

LIFESTYLE

Week 4

Curious?

Committed?

Faith is more than believing...

Pastor Andy Hagen

Twenty-three: Let Go

"If God gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers—most of which are never even seen—don't you think He'll attend to you, take pride in you, do His best for you? What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with getting, so you can respond to God's giving. People who don't know God and the way He works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how He works. Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes." (Matthew 6:30-34 *The Message*)

COMMITTED!

"Pastor," the middle-aged man across the table from me softly spoke, "I've been through a lot of things lately. But I've noticed other people who have gone through even more difficult times than me seem to get through because their faith is so strong. I want to get a stronger faith." Naturally, this was the kind of conversation every pastor enjoys. He continued, "The thing that is holding me up is that some of these people have told me the way to get a stronger faith is to 'turn my life over to God.' I don't really understand what that means. But I hope it doesn't mean just sitting around waiting for God to do things because that doesn't seem right to me either."

I couldn't have put the situation better myself. There is indeed some confusion about "letting go and letting God." What do we let go of and what is still our job as a Christian? What can we expect God to do and what does He want us to take care of? The "Serenity Prayer" written by Reinhold Niebuhr and used internationally by the Alcoholics Anonymous movement puts it this way:

*God grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change;
Courage to change the things I can;
And wisdom to know the difference.*

It can take a lifetime in the Kingdom to sort these things out and only in eternity will we know how well we did. But Jesus' teaching can give us some guidance.

First, Jesus says that God is already a lot more in charge of things, even your life, than you may even know right now. We can't always put our finger on it, and it can be a little presumptuous to try to do so. I am always nervous when people launch into a story about how God intervened in all sorts of circuitous ways to bring about a positive outcome. When they start with, "I thought I was going to be late for my appointment but God opened up a parking space right in front of the building," I get glass eyed. Yet, I can't deny that God could have and God may have done just that. What I am sure of is that:

CURIOUS?

I thought Christianity was all about taking responsibility for our own actions. It sounds like we aren't supposed to worry about what we do or what happens. I spend a lot of time on Saturday mornings worried about my lawn. I mow, trim, edge and weed for several hours. For this I am rewarded with a lawn that looks pretty good for about a week until I need to do it all again. I worry about the work on my desk or the emails I have to return but as soon as I catch up, more comes my way. I worry about problems that come only to find more behind them when they are solved. At what point do I come to the conclusion that what I worry about is not as important as what God wants me to do? Chances are good that if I ask God each day what He wants done I will have a lot of work and responsibility on my hand. But if I let Him lead me, I will focus on the right problems and issues instead of the wrong ones. And since I am working for Him, I know that He knows when I'm doing my best and when I can't do any more. And when I finish His work I know I've been faithful no matter what others may say.

I'm not so sure why I will get more from God by relaxing than by working. Doesn't the Bible say, "God helps those who help themselves?" This quote is from Benjamin Franklin, not the Bible, but it isn't totally wrong. It is true that God uses our hands to get an awful lot of His work done. Since doing God's work is incredibly rewarding, the more we let Him use our hands the more blessed we are likely to feel. And certainly those who sit on their hands and leave everything up to God are missing the opportunity entirely. But all too often, we

This is how much God loved the world: He gave His Son, His one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in Him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. (John 3:16 The Message)

Since I am sure of this ultimate example of how God loves the world I find that I am more confident that He loves me and will give me eternal life. If I don't get the parking spot, I'm okay with that. One way to turn your life over to God is to accept that He has already taken care of the most important thing of all: your eternal life.

Second, Jesus says that when we are living in the Kingdom we surrender all sorts of control over and expectation of life. This is not easy for women but it is especially not easy for men. We are trained to take charge and set goals. We are evaluated and rewarded by how well we shape the world around us to get things done. Letting go does not mean we drop our tools and go home. It doesn't mean we sit down cross legged, chant "ommmm" and wait for a sign for what to do next. What it means is that we start each day asking God to use our hands and our plans for His will and not our own. For most of us, it means going back to work tomorrow but seeing work not just as a way to make money but as a way to serve God. For all of us it means holding our plans loosely in our hands as an offering to God. If He takes them and blesses them, fine. If He takes them and hands us a new set, that's fine too.

Finally, turning our lives over to God means turning our lives over to His people, too. God often accomplishes His will in our lives through the people in our lives. He will send His word for us through a sermon by the pastor. He will point out a new way through a word of scripture studied in a small group. He affirms our efforts through the encouragement of brothers and sisters in Christ. God will pick us up using the hands of others and turn us around through their examples. Letting go may mean letting others guide and shape you. And it always means letting God be the final one to answer the question, "What can I do for you today?"

jump in to "help ourselves" before asking God what He wants us to do for Him. It may be hard to understand that sometimes improving our lives or making us happier is not God's job at the moment. A mother may need to forgo an evening with her children to help an elderly neighbor. A teenage boy may give up his popularity to befriend a new student who is considered a loser. First, we must relax all of our plans and expectations. No easy task! Then we need to say, "Here I am Lord, send me."

We know that people are starving, sick, and dying all over the world. How am I supposed to believe that He will take care of me? You are asking an excellent question that once again holds so many intelligent, compassionate people back from accepting the Kingdom. There are several answers to your question but I believe those who trust God come to believe He does provide. One answer is that God has provided plenty for everyone to be cared for, it is just that we have disrupted His distribution system through our selfishness and greed. How can we blame Him for things that we could easily solve if we tried? Another answer is that we all must take personal responsibility for the trouble we cause and the trouble we get into. It is not fair to blame God for an accident caused by our negligence. Yet another answer is that we may not be able to see how God is taking care of everything and everyone but by faith we are given glimpses to reassure us that it is true. The final answer is that He has taken care of the one big thing: our eternity. We may not experience His care at every moment. On the cross, even Jesus felt abandoned for a moment.

Question for Reflection: How can I learn to do a little less planning for the future and a lot more praying to the God who holds it in His hands?

Twenty-four: Encourage Others

"Don't pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults— unless, of course, you want the same treatment. That critical spirit has a way of boomeranging. It's easy to see a smudge on your neighbor's face and be oblivious to the ugly sneer on your own. Do you have the nerve to say, 'Let me wash your face for you,' when your own face is distorted by contempt? It's this whole traveling road-show mentality all over again, playing a holier-than-thou part instead of just living your part. Wipe that ugly sneer off your own face, and you might be fit to offer a washcloth to your neighbor." (Matthew 7:1-5 The Message)

COMMITTED!

The cultural stereotype of the judgmental Christian can only be blamed on Christians themselves, not the Christ they follow. It is sad to think that the perception of Christians as intolerant and arrogant keep people from discovering our loving and humble Lord. How can we replace the image of the "holier-than-thou" Christian with the kneeling servant washing the feet of his friends? We can reverse the stereotype, change the perception and change the image if we seek first God's righteousness instead of our own.

Most of the public relations problems we face in the Christian community come from a misguided pursuit of holiness by Christians. For ages, people have associated their Christian affiliation with a certain amount of social standing. Being a good Christian was considered a good thing in western cultures. The way to measure the relative goodness of a Christian was generally by their outward expressions of piety and morality. Good Christians went to church a lot, gave donations, abstained from meat on Friday, and so on. Naturally, those who wanted to be seen as good Christians pursued these outward signs whether their inward faith was strong or non-existent. Some who carried on the outward show very may have been down-right evil in their hearts.

What's new? Jesus railed against the religious leaders for being "whitewashed tombs," that is, clean on the outside but dead inside. Plenty of Christians today mask their inner death with outward life. One thing for non-Christians is that they have always been able to see right through us! No more irritating to them is when a phony Christian judges someone else. Jesus joins them in that reaction. He urges us to drop the pretense. No external signs of faith can cover up the fact that we are all still sinners. Stop being the judge and join the other criminals in the docket. The good news is that when you stop judging you will get a loving and merciful judge, his heavenly Father.

CURIOUS?

Judgmental Christians really make me angry. They need to point their finger at themselves more often. Amen. There can be no clearer sign that someone is drifting in and out of Kingdom life than their mean spirit toward others. But remember that they are sinners too, even if they've forgotten that. It is natural that when you are trying to do better you want to compare yourself to others. It is sinful when that becomes the reason for your criticism and the source of your joy! But you should also know that Christians in the Kingdom tend to be the most accepting and caring people in the world. They have learned about how Jesus ate with tax collectors, talked with prostitutes, touched lepers, taught women and welcomed children. They are content to let God touch people's hearts so that they seek His will. They just want to reach out and share their joy and lend a hand. If you don't think this is true, stop by church sometime and the pastor can introduce you to a few humble lovers.

On the other hand, is Jesus saying that no one should be judged at all? That sounds like "anything goes" to me. Everyone has been judged already. We are all guilty of being sinners and our punishment should be death. But at the last minute, the judge received an offer. An innocent man offered to take the punishment for us all. The judge accepts the offer and issues us a full pardon. When we accept the initial judgment, when we realize the pardon we have received, we understand what Paul means when He writes: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus..."

Does this mean that there is no rule of piety or moral code in the Kingdom? Does this mean we all can pretty much do whatever we want as long as we don't judge others? Is this every man and woman for himself or herself? In this teaching Jesus makes it clear that the first thing we must do is judge ourselves.. We who have chosen life in the Kingdom by the Lord who has chosen us for salvation must look in the mirror everyday. Since the job of reforming ourselves is never over it doesn't leave much time to correct others. But we may be called to that task, sometimes they will even ask us for guidance. Then we must offer it humbly and gently. Those outside of the Kingdom don't need our judgment. God will be their judge. But we can imitate Him by being clear AND compassionate. In the end, life in the Kingdom is so filled with serving God and loving our neighbor. Who has time for negativity and criticism?

(Romans 8:1 TNIV). But what is interesting is that this whole trial has an effect on us. We come to the conclusion that we want to live in a new way, not because we must, but because we want to. In fact, we want to live in this attitude of gratitude so deeply that there really is no need to lay down all the laws for us anymore. We live them out in the joy of the Spirit!

What if someone really is messing up and needs to be straightened out? Our nation's laws are clearly written down and available to every citizen. That doesn't mean that we obey them. The same is true for God's laws. The problem usually isn't pointing out to people that they are wrong. In most cases they either know already or can figure it out by the trouble they have gotten into. The real issue is whether they believe that God's way is the only way. Most of us fudge on this one. We think God's way is a good way but we kind of like how our way weaves around. When we accept God's way as the only way we then stop questioning the directions and instead ask, "Where do I go next?" To understand that God's way is the only way people need to see us walking God's way as best as we can and they may need our help to get on or back on track.

Question for Reflection: Have I been guilty of judging someone lately and not paying enough attention to my own shortcomings?

Twenty-five: Honor God

"Don't be flip with the sacred. Banter and silliness give no honor to God. Don't reduce holy mysteries to slogans. In trying to be relevant, you're only being cute and inviting sacrilege." (Matthew 7:6 The Message)

COMMITTED!

The more traditional rendering of this text is "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces" (Matthew 7:7 *NIV*). The general sense is that this provides a condition for the teaching on not judging that Jesus just shared. In the Kingdom we focus on judging ourselves so that we may more closely follow Jesus and we turn over the ultimate judgment to God. In great humility and with great sensitivity we may turn to our neighbor with support, encouragement and guidance. But that doesn't mean we don't have to exercise good judgment about our stewardship of the "mysteries of God." There are times when we need to do our best to ensure that God's sacred things are respected and the pearls of wisdom Jesus shares are not abused.

Perhaps the most common example of this is when you or those around you use the Lord's name to curse. In our culture this is no big deal and even faithful Christians may find themselves slipping from time to time. When we hear it we could just let it go - "judge not!" But for those of us who see God's name as holy, this is not just rude speech; it brings us pain to hear it. And when God's name is misused it is disrespectful to Him. The holiest thing on earth is being dropped in the mud! We must guard our language carefully and encourage others to do the same.

This teaching also reminds us that the gift of faith is priceless. There are little and big ways we can devalue that gift. Attending worship only when it is convenient or praying only when we really have a problem puts faith behind the glass that says, "In Case of Emergency Strike Here." While no one should be judged for how much they know about the Bible, what is the excuse for a committed Christian to be still relatively unfamiliar with it? Gossiping about church members or complaining about the church ministry to others is not only harmful; it is not what life looks like in the Kingdom. In the "Parable of the Pearl of Great Price" Jesus tells us to sell everything we have to buy it. Why then would it sit on a closet shelf getting dusty? We may not wish to cast sacred things to the dogs but when we neglect them isn't that where our faith is going?

The translation of the Bible provided by *The Message* gives us another angle to pursue: do we trivialize our faith too much when we try to make it easier or more attractive for others to notice and accept? This criticism should not be leveled too quickly by those who think that the only way to

CURIOUS?

It's no big deal when I use the names of God or Jesus when I'm upset; those are just words. A new believer at a church I served was particularly bad about using this kind of language and didn't seem to care even when he used it in church settings. For him, it was just a bunch of words he had grown up hearing all the time. I knew that if I approached him with a judgmental attitude he would just turn away. In fact, that might have been just what he was looking for! Instead I took him aside one time and explained that these words meant a lot to us and that his use of these words was hurting people around him. He had never thought of it that way. And because he really cared about the people around him, he was much more careful. As we get closer to God and Jesus we will find we don't feel good about using their names in any other way than in prayer and praise.

What's the real danger of just tossing the spaghetti to see what sticks? I probably wouldn't be interested in a church that doesn't take chances. I doubt that many churches are guilty of too much innovation. Churches need to be constantly looking for ways to reach out to new people if the old ways are not connecting anymore. But we need to exercise some wisdom, too. In the Kevin Smith movie, "Dogma," the Roman Catholic Church, with George Carlin as its local bishop, has created a new public relations campaign to help people reconnect with Jesus. At a press conference, the bishop unveils the new look of Jesus they will be promoting, Buddy Christ, a smiling, cool-looking guy with a wink in his eye who is making a thumbs up

show God respect is to keep everything in the church the same as it has always been. Beloved hymns may not be the best way to pass the good news on to a new generation. Nor is the building of a church facility without a cross because it might turn people off. The tension of how to share the good news is a constant one and must involve a dialogue between past heritage, present needs, and future opportunities.

Paul was very clear about the danger of just this approach to preaching: *For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power* (1 Corinthians 1:17 *TNI*). For Paul, no amount of fancy preaching should upstage the life-giving message of the Gospel. Yet there is no question that Jesus used entertaining stories that his audience loved and irritated the holy people around him who thought they were inappropriate. In fact, much of Jesus' ministry is about reaching those around him by whatever means possible. He was criticized for "throwing pearls to swine" when he met with the adulterous Samaritan woman at the well in the fourth chapter of John. In the "Parable of the Sower," Jesus almost shows a wonton disregard for where the words of God are scattered. The farmer tosses the seeds everywhere, even on places where it couldn't possibly grow! But then God makes up for the loss as the seeds on good ground create a bumper crop. (Matthew 13:1-9)

The key is to love God and revere Jesus' teachings so much that you will know when you have gone too far. Smoke pots and light shows may be great for rock concerts but they may be a total distraction at a worship service. We may want to trust more in the heritage of our faith. People returning to faith often feel more comfortable with the traditions they grew up with. They may not have come back to be entertained as much as to be fed. And non-believers are often intrigued by faith concepts that are not immediately reduced to three points in a sermon. None of these considerations should cause us to hesitate from sharing the gospel. It can survive however it is shared! In the Kingdom we want the message to get out and we want the message to be heard. In the end, it is the gospel that saves, not the package we send it in.

sign. Since this whole comedy alternates between sacrilege and a search for meaning I wondered what the director had in mind. Put simply, "We know you religious guys want to make faith more relevant to the rest of us, but don't make it silly or water it down so much that it is not worth looking into." So the danger is that if anything we do with the message makes it look like we don't take it seriously, then no one else will.

What should I do if I am hanging out with people who are ripping into the Christian faith? People in sin and pain or people who are just plain ignorant may attack or ridicule the Bible or Jesus himself. They may say: "I don't believe a word of the Bible, it is just something made up by people who want to control other peoples' lives." Some say that to prevent them from getting any more ammunition we should just give up on them. I find that hard to imagine as I see how Jesus never gave up on people. Perhaps in the Kingdom, we should prayerfully engage in a conversation with them, not to approve of their words, but to provide instruction. What if we say, "You probably have heard a lot of things about the Bible. I'm not an expert but I would be willing to explore this with you if you are interested." If they are not in a place to open the dialogue then put them in you prayers. God has turned some of the greatest doubters into amazing people of faith.

Question for Reflection: Have I really cherished and devoured God's Word or have I neglected it and taken it for granted?

Twenty-six: Ask with Confidence

"Don't bargain with God. Be direct. Ask for what you need. This isn't a cat-and-mouse, hide-and-seek game we're in. If your child asks for bread, do you trick him with sawdust? If he asks for fish, do you scare him with a live snake on his plate? As bad as you are, you wouldn't think of such a thing. You're at least decent to your own children. So don't you think the God who conceived you in love will be even better?" (Matthew 7:7-11 The Message)

COMMITTED!

I was on a middle school ski trip when I fell on the slopes and was clipped in the face by another skier. It wasn't life threatening so they called my father to pick me up and take me to an emergency room. We arrived at the hospital well after midnight. My father was worried and exhausted; He'd been up since very early the previous day. When they opened up the cut above my eye to look for debris I heard a "clunk." My father had taken one look at me and passed out. They all stopped what they were doing with me to attend to him. At some point they must have sewn me up because I remember being in a room worrying about my dad. I made the classic deal with God, "God if you will just take care of my father I will become a pastor." He turned out fine and I did become a pastor, but not because of that bargain. I am constantly reminded of my deal with God when I hear how others have made their own deals.

It is understandable that we might turn to God in this way. After all, the life we know in this world is all about reciprocity. "I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine." Our relationships are full of such examples: I'll love you if you love me in return. Our income is dependent on some kind of agreement to work for an employer in return for fair compensation. Sociologists describe the "social contract" we develop in a culture where we can expect certain outcomes from certain behaviors: if I go to school I will get a better job when I get out. Throughout history, religion has been seen by many as simply a way to clarify what we must do to get our god or goddess to do in return: if we dance this way rain will come. Why would we not come to God with an offer He cannot resist?

Jesus certainly knew the ways of the world. He was also very aware that the scripture is full of bargaining. He must have observed this behavior all around him as people made their deals with God. "Look how holy I am! I think I am ready for my reward, God!" But Jesus has some news for us: this is not the way to come to God in prayer. Jesus reassures us that it is not necessary or even faithful to come to God in this way anymore. Just "ask and it shall be given, knock and the door will be opened. God knows what to give you and He will give it when He is ready." We don't need to set up a quid pro quo with God; God wants to give us good things. Jesus wants us to know that they are given with no

CURIOUS?

I'm done making deals with God. I tried to when my mom was sick but she didn't get better and I just gave up on God. Sadly, there are many who have lost their faith in God because they feel they lived up to their end of the agreement but God did not live up to His! There is no doubt that we feel let down, even angry, when God does not intervene in a situation we have asked Him to consider. But we are not in charge of God. God is the one who is in charge. We can't manipulate Him and we should ask ourselves the question: do we really want to? What would the world be like if God accepted every deal people made with Him? There have been Christians on both sides of a war. How could God keep a deal with each side to let them win? God made a deal on the cross for you and your mother already: His son's life for your eternal life. I'm sorry you didn't get to spend more of this life with her, but the Father has made a way for her and will make one for you if you can learn to trust Him again.

I remember that it says, "anyone who asks, receives; those who seek, find;" but that just hasn't been true for me or for others I know. There is no doubt that the specifics of prayers are not always answered. Good Christians have prayed heartfelt prayers that did not get the results they hoped for. The interesting thing is that they keep trusting and they keep praying, anyway. You see, they ask and seek but they leave it up to God to give and guide. They know that they need the Father so much that there is no question of giving up on Him. They may not understand or even like His

strings attached. Like everything else from God, His answers to our prayers are free and grace-filled. Deal with that!

It is hard to let go of this way of relating to God because we are giving up the pretense of control. In our bargain we do make a commitment to God. Sometimes it is a rather crazy one like promising to become a pastor when you just became a teenager! Other promises are rather vague like saying you will try to be a better person. For those who really feel they need some leverage they may make promises to God that they cannot possibly keep. This is unhelpful because God knows you will not be able to keep it but you will be so embarrassed you may end up hiding from Him in shame! The worst part of a bargain with God is that we not only box ourselves into some kind of behavior but we do the same for God. In the process of our deal making we break the greatest commandment! We try to assign God to a role, dictate His actions and clarify the outcome. In other words, we try to become God ourselves. This is not life in the Kingdom. This is trying to apply the ways of the world to the ways of God.

The only way to let go of this human tendency is to trust that God is good: the very definition of good. Jesus has taught us to call Him, "Father," and then appeals to that image to ask us to trust that the Father wants to give us good gifts. The astounding thing is that when we come to trust in our heavenly Father we come to see just how blessed we are in each and every in any situation. Now that we've dropped the pretense of control over life we are free to turn it over to God. We stop treating God like a Santa Claus who will only leave us coal unless we've been nice enough. We start coming to God like a Father who we can count on to love us. How He shows that love is His privilege and His joy. We were never in charge anyway. Now we have something much better with God than a contract, we have a relationship.

will at times. Read the Psalms to see that even faithful people complain about God's timing and delivery! As they live in this relationship with God, this Kingdom life, they start to see all sorts of ways that God does open doors and answer prayers. More often than not they start to see that God's response to their prayer was exactly what they needed. Sort of like a Father caring for a child?

I have to be honest with you. All this talk about God as a good Father is confusing for me. My father just wasn't there for me. God is much, much more than a Father. God is God. Jesus uses this title because he can draw all sorts of parallels between the ideal Christian father and his own heavenly one. For those of us who have not seen such fatherly behavior we need to do some translating. We may not have received the love we needed from our own father but we have seen other loving fathers in action and have received such fatherly love from others. We can enlarge this image to include motherly love as well because God is not limited to a gender. While we wish all fathers could set such an example that would lay the right groundwork for understanding God in the same way, that doesn't always happen. The good news is that although your earthly father might not have been there for you, your heavenly Father is always there for you!

Question for Reflection: What should I be knocking on God's door about right now?

Twenty-seven: Do It

"Here is a simple, rule-of-thumb guide for behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you, then grab the initiative and do it for them. Add up God's Law and Prophets and this is what you get." (Matthew 7:12 The Message)

COMMITTED!

Jesus' "Golden Rule," is unquestionably one of the most memorable and helpful moral teachings passed down to us: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. But the sentiment of this teaching is not unique to Christianity. Versions of it are found within nearly all of the world religions, in the Jewish teachings before and after Jesus, and even in secular philosophy. That doesn't mean it is in any way diminished. If this way of living were adopted by all who heard it in one form or another, this world would be a very different place. If all the people who knew this rule were honest in their application of it, crazy ideas like world peace and the end of hunger might not seem so crazy. The point is that although the Golden Rule is well known it is not so well practiced. So, what up?

Most of the time, this ethical teaching is applied in the negative: do not do unto others what you would not want them to do to you. This is an incredibly convenient way to look at it because it mostly means we shouldn't do anything to hurt our neighbor. We don't want to be robbed so we don't rob others. We don't want to have our car door nicked so we are careful not to nick the car door next to us in the parking lot. We don't want to be gossiped about so we don't gossip about others. Well, we try not to do what we wouldn't want done to us anyway. How are we going to get world peace out of this? When applied this way we focus on what we shouldn't do. We are disengaged from others like building a wall instead of engaged with others, like building a bridge.

Notice that Jesus states this rule in the positive: do unto others. Now we are really getting somewhere. It is not enough to avoid doing bad things. Now we must think about what we would like to experience from others. We would like them to love, respect, care for, be kind to, help, support, listen to, encourage and bless us, right? Jesus says that these are now the marching orders for us as we encounter others – all others. I was never going to kill my neighbor because I didn't want to be killed by anyone. But now I need to bless my neighbor because that is what I would like to experience myself. World peace won't come when people just leave each other alone. It will only come when we reach out our hands in service, our minds in understanding and our hearts in love. Life in the Kingdom is one of taking the offense, not sitting on the defense. Only the offense here is not offensive, it is innovative, compassionate, enthusiastic service to our neighbor.

CURIOUS?

My problem right now is not obeying the Golden Rule; it is dealing with all the people who cause me grief because they ignore it. This whole concept sort of falls apart when it's one-sided, doesn't it? If you are following the Golden Rule and everyone else is not, you are cooked. In this case, it would seem smarter to drop the rule and fend for yourself. But that is not the lifestyle Jesus calls us to. The reason he wants you to obey the rule has nothing to do with whether it works for you. It has everything to do with it being the right way for you to live. When you treat others as well or better than you would want to be treated by them you are making the world a better place; you are not far from the Kingdom.

What if I just want to be left alone by people? Can't I just leave them alone and call it a day? Unless you have a private island and you plan to live there as a single person, you are going to have to deal with people. You can choose to keep your distance as much as possible but most people wither and die without meaningful relationships. Why not choose to follow the rule and see where it gets you? Certainly there will be times you are taken advantage of. But you will be able to look in the mirror and respect yourself. Meanwhile, you will get a taste of what it was like for Jesus. He blessed everyone and received curses in return. Yet there was no man on earth more full of purpose and joy than Jesus Christ. He wants that for you, too.

I do not have the time or energy to push this

This still sums up the Law and the Prophets pretty well. Abraham didn't have to let Lot choose the best place for grazing as his division of their property but that was exactly how old Abe would want to be respected. Boaz didn't need to care for Naomi and Ruth but that's probably how he would have liked to be treated if her were in their dusty sandals. The old woman didn't have to share her last flour and oil but she had known hunger and thirst and saw it in Elijah's face. And when David conveniently eliminates beautiful Bathsheba's spouse from the picture so he could mosey on over, we have no trouble seeing that he shattered the Golden Rule.

Jesus, however, takes this Golden Rule one step farther and invites us to do the same. He treats this as the rule but jumps off from there into Kingdom living. For Jesus also saw the commandment to mean: do for others what they would never do for you. Everyone Jesus met was in need of a savior but no one deserved one. The religious leaders treated him like garbage, his disciples abandoned him, the crowds sentenced him and the soldiers mocked him. But he picked up his cross and died for all of them, for all of us, anyway.

We can understand someone dying for a person worth dying for, and we can understand how someone good and noble could inspire us to selfless sacrifice. But God put His love on the line for us by offering His Son in sacrificial death while we were of no use whatever to Him (Roman 5:7 The Message).

We are living in the Kingdom when we not only obey the Golden Rule but when we exceed it in sacrificial love for those who didn't ask for it, won't thank us for it, and won't ever reciprocate. This really may be the only true form of love: unmediated and unconditional. World peace, anyone?

rule all the way. I can barely take care of my business, let alone someone else's. We are all pretty busy, as we have said before. And the needs of others, once we start looking for them, can be overwhelming. When you are in the Kingdom lifestyle you will see opportunities to love others everywhere you turn. Jesus felt this frustration himself when he looked out over the crowd of people who wanted a piece of him.

When he looked out over the crowds, his heart broke. So confused and aimless they were, like sheep with no shepherd. "What a huge harvest!" He said to his disciples. "How few workers! On your knees and pray for harvest hands!" (Matthew 9:36-38 The Message)

If you really give this a try you will reach a breaking point too. We can't help everybody all the time. But we can help some people some of the time. And we can pray that God will send more workers to join us. He always does.

Question for Reflection: What can I do for someone that will stretch and break me but make me whole again?

Twenty-eight: Stay Focused

"Don't look for shortcuts to God. The market is flooded with surefire, easygoing formulas for a successful life that can be practiced in your spare time. Don't fall for that stuff, even though crowds of people do. The way to life—to God!—is vigorous and requires total attention. Be wary of false preachers who smile a lot, dripping with practiced sincerity. Chances are they are out to rip you off some way or other. Don't be impressed with charisma; look for character. Who preachers are is the main thing, not what they say. A genuine leader will never exploit your emotions or your pocketbook. These diseased trees with their bad apples are going to be chopped down and burned." (Matthew 7:13-20 *The Message*)

COMMITTED!

In the book and movie, "Julie and Julia," we meet a young woman who is unsatisfied and unfulfilled with her life. Her friends have all reached the heights of success but it has eluded her. She seems to lack focus, drive and commitment. She is a genuine food lover but like many things in her life, she takes the easy way out when it comes to cooking. As she becomes aware of her approach to life she turns to someone she has always admired who had focus, drive and commitment to burn: Julia Child. Julie decides to take on a personal challenge: to cook all of the recipes in Julia Child's "Mastering the Art of French Cooking" in one year.

This is no small feat to attempt for this is one of the most serious and rigorous books on French cooking around. Her kitchen is woefully inadequate for the complicated dishes. She has no training in the necessary techniques. Her full-time job leaves her little time for the time consuming preparations. Even finding the ingredients becomes a challenge that takes her all over town. The stress is great and the failures are frequent. But when she finishes her year she has been transformed from an indifferent cook to a master of French cooking. She has developed the attitude, skills and commitment of a real gourmet.

The truth is that almost anyone can whip up some kind of meal. But it takes real dedication to cook a perfect Boeuf Bourguignon like Julia Childs. There are hours of gathering the right ingredients, preparing each one carefully, meticulously following the instructions and not resting until it is just right. Many have found all sorts of short cuts and simplifications to her recipe but the final results are just not the same. Some things just need to be done right. Or not at all.

So many times we seek shortcuts and wide gates to get where we are going. We get somewhere faster and easier but are we really satisfied or rewarded? Would a mountain climber get the same joy from being

CURIOUS?

I thought that God wanted everybody to get into heaven. You make it sound so difficult. God does want everyone to enjoy life in the Kingdom. The way isn't hard to weed people out. It is hard because it goes against everything we have learned from the world. For example, some might think that it is asking a lot to care about our neighbors. They have been taught to take care of themselves first. But in the Kingdom, we find that caring for our neighbors is more satisfying than worrying about ourselves. Those who desire to live in the Kingdom find that the narrow way focuses our hearts and minds on the one true goal of our lives, fulfilling God's will for us. Jesus shows us that the gate to heaven is open. He has opened it. Now he invites us to walk through it. Sadly, some may never accept that invitation because they are too busy choosing their own path.

What does it mean to be a disciple under discipline? Does this mean when we follow Jesus he will constantly be punishing us? We often use the word discipline in the sense of punishment for certain behaviors. But we also use it to describe someone who is really focused, driven, committed. These people have determined a goal and will do what they need to do to reach it. A disciple of Jesus is one who makes following Jesus the goal of his or her life. People who chose to become disciples of Jesus let him determine the purpose and direction of their lives. If Jesus demands pa-

lifted to the summit by a helicopter? Is there any pride in a mail order degree? Could anything compare to walking through the door of the house you saved years to buy? It takes a lot of effort to get somewhere in life on your own merit. It takes a great deal of dedication to become truly good at something. And it takes drive to push through all of the distractions and obstacles to reach truly worthwhile goals.

So it is with life in the Kingdom, says Jesus. It's a narrow gate and a long road. The ways of the world may tempt us to think otherwise, but they are wrong. The broad road is the road that leads to dissatisfaction and destruction. This is the life of the miserable lottery winner, the spoiled child, the lazy person who blames everyone else for his lack of effort. In the Kingdom we are disciples under discipline: Julie is committed to following the recipes all the way through. In the Kingdom we imitate our Lord so that we can become more like Him: Julie becomes Julia. In the Kingdom we know that anything good is worth everything we have to give it.

Jesus also warns us of those who might point us toward the wide gate. They look good and they have good sales pitches. But they are selling a dead-end life. It is clear when you scratch their shiny surface to see the rust, smell the decay on their breath, and see the barrenness of their own personal witness. They promise a perfect Lobster Thermidore can come out of the microwave. We can't let their razzle and dazzle send us head long in the wrong direction. We follow the man carrying the cross down the winding path. And we eagerly pick up our cross to follow Him. He knows the real way, the real truth, and the real life. He is all of those. You only have to gaze at him on the cross to know he is worth trusting. So we open the book and start cooking. And he will transform us in the process.

tience they develop it. If Jesus requires endurance they seek it. If Jesus commands love they open their hearts. They don't just ask, "What Would Jesus Do?", they ask "What do you want me to do, Jesus?" Remember that he is worthy of this trust. He never asks us to do what he hasn't done or go where he hasn't already gone. And he will never ask us to save the world because he has already done that.

If Jesus died for me, why do I need to pick up my cross? Jesus died so that you could pick up your cross. You would have no strength to carry it otherwise. You see, those without Jesus stand around ignoring their crosses. They deny their addictions, pretend they are happy, lay in the dust of despair, or die sad and lonely. Who can blame them? Who would want to pick up their cross? It's a nasty, painful, terrible thing to carry. But look over there. Jesus is going by with his cross. He looks at you in love and says, "Pick it up and let's go. We are going to beat this thing together. I'll destroy death for you and help you take care of whatever else is killing you." Along the way he may bring others alongside you to ease your burden or ask you to take theirs on your shoulders. All the while you are walking, not to death, but to life. In the Kingdom the cross is transformed into a sign of life, the only true life.

Question for Reflection: What area of my Christian lifestyle should I focus on at this time?

Twenty-nine: Don't Play Games

"Knowing the correct password—saying 'Master, Master,' for instance— isn't going to get you anywhere with me. What is required is serious obedience—doing what my Father wills. I can see it now—at the Final Judgment thousands strutting up to me and saying, 'Master, we preached the Message, we bashed the demons, our God-sponsored projects had everyone talking.' And do you know what I am going to say? ' You missed the boat. All you did was use me to make yourselves important. You don't impress me one bit. You're out of here.'" (Matthew 7:21-23 *The Message*)

COMMITTED!

My daughter worked at a local surf shop. She told me that the vast majority of the customers and the ones who spent the most money were kids who didn't own surfboards. Although both owners were avid surfers, and they carried a great line of boards and surfing gear, it was clear that what really sold for them was the trappings of the surf culture. By purchasing the clothing, shoes, sandals, bags, watches, jewelry and music they could become surfers without getting wet. I think the real surfers found it amusing and perhaps even a little flattering, but they didn't spend too much time hanging around the store. They were too busy surfing to worry much about "posers."

There are some Christians who might fall in the category of "posers." They carry their study Bible to class in the right little Bible tote. They only listen to Christian radio and Christian music. They have a variety of nice crosses to wear and clever Christian T-Shirts with slogans like, "Pick Jesus," inside a large guitar pick. They are members of the biggest and newest churches. Their kids only watch "Veggie Tales" videos. They have the whole Evangelical Christian culture down. But Lutherans have their own versions of this and Catholics too. For Lutherans, a Christian culture smells like "tuna hot dish," looks like the church softball league, and sounds like organ music. For Catholics it looks like St. Christopher medals around the neck, St. Francis statues in the garden, and fish on Friday. There is absolutely nothing wrong with having a unique Christian culture. It just doesn't guarantee that you are living in the Kingdom.

A Kingdom-living person may well surround themselves with the accessories of the Christian culture. Or they may be too busy being a Christian to get around to it. You may not see a cross around his neck but at the painful crossroads of life he is always found bringing hope. She may not know how to make a hot dish but she knows how to serve it up at the local soup kitchen. She may not carry a rosary but she is at the shelter hugging the children just like Mary held Jesus. They are not associating with a lifestyle; they are living the lifestyle.

CURIOUS?

So why don't we just get rid of all those Jesus knick-knacks? I'm definitely down with that since I have never liked "tuna hot dish" or those fish bumper stickers. The point is not to strip away the artifacts of Christian culture. They serve a purpose. My life has been greatly enriched by the addition of contemporary Christian music to my CD collection and I am proud to wear the cross I received at a recent Christian retreat. I appreciate my Lutheran heritage and whenever I travel I appreciate other cultural expressions of faith. The world would be a poorer place if we tried to make a generic version of Christianity. While these things don't make us Christians they can play a role in our Kingdom living. They can serve as reminders of what we believe, expressions of our faith, and even ways to share it with others. But the real Christian faith is found deeper within, past the cultural layers to the heart of it all: a relationship with God that is characterized by trust and obedience.

This idea of a final judgment has me a little concerned. How do I avoid "missing the boat?" This is a hard teaching to reconcile with the clear gospel message. We believe that we are not saved by who we are or what we do but by trusting in who Jesus is and what he did for us. Yet here is Jesus saying "take off," to some do-gooders. There are two ways to look at this. First, it is possible that Jesus is merely

Jesus' stern warning about confusing culture with Kingdom lifestyle was leveled at the religious leaders of his day who themselves were confused. They were so often doing the right thing for the wrong reason. They ate a certain way to look holy instead of seeking to honor the holiness of God. They gave offerings to look faithful instead of faithfully giving to further God's work. They dressed exactly right but there wasn't much inside. How it must have pained Jesus to see them get it all wrong. But they didn't get it and neither will we if we mistake looking like Christians for being Christians. Paul said it well when he said:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1-3 NIV).

I couldn't agree with Paul more on this! Wearing a Jesus T-shirt doesn't make someone a Christian. When I first became a pastor I wore my clergy collar every day to work. I was inexperienced but it made me feel professional. I was young but the collar told the world I was a pastor. Plus the collar reminded me that I had certain responsibilities and commitments. It is much harder to slip into unchristian behavior in a clergy collar – believe me! I think many Christians feel the same way. They don't put their T-Shirt or cross on as a fashion statement or as a way of becoming superior to others. They surround themselves with things that remind them of who they are and what they believe. And like me wearing the clergy collar, it may even help them avoid unchristian behavior. What is certain is that neither the Lord nor the people around us are very impressed by what we wear or even what we do if our motives are not Kingdom-oriented.

expressing his displeasure that those he has saved are doing the right things for the wrong reasons. Jesus may not be sending them off to hell. But he is telling them (and us) that we need to get our motivations straight or our actions will be off track. Second, it may be that Jesus is concerned about those whose motivations are devious and untrusting. Perhaps they have only been doing these things to look good instead of as a part of their Kingdom living. Or maybe they don't trust that Jesus really died for them so they want to earn their own points to heaven. Life in the Kingdom begins when we trust him and only do what we do to honor and glorify his name.

Question for Reflection: In what ways have I confused Christian culture with a Christian lifestyle?

Thirty: Build Wisely

***"These words I speak to you are not incidental additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundational words, words to build a life on. If you work these words into your life, you are like a smart carpenter who built his house on solid rock. Rain poured down, the river flooded, a tornado hit—but nothing moved that house. It was fixed to the rock. But if you just use my words in Bible studies and don't work them into your life, you are like a stupid carpenter who built his house on the sandy beach. When a storm rolled in and the waves came up, it collapsed like a house of cards."* (Matthew 7:24-27 The Message)**

COMMITTED!

I get my hopes up every time I see the headlines or hear the promises on the television: "Five Ways to Get Rich During This Economic Downturn" or "A Simple Plan for Raising Healthy Children," or "Secrets to Weight Loss." It doesn't take me long to be disappointed as I read or listen. Some of the advice is great but impractical: I know I could get rich if I bought solid stocks when the market is down but I don't have the money now or the time to wait until they go up. Other advice is tired and obvious: if you want to have healthier children turn off the TV and cut back on junk food. Finally some of the advice is just wrong: there is no secret to weight loss; it is just simple math that we need to eat less and exercise more. While you can find nuggets here and there that may help you live a marginally better life most of the promises do not stand up well.

Yet the desire to improve our lives continues. We look at our marriages and we want them to be stronger. We think about our children and we wish they could be happier. We check our bank account and need it to be fatter. We go to work and wonder if we are really making a difference in the world. We look at our future and can't be sure it will be brighter. We sense there must be something more and we just keep looking for it. As Bono of U2 once sang, "I still haven't found what I am looking for."

Jesus wants us to start over. His words, his way, and his life provide us a new foundation to build upon. This ground is firm and it is smack dab in the middle of the Kingdom of God. So how do we build on this new foundation? Look back over the sermon Jesus has nearly completed. We build on this foundation when we let God rule our lives, when we humbly seek His will, when we become human bridges to peace, when we are salt and light to the world, when we obey the fullest extent of God's laws because we love Him, when we offer forgiveness instead of seeking revenge, when we truly love the spouse God has given us, when we tell the truth, when we love enemies, when our prayers are as much to change us as to change the world, and when we let go and let God.

CURIOUS?

I don't see what's so wrong with trying to improve my life. Neither does God but He knows that it can only be done His way. We have to start over with His son, Jesus, or there is no real improvement. Would you hand wax a car that is covered with rust? Would you put fertilizer on a bed of weeds? Jesus is saying, "What's the point of remodeling a house that is going to come crashing down at the next storm?" Channel your desire to improve your life in the only direction that can make that possible: seek first the Kingdom of God and then all will be added unto you!

Why is it so hard to find what I'm looking for? I share your frustration! But we won't find what we are looking for because we are looking for the wrong thing. We are looking for little things to improve our lives when what we really need is to have our lives completely changed. Most of us have built our lives on the foundations the world has offered us. It is not the world that God created; it is the world that Adam and Eve made. In the garden it was clear that God was the Creator, the Father, and the Lover. It should have been easy for the first humans to trust in Him totally since He was providing for them completely. The fact that they quickly broke His trust was simply evidence of the fact that they really didn't trust Him. They didn't think God really wanted the best for them so they looked out for themselves as best as they could.

In other words, we are really only safe, secure, and satisfied in this world when we give up on this world and throw our lot in with the Kingdom. Not only is this hard to do but it is hard to keeping doing. Martin Luther knew this when he said that we are simultaneously saints and sinners. No sooner do we trust in God than we turn around, listen to the snake and bite the apple. Just when we've loved our enemy we brag about it to everyone as evidence of our holiness. At the moment we let go of the hold worldly possessions have on us we use that as leverage in a prayer for God to throw us a bone in return. Jesus knows the nature of the people he came to save. He died for us anyway. But in that dying he gave us an amazing gift. Our sin doesn't immediately and permanently eject us from the Kingdom. It doesn't have to wipe out all the growth we've experienced up to that point. We don't have to prove ourselves all over again to be worthy of him since we were never worthy to begin with. We can ask for and receive forgiveness. And we can get back to building our house in the Kingdom.

If I try to build on this new foundation will I get the life I've always wanted? No. You are much more likely to get the life God wants for you, though. There may be times when you can't see how following Jesus is making your life better. But just wait until the storm! You won't be able to measure your success according to the world's standards but don't worry; those standards will melt away one day. The people around you will think you are strange but hang on; they will quickly discover that you are a blessing to them. Like poor old Noah, you may get ridiculed and have doubts about building an ark on dry land. But wait until you wake up in the morning after the storm to find your house is not only intact but someone has made the coffee!

Question for Reflection: What part of my faith is built on sand and what part of it is built on rock?

In Conclusion

When Jesus concluded his address, the crowd burst into applause. They had never heard teaching like this. It was apparent that he was living everything he was saying—quite a contrast to their religion teachers! This was the best teaching they had ever heard. (Matthew 7:28-29 The Message)

Your reputation may precede you. Your position may give you legitimacy. Your words may sound wise. But, in the end, a teacher is judged by her behavior. This is an inconvenient truth for anyone in the position to counsel, advise, teach, lead, mentor or train. You see, we can have some control over our reputation: just flatter people, be in the right place at the right time, join the right club, and don't forget to promote yourself. We can seek a title and a job that gives us the authority to tell people things that we know that they should know. We can carefully structure our presentations and spice them up with catchy themes and memorable images. But the whole thing collapses if anyone gets the idea that our actions do not match up with our words.

Who follows the program of an overweight diet guru? Who listens to the marital advice of a thrice-divorced counselor? Who puts themselves through the grueling workout of a flabby physical trainer? But that is not the situation here at the foot of this mountain. The crowd who has been listening in to the words of Jesus sense that he isn't just telling them what to believe, He is one who lives the things he believes. Jesus doesn't just tell others how to live so they are blessed; he shows them how to be blessed. He doesn't just obey the commandments; he fulfills them. He won't just tell them about the way; he is the way. He will be his own sermon illustration.

The "t" in the title of this book is fashioned as a cross for a crucial reason. There is no Christian lifestyle without the cross. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus presents the ways and means of the new Kingdom lifestyle he is offering the COMMITTED, his disciples. But it will not come cheaply. First, he will have to go all the way to prove it is really a new life. He will fulfill all of the words of this sermon in the way he walks through our fallen world. He will show just how near this Kingdom is as he brings us flashes and glimpses of it through his words and his deeds. Then Jesus will seal the deal by walking that one walk up the hill to the cross. Without Jesus' death on the cross, there is no new life or Kingdom lifestyle. These words may have been saved as good advice or clever thoughts or high ideals. But after the cross, after he lives it unto death, these words come alive! He is the one who testifies to them and validates them. The one who loves us that much as he hangs on the cross is totally credible as the teacher who wants us to live in love.

COMMITTED!

Jesus' first invitation is to "come and follow me." But the next invitation, the one that really separates the COMMITTED from the CURIOUS is this one: *Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me* (Matthew 10:38 TNIV). You see, the road really is narrow and it winds all the way up that "hill far away." The cross we take up is to live this new lifestyle, trusting in Him always. The chances of success are slim but the way is good! Our victory is wrapped up in the one that he has already won! We will stumble and fall but only for a moment because, lo, he is with us always. For those who are already COMMITTED, the challenge of this lifestyle remains. We must seek deeper wisdom in the scriptures, greater strength from fellow disciples, guidance from the Holy Spirit, and, most of all, seek the Kingdom of God!

CURIOUS?

For the CURIOUS, first we say, "blessings!" Whether you quickly skimmed or carefully read this book, I want to thank you for letting your curiosity take you to a new place. You have joined Zacchaeus in the tree looking down for a moment or the countless others at the edge of the crowd straining to hear a word of hope from this intriguing teacher. Perhaps our ears have been opened to some new sounds and you've had a little taste of this Kingdom. It probably strikes you as quite strange. If so, then you are on the right track. It is all strange and it is all wonderful too. Perhaps you thought a Christian lifestyle was anything but what you have now explored. So you may be either confused or elated by now. Our prayer for you is that your curiosity still remains. We pray that you are still there at the very edge of the crowd trying to see the teacher a little clearer and hear his words a little better. Who knows? You may even find yourself right next to him someday. One thing we do know, he already is next to you. And we believe that Jesus has chosen to save you and love you so that you can choose the one lifestyle that will bring you life.

