serve, I speak what He calls me to speak—and I let the chips fall where they may. Some people will approve. Some won't. Some will misunderstand. Some will criticize. Some will praise.

And I rest in God's approval regardless.

This doesn't mean we're reckless or careless about our reputation. First Timothy 3:7 says elders should have "a good reputation with those outside the church" (NASB). Our conduct should be honorable (1 Peter 2:12).

But it means our primary concern is God's evaluation, not people's. We care about character more than image. We pursue godliness more than good PR. We seek to please God even if it costs us human approval.

And when we die to our reputation—when we release our grip on controlling what people think—we find freedom. Freedom to be authentic. Freedom to obey God without fear. Freedom to live for an audience of One.

Finding Security in God's Evaluation

Fourth: We find our security in God's evaluation alone. We anchor ourselves in His opinion of us. We build our identity on His assessment, not theirs.

Psalm 139:1 (NASB): "O LORD, You have searched me and known me."

LEARN FROM ME

You have searched me and known me.

God knows you. Completely. Fully. Nothing hidden. Nothing disguised. Nothing unknown.

He knows your thoughts before you think them (v. 2). He knows your words before you speak them (v. 4).

He knows your motives, your struggles, your failures, your secret sins.

And He loves you. Not despite knowing you fully. But knowing you fully.

That's security. That's the foundation we need. God knows me completely and loves me fully. God sees me clearly and approves of me in Christ. God evaluates me accurately and still calls me His beloved child.

When we find our security there—when we anchor ourselves in God's knowledge of us and love for us—we're free from needing anyone else's opinion. Because the One who knows us best loves us most. The One whose opinion matters most is already pleased with us in Christ.

No one else's evaluation can add to that or take away from that. Their approval doesn't make us more acceptable to God. Their disapproval doesn't make us less loved by God.

We're secure. In His knowledge. In His love. In His approval.

And that security sets us free to live for an audience of One.

The Joy of Obscurity

Finally: We discover the joy of obscurity. The freedom of being unknown by most, unrecognized by many, unnoticed by the crowd. The beauty of serving in secret, giving in hidden ways, doing good that no one but God sees.

Jesus talked about this in Matthew 6. Give in secret. Pray in secret. Fast in secret. Do your righteous acts without broadcasting them, without making sure people know, without needing recognition.

LEARN FROM ME

And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

There's joy in this. Real joy. The joy of knowing God sees even when no one else does. The joy of serving for His glory alone without needing human applause. The joy of being free from the performance, the platform, the need to be noticed.

This is countercultural. We live in an age of personal branding, social media platforms, constant self-promotion. The message is: Be seen. Be noticed. Build your following. Get your name out there.

But Jesus offers something different. The joy of obscurity. The freedom of being known by God and being content with that. The peace of serving without seeking recognition.

And paradoxically, when we stop seeking human recognition, when we're content to be obscure, when we find our joy in God's "well done" alone—we're most free. Most authentic. Most useful in God's hands.

Because we're finally living for the right audience. The audience of One. The only One whose opinion ultimately matters.

The Freedom to Be Faithful

Here's where we land: Living for an audience of One sets us free to be faithful. Not impressive. Not perfect. Not always successful by worldly standards. But faithful.

Faithful to what God's called us to do. Faithful in using the gifts He's given. Faithful in serving where He's placed us. Faithful in obeying what He's commanded.

When you're living for human approval, you can't just be faithful—you have to be impressive. You have to stand out. You have to do something that gets noticed.

But when you're living for God's approval, you can just be faithful. Quietly. Consistently. Whether anyone notices or not. Whether anyone applauds or not. Whether anyone recognizes it or not.

LEARN FROM ME

Because you're not working for their applause. You're working for His "well done." You're not seeking their recognition. You're seeking His approval. You're not performing for their platform. You're serving for His glory.

And that's freedom. The freedom to be faithful without needing to be famous. The freedom to serve without needing to be seen. The freedom to obey without needing to be honored.

Just faithful. That's all. That's enough. That's what God asks. That's what He'll reward.

"Well done, good and faithful servant."

Not "Well done, impressive servant." Not "Well done, famous servant." Not "Well done, recognized-by-many servant."

But "Well done, good and faithful servant."

That's the approval that matters. That's the audience that counts. That's the One we're living for.

And when we finally grasp that—when we really internalize it, when we learn to live it—we're free. Free from the tyranny of human opinion. Free from the slavery of people-pleasing. Free from the exhaustion of performing for the crowd.

Free to live for an audience of One. Free to seek His approval alone. Free to hear His "well done" and let that be enough.

This is the life Jesus offers. The life of freedom. The life of joy. The life of resting in God's approval and being liberated from the need for anyone else's.

It's not easy. It's not natural. It goes against every instinct we have. But it's true freedom. Real freedom. The freedom Christ died to give us.

LEARN FROM ME

Freedom from people. Freedom for God. Freedom to live for His glory alone.

This is the goal. This is the invitation. This is what we're learning.

To live for an audience of One. To seek His approval above all others. To find His "well done" enough.

And to discover, in that seeking, the freedom and joy and security we were always meant to have.

Not in human recognition. But in divine approval. Not in earthly applause. But in heavenly reward. Not in people's evaluation. But in God's.

He sees. He knows. He approves. He will reward.

And that's enough. More than enough. Abundantly, gloriously, completely enough.

The audience of One. The only One who matters. The only One whose opinion counts. The only One we're ultimately accountable to.

Live for Him. Serve Him. Seek His approval. Let His "well done" be your goal and His pleasure be your reward.

And find, in that single-minded devotion to the audience of One, the freedom you've been searching for all along.

LEARN FROM ME

CHAPTER 19: The Community of Glory—Brothers and Sisters for God's Renown

"By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

— John 13:35 (NASB)

I almost gave up on the church.

Not on Jesus. Not on the gospel. Not on my faith. But on the church. On organized religion. On gathered communities of believers. On the whole messy, frustrating, disappointing business of doing life with other Christians.

I'd been hurt too many times. Betrayed by people I trusted. Disappointed by leaders I looked up to. Wounded by conflicts that should never have happened. I'd seen the ugliness behind the scenes. The politics. The power plays. The gossip disguised as prayer requests. The judgment masked as concern.

And I was done. Tired. Ready to be a solo Christian. Just me and Jesus. Read my Bible at home. Pray by myself. Worship God in the privacy of my own heart. No more dealing with difficult people. No more navigating church drama. No more being disappointed by imperfect Christians.

I had convinced myself this was actually more spiritual. More pure. More focused on what really mattered—my personal relationship with God—without the distraction of messy human relationships.

But I was wrong. Dead wrong. Dangerously wrong.

Because God didn't design Christianity to be a solo sport. He didn't create us to live our faith in isolation. He didn't intend for us to pursue holiness alone or display His glory independently.

He made us for community. For the body. For the church. Not because He likes to make things difficult. But because there are aspects of His glory that can only be displayed through community. Facets of His character that can only be seen in the way His people relate to one another. Dimensions of His love that can only be experienced in the context of brothers and sisters loving each other.

LEARN FROM ME

God's glory is not just revealed through individual Christians living holy lives. It's revealed through the church—the collective body of believers—living together in unity, loving one another sacrificially, bearing one another's burdens, displaying to the watching world what it looks like when God's people reflect God's character together.

This is what Jesus prayed for in John 17. That we would be one. That our unity would display God's glory. That the world would see our love for one another and know that God sent Jesus.

Community is not optional. It's not just for extroverts. It's not a nice addition to the Christian life for those who like that sort of thing. It's essential. Fundamental. Central to what it means to live for God's glory.

Because God's glory is displayed not just in individual believers but in the gathered community of believers. Not just in solitary disciples but in the body of Christ functioning together. Not just in personal holiness but in corporate unity.

And I needed to learn this. I needed to come back to the church. Not to a perfect church—there is no such thing. Not to a community without problems—that doesn't exist. But to a messy, imperfect, struggling community of fellow ragamuffins who, despite all our flaws and failures, are learning together what it means to love one another for God's glory.

So let's talk about community. About why it matters. About what it looks like when it's working. About how we display God's glory together. And about why, despite all the difficulties and disappointments, we desperately need the church.

I. Created for Community

We need to start with this fundamental truth: God created us for community. This isn't just a nice idea or a practical arrangement. It's woven into the fabric of who God is and who we are.

LEARN FROM ME

The Trinity: Community at the Core of God

God Himself exists in community. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Three persons, one God. Perfect unity. Perfect love. Perfect communion.

John 17:24 (NASB): "Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world."

You loved Me before the foundation of the world.

Before creation. Before time. Before anything else existed. The Father loved the Son. The Son loved the Father. The Spirit was present in that perfect communion of love.

God has always existed in community. Perfect, loving, harmonious community. The Trinity is the ultimate model of unity in diversity, of distinct persons in perfect relationship, of community at the very core of existence.

And we were made in God's image. Which means we were made for community. For relationship. For connection with others. It's not just a nice addition to our lives—it's part of our design.

Genesis 2:18 (NASB): "Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.'"

It is not good for the man to be alone.

This is the first time in creation God says something is "not good." Everything else was good. Very good. But this—man alone—was not good.

God created us for relationship. For community. For connection with others. Isolation is not God's design. Independence is not His plan. We were made for interdependence, for mutual support, for life together.

LEARN FROM ME

The Body Metaphor

Paul uses the metaphor of a body to describe the church. And it's brilliant. Because a body is one thing made of many parts. Unity in diversity. Different members with different functions, all working together for the good of the whole.

First Corinthians 12:12-13 (NASB): "For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit."

We were all baptized into one body.

When we become Christians, we don't just enter into a relationship with God. We're baptized into a body. We're joined to other believers. We become part of the church. We're connected to brothers and sisters in Christ.

This is not optional. This is not a choice we make after we're saved. This happens at salvation. You can't be in Christ without being in the body. You can't be connected to the Head without being connected to the other members.

Verses 14-20: "For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot says, 'Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body,' it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. And if the ear says, 'Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body,' it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. If they were all one member, where would the body be? But now there are many members, but one body."

God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired.

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God placed you in the body. Intentionally. Purposefully. Not randomly. Not accidentally. He put you where He wants you, with the people He wants you to be connected to, in the community He designed for you.

And the body needs you. You're not optional. You're not an extra. You're not dispensable. The body is incomplete without you. Your gifts, your service, your presence—they matter. They're essential.

Verse 21: "And the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'; or again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'"

I have no need of you.

You can't say this. You can't claim you don't need other believers. You can't function as a Christian in isolation. You need them. And they need you.

This is God's design. This is how He structured things. Community is not optional. It's essential. For us and for the body.

Hebrews 10:24-25 - Not Forsaking Our Own Assembling

Hebrews 10:24-25 (NASB): "And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near."

Not forsaking our own assembling together.

This is a command. Not a suggestion. Not a recommendation for those who like that sort of thing. A command. Don't forsake the assembling together.

Why? Because we need each other. We need to stimulate one another to love and good deeds. We need to encourage one another. We need the gathered community of believers.

LEARN FROM ME

As is the habit of some.

Even in the first century, some Christians were making a habit of forsaking the assembly. Staying home. Going solo. Disconnecting from the community. And the writer of Hebrews says: Don't do that. You need the assembly. The body needs you.

And all the more as you see the day drawing near.

The closer we get to Christ's return, the more we need community. The darker the world gets, the more we need the light of gathered believers. The harder life becomes, the more we need mutual encouragement.

Community is not optional. It's essential. God designed us for it. God commands us to it. God uses it to display His glory.

II. Unity: The Display of Glory

Now here's the crucial connection: The unity of believers displays God's glory to the watching world. When Christians are united—when we love one another, when we serve one another, when we're one despite our differences—the world sees something supernatural. Something that can only be explained by God.

Jesus's Prayer for Unity

John 17:20-23 (NASB): "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me."

This is Jesus praying. On the night before His crucifixion. One of His final prayers. And what's He praying for? Our unity.

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That they may all be one.

Not just get along. Not just be polite to each other. Not just coexist. But be *one*. United. In genuine, deep, supernatural unity.

Even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You.

The model is the Trinity. The unity we're called to reflect is the unity of Father, Son, and Spirit. Perfect communion. Perfect love. Perfect oneness.

So that the world may believe that You sent Me.

This is crucial. Our unity is evangelistic. It's a witness. It's proof to the watching world that God sent Jesus. When the world sees Christians genuinely united—across racial lines, across economic lines, across cultural lines, across all the things that normally divide people—they see something that can't be explained naturally. They see God at work.

The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one.

Unity displays glory. God's glory is revealed when His people are united. When we're one, the world sees what God is like. They see His character. They witness His power. They encounter His love.

That they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know.

The goal is not just unity for our benefit. The goal is unity that makes God known. Unity that reveals God's character. Unity that displays God's glory to the watching world.

This is why disunity is so damaging. This is why church splits are so tragic. This is why conflicts between believers are so destructive. They don't just hurt us—they obscure God's glory. They hide what should be visible. They prevent the world from seeing what God is like.

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Unity displays glory. Disunity hides it. The choice is ours.

Ephesians 4:1-6 - Preserving the Unity of the Spirit

Ephesians 4:1-6 (NASB): "Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all."

Being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit.

Notice: We don't create unity. The Spirit creates it. But we preserve it. We guard it. We protect it. We're diligent about maintaining it.

How? *With all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love.*

Unity requires humility—not thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought, not insisting on our own way, not demanding that everyone agree with us. Unity requires gentleness—treating each other with kindness, not harshness, not aggression, not force. Unity requires patience—enduring each other's weaknesses, bearing with each other's failures, not giving up when it's hard. Unity requires love—genuine, sacrificial, other-centered love.

These are the character qualities that preserve unity. And notice: They're the same qualities Jesus displayed. Humility. Gentleness. Patience. Love.

When we're becoming like Christ, we're becoming people who preserve unity. When we're displaying Christ's character, we're protecting the unity of the Spirit.

There is one body and one Spirit... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.

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This is the foundation of our unity. Not agreement on every detail. Not uniformity in every practice. Not conformity to every preference. But oneness in the essentials. One Lord. One faith. One baptism. One God and Father.

We're united by Christ. By the Spirit. By our common faith. By our shared Father. That's the unity we preserve. That's the oneness we protect.

And when we do—when we're diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit, when we display Christ's character in how we relate to one another—God's glory is revealed. The world sees. The world knows. The world encounters God through our unity.

Psalm 133 - The Goodness of Unity

Psalm 133:1 (NASB): "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!"

How good and how pleasant.

Unity is good. Objectively good. Not just beneficial or practical or helpful. But good in itself. Valuable. Beautiful. Desirable.

Unity is also pleasant. Enjoyable. Delightful. Not just duty or obligation. But something that brings joy, that's satisfying, that's a pleasure to experience.

When brothers and sisters dwell together in unity—when we're genuinely one, when we love each other, when we're at peace with one another—it's good. It's pleasant. It's a gift.

And it's rare. Which is why the psalm says "Behold"—look at this, pay attention to this, notice this, because it's remarkable. In a world of division and conflict and hostility, unity among God's people is something to behold. Something remarkable. Something worth noticing.

Because it reveals God. It displays His glory. It shows the world what He's like.

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III. Love: The Primary Evidence

Jesus says the way the world will know we're His disciples is by our love for one another. Not our correct doctrine. Not our moral behavior. Not our spiritual gifts. But our love.

Love is the primary evidence of discipleship. Love is what makes us recognizable as Jesus's followers. Love is what displays God's glory through community.

John 13:34-35 - A New Commandment

John 13:34-35 (NASB): "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another.

This isn't entirely new. The Old Testament commanded love for neighbor (Leviticus 19:18). But what's new is the standard: *Even as I have loved you.*

We're not just called to love in a generic way. We're called to love *as Jesus loved*. With the same kind of love. In the same way. To the same extent.

How did Jesus love? Sacrificially. Unconditionally. Persistently. Humbly. Graciously. Completely. He loved to the point of death. He loved enemies. He loved those who betrayed Him. He loved without expecting anything in return.

That's how we're called to love one another. Not perfectly—we're not Jesus. But increasingly. Progressively. More and more in the way He loved.

By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.

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This is the mark. This is the evidence. This is what makes us recognizable as Jesus's followers.

Not our theology, though theology matters. Not our morality, though holiness is important. Not our spiritual experiences, though God works in our lives. But our love for one another.

When the world sees Christians genuinely loving each other—caring for one another, serving one another, sacrificing for one another, forgiving one another, bearing with one another—they see something different. Something that can't be explained by natural affection or common interests or social bonds.

They see supernatural love. Love that looks like Jesus. Love that can only come from God. And in that love, they see God's glory.

First John 4:7-12 - God Is Love

First John 4:7-12 (NASB): "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us."

God is love.

This is God's nature. His character. His essence. Love is not just something God does. It's what God is.

And when we love one another, we're reflecting God's nature. We're displaying His character. We're showing the world what He's like.

No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us.

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God is invisible. But when we love one another, God becomes visible. When we love with His love, people see Him. When we display genuine, sacrificial, Christ-like love for one another, God's presence is made known and His love is brought to full expression in us.

This is how God's glory is displayed through community. Through love. Through brothers and sisters genuinely loving one another in ways that reflect God's character.

Not sentimental love. Not superficial niceness. Not fake politeness. But real, costly, sacrificial, Christ-like love.

The kind of love that forgives when it would be easier to hold a grudge. The kind of love that serves when it would be more comfortable to be served. The kind of love that sacrifices when it would be more natural to protect. The kind of love that perseveres when it would be simpler to give up.

That kind of love—God's kind of love, Jesus's kind of love—displayed in the community of believers, reveals God's glory to the watching world.

First Corinthians 13 - Love as the Standard

We've looked at 1 Corinthians 13 before, but we need to come back to it in the context of community. Because this chapter is not primarily about romantic love or abstract love. It's about how love should characterize the church, the community of believers.

First Corinthians 13:4-7 (NASB): "Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

This is what love looks like in community:

Patient - not quickly frustrated with other believers' weaknesses or slowness to grow.

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Kind - actively looking for ways to help, serve, encourage, bless.

Not jealous - rejoicing when other believers are blessed or recognized, not envious of their gifts or successes.

Does not brag, is not arrogant - humble about our own achievements, not needing to prove ourselves or one-up others.

Does not act unbecomingly - treating others with respect and dignity, even in disagreement.

Does not seek its own - willing to give up our preferences for the good of others and the unity of the body.

Not provoked - slow to anger, not easily offended, not touchy or defensive.

Does not take into account a wrong suffered - forgiving, not keeping score, not holding grudges.

Does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth - wanting what's best for others, celebrating their victories, mourning their failures.

Bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things - committed to the relationship, refusing to give up, choosing to trust and hope even when it's hard.

This is the love that displays God's glory in community. This is what makes us recognizable as Jesus's disciples. This is what reveals to the world what God is like.

And when a community is characterized by this kind of love—when believers genuinely treat each other this way, when this is the norm rather than the exception—the world takes notice. They see something they can't explain. Something supernatural. Something that points to God.

That's glory. That's how God's character is displayed through the community of His people.

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IV. Bearing One Another's Burdens

Community is not just about gathering together. It's about actually doing life together. Bearing one another's burdens. Helping each other through the struggles. Being there for one another in the hard times.

This is where God's glory gets displayed in practical, tangible ways. When believers sacrificially care for one another, when we bear one another's burdens, when we actually help each other through life's difficulties—the world sees something different. Something that reflects God's character.

Galatians 6:2 - Bear One Another's Burdens

Galatians 6:2 (NASB): "Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ."

Bear one another's burdens.

Not just your own burdens. Not just take care of yourself and expect everyone else to do the same. But bear *one another's* burdens. Help carry what your brothers and sisters are carrying. Share the weight. Lighten the load.

This is practical. Concrete. Tangible. It means:

When someone is grieving, you grieve with them. When someone is sick, you care for them. When someone is struggling financially, you help them. When someone is overwhelmed, you step in. When someone is isolated, you reach out. When someone is carrying too much, you share the load.

And thereby fulfill the law of Christ.

This is how we fulfill Christ's law. Not by keeping rules. But by loving others. By bearing their burdens. By practically caring for one another.

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And when we do this—when the church functions as a community of burden-bearers, when believers actually help each other through life's struggles—God's glory is displayed. Because the world doesn't operate this way. The world says, "Take care of yourself. Look out for number one. Don't get too involved in other people's problems."

But the church says, "We're in this together. Your burden is my burden. Your struggle is my struggle. I'm not letting you carry this alone."

And that's different. That's supernatural. That's love that looks like God.

Romans 12:15 - Rejoice and Weep Together

Romans 12:15 (NASB): "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep."

Rejoice with those who rejoice.

This is harder than it sounds. Because our natural tendency is to be envious when others are blessed. To be competitive when others succeed. To compare ourselves unfavorably when others are celebrated.

But genuine community rejoices with those who rejoice. We're genuinely happy when others are blessed. We celebrate their successes. We're not threatened by their victories. We don't make it about us.

Weep with those who weep.

This means entering into others' pain. Not fixing it. Not minimizing it. Not offering trite solutions. But weeping with them. Being present in their suffering. Sharing their grief.

When the church does this—when we genuinely rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep—we're displaying God's character. Because God rejoices over us (Zephaniah 3:17). And God weeps with us (John 11:35).

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And when the world sees believers entering into one another's joys and sorrows, when they see us genuinely caring about each other's experiences, when they witness the church functioning as a real community that shares life together—they see something that points to God.

Acts 2:44-47 - They Had All Things in Common

Acts 2:44-47 (NASB): "And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved."

They had all things in common.

This is radical. This is countercultural. This is community functioning at a level most of us have never experienced.

They shared their possessions. They sold property to help those in need. They made sure no one lacked. They ate together. They did life together. They were genuinely a community.

And the result? *The Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.*

Their community was evangelistic. Not because they had great programs or compelling preaching (though they did). But because the way they loved one another, the way they cared for one another, the way they functioned as a genuine community—it was attractive. It drew people in. It made them want to be part of it.

Because the world is starving for real community. For genuine connection. For people who actually care about each other and help each other and do life together.

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And when the church provides that—when we're a community characterized by genuine love and practical care and sacrificial service—we display God's glory. We show the world what He's like. We make Him visible through our love for one another.

V. The Witness of Community

Let's be clear about why all this matters: The community of believers is one of God's primary means of revealing Himself to the world. The church—when it's functioning as it should—is a display of God's glory that draws people to Him.

The Apologetic of Love

In John 17, Jesus says the unity and love of believers will convince the world that God sent Him. This is apologetics. This is evangelism. This is proof.

Not logical arguments. Not historical evidence. Not philosophical reasoning. Though all of those have their place. But the love and unity of the church.

When the world sees Christians who genuinely love one another, who are united despite their differences, who care for each other sacrificially—that's convincing. That's compelling. That's evidence that God is real and Jesus is who He claimed to be.

Because you can't fake this. You can't manufacture genuine love and unity. You can't produce supernatural community through natural means. It requires God. It requires the Spirit. It requires transformation.

And when the world sees it—when they witness a community that loves like Jesus loves, that's united in Him, that bears one another's burdens and rejoices and weeps together—they encounter something that can't be explained except by God.

That's apologetics. That's the argument. That's the proof. Love is the primary apologetic for the reality of God and the truth of the gospel.

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The Attraction of Authentic Community

People are drawn to authentic community. They're hungry for it. They're desperate for it. The world offers counterfeits—groups based on common interests, communities built on shared demographics, connections limited to social media—but these don't satisfy. They don't provide what people really need.

But when the church is an authentic community—when we're genuinely connected, when we know each other deeply, when we care for each other sacrificially, when we're committed to one another for the long haul—that's attractive. That's compelling. That draws people in.

Not because we're perfect. Not because we have it all figured out. Not because our community is without problems or conflicts or struggles.

But because we're real. Because we love each other despite our flaws. Because we're committed to one another through the mess. Because we're experiencing something supernatural—God's love binding us together in ways that transcend natural affinity or common interest.

And the world sees that. And they want it. And they're drawn to the God who makes it possible.

One Another as Witness

The New Testament is full of "one another" commands. Love one another. Serve one another. Forgive one another. Bear one another's burdens. Encourage one another. Pray for one another. Confess to one another. Be kind to one another. Show hospitality to one another.

These aren't just nice ideas for how Christians should behave. They're the visible expression of what it means to be the body of Christ. They're how God's character gets displayed through community. They're the witness the church gives to the watching world.

When we actually live out these "one anothers"—when we're communities characterized by love and service and forgiveness and encouragement and all the rest—we're showing the world what God is like.

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We're displaying His love when we love one another. We're revealing His grace when we forgive one another. We're manifesting His kindness when we're kind to one another. We're embodying His hospitality when we welcome one another.

The "one anothers" are how God's invisible character becomes visible through the community of His people.

And the world is watching. And when they see it—when they witness believers actually loving one another, serving one another, bearing one another's burdens—they see God.

That's witness. That's evangelism. That's how God's glory is displayed through the community of His people.

The Messy, Beautiful Reality

Here's the truth: Community is hard. Church is messy. People are difficult. We disappoint each other. We hurt each other. We fail each other.

The church is not a gathering of perfect people. It's a hospital for sinners. A community of ragamuffins. A collection of broken people who are being healed together.

And that's actually part of the beauty. Part of the witness. Part of the glory.

Because when a group of imperfect people genuinely love one another, forgive one another, bear with one another, stay committed to one another despite the messiness—that's supernatural. That's a display of God's grace. That's evidence of His transforming power.

The world doesn't expect perfect people to love each other. But when flawed, broken, struggling people love each other anyway—when we extend grace to one another, when we forgive one another, when we stay committed through the difficulties—that's remarkable. That points to God.

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So we don't give up on community. We don't abandon the church when it disappoints us. We don't go solo when it gets hard.

We stay. We love. We forgive. We serve. We bear burdens. We preserve unity. We display Christ's character through how we relate to one another.

Not perfectly. Not without struggle. Not without failure and repentance and starting over.

But persistently. Faithfully. With the help of the Spirit. For God's glory.

Because the community of believers—messy as it is, imperfect as we are—is still God's chosen means of displaying His glory to the world. Still the body of Christ. Still the primary witness to His love and grace and transforming power.

So we gather. We love one another. We serve one another. We bear one another's burdens. We preserve the unity of the Spirit. We live out the "one anothers." We function as the body.

And in doing so—in being the community of believers God called us to be—we display His glory. We make Him known. We show the world what He's like.

Together. As brothers and sisters. For His renown. For His glory. For His name.

That's the community of glory. That's what we're called to be. That's how God reveals Himself through His people.

Not in isolation. But in community. Not as individuals. But as the body. Not alone. But together.

For His glory. Always for His glory.

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CHAPTER 20: Until He Comes—Living in the Light of His Return for God's Ultimate Glory

"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

— Romans 8:18 (NASB)

I have days when I wonder if any of this matters.

Days when the news is so dark I can barely stand to read it. Days when the brokenness of the world feels overwhelming. Days when I look at my own life and see so little progress, so much struggle, so many failures. Days when the gap between what should be and what is feels unbearably wide.

On those days, I'm tempted to give up. To stop trying. To conclude that all this talk about living for God's glory is nice in theory but doesn't actually change anything in a world this broken.

But then I remember: This isn't the end of the story. This isn't how things will always be. This present darkness is temporary. This current brokenness is not permanent. This world as it is now is not the world as it will be.

Jesus is coming back. And when He does, everything changes.

The brokenness gets healed. The darkness gets flooded with light. The injustice gets set right. The suffering ends. The glory that's been hidden gets revealed. The transformation that's been partial gets completed. The Kingdom that's been inaugurated gets fully established.

Every tear wiped away. Every wrong made right. Every enemy defeated. Every promise fulfilled. Every hope realized. Every prayer answered. Every longing satisfied.

And God's glory—which we've been catching glimpses of, which we've been reflecting dimly, which we've been living for imperfectly—God's glory will be fully revealed. Completely displayed. Universally acknowledged.

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Every knee will bow. Every tongue will confess. Every creature in heaven and earth and under the earth will declare: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" (Revelation 5:12, NASB).

This is the hope that sustains us. The promise that keeps us going. The certainty that makes present suffering bearable and present struggles meaningful.

We're living in the in-between time. Between Christ's first coming and His second. Between the already and the not yet. Between the inauguration of the Kingdom and its consummation. Between glory glimpsed and glory revealed.

And how we live in this in-between time matters. Not because our efforts will bring about His return—only God determines that timing. But because living in light of His return shapes everything. Our priorities. Our choices. Our values. Our endurance. Our hope.

We're not just killing time until Jesus comes back. We're living with purpose, with mission, with direction. We're living for God's glory now, knowing that one day His glory will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea. We're working, serving, loving, obeying—not because we're building the Kingdom through our efforts, but because we're participating in what God is doing until the King returns to complete what He started.

This is what it means to live eschatologically. To live in light of the end. To let the certain future shape the present. To order our lives around what we know is coming rather than what we see right now.

So let's explore this together. Let's look at what Scripture promises about Christ's return. Let's see how that hope shapes how we live now. And let's learn to endure, to persevere, to keep going—until He comes.

I. The Certainty of His Return

First, we need to establish this clearly: Christ is coming back. This is not wishful thinking. Not religious fantasy. Not a comforting myth we tell ourselves to make hard times bearable.

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It's as certain as His first coming. As guaranteed as His resurrection. As sure as God's faithfulness.

He Will Come Again

Acts 1:11 (NASB): "They also said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.'"

This Jesus... will come in just the same way.

The angels don't say "might come" or "could come" or "we hope He'll come." They say "will come." Future tense. Certain. Guaranteed.

Jesus ascended into heaven. Visibly. Bodily. The disciples watched Him go. And He will return the same way. Visibly. Bodily. In the clouds. Just as He left.

This is not symbolic. Not metaphorical. Not spiritualized. Jesus is coming back. Literally. Physically. Actually.

John 14:3 (NASB): "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also."

I will come again.

Jesus Himself promises it. He's going to prepare a place for us. And then He's coming back to get us. To bring us to be with Him. To take us where He is.

This is a promise. From Jesus. And Jesus keeps His promises. He came the first time, just as promised. He died and rose again, just as promised. He sent the Spirit, just as promised. And He will return, just as promised.

Count on it. Bank on it. Build your life around it. Jesus is coming back.

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First Thessalonians 4:16-17 - The Lord Himself Will Descend

First Thessalonians 4:16-17 (NASB): "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord."

The Lord Himself will descend from heaven.

Not a representative. Not an angel. Not a proxy. But *the Lord Himself*. Jesus. In person. Coming down from heaven.

With a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God.

This won't be quiet. This won't be subtle. This won't be something only a few people notice. It will be loud, dramatic, unmistakable. Everyone will know. Everyone will see. Everyone will hear.

And the dead in Christ will rise first.

Those who have died trusting in Christ will be raised. Their bodies resurrected. Death defeated. The grave emptied. This is the resurrection of the dead—not a spiritual concept but a physical reality.

Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

Those who are alive when Christ returns will be transformed. Caught up. Given resurrection bodies. United with those who have already died and been raised.

And so we shall always be with the Lord.

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This is the goal. This is the destination. This is what we're moving toward. Not just heaven as a location. But being with the Lord. Forever. Always. Never separated again.

This is certain. This is coming. This is what we're waiting for.

Revelation 1:7 - Every Eye Will See Him

Revelation 1:7 (NASB): "Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. So it is to be. Amen."

Every eye will see Him.

Not just believers. Not just the faithful. But *every eye*. Everyone who's ever lived. Everyone who's ever died. Everyone who's alive when He returns. All will see Him.

Even those who pierced Him.

Even His enemies. Even those who rejected Him. Even those who crucified Him. They will see Him. They will witness His return. They will acknowledge His Lordship.

And all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him.

Some will mourn in repentance—finally seeing what they refused to see before. Some will mourn in terror—realizing they've been on the wrong side. Some will mourn in regret—understanding too late what they missed.

But there will be no ignoring it. No denying it. No escaping it. He is coming. And every eye will see Him.

So it is to be. Amen.

This is settled. Certain. Guaranteed. It's not a possibility. It's not a maybe. It's a definite: "So it is to be."

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Christ is returning. Count on it.

II. What His Return Means

So Jesus is coming back. That's certain. But what does it mean? What happens when He returns? What changes? What's accomplished?

The Completion of Redemption

Christ's return completes what His first coming began. His death and resurrection accomplished redemption. But the full application of that redemption—the final defeat of death, the resurrection of our bodies, the complete removal of sin's effects—that happens when He returns.

Romans 8:23 (NASB): "And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body."

Waiting eagerly for... the redemption of our body.

We've been redeemed spiritually. Our souls have been saved. We've been adopted as sons and daughters. We have the Spirit as a down payment, a guarantee, the first fruits of what's coming.

But our bodies haven't been redeemed yet. They still decay. They still get sick. They still die. They still bear the effects of the fall.

But when Christ returns, our bodies will be redeemed. Resurrected. Transformed. Made new. Given the fullness of redemption.

Philippians 3:20-21 (NASB): "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself."

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He will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory.

Our current bodies are humble. Weak. Subject to decay. Limited. Broken.

But when Christ returns, He will transform them. Make them like His resurrection body. Glorious. Powerful. Imperishable. Perfect.

This is the completion of redemption. Not just souls saved. But bodies redeemed. Not just spiritual transformation. But physical resurrection. Not just forgiveness of sins. But removal of all sin's effects.

Complete redemption. Total salvation. Full restoration. When Christ returns.

The Final Defeat of Evil

Christ's return also means the final defeat of all evil. Sin, death, Satan, every enemy of God—all will be finally, completely, eternally defeated.

First Corinthians 15:24-26 (NASB): "Then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death."

When He has abolished all rule and all authority and power.

Every power that opposes God will be abolished. Every authority that resists His will will be destroyed. Every force that works against His purposes will be eliminated.

He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet.

Christ is reigning now. But His enemies are not yet fully defeated. They're still active, still fighting, still causing damage. But they're defeated enemies. The outcome is certain. They're just waiting for the sentence to be carried out.

LEARN FROM ME

And when Christ returns, the sentence will be carried out. All enemies under His feet. Completely defeated. Eternally subdued.

The last enemy that will be abolished is death.

Death is the final enemy. The ultimate expression of the curse. The most visible consequence of sin. And death will be the last enemy defeated.

But it will be defeated. Completely. Finally. Forever. Death will be swallowed up in victory (1 Corinthians 15:54). It will be thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:14). It will exist no more.

No more death. No more decay. No more graves. No more funerals. No more separation from loved ones. No more fear of dying. Death itself will be dead.

When Christ returns.

The Revelation of God's Glory

And most importantly for our purposes: Christ's return means the full revelation of God's glory. The glory we've been living for, the glory we've been reflecting imperfectly, the glory we've been displaying dimly—that glory will be fully revealed.

Second Thessalonians 1:9-10 (NASB): "These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed."

When He comes to be glorified in His saints.

Christ will be glorified in us. His glory will be displayed through us. His character will be fully reflected in us. His image will be completely restored in us.

LEARN FROM ME

We will finally be what we were always meant to be. Perfect image-bearers. Complete glory-reflectors. Fully conformed to Christ's image. Displaying God's character without distortion or dilution.

And Christ will be glorified through that. Praised for what He's accomplished in us. Honored for the transformation He's worked. Marveled at for the masterpiece He's created.

And to be marveled at among all who have believed.

We will marvel at Him. Stand in awe of Him. Be stunned by His glory. Overwhelmed by His beauty. Amazed at who He is and what He's done.

This is the goal. This is the destination. This is what everything has been moving toward. The full revelation of God's glory. The complete display of His character. The universal acknowledgment of His worth.

When Christ returns, God's glory will fill the earth. Every creature will see it. Every tongue will confess it. Every knee will bow to it.

And we—those who have been living for His glory, who have been reflecting His character, who have been displaying His image—we will be part of that glory. We will reflect it perfectly. We will display it completely. We will participate in it fully.

For His glory. Forever.

III. How the Hope Shapes Our Present

So Christ is coming back. Redemption will be completed. Evil will be finally defeated. God's glory will be fully revealed. That's the future. That's what's coming. That's certain.

But how does that shape how we live now? How does the hope of His return change our present?

LEARN FROM ME

Living with Eternal Perspective

First: The hope of Christ's return gives us eternal perspective. It helps us see our current circumstances in light of eternity. It reminds us that what we're experiencing now is temporary, but what's coming is eternal.

Second Corinthians 4:17-18 (NASB): "For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal."

While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen.

This is the perspective shift. We don't focus on what's visible—our current circumstances, our present struggles, the difficulties we can see. Instead, we fix our attention on what's invisible—the future glory, the promised redemption, the certain return of Christ.

For the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

What we can see is temporary. Fleeting. Passing away. The present suffering, the current darkness, the visible brokenness—it's all temporal. It won't last.

But what we can't see yet—the glory that's coming, the redemption that's promised, the transformation that's certain—that's eternal. That lasts forever. That's what's real and permanent and ultimate.

When we grasp this, when we really internalize this eternal perspective, it changes how we experience the present. The suffering is still real. The struggles are still hard. The difficulties are still painful. But they're not ultimate. They're not final. They're not forever.

They're momentary, light affliction producing eternal weight of glory. The present is producing the future. The temporal is working toward the eternal. The visible is giving way to the invisible.

And that changes everything.

LEARN FROM ME

Hebrews 11:13-16 - Living as Strangers and Exiles

Hebrews 11:13-16 (NASB): "All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them."

Having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

This is how we're supposed to live. Not as people who belong here. Not as people whose home is this world. But as strangers. Exiles. People passing through on the way to somewhere else.

This world is not our home. This life is not our destination. We're citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20). Our real home is with God. Our true country is the one that's coming.

And when we live as strangers and exiles—when we don't get too attached to this world, when we hold loosely to temporary things, when we invest in eternal realities—it shows we're seeking a country of our own. A better country. A heavenly one.

Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God.

When we live this way—when we live as pilgrims, as people longing for home, as strangers who don't quite fit here because we were made for somewhere else—God is pleased. He's not ashamed to be called our God. Because we're living in light of what He's promised. We're ordering our lives around the city He's prepared for us.

This is living with eternal perspective. This is how the hope of Christ's return shapes our present. We live as strangers here because we're citizens there. We hold this world loosely because we're gripping the next world tightly. We invest in eternal things because temporary things are passing away.

LEARN FROM ME

Purifying Hope

First John 3:2-3 (NASB): "Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure."

Everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself.

The hope of Christ's return is not just comforting. It's purifying. It motivates holiness. It drives us toward Christlikeness.

Why? Because we know that when He appears, we will be like Him. We know we're being transformed into His image. We know the destination is complete conformity to Christ.

And when we fix our hope on that—when we keep that goal in view, when we remember where we're heading—it motivates us to pursue purity now. To put off sin now. To pursue holiness now. To become now what we will be then.

Not to earn our transformation. We can't make ourselves like Christ through effort. But to align ourselves with what God is doing. To cooperate with the Spirit's transforming work. To practice now what will be true then.

The hope of Christ's return purifies us. It makes us want to be like Him. It motivates us to pursue holiness. It drives us toward the image we're being conformed to.

This is how hope shapes present living. It's not passive waiting. It's active pursuing. Not sitting around wishing Jesus would hurry up and come back. But actively becoming more like Him while we wait.

LEARN FROM ME

Titus 2:11-14 - Grace That Trains Us

Titus 2:11-14 (NASB): "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds."

Looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus.

We're looking for His appearing. Eagerly. Expectantly. As our blessed hope.

Instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age.

And while we're looking for His appearing, grace is training us. Teaching us. Instructing us to live differently. To deny ungodliness. To say no to worldly desires. To live sensibly, righteously, godly—in this present age.

Not in the age to come. Not when we're in heaven. But now. In this present age. While we're waiting for Christ's return.

The hope of His appearing shapes how we live now. It trains us. It instructs us. It motivates us to live for God's glory while we wait for God's glory to be revealed.

This is how eschatological hope works. It's not escapism. It's not checking out from the present because we're focused on the future. It's letting the certain future shape the present. It's living now in light of what we know is coming then.

And grace does the training. Grace teaches us. Grace empowers us to live this way. Not law. Not guilt. Not fear. But grace—the same grace that saved us is training us to live for God's glory until Christ returns.

LEARN FROM ME

IV. Endurance Until He Comes

Living in light of Christ's return also means endurance. Perseverance. Keeping going even when it's hard.

Continuing to live for God's glory even when we're tired, discouraged, ready to give up.

Because the wait is long. And the struggle is real. And there are days when we wonder if we can keep going.

But the promise of His return sustains us. It gives us hope to endure. It provides motivation to persevere. It offers a reason to keep going when everything in us wants to quit.

James 5:7-8 - Be Patient Like the Farmer

James 5:7-8 (NASB): "Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near."

Be patient... until the coming of the Lord.

Patience. That's what we need. Not frantic activity. Not anxious striving. Not desperate attempts to make things happen faster. But patience.

The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil.

The farmer can't make the crops grow faster. He can plant. He can water. He can fertilize. He can remove weeds. But he can't make the growth happen. He has to wait. Patiently. For the early rains and the late rains. For the seasons to do their work. For the harvest to come in its time.

You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.

LEARN FROM ME

We wait like farmers. We do what we're called to do—plant, water, tend, serve. But we can't make the Kingdom come through our efforts. We can't force Christ's return. We can't rush God's timing.

We have to wait. Patiently. Strengthening our hearts. Remembering that the coming of the Lord is near. Holding on to the hope. Enduring until He comes.

Revelation 2:25 - Hold Fast Until I Come

Revelation 2:25 (NASB): "Nevertheless what you have, hold fast until I come."

Hold fast until I come.

This is Jesus speaking to the church in Thyatira. And the command is simple: Hold fast. Don't let go. Don't give up. Don't abandon what you have. Keep holding on. Until I come.

This is the call to endurance. To perseverance. To faithfulness over the long haul.

Not until you feel like it. Not until it gets easier. Not until the circumstances improve. But until Christ comes. However long that takes. However hard it gets. However tired you become.

Hold fast. Keep going. Don't quit.

Because He's coming. The end is certain. The hope is sure. The promise is guaranteed.

So hold fast. Until He comes.

First Corinthians 15:58 - Steadfast, Immovable, Abounding

First Corinthians 15:58 (NASB): "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord."

LEARN FROM ME

Be steadfast, immovable.

Don't be shaken. Don't be moved. Don't let circumstances or opposition or discouragement or exhaustion move you from your position. Stand firm. Be steadfast. Be immovable.

Always abounding in the work of the Lord.

Not just holding on. Not just surviving. But abounding. Overflowing. Continually engaged in the Lord's work. Always serving. Always giving. Always living for His glory.

Knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.

This is what sustains us. This is what enables endurance. The knowledge—the certainty—that our toil is not in vain. Our work matters. Our service counts. Our labor for the Lord is not wasted.

It might feel like it some days. It might seem pointless when you can't see results. It might appear futile when the world keeps getting darker and the church keeps struggling and you keep failing.

But it's not in vain. Not one act of service. Not one moment of faithfulness. Not one choice to obey. Not one sacrifice made for God's glory. None of it is wasted. All of it matters. All of it counts. All of it is being used by God to accomplish His purposes.

So be steadfast. Be immovable. Keep abounding in the work of the Lord. Because your toil is not in vain.

Until He comes.

The Day Is Drawing Near

Hebrews 10:25 (NASB): "Not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near."

LEARN FROM ME

And all the more as you see the day drawing near.

The closer we get to Christ's return, the more we need encouragement. The more we need community. The more we need to gather together, to strengthen one another, to help each other endure.

The day is drawing near. We're closer now than we've ever been. And that should motivate us. Should energize us. Should drive us to encourage one another all the more.

Not to become complacent. Not to coast. Not to ease up. But to double down. To strengthen our hearts. To hold fast. To keep going with renewed vigor because the end is in sight.

The day is drawing near. Hold on. Keep going. Endure. Encourage one another. Strengthen your hearts.

Until He comes.

V. Living for God's Ultimate Glory

So how do we put this all together? How do we live in light of Christ's return? How does the hope of His appearing shape our daily lives?

We live for God's ultimate glory. We order our lives around the certain future. We make choices today based on what we know about tomorrow. We invest in eternal realities rather than temporary pleasures. We pursue what will last rather than what will pass away.

Seeking the Things Above

Colossians 3:1-4 (NASB): "Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory."

LEARN FROM ME

Keep seeking the things above.

Present tense. Continuous action. Not seek once and be done. But keep seeking. Continuously. Daily.

Persistently.

The things above. The realities of heaven. The eternal truths. The Kingdom values. The priorities of God.

The glory that's coming. The Christ who is seated at the right hand of God.

Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.

This is where the battle is fought. In our minds. In what we think about. In what we focus on. In what occupies our attention.

We can set our minds on earthly things—temporary pleasures, passing satisfactions, fleeting successes, the approval of people, the accumulation of stuff. And if we do, we'll live for those things. We'll orient our lives around them. We'll make decisions based on them.

Or we can set our minds on things above—eternal realities, Kingdom priorities, Christ's glory, the hope of His return, the transformation that's coming. And if we do, we'll live for those things. We'll orient our lives around them. We'll make decisions based on them.

What we set our minds on determines how we live. So set your mind on things above.

When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.

This is the promise. This is the hope. This is the certainty that makes it all worthwhile.

Christ will be revealed. His glory will be displayed. His character will be fully manifested. And we—those who have been living for His glory, who have been setting our minds on things above, who have been seeking Him—we will be revealed with Him in glory.

LEARN FROM ME

Not our glory. His glory. But we'll share in it. We'll participate in it. We'll reflect it perfectly. We'll display it completely.

Revealed with Him in glory. That's the goal. That's the destination. That's what we're living for.

Second Peter 3:11-13 - What Sort of People Ought We to Be?

Second Peter 3:11-13 (NASB): "Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells."

Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be?

This is the question. If everything we see is temporary—if this world is passing away, if the heavens and earth as we know them are going to be destroyed—what sort of people should we be?

In holy conduct and godliness.

Holy. Godly. Set apart. Living differently. Not conformed to this world but transformed by the renewal of our minds. Not pursuing temporary things but investing in eternal realities.

Looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God.

Eager for it. Longing for it. Living in anticipation of it. And somehow—mysteriously—hastening it. Not that we control God's timing. But that our holy living, our godliness, our prayers, our proclamation of the gospel—all of it is part of how God is working out His purposes and moving history toward its appointed end.

We are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.

LEARN FROM ME

This is the hope. Not just heaven as a spiritual realm. But new heavens and a new earth. A restored creation. A renewed cosmos. A place where righteousness dwells. Where God's will is done perfectly. Where His glory fills everything.

This is what we're living for. This is what we're waiting for. This is the ultimate glory—God's glory filling the new heavens and new earth, with us dwelling in His presence forever.

Revelation 22:20 - Even So, Come, Lord Jesus

The Bible ends with this prayer: "He who testifies to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming quickly.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:20, NASB).

Come, Lord Jesus.

This is the prayer of the church. This is the longing of believers. This is the hope that sustains us.

Come. Return. Finish what You started. Complete the redemption. Defeat the enemies. Reveal the glory. Make all things new.

Come, Lord Jesus.

And He will. He's coming quickly. The day is near. The hope is certain. The promise is sure.

So we wait. We endure. We keep going. We live for His glory. We set our minds on things above. We seek the things of the Kingdom. We pursue holiness and godliness. We love one another. We serve faithfully. We display His character. We reflect His image. We point to His glory.

Until He comes.

LEARN FROM ME

And when He does—when the trumpet sounds, when the dead are raised, when we're caught up together to meet Him, when we see Him face to face, when we're fully transformed into His image, when the new heavens and new earth are revealed, when God's glory fills everything—we will finally be home.

Finally complete. Finally healed. Finally whole. Finally what we were always meant to be.

Image-bearers perfectly reflecting God's glory. Worshipers eternally praising His name. Children forever in our Father's presence. The redeemed dwelling in the City of God.

And God will be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28). His glory will fill the earth. His purposes will be fully accomplished. His Kingdom will be complete.

And we—ragamuffins and broken people and struggling disciples who learned to take His yoke and live for His glory—we will be part of that glory. Reflecting it. Displaying it. Participating in it. Enjoying it.

Forever.

For His glory. Always for His glory.

Until He comes. And when He comes. And forever after He comes.

To Him be the glory. Forever and ever. Amen.

Come, Lord Jesus

So this is how we live. This is what shapes our days. This is what sustains us through the struggles and disappointments and failures and weariness of the Christian life.

We know He's coming back. We know redemption will be completed. We know evil will be defeated. We know God's glory will be revealed. We know we'll be with Him forever.

LEARN FROM ME

And that certainty changes everything.

It gives us hope when we're discouraged. It provides perspective when we're overwhelmed. It offers motivation when we're tired. It supplies endurance when we want to quit.

We're not just surviving. We're not just enduring. We're not just trying to make it through.

We're living with purpose. With mission. With direction. We're living for God's glory now, knowing that His glory will be fully revealed then. We're taking His yoke, learning from Him, finding rest for our souls—while we wait for Him to return and make all things new.

This is the life of discipleship. This is what it means to learn from Jesus. This is the apprenticeship He calls us to.

Not just for a season. Not just until we get tired. Not just when it's convenient or comfortable or easy.

But until He comes. Until the day of His appearing. Until we see Him face to face and are fully conformed to His image and His glory fills the earth as the waters cover the sea.

Until then, we take His yoke. We learn from Him. We live for His glory. We endure. We persevere. We keep going.

Not alone. But yoked to Him. Not in our strength. But in His. Not for our glory. But for His.

From glory to glory. Until glory.

Come, Lord Jesus. Come quickly. We're waiting. We're longing. We're living in light of Your return.

Until You come, we'll keep going. We'll hold fast. We'll be steadfast and immovable. We'll abound in Your work. We'll live for Your glory.

LEARN FROM ME

And when You do come—when the waiting is over, when the struggle ends, when the transformation is complete, when glory is revealed—we'll be ready.

Not because we're perfect. But because You've been faithful. Not because we've earned it. But because You've accomplished it. Not because we've finished the work. But because You promised to complete what You started.

And You keep Your promises.

So come, Lord Jesus. Come and complete the redemption. Come and defeat the enemies. Come and reveal the glory. Come and take us home.

Until then, we're Yours. Learning from You. Taking Your yoke. Finding rest in You. Living for Your glory.

Come, Lord Jesus. Come.

LEARN FROM ME

EPILOGUE: The Ragamuffin's Journey—Never Finished, Always Beginning

"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, 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. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

— Matthew 11:28-30 (NASB)

I'm sitting in my workshop, hands covered in sawdust and wood stain, working on an old dresser someone left on the curb. It's in bad shape—water damage, broken drawer pulls, finish worn down to bare wood in places. Most people would see trash. I see potential.

This is what I do now. Restore furniture. Take broken, discarded, forgotten pieces and bring them back to life. Sand away the damage. Repair the brokenness. Apply new finish. Make them beautiful again. Make them useful again.

It's honest work. Simple work. Work that doesn't require me to pretend to be more than I am or know more than I know. Work that lets me be just a ragamuffin with some tools and a little bit of skill, trying to make broken things whole.

And as I work, I think about how much I'm like this dresser.

Damaged. Broken in places. Worn down. Scarred by years of use and misuse. Not as impressive as I once thought I was. Not as put-together as I want people to believe. Just an old piece of furniture that someone might mistake for trash.

LEARN FROM ME

But Jesus sees potential. Jesus is in the restoration business. And He's been working on me for years now—sanding away the rough edges, repairing the brokenness, applying new finish, making me into something useful again.

It's slow work. Painstaking work. Sometimes it feels like He's barely made a dent. I look in the mirror and see the same old Jeff—still struggling with the same sins, still falling into the same patterns, still failing in the same ways.

But then there are moments—fleeting but real—when I catch a glimpse of what He's doing. When I respond with patience instead of anger. When I choose humility instead of self-promotion. When I extend grace instead of judgment. When I serve without needing recognition. When I live for His glory instead of my own.

And in those moments, I see it. I'm being transformed. Slowly. Imperceptibly. Often two steps forward and one step back. But it's happening. Jesus is making me new. Just like He promised.

Still Learning, Always Learning

I started this book by confessing that I'm not an expert on discipleship. I'm not a model Christian. I'm not someone who has this all figured out.

And now, having written twenty chapters about learning from Jesus, about taking His yoke, about living for God's glory—I need to confess something else: I'm still learning. All of it. Every day.

I'm still learning what it means to come to Jesus with my weariness and burdens instead of trying to carry them myself.

LEARN FROM ME

I'm still learning what it means to take His yoke instead of creating my own impossible yokes.

I'm still learning what it means to be gentle and humble in heart instead of proud and self-promoting.

I'm still learning what it means to find rest for my soul instead of exhausting myself with striving.

I'm still learning what it means to live for God's glory instead of my own.

Every single day, I'm learning. Or trying to learn. Or failing to learn and then starting over the next day.

Because that's the thing about apprenticeship with Jesus: You never graduate. You never arrive. You never get to the point where you've learned everything and don't need Him anymore.

Dallas Willard wrote: "Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning. Earning is an attitude. Effort is an action."

I'm still making the effort. Still showing up. Still practicing. Still trying to learn. Not to earn Jesus's love—I already have that. Not to prove my worth—that's settled in Christ. But because I'm an apprentice. And apprentices learn by doing. By practicing. By failing and trying again. By messing up and being corrected. By slowly, gradually, over years and decades, becoming more like the Master they're learning from.

So I'm still in the workshop. Still learning. Still being taught. Still being transformed. From glory to glory. Bit by bit. Day by day.

And I suspect I'll be learning until the day I see Him face to face.

LEARN FROM ME

The Invitation Stands

Here's what I want you to know: The invitation Jesus extends in Matthew 11:28-30 isn't just for the beginning of your Christian life. It's not just for when you first come to Him. It's not just for new believers who haven't messed up yet.

The invitation stands. Today. Right now. For you. For me. For everyone who is weary and burdened.

"Come to Me."

Not "You came to Me once, now figure it out on your own." But "Come to Me." Present tense. Continuous action. Keep coming. Come again. Come today. Come tomorrow. Come every day.

Come when you're exhausted from trying to live the Christian life in your own strength. Come when you're burdened by guilt over your failures. Come when you're weary of performing for people's approval. Come when you're crushed under the weight of expectations you can't meet. Come when you're tired of carrying yokes you were never meant to carry.

Come to Jesus. Again. And again. And again.

"Take My yoke upon you."

Not "You took it once, you should be good now." But take it. Daily. Continuously. Choose it afresh each morning. Pick it up when you've dropped it. Return to it when you've wandered off. Let Him fit it to your shoulders again when you've been carrying something else.

Take His yoke. His purposes. His agenda. His mission. His way of living. His priorities. His Kingdom. His glory.

Not your yoke. Not the world's yoke. Not religion's yoke. His yoke. The one that fits. The one that's easy. The one that's light.

LEARN FROM ME

"Learn from Me."

Not "You've learned enough." But learn. Keep learning. Stay a student. Remain an apprentice. Continue to sit at His feet and listen. Keep observing how He lives. Keep studying His character. Keep imitating His example.

Learn from Him. Today. Tomorrow. Every day. For the rest of your life.

The invitation stands. It never expires. It never gets withdrawn. It never becomes irrelevant.

You're never too far along in your Christian walk to need Jesus's invitation. You're never too mature to come to Him. You're never beyond needing to take His yoke and learn from Him.

The ragamuffin needs the invitation as much as the beginner. The broken pastor needs it as much as the new convert. The struggling disciple needs it as much as the earnest seeker.

We all need it. Every day. All of us.

Come to Me. Take My yoke. Learn from Me.

The invitation stands.

Grace for the Journey

I need to say this clearly: If you've read this book and all you feel is guilt—guilt over how far you fall short, guilt over how little you've changed, guilt over how poorly you're living for God's glory—then I've failed. I've communicated something I didn't intend.

Because this is not a book about law. It's a book about grace. It's not about trying harder. It's about trusting more. It's not about performing better. It's about abiding deeper.

LEARN FROM ME

Yes, we're called to live for God's glory. Yes, we're called to be transformed into Christ's image. Yes, we're called to take His yoke and learn from Him. Yes, we're called to holiness and obedience and love and service.

But all of it—all of it—flows from grace. Empowered by grace. Made possible by grace. Sustained by grace.

Brennan Manning wrote: "My deepest awareness of myself is that I am deeply loved by Jesus Christ and I have done nothing to earn it or deserve it."

That's where we start. That's the foundation. That's what makes everything else possible.

You are deeply loved by Jesus Christ. Not because of what you've done. Not because of how well you're living for His glory. Not because of how transformed you've become. Not because of how faithfully you're taking His yoke.

But because He loves you. Period. Unconditionally. Completely. Forever.

And from that love, from that grace, from that secure identity as God's beloved child—that's where the transformation happens. That's where the yoke-taking flows. That's where the glory-living emerges.

Not as the means of earning love. But as the result of being loved.

Not to become acceptable. But because you're already accepted.

Not to prove your worth. But because your worth is already established in Christ.

Grace. It's all grace. From beginning to end. Alpha to Omega. First to last.

LEARN FROM ME

And when you fail—which you will, because you're human and broken and still being transformed—grace covers it. When you fall—which you will, because you're a ragamuffin learning to walk in a new way—grace picks you up. When you forget and slip back into old patterns—which you will, because transformation is slow and you're not there yet—grace reminds you who you are and whose you are.

Grace for the journey. Grace for the failures. Grace for the slowness. Grace for the struggles. Grace for the ragamuffins.

Because that's who Jesus came for. Not the put-together people. Not the ones who have it all figured out. Not the ones who are already living perfectly for God's glory.

But the weary. The burdened. The broken. The struggling. The failing. The ragamuffins.

Us.

Grace for us. Abundant grace. Lavish grace. Sufficient grace.

"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9, NASB).

His grace is enough. For all of it. For the whole journey. For every failure and every success. For the days you soar and the days you barely crawl. For the moments you reflect His glory clearly and the moments you obscure it completely.

His grace is sufficient.

Rest in it. Receive it. Let it be the foundation you build on, the air you breathe, the ground you stand on.

Grace. All grace. Nothing but grace.

LEARN FROM ME

What Now?

So you've read the book. You've thought about taking Jesus's yoke. You've considered what it means to learn from Him. You've contemplated living for God's glory instead of your own.

What now?

Here's what I'd suggest: Start small. Start simple. Start today.

Don't try to revolutionize your entire life tomorrow morning. Don't create a massive plan to completely overhaul how you're living. Don't put yourself under a crushing burden of new commitments and resolutions and determinations to finally get this right.

That's just creating another yoke. Another burden. Another weight to carry.

Instead, just come to Jesus. Today. This morning. Right now.

Bring your weariness. Bring your burdens. Bring your failures and struggles and inadequacies. Bring the weight you've been carrying. Bring the yoke that's crushing you.

And exchange it. Take His yoke instead. His purposes instead of yours. His agenda instead of your own. His glory instead of your glory.

And then learn. Just learn. Watch Jesus. Study His life. Meditate on His character. Observe how He lived. Contemplate how He loved.

And practice. Just practice. Try loving like He loves. Attempt serving like He serves. Make one choice today to live for God's glory instead of your own. Take one step in the direction of humility instead of self-promotion. Make one decision to seek God's approval instead of people's.

Just one. Today.

LEARN FROM ME

And then tomorrow, do it again. Bring your weariness again. Take His yoke again. Learn from Him again. Practice again.

One day at a time. One choice at a time. One step at a time.

From glory to glory. Slowly. Gradually. Over years and decades. A lifetime of apprenticeship. A lifetime of learning. A lifetime of being transformed.

This is the journey. And you're invited. Not to be perfect. Not to have it all figured out. Not to get it right every time.

But to come. To take. To learn. To grow. To be transformed.

As a ragamuffin. As a broken, struggling, imperfect apprentice who desperately needs a Master who is gentle and humble in heart.

As someone who needs grace every single day. Who needs rest for your soul. Who needs an easy yoke and a light burden.

As you.

You're invited. The invitation stands. Come to Him.

The Ongoing Story

My story isn't finished. I'm still being restored, like that dresser in my workshop. Still being sanded and repaired and refinished. Still in process. Still being transformed from glory to glory.

And your story isn't finished either. You're still being written. Still being shaped. Still being transformed. Still learning from Jesus.

LEARN FROM ME

This is the ongoing story of every disciple. Every apprentice. Every ragamuffin who has taken Jesus's yoke and is learning from Him.

We're all in process. All being transformed. All moving from glory to glory, however slowly, however imperfectly.

And one day—one glorious day—the transformation will be complete. The learning will be finished. We'll see Him face to face and be fully conformed to His image. We'll finally be what we were always meant to be.

But until then, we're in the middle. In the mess. In the struggle. In the slow, gradual, often frustrating process of transformation.

And that's okay. That's normal. That's the Christian life.

Not arrival. But journey. Not destination. But process. Not perfection. But progress.

From glory to glory. Until glory.

And Jesus—gentle and humble in heart—walks with us every step of the way. Bearing the weight with us. Teaching us. Transforming us. Making us new.

This is the ragamuffin's journey. Never finished. Always beginning. Always learning. Always being transformed.

And it's beautiful. Not because we're beautiful. But because He is. Not because our transformation is impressive. But because His faithfulness is. Not because we're doing it right. But because He's doing it in us.

For His glory. Always for His glory.

LEARN FROM ME

Come

So here's my final word to you, fellow ragamuffin:

Come.

Come to Jesus with your weariness. Come to Jesus with your burdens. Come to Jesus with your failures and struggles and inadequacies. Come to Jesus with your broken attempts to live for His glory. Come to Jesus with your desperate need for grace.

Come as you are. Not as you should be. Not as you wish you were. Not as you think you need to be before He'll accept you.

But as you are. Right now. Today. Weary. Burdened. Broken. Struggling. Failing.

Come.

Take His yoke. His purposes. His mission. His way. His Kingdom. His glory.

Not your yoke. Not your self-made burdens. Not your impossible expectations. Not your crushing performance standards.

His yoke. The one that fits. The one that's easy. The one that's light.

Learn from Him. Watch Him. Study Him. Observe Him. Imitate Him. Follow Him.

Not perfectly. Not flawlessly. Not without stumbling and failing and starting over.

But honestly. Genuinely. Persistently. As an apprentice learning from the Master. As a student sitting at the feet of the Teacher. As a ragamuffin being transformed by grace.

LEARN FROM ME

And find rest. Rest for your soul. Rest from striving. Rest from performing. Rest from trying to earn what you've already been given. Rest from carrying burdens you were never meant to carry.

Rest in Him. Rest in His love. Rest in His grace. Rest in His finished work.

And live. Live for His glory. Not perfectly. Not impressively. But faithfully. Genuinely. As one who has been loved and is learning to love in return. As one who has received grace and is learning to extend grace. As one who has been transformed and is being transformed and will one day be fully transformed.

Live for an audience of One. Live as part of the community of glory. Live in light of His return. Live the yoked life. Live from rest. Live by grace.

Live for His glory.

Not because you have to. But because you get to. Not as a burden. But as a gift. Not as slavery. But as freedom.

For His glory. Always for His glory.

From now until you see Him face to face. From this day until He returns. From this moment until glory is fully revealed.

For His glory.

Come to Me, Jesus says. Take My yoke. Learn from Me.

The invitation stands. For you. For me. For all of us ragamuffins.

Come.

LEARN FROM ME

To God be the glory—great things He has done, great things He is doing, and great things He will do. To Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.

The End

And the Beginning

LEARN FROM ME

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This book exists because of grace. God's grace to a ragamuffin pastor who needed to learn (and is still learning) what it means to take Jesus's yoke.

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To the churches and individuals who have hurt me and been hurt by me—thank you for teaching me that the body of Christ is messy, imperfect, and desperately in need of grace. We're all ragamuffins together.

To my daughters, Amy and Beth—I'm sorry for the years I chose ministry over family, performance over presence. I'm learning. I'm growing. I love you.

To the first responders, municipal employees, and marginalized souls I serve through Metro Community Chaplaincy and my various ministries—thank you for letting me walk with you through darkness and light. You've taught me more about grace than I've taught you.

LEARN FROM ME

To anyone who reads this book and finds in it permission to come to Jesus as a ragamuffin, to take His easy yoke, to learn from Him without pretending to be more than you are—this was written for you. May you find rest for your soul.

And to Jesus—gentle and humble in heart, patient with slow learners, faithful to complete what You've started—thank You. For the yoke that fits. For the burden that's light. For the rest that's real. For the glory that's Yours alone.

All glory to You. Forever and ever. Amen.

bro. jeff

THE END