

WEEK 4



DAY 1 – COMMUNITY

Part of actualizing change in our lives is to place ourselves in a position where change can occur. It's impossible to grow anything in poor quality soil. No matter how attentive you are, plants placed in poor quality soil will fail for lack of nutrition and ability to root. Similarly, Jesus is calling us into the community of people he is building. He is calling us away from loneliness toward a life of mutual edification, accountability, and fellowship; a rich soil where we can grow, change and flourish.

In stark contrast to the community Jesus is calling us to build is one of the most common pathologies in the 21st century, loneliness. We are a lonely society, plagued by extreme individualism and increasingly transient relationships. Particularly in dense metropolitan areas, community has become nearly non-existent. Across the board, we lack long term, meaningful community. Since the 1950s, church attendance has dramatically declined, but it's not the only form of community that has diminished. From bowling leagues to bingo, people are not committing to forms of community like they used to.

We must firmly acknowledge following Jesus means living in community. In fact, we cannot follow Jesus without joining his community. This is not to say salvation is corporate. It's not. Knowing Jesus is an individual decision, but community is a vital aspect of spiritual formation. Jesus regularly invited people to join his community. Not all accepted his invitation, but many did. He extends that same invitation to us.

"As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, **Follow me.**" And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. (Matthew 9:10 NRSV)

When Jesus invited people to follow him, to adopt his way of life, he was by default inviting them into community. Jesus also didn't shy away from spending time with people who were far from God, always extending grace, acceptance, and love while simultaneously moving toward growth and change.



DAY 1 – COMMUNITY

Jesus was all about connecting with people. We can imagine Jesus was a master of conversation and interpersonal relationships. There is something humanizing about having face-to-face conversations. It's a lost art we need to reclaim. During conversation, we develop the capacity for empathy, experience the joy of being heard, understood and valued.

The early church was a picture of community. Christ-followers in partnership and mutual submission with one another. We should unquestionably long for and emulate the type of community envisioned in the book of Acts. Consider the following passages, contrasting them with life in the 21st century.

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and **fellowship**, to the breaking of bread and the prayers...And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." (Acts 2:42; 2:46 - 47 ESV).

"Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need." (Acts 4:32 - 35).

A community is a group of people coming together around a common interest. Not surprisingly, the community Jesus built and is building is centered around him. In all of its human imperfection and messiness, Jesus is building a community of people with glad and generous hearts, who praise, look out for each other and grow together.

BE with Jesus by spending time in a community of believers (daily and weekly).

BECOME what Jesus did by committing to an imperfect church community, faults included; long term.

DO like Jesus by inviting those who are far from God into his community, the church.



DAY 2 – SIX ASPECTS OF HUMAN LIFE

In Dallas Willard's *Renovation of the Heart*, he outlines six aspects of human life important to us as individual human beings. The idea behind real, effective, lasting change is that when all six aspects are oriented toward God, who restores and sustains them, we can experience renovation and renewal. The six aspects of human life are as follows (taken from *Renovation of the Heart*, by Dallas Willard):

- (1) Thought (images, concepts, judgments, references)
- (2) Feelings (sensation, emotion)
- (3) Choice (will, decision, character)
- (4) Body (action, interaction with the physical world)
- (5) Social context (personal and structural relation to others)
- (6) Soul (the factor that integrates all of the above to form one life)

Every human being thinks, feels sensation and emotion, makes concrete choices with real implications, has a body that interacts with the physical world and finds themselves in a particular social context. Do a quick tally. How many of the 6 aspects of human life in your own context are effectively organized around apprenticeship to Jesus? It's okay if you didn't "pass." Spiritual formation in Jesus is a process with the eventuality of the "easy yoke" as an end goal, orienting the various dimensions of human life completely toward God.

It's true that certain aspects of human life will be easier to master than others. It may be the case your social context is really healthy with solid friendships, a great community of faith and a healthy nuclear family. However, you may know you struggle with where your thoughts lead you and what they become. Assess where you are in these six dimensions; where you excel and where you struggle. Be mindful of the areas where you struggle and begin to focus on incremental, concrete steps that will help you navigate toward God in that particular area of your life.

WEEK 4
DAY 2



DAY 2 – A THEOLOGY OF THE ORDINARY

“The spiritual life does not consist of any special thoughts, ideas, or feelings but is contained in the most simple ordinary experiences of everyday living.”

- Henri J.M. Nouwen

It seems some of the disconnect concerning spiritual formation is linked to unrealistic expectations of what it means to live a spiritual life. We all have images of hyper-spiritual people like Mother Theresa, Martin Luther, Billy Graham or any number of truly pious figures. It's as if we silently acquiesce to a dim spirituality, capitulating to the untruth that we are not, in fact, spiritual people. On the contrary, we are all spiritual people, but we may be looking for spirituality in the wrong places.

It's easy to place “spirituality” in some far off place, out of reach, so we don't have to look it in the face. In reality, our ordinary lives should be eclipsed by the spiritual things that are rightfully ours in Jesus through the Holy Spirit. What's particularly poignant is this happens in the context of ordinary life. If we reserve the spiritual for certain pious people or for certain times or places, we will never experience a renewal of our whole person and we will never be able to influence our culture.

It's imperative we integrate Jesus into the very fabric of our every day lives, pursuing a life of spiritual depth. Our faith isn't something “far off” or distant, it's something that occurs in the context of every day, ordinary life. Consider your daily routine. Morning coffee, breakfast, daily commute, work, hobbies, time with your family, kids, peers, and friends. Are these dimensions of your life completely disconnected from your spirituality? It's our task to find that quiet stream underneath the noise and hurry of the 21st century to access the depths of what Jesus truly has for us during this life. He desires to shape and form us into a different people – a kind of people who abide in his presence during ordinary life.

BE with Jesus today by speaking less and listening more.

BECOME like Jesus by picking which of the six dimensions of human life is least oriented toward Jesus. Triage and form a plan for correction. Write it down.

DO what Jesus did by practicing everyday spirituality, in the midst of life.



DAY 3 – PASSIVE AND ACTIVE FAITH

So often in life, we passively wait for something to happen. The definition of passive is to accept or allow what happens or what others do without active response or resistance. Sure, you might get lucky, but odds are, if you live a passive lifestyle, not much of anything will happen. This same type of thinking also pervades our spirituality. Many seem to think there is nothing we can do after salvation to progress in our spiritual formation, so they simply wait for heaven.

While it's true we are saved by faith, this truth isn't an invitation to a passive life, especially concerning our spiritual formation and our relationship with Jesus. Interestingly, our spirituality, the area of our life where we should be most active, is often the place where we are most passive. Consider other relationships in your life. Are they "passive?" Consider other pursuits. Whether it's skiing, investing, literature or real estate, they aren't passive. James related the following concerning our faith:

"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily need, what is the good of that? **So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.**" – James 2:14 -17

In the same way, if we are caught in addiction, depression, anxiety, wrong thinking and sin, our *active* participation in the healing process is needed. This may mean simply submitting to Jesus, committing to your church community, seeking help, committing to the daily study of the scriptures or something else entirely. Perhaps active faith in your context is involvement in the church as a high-capacity volunteer or pursuing a specialized ministry you are passionate about. Regardless of the specifics, we are each called to actively participate in our faith. If we passively wait, it's unlikely real, authentic change will take place in our lives.

WEEK 4
DAY 3



DAY 3 – PASSIVE AND ACTIVE FAITH

A great question to ask is when you last actively pursued spiritual formation of any sort. Now, exclude Sunday morning. When was the last time you sought to grow as a disciple? Do a quick self-assessment. Write down areas of strength and areas needing improvement and active participation.

If our faith is truly active, it will pervade our lives. We need to rid ourselves of the secular/sacred dichotomy. There isn't a place for religion and another for everything else. Our religion defines us. Our Christianity should distinguish who we are as unique image-bearers with the distinct goal of bringing the world into relationship with Jesus.

It is through active participation in our faith that we will begin to experience growth. Remember the concept of apprenticeship? We learn via immersion. An apprentice could never "passively" progress to become a master craftsman. Participation was a necessary prerequisite to learning, growing and mastering a trade.

It is through the process of being with Jesus (abiding in his presence continually) that we become like Jesus, so that we can do the things he did. We are to immerse ourselves in the lifestyle of Jesus, emulating his rhythms, practices, and disciplines. We are called to be salt and light, which is next to impossible if we perceive our faith as something that occurs just between us and God with no external outworking. Yes, there is an intimacy that occurs between us and God, but this too is a result of actively pursuing God.

Our faith is often the only area of our life where we are okay with passivity. When it comes to politics, careers, money or hobbies we push, fight, labor and strain with everything we have to be successful. Our faith should be our priority and the area of our lives where we give the most effort.

BE with Jesus by actively pursuing him today by spending 15 minutes in prayer.
BECOME like Jesus by examining priorities, and, if necessary, start making adjustments.

DO what Jesus did by reaching out to one person today in order to encourage or help them in a tangible way.



DAY 4 – SALVATION AS A LIFESTYLE

In legal terms, an irrevocable trust is a tax-shelter set up by someone for the benefit of someone else. The “grantor,” after setting up the trust, cannot access, change or otherwise modify the trust. However, the beneficiary also may not access the trust until certain terms are met (e.g. the death of the grantor or a certain age). Often, for extended periods, a trust remains in a state of “limbo” where neither party can access the benefits. Sometimes, we treat our salvation like an irrevocable trust. God, the “grantor,” has set up a trust (our salvation), but we really cannot access its benefits until after death (the terms of the trust). We wait patiently to receive the promised benefits at a later date.

While it is true we will not *fully* receive the benefits of promise until we die, or until Christ returns, we have to ask the question, are we looking at our salvation as an irrevocable trust, of which we will only later receive the benefits? In contrast is the view our salvation is something to be experienced right now. Our faith isn't something to be reserved only for special times, places or occasions. We are to take the “yoke” of Jesus now, experiencing the peace, life and rest he offers.

There are entire sermons built around “taking Christ into the workplace” or “bringing Jesus into our homes.” With good intentions this type of thinking perhaps points to the deadly assumption that we normally leave our faith at the door of the church. This tendency possibly originates from the assumption our body, daily life and overall lifestyle contribute very little to our spirituality. Nothing could be further from the truth.

In looking at the life of Jesus, as well as his followers, we can't help but notice a life deeply characterized by certain repetitious practices such as prayer, fasting, solitude and service. By extension we can assume Jesus intended his followers to live similarly, emulating his lifestyle and practices. Without demanding anything formulaic, we should resoundingly confirm *the lifestyle we live after conversion matters*. We need to begin thinking of salvation as a lifestyle, not an irrevocable trust.

WEEK 4
DAY 4



DAY 4 – SALVATION AS A LIFESTYLE

“The vitality and power of Christianity is lost when we fail to integrate our bodies into its practice by intelligent, conscious choice and steadfast intent.”

- Dallas Willard

As previously mentioned, removing our faith from the realm of real life is problematic. Our faith is not an irrevocable trust only to be accessed at a later date. Some of this thinking is derived from the idea the body is inherently bad or unspiritual. This couldn't be further from the truth. Jesus shared a human frame, and, as is the case for all human beings, his body was the focal point of his life. We have to ask the question, do we see the body only as a hinderance to spirituality? If this is the case, apprenticeship to Jesus will remain only a mild diversion in our lives awaiting a later fulfillment.

Our body is our life, and to withhold our bodies from our faith is to exclude many dimensions of that faith. In 1 Corinthians, Paul rhetorically asks, "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?" (1 Cor. 6:15). We are to use the entirety of our being (bodies and daily living included) to serve Jesus as a lifestyle. To dissociate the human body would have been incomprehensible to the Hebrew people. Furthermore, the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection were all bodily events. We need to dispel the notion true spirituality somehow takes place outside of the context of our body (when we die).

Salvation is not only forgiveness but a new way of life. The problem with most theories of atonement is they don't link salvation to an abundant life. They simply account for "how" the transaction of forgiveness occurred. While theories of atonement are unquestionably important, it's only one aspect of conversion and belief in Jesus. In Romans, Paul relates how we were not only reconciled to God by the death of his Son but would also be saved by his life (Romans 5:10). When we focus exclusively on the "how," we lose the important aspect of being saved by his life and practice through daily living.

BE with Jesus by spending 10 minutes in prayer, asking for the humility to implement change and recognize wrong thinking.

BECOME like Jesus by walking through your neighborhood and praying about how you reach those who are far from God.

DO Jesus did by having a conversation with someone who is far from God (doesn't have to be oriented around faith or religion).



DAY 5 – EFFECTING REAL CHANGE

“All men of the modern world exist in a continual and flagrant antagonism between their consciences and their way of life.”

– **Leo Tolstoy**

Unquestionably, we believe in our hearts we should be like Jesus. Yet, there seems to be a disconnect between actualizing this goal in ourselves and others. It just seems like something that is far from reach. To clarify, we are not talking about sinlessness or perfectionism, but Christlikeness. Picture the following scenario: You suddenly tell your Christian friends you have decided to “follow Jesus and quit sinning.” How would they respond? Probably with incredulous bewilderment and perhaps, correctly, a bit of skepticism. Some may pushback, saying, “only Jesus was sinless.” Alternately, if you told your friends you did not intend to actually follow Jesus or to stop sinning, they would respond with concern. The reality of the matter is we must choose a trajectory for our life: the spirit or the flesh.

This is where a practical theology comes into play. Given, theology is a bit of a stuffy term with connotations of egregiously long books, but it simply refers to a way of thinking about and understanding, or misunderstanding, God. The thing about practical theology is everyone has one, and they significantly influence our decisions and the manner with which we live. Furthermore, a poorly developed or uninformed theology influences our life just as significantly as a thoughtful or informed one.

The spiritual disciplines, which is just a fancy way of saying “the things that Jesus did regularly,” guide us toward spiritual formation and a good practical theology. To clarify, this is not salvation by works, but Christian living. The moment we feel we can attain victory over sin by the power of the will alone we have failed. Remember, the fruit of the spirit is not a by-product of the will alone. The disciplines aid in spiritual growth *after* conversion. It may be that in the West, we have overemphasized doctrine and underemphasized practice. Understanding correct doctrine, while good and necessary, is only one aspect of living a plenary Christian life.

WEEK 4
DAY 5



DAY 5 – EFFECTING REAL CHANGE

The question then remains, are we becoming the kind of people we know in our hearts we should become? Are we, in the process of redemption, taking seriously the hours and minutes in our day? The spiritual disciplines, which we will spend the next section learning about, are a “guide,” in conjunction with the Holy Spirit so that we are better able to redeem the time we have been given. To undertake the disciplines is to take our faith as seriously as we would any other pursuit in life. If we want to become a runner, we practice running, and so on. So too with our faith, we need a theology of “practice” in order to grow spiritually. Paul puts it like this:

“Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one.” (1 Corinthians 9:24 - 25 NRSV)

As previously noted, a thoughtless or careless theology guides us just as significantly as an informed theology. The disciplines assist us in knowing how to live effectively, being salt and light, in the midst of a sick world desperately in need.

Please don’t think of the disciplines as some stifling chore intended to eradicate all fun from our lives. On the contrary, Richard Foster says, “Joy is the keynote of all the disciplines. The purpose of the disciplines is liberation from the stifling slavery to self-interest and fear.” Furthermore, the disciplines are not difficult, and are advantageous to the new and experienced Christian alike. Really, the only requirement is a longing after God. As the psalmist longed, so too should we turn our faces toward God.

“As a deer longs for flowing streams,
So my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
For the living God.”

– Psalm 42:1 -2

Remember too the disciplines are not a series of religious obligations, but a well from which to drink and grow spiritually, drawing us closer to Jesus through the Holy Spirit. The purpose of the disciplines is to assist us in experiencing a life of intimacy with God.

BE with Jesus by spending 10 minutes in silent reflection.

BECOME like Jesus by reading through one of the Gospels, taking notes on Jesus’ habits.

DO what Jesus did by encouraging or practically helping someone today.



