

# **Simple Jesus: Boiling Down Your Religion Without Watering Down Your Faith**

by Cory P. Walker

## **Preface**

This simple book seeks to illustrate the inconsistencies I have noted between the simple, powerful example of Jesus and his first followers and the complicated web of modern-day Christian practices. The discrepancy between the two is profound to me and seems only to be matched in scope by what seems to be an unwillingness to do something about them. These inconsistencies are at best ironic, and at worst, they create a religion whose form lacks the simple power to change lives. In addition, this book seeks to motivate the reader to a thought provoking, soul searching quest for a simple faith laser focused on relating to God and others the way we are designed to.

I'm not coming at this topic from a theological or ecclesiastical perspective, although I have a bachelors degree in Biblical Studies and Pastoral Ministries and have over twenty years of ministry experience. Instead, I am doing my best to come at the topic from a simple, common sense perspective that seems to be congruent with the message and life of Christ. I consider myself to be a follower of Christ, but even more accurately, a friend of Jesus. While I grew up in the church, I have spent the last fifteen years look for, discovering, and developing a relational faith with the living Jesus. I hope to share with you some of what I have discovered. As the title suggests, I hope to keep it simple and boiled down, yet full of what I believe to be profound truths that will be revealed to anyone who chooses to seek God for understanding without first getting permission from someone more schooled or in "spiritual authority" over them.

## **Introduction**

While "simple" is an adjective and may conjure up images of the uneducated or unintelligent, it is by definition much more of a compliment than a put down. "Simple" reflects a lack of complication. Complication in most of our lives takes on the form of drama and, simply speaking, drama drains the soul. Simplicity reflects peace, solitude, and tranquility. Who among us doesn't need more of these? In one sense, simple can mean having a singular purpose and a narrow focus. In another sense, it can mean

free from vanity, guile, or ostentation. Both definitions seem reflective of the nature and character of Christ. By these definitions, Jesus was simple, and I believe the path he walked was simple, and that same path he asks us to walk is meant to be one of simplicity. Not the "let's sell everything we have and move to a commune to reduce our carbon footprint" type of simplicity; but a narrowly focused, uncomplicated, integrated life of faith- a life of faith dedicated to the things which Jesus held to be most important.

## **The Jesus Project**

A few years ago, I took up the practice of journaling. Now journaling was not, at that time, one of the things on the church's list of "what you should be doing if you are a really good Christian" but in many congregations it now is top of the list. I have noticed over the years that different church bodies have different expectations for their members. There are expectations of conduct, attendance, appearance, involvement, support... and the list can go on and on. But I digress. I took up the practice of journaling because I had started to notice an abundance of thoughts and feelings running the halls of my mind. I had heard of the practice of journaling while reading one of the books I was researching while I was the Adult Growth Director of the church where I ministered. I wondered if the practice would help me get some of my excess thoughts and feelings out of the way so I could get back to the "important" things in my life. What I found was that when I dedicated the time to write them down, the thoughts and feelings started to organize themselves into a series of themes. As I thought about them, I realized that these themes had some serious familiarity to them. I realized that these thoughts and feelings had been running through my head and my heart most of my life. These thoughts were an undercurrent which had been flowing through my life for years and were meant to prompt me toward a different kind of living.

In one of my weekly journaling sessions, I was struck by a thought that provoked overwhelming feelings of truth, purpose, and direction. JESUS WAS CALLING ME TO A LIFE OF SIMPLIFICATION. In the moments that followed, I was overcome with the desire to start a one-month-long exercise that I eventually came to call "The Jesus Project".

The gist of the Jesus Project was to spend thirty days focused on only doing the things which I had found to be directly beneficial to developing a better relationship with

Jesus. All other things, no matter how spiritual they might seem or how prominent a role they had been playing in my life, would be set aside regardless of the expectations of others. Now let me clarify: I'm not independently wealthy, so I'm not talking about a thirty-day trip to the mountains to meditate and pray. I still went to work, played with my kids, and spent time with my wife and friends. It was the other "supposed to" sort of stuff and the time stealing habits of my life that I set aside. What I discovered during the process changed my life forever and is the essence of *Simple Jesus*. I hope it challenges your assumptions, solidifies your beliefs, and helps you tear down walls constructed by you and others that may be hindering your own growth and all that Christ wants to do in you.

Now, I'm not a disillusioned, backslidden (if your theology permits) Christian looking to burn it all down; I'm a simple reformist looking to lift people up with hope- hope that there is an abundant life in Jesus that's not well represented by modern day Christianity.

Nearly a decade ago, I read a book which I thought made some valid points regarding questions I had about things that were seen as status quo within Christianity. I gave a copy to my pastor at the time and asked him to read it and tell me what he thought. After reading it, his response was something like "interesting viewpoints", which was what he usually said when he didn't agree with someone. What he did then really started to open my eyes about the broken nature of the "spiritual authority" concepts that had been a part of my entire life. He went on to point out that, after reading the book, he did a bit of research about the author. He found that the author claimed no affiliation with a home church organization or denomination. He said that in his opinion, you can't trust the viewpoints of people who aren't under any real spiritual authority. In other words, he shot the messenger instead of taking the message and my valid questions to heart. I've heard it said that the sting in any rebuke is probably the truth. It's a sad fact that most of us will avoid altogether and openly criticize anything we feel could point out to others that we may be wrong about something. Ironically enough, this pastor whom I had known closely for nearly a decade, had no accountability himself at that time and had been making a series of choices that led the organization he oversaw into financial, spiritual, and demographic chaos. It reminded me of something my father used to say to me: "We often see in others what we don't like about ourselves."

I read an amazing book years ago, and in the introduction the author did something both wonderful and humble. He told the readers that he believed passionately that the

things he had written in the book were from God and that they would benefit anyone who paid attention to them, but he also reminded the readers that he was just a man and therefore fallible; and while he had done his best to approach the topic honestly and sincerely, essentially the readers should eat the meat and spit out the bones. I echo his sentiment with this book. I would challenge you at this point to ask the Lord to guide and direct you in the page to come, to cement in your heart any truths found here which you need to grab hold of and to help you lay down anything that may be holding you back from a deeper relationship with Jesus. If you do, I believe he will honor that prayer. So hold onto your seat, because here we go!

If you have picked up a copy of this book and are starting to read the back cover, chances are you're already searching for something more or something less or at least some more clarity on what the "Christian life" is all about. Maybe you've had a relationship with a church that went south or have had an up-close and personal encounter with the modern-day Pharisee. Maybe your experience with Christianity seems far from Christ's promise of "my burden is easy and my yoke is light." The good news is God wants this relationship with you far worse than you want it with him. The fact that you're reading this right now suggests that you've already taken the first steps into a deeper walk with him. And I pray right now that if you will continue reading this book, Jesus will reveal himself to you in a way you've never known before, a way that will change your life forever.

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## Chapter One

### Fancy Broken Things

Silently across the nation, as Christianity becomes increasingly irrelevant to the average non-believing American, the traditional organizational church as a whole is shrinking. One would think that Christian leaders would take note and get to the lm of what is going wrong, but instead we all too often just make a subtle shift in style, do a quick remodeling of the facility, and hope for the best.

In an effort to avoid this decline in attendance, we have lost the heart of what the church was supposed to be all about- making disciples. We can't run from the fact that attendance in weekly church activities is substantially down across all denominations and non-denominations alike. Instead of facing this fact head on and asking the tough questions, many Christian leaders have instead sprinted to compete for what Sunday morning saints still exist. Like a group of people running from a bear in the woods, we have sought to just be one of the fastest runners so the bear will devour the others first. All of our changes only serve to prolong the inevitable: Christianity in America is becoming more and more irrelevant to our culture. Nothing could be more ironic, for America was founded largely by Christians looking to express their faith without oppression, and it was America who spawned the missionary efforts of the past century that are currently changing the destinies of people across South America, Africa and Asia. But in our quest to reach others abroad, we have failed to reach our neighbors next door.

This competition for the Sunday morning saints has caused, or has at least fed into, an equally challenging condition in American church culture- a condition called Christian Consumerism. In our effort to get those attendees who still exist to come to our events and facilities, we have sought to have the best and brightest staffs, the nicest and newest facilities, and the most cutting edge worship bands. On the surface, all of these are noble pursuits, but when sought after with the wrong motives, they can cause us to

be simply a fancier, fresher version of our old, irrelevant selves. The net effect of our updates is that attendees are just shopping. When they are asked for their support or involvement in the mission, they often give the "no thanks, I'm just looking" response. Meanwhile, many of us have lost sight of the goal: taking Jesus into our culture. Scripture tells us to be in the world but not of it; but I would suggest that the western church is doing poorly at both. We have settled for an attraction model of doing church where we try to get the world to come see how great our stuff is instead of taking the love of Christ into our culture through our daily lives. How many of our non-Christian friends (if we have any) know that we love them and that we care? This is important to ask because, without love, all of our fancy things, biblical knowledge, and our stunning spiritual gifts are only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal - just noise to our world.

Discipleship is messy, I grant you that, but Jesus didn't call us to make converts. He didn't call us to market the kingdom through slick presentations, multimedia campaigns, or the latest church growth strategies. He told us to GO and make disciples. A disciple, by nature, is someone with whom we share our lives. Most of the Lord's initial disciples took some time after they were invited to follow him around the country before they understood the message and actually believed. In the same way, we need to incorporate people who are not yet in relationship with Christ into our schedules and our homes so they can know they are loved. Christian disciple making is a process, not an event. It's not something that the church organization's evangelism or outreach department is responsible for. It's something all followers of Jesus are responsible for. The Apostle Paul's invitation to "follow me as I follow Christ" gives us a great insight into discipleship. Each of us is on a spiritual journey, either moving closer to God or further away from him. The enemy of our souls and our world is attempting to drag each of us away from God, but it is God's plan that Christians be loving people closer to him. At some point in the process of moving closer to God, each of us passes from death to life when we believe and trust in Christ as our savior, but this is a process and not an event. While some of us who have made such a decision can point to a time and place where we recognized that we believed and a decision was made, that decision was preceded by many God encounters wherein he used people and circumstances to love us closer to himself. We as Christians today need to recognize our responsibility to love and relate to people apart from Christ, for it is our loving relationship with them that paves their way into the kingdom. Disciple making is all about relationship, so secluding ourselves from the world, boycotting and criticizing their actions while simultaneously begging them to come to our outreach events and hoping for conversions is not a plan to succeed.

Jesus said that the greatest commandment was to love God and that the second was to love your neighbor as yourself. Loving your neighbor as yourself requires us to *know* our neighbors. Being God's ambassadors requires us to be relevant to and engaged with the people we are trying to reach, and God has given each of us the privilege of being surrounded by plenty of opportunities to relate to people who are his future friends. It's time for us as individuals to reach out in love instead of simply supporting outreaches done by our church organizations. It's time for us to love lavishly his most treasured creations. I'm confident and optimistic that we can succeed because, after all, it's God's plan, and he never plans to fail. This expecting organizations (that God did not create) to accomplish our mission is, in my opinion, where it all went wrong. We have forgotten who we are. The church in America is having an identity crisis and doesn't yet know it.

## Chapter Two

### The Steeple Effect

Drive across any community, and you will see a skyline dotted with steeples and spires that sit atop religious structures which are commonly referred to as churches. If these structures were merely meeting places for healthy, thriving spiritual communities, this wouldn't be a problem, but many are vacant and most are mere monuments to a time when religious Christianity was popular regardless of whether it was healthy. The simple truth is that most organizational churches are seeing their service attendance shrink at an alarming rate. I can take you to six such structures in my own neighborhood, none of which has the attendance to justify the size and expense of their buildings. Most of them are struggling just to pay the bills that come along with maintaining a structure "worthy" of worshiping God in. Strikingly missing from scripture which records the history of the first few generations of Christians is any account of church services, church buildings, or church staff. The people saw the church as their identity and therefore recognized the privilege and responsibility of loving others and loving God in their daily lives. It wasn't until nearly 400 AD, when the Roman version of faith began to dominate Christianity, that the practice of building worship facilities took hold. This seems to have ushered in the subtle shift whereby people started referring to the structures themselves as the church. At such point, the organizational church was born, and I believe that with it came the beginning of the end of the most effective era of expansion of the simple and powerful expression of church.

As a former pastor, I can't tell you how often people would come to me after an event or a service and tell me what they thought the church ought to be doing. I would usually remind them that they were the church and therefore should take their own advice and do that thing they were suggesting. Rarely was my counsel received. It's much easier to give to a non-profit organization (the modern day church) and then, after paying your dues, offer your critique of the performance and give your opinions as to what the organization should do to meet its goals than it is to take an honest look inward and ask God to show you where you're falling short. Now, I want to pause for a moment and point out what I think should be starting to become evident: If the enemy of God and all whom he loves could not stop the church from expanding its presence and influence in this world, then he would do the next best thing and dilute it by perverting many of its beliefs and warp its identity. After all, a watered down and distracted church will be far less effective at its mission and far less attractive to those who are apart from God. The scripture, speaking of the early church, says "People in general liked what they saw. Every day their number grew as God added those who were saved." (Acts 2:47 The Message) When was the last time those outside the church viewed it this way?

When Jesus said, "Come to me all that are weary and burned out on religion and I will give you rest," he hinted to the fact that religion- man's ideas of what to do to get in good with God- can burn you out, use you up, and leave you feeling disillusioned and misled.

Now, this isn't an anti-Catholic book any more than it is an anti-Protestant book. This is a pro-simple, pro-effectiveness and pro-relational faith book. As followers of Christ, our effectiveness is determined by how well we are doing at that which was most important to him: loving God and loving others as we love ourselves.

This shift from seeing the church as our identity to seeing the church as a place we go or events we attend have brought with it serious consequences. On the surface, having a nice place to gather to corporately worship God seems innocent enough, but some of the side effects of this shift have seriously hindered the life of the average Christian. I have personal knowledge of a church with a million dollar mortgage that was unable to help a single mother who attended regularly, who had committed her life to Christ through the church's ministries, with an inexpensive appliance repair because they just didn't have the money.

Another side effect of seeing the building as the church is that what we do when we go there becomes very important, and by default, what we do when we are not there becomes less important. How we act, what we say, what we wear, what we do, and the way in which we do it while we are "in church" are huge point for discussion as well as division. This can lead to an inauthenticity that paralyzes relational connection. Many people are living dualistic lives, not wanting anyone in one part of their lives to know what goes on in another. So much of how we practice our faith when we "go to church" has been the determining factor for the formation of hundreds and thousands of new denominations over the years.

With this change that accompanied the rise of the church at Rome went the effectiveness of a simple faith practiced in the context of the everyday lives of a community of friends and friends to be. As someone who was once an overseer of several families who sought to practice their faith in a daily manner and to share their lives and open their homes to each other, I can tell you of the opposition, the eye rolls, the strange looks and smirks that were often given when I answered the common question people would ask, "Where do you go to church?" You would have thought I was from another planet or had two heads or something. To think that we would arrive at a place in "modern Christianity" where expressing your faith corporately in a manner consistent with how they did in the first century would make you somewhat of an outcast was saddening. More than ever before, I want to remind people that, regardless of where you are physically on a Sunday morning, you can't "go" to church; and if someone is trying to guild you into compliance with their expectations for you, then they may more resemble the Pharisees of Jesus' day than they do his early followers.

## Chapter Three

### Double Vision

While the scriptures seem to point to each of us having unique gifts in order to pursue God's unique plan for our lives, it has been my experience that many church leaders see the church as their own. If you spend much time around pastors or at ministry conferences, you will often hear this as they reference the church they lead in phrases such as, "Well, at my church..." or "How large is your church?" "Over at Pastor So and So's church..." It's a subtle shift, and it could just be verbiage, but I have seen enough from the inside or the back side of ministry to suggest otherwise. As a result of seeing the church as their own, they fall into the trap of thinking that it's their job to get a

"divine" vision for the church. This vision is not to be challenged, and doing so will usually end with a swift rebuke or ostracizing. The leader will often quote the Old Testament passage, "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18 KJV) as his responsibility to determine the course of "his church." But a simple reading of this passage will show that it isn't talking about the church at all, nor about receipt of a specific vision. In fact, the church hadn't even been established at this point, and a simple reading of the rest of the verse shows the point of the passage to be very different. "But he that keepeth the law, happy is he." This often quoted proverb is talking about mankind's need for moral boundaries in order to keep us from rampant sin. The previous verse talks about the need to correct a child in order for him to fully mature. This tactic or concept is called proof texting, and I will give it further attention later.

God has given each of us our own destiny. In fact, destiny essentially means "divine plan." How you live out that plan depends on how good your vision is. While eyesight in life is wonderful, having a vision is crucial. Vision is the ability to see clearly what is going on, what path to take, and where the next step is on that path. These are things which are yours to determine. While there is wisdom in wise counsel, there is also danger in unwise or agenda driven counsel.

In short, Christ came to make a way for each individual to have an ongoing relationship with God. But much of Christianity has devolved into a system where we need others to go to God for us, interpret scripture for us, and help us understand what God wants from us. Nothing could be further from the truth. And this need for leadership to discern God's plan for us is, in my opinion, at the root of much of the dysfunction and unproductiveness of the western church. It's much healthier for churches to be all about what is best for their members than it is for the members to be all about what is best for the church organization. Helping people get to know God better and take full advantage of the access they have to him because of Christ's sacrifice should be one of the church's primary roles.

"For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago." (Ephesians 2:10 NLT)

It's up to us to pursue our own destinies. No one else has the responsibility. Don't let others discourage you from the pursuit or delay of the journey. The future is yours to write. Why not write the next chapter yourself with boldness and wisdom and love?

In my experience, often misguided leaders will hijack someone's potential, co-opting their abilities to shore up their own dreams. But we each have the responsibility to grow into our own destinies, not expecting others to serve our purposes.

Conformity to others' expectations can stifle your own unique creativity. Treat others with respect, honor God, and follow your heart. These things will take you far. God is ultimately creative, and we as his creation reflect that diversity. Think about light as it is broken down into all of its colors. It's all light, but it all looks just a bit different, and when you take into account how God creates life using the genetic system of human reproduction, we come up with an infinite number of purely crafted individuals whose abilities, gifts, and talents are unique and diverse as can be imagined.

Be assured that God designed you on purpose for a good reason. He planned for you to make a real difference in this world. Don't put that potential on the shelf or let it get sidetracked by some well-meaning spiritual leader who tells you to get with the program, or that God gave him a vision he can't fulfill without your help. With diversity comes strength. Don't you imagine that a church comprised of unique individuals set free to become all God intended them to be instead of one here most people look, act, and think alike is a scary thing to the enemy? Group think, group action, and group destiny are unhealthy in any venue but especially damaging in the family of God. They lead to movements like David Koresh, Jim Jones, and the like.

## Chapter Four

### Father Son and Holy Bible

Last time I checked, the trinity was made up of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit- not Father, Son, and Holy Bible. While we often hear sermons and teaching on how we need to study scripture or what our daily devotional time should look like, we rarely hear teaching on the Holy Spirit and his relationship to us. While God's spirit certainly does speak to us through scripture, I would suggest that scripture itself is not the only means by which he communicates. If you are feeling the desire to set this book down right now because I mentioned the Holy Spirit, rest assured, I'm a former Pentecostal, not a practicing one. Don't get me wrong; I thoroughly believe in the Holy Spirit's role

in the lives of all believers, but I don't believe it was God's idea to divide his followers into two groups: those who are "filled" and those who are "not." I'm also not a big fan of what my upbringing calls the "initial physical evidence." Yes, that's actually a doctrinal title. While it's not relevant to the topic at hand, I'll just say that it is my opinion that requiring people to pursue specific evidence of a Spirit Filling leads to even more division. I would greatly encourage you to pursue the Holy Spirit and desire his engagement in your life through his gifts, but avoid the trap of getting caught up in some of the hokeyness that's out there because, while much of it is a sincere response to something real God is doing in someone's life, it can often serve as a distraction which the enemy uses to rob some believers of the life changing power of the Holy Spirit when embraced relationally as your friend and guide.

In one place in the letter to the Romans, scripture actually says that "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." Romans 8:16 NIV. All throughout the New Testament, we see references to being led by the Spirit. I believe the connection between our spirit and God's Spirit is the venue through which this leading takes place. This occurs in our heart. It's the place where the lies of our culture, our upbringing, and our selfish thoughts and behaviors are brought into the light. Learning to pay attention to the Spirit's lead in my life has been one of the most beneficial pursuits I have ever undertaken. And it could be for you, too.

Check out what Jesus says about the Holy Spirit in the book of John. "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads you into all truth. The world cannot receive him, because it isn't looking for him and doesn't recognize him. But you know him, because he lives with you now and later will be in you." John 14:16-17 NLT

I don't know if it's in reaction to some of the excesses of the full gospel/Pentecostal movements of the twentieth century or if it's a byproduct of the Bible church culture that seems to have elevated knowledge over experience, but this marvelous third person of the trinity has somehow been relegated to only helping us understand scripture. In my experience, the Holy Spirit/Spirit of God/Spirit of Christ/Spirit of Truth desires to be actively involved in our daily lives, not just during our "devotional times", whatever those are. I mean, whatever happened to devoting our whole life to God, not just certain set aside times we expect him to speak to us through the scriptures? The Holy Spirit wants to be our daily companion, leading us and guiding us, directing our paths, helping us both touch others and be touched by God as we live out our faith on a daily basis. So instead of feeling guilty about not reading the scriptures enough, why

not take a moment and ask the Holy Spirit to make himself expressly known throughout your day even now as you are reading what I believe he has given me to say? Ask him to highlight the parts he wants you to grab hold of.

## Chapter Five

### God Doesn't Want Your Money

Attend virtually any church or turn on Christian television any day of the week, and it won't be long before you hear about what Christians should be doing with regard to giving to "the work of the Lord". Much has been made of the percentage of their income that Christians should drop into the offering plate. Most churches teach some version of the concept of tithing. This is a double-edge sword for most ministers because, while they don't want to run off new attendees by telling them that they are expected to pony up ten percent of their income in the offering each time they show up, they also don't want to find themselves in a place where the bills of the organization can't be paid because not enough money came in. While I was in Bible college, I attended a church for a time where the offering was received at the beginning of the service, promptly counted, and the total then delivered to the minister, who would then potentially take up another offering because not enough funds had come in to pay the bills for the week. It wasn't long before I, as well as many other attendees, found some other pew to warm each Sunday where the expectations were less.

At this point, I think it is best to set the record straight with regard to the fact that the Son of God didn't come to earth born of a virgin to live a sinless life and die a sacrificial death so that we would feel obligated to give him large sums of money every time the offering plate is passed. In fact, Jesus came to fulfill the righteous requirements of the law so that we wouldn't have to. Tithing, or giving ten percent of one's income to the temple, is a hold-over from and a throwback to the old covenant between God and the nation of Israel and even before that between God and the patriarchs.

It's interesting to note that in the divinely inspired historical record of the early church commonly called the book of Acts and spans the first sixty-ish years after the ascension of Christ, the concept of tithing isn't mentioned even once. In addition, all of the letters written to the various locations of the early church commonly referred to as the epistles- letters such as Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, and Corinthians- don't mention tithing either. Come to think of it, the records of Jesus' teachings found in the

gospels only recount one time that Jesus even mentions tithing, and that is in a conversation with Jewish teachers who were not his followers who were trying to catch Him in a trap so they could disgrace him and potentially bring him up on charges. He tells them that they should not only tithe but give all the offerings mentioned in the law as well. He does so to avoid their trap and to encourage them to live up to what they were expecting others to do. But in conversations with his followers and with the crowds, the concept doesn't come up even once.

Why, then, is so much made of tithing in modern Christianity? I would suggest that this teaching is driven primarily by the needs of the organizational church. When you have a church building (a concept foreign to the early church for a least a few hundred years after Christ's ascension), a paid professional staff, and the need to provide cutting edge services multiple times a week, you need people to give large sums of money in the offerings in order to simply pay the bills. Even if you believe tithing is a new covenant concept that should be adhered to by Christians today, the Old Testament admonishments to tithe told the original readers of the text to do so at the temple. While the organizational church has done a lot of good work over the centuries, it is certainly not the house of God, or the temple. In fact, the scriptures teach us that God no longer dwells in temples made with human hands but that he has taken up residence in the hearts of his people.

I'm well aware that writing this book may put me on the spiritual poo list of various ministers who live and die by the tithe, but setting people free from the bondage and legalism that comes with telling people just how much they have to give in an offering is well worth it. Now, don't get me wrong; the new covenant teachings of the Bible tell us a lot about giving. They speak of giving intentionally, generously, cheerfully, privately, and proportionally with how God has blessed you; but they fall short of telling you what percentage to give. If you have heard some sermon that told you the reason the New Testament writings don't talk about an amount or percentage to give is because the people reading those writings would have understood this because they grew up within the Jewish culture, then let me remind you that most of the New Testament epistles show us how God was advancing his good news to the non-Jewish people, or Gentiles. The New Testament also speaks of people who have the spiritual gift of giving as well, but how much teaching have you ever heard on that subject? It's much easier to just issue a one-size-fits-all edict on how much people should give than to teach them these principles and to determine what ministry or needs that they come across they should give to. I once was called on the carpet for giving so little to a religious organization as to suggest that I wasn't tithing, only for the spiritual leader on

the other end of the phone to get an earful because I was tithing; I was just making so little money at the time that the offering reflected it.

The saddest part of all this to me is that if the church were being expressed in an early church, organic way like it was prior to man's religious tendencies impacting it, the need to fund a large, hierarchal organization would not be necessary. Good news for every believer is that God isn't going to stop blessing you if you choose to cease tithing. I would encourage you to give scripturally and in a manner consistent with your heart.

For years I wrestled with writing a tithe check because it felt like I was just paying one of the bills, just checking off another thing on my to do list. I also wrestled with whether or not it was appropriate to give all my tithe to one local church or whether I could give some of it to various ministries I supported or to people I came across who were in need. I would suggest to you that giving where you feel directed to give, where you desire to give, and the amount you wish to give are all very Godly and, yes, scriptural concepts. We have been using these concepts personally for the last ten years now, and we are seeing that God is blessing us just the same as he was in the past when we were tithing.

Let me conclude by reminding you that the Apostle Paul (you know, the guy who was inspired by God to write over half the New Testament) was both an apostle and a church planter, and he chose not to make his primary living by preaching the gospel. He said in Philippians 4, "I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength." If we were to follow most of the modern teachings on tithing, then we would assume that if we did tithe, we could expect to never have the empty stomach or an empty bank account that Paul testifies about. Paul seems to have learned that money is not the gauge by which we should judge whether or not we are blessed by God. The message for all of us living in relationship with Jesus is that we can rest securely in knowing that God doesn't want your money. He wants your heart. He wants you to center your life around knowing him better and better. As you do so, you will undoubtedly find that you are giving more and more of your time, your talent, and your money to the things which are becoming more important to you than ever, but you can also rest assured that this giving of yourself will be a true honor, quite fulfilling, and such a joy. So the next time you get paid, why not ask the Lord just what he wants you to give and to whom. You might be

pleasantly surprised at the ideas that pop into your head or what imminent need you run across that you will now have the funds to meet.

## Chapter Six

### I'll Bring You More Than a Song

One line from a popular worship song from years back says, "I'll bring you more than a song, for a song in itself is not what you have required." This song hints at something I have believed for quite some time- that worship and singing are not the same thing. The scripture itself points this out. "Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God- this is your true and proper worship." Romans 12:1 NIV

Praising and worshipping God are natural responses to our understanding of the grace he has extended to us and the blessings he brings into our lives, so don't get me wrong here. It's totally appropriate to express our praise to God verbally and even musically, but as the scripture above points out, it shouldn't be the only way we worship. The life we live is far more important than what we merely sing with our lips. Speaking of the religious people of his day, Jesus said, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules." Matthew 15:8-9 NIV

Vocal worship is much like what we do when we are grateful to someone for something nice they do for us. We thank them verbally or with a note or a text. In a love relationship, we might even give them a gift or write them a poem. I have even been known to sing my wife a line or two from a classic romantic song. But think how sad it would be if we constantly went around praising someone but living our lives in a manner that didn't honor the things they stood for. As a pastor, I did quite a bit of marital counseling, and it never ceased to surprise me that many times the people I counseled would praise their spouse in public but trash talk, argue with, or even verbally abuse them in private. Scripture, as a historical record of man's relating to God, speaks regularly about how man verbalized his worship to God through song. In fact, the book of Psalms is actually just a song book. So singing praise to God is obviously a valuable practice. I enjoy popping in my earbuds while on a walk or on the treadmill or having songs playing on the car stereo that make me think about how good God is to me. Certainly music can move us and motivate us to do good. But the sheer amount of time we allocate to musical worship as part of our church traditions is surely

not consistent with the teaching of Christ as to the purpose of this new covenant community. But then again, if you've been paying attention to what I've written so far, you will have noticed that much of what we hold dear with regard to our traditions doesn't necessarily jive with the teachings and practices of Christ and his first followers.

It's interesting to see the heights to which the worship experience has risen. I first noticed this upon my graduation from Bible college twenty-five years ago when most of the graduating class was beginning their epic ministry journey as youth pastors with hopes of climbing the ladder to associate and then senior pastor. Some of our very musically gifted classmates stepped right into the music ministry as worship pastors instead, which was a trend that decent sized churches had started a couple of decades before. One classmate of mine began his ministry career as a full time music minister with a salary of three times that of a starting youth minister. It was at this point that I realized just how important musical worship had become in the western church culture. Three years earlier, in my fundamentals of music and worship course (a requirement for almost everyone), we were told of the importance of worship (which was used synonymously with singing) and just how powerful a tool it was for ministry. From setting the mood for a call to repentance at the end of a service or putting people into a more generous mood right before or during the receipt of an offering, music, we were told, could really move people. I totally agree. Over the centuries, music has been used to move people emotionally, not just in religion, but in politics, culture, government, sports, fitness, and even war. Since music moves people, doing whatever it takes to have the best musical experience at a church becomes priority because one thing that the American church culture has seen for sure is that the American church attendee is often very consumer-oriented, and if they don't like the "services" they receive at a given local church, they will not hesitate to attend elsewhere. Thus begins the competition for creating the best worship experience. One pastor I worked for when I was an associate pastor told me that our goal should be to see what services the larger churches in the next town over offered and replicate them so that the people who drove right by our church to go to the larger one in the next town would instead come to ours. While that's not quite the Great Commission, at least he was honest about it.

One church with which I'm familiar, while undergoing a renovation of their facility decided to borrow an extra \$50,000 for improvements to stage lighting, sound systems, and video backdrop technologies. All of these things were for the purpose of creating a more concert-like, state of the art worship experience. While these things are not necessarily wrong, one has to wonder if God expects us to go into debt in order to have a better time singing out our adoration of him.

Years ago, I heard a missionary speak about the first time his children, all of whom had been born overseas, came to the States and attended a church service at which he would be speaking. They sat quietly on the front row for the hour before the service began while the worship team and the band warmed up, practiced, and performed sound and video checks. One of the children leaned over to his father and asked, "Daddy, when will the show start?" While I don't question the devotion of the artist or the motives of the worshipers, the modern worship experience does seem to be all about the "show." When questioning this concept once, I was told that the worship pastor's job was to "usher us into the presence of God," a phrase which doesn't seem to have its roots in Jesus' teachings, yet one can easily see how this belief has elevated musical worship to a level that warrants and justifies us spending half our gathering time singing and relegating a substantial portion of our budgets to bringing about a professional worship experience. I can't help but wonder if we ought to be looking to spend our time and resources more proportionally on the things that Jesus seemed to deem most important. I love to worship God through song, and I love how it makes me feel when I do, but this should not be my motive in worshipping through song. If "it's all about you, Jesus," then doing what Jesus thought was most important should be paramount in all our church activities. Another version of the scripture I quoted earlier from Romans 12 this way:

"So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work and walking around life— and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you." Romans 12:1-2 The Message

God wants more than our song. He wants our hearts and our lives.

## Chapter Seven

### The Ultimate Diversion

One definition of the word *inspiration* is “to stir up from within.” Over the last decade or two, I have noticed that most of the things which are inspiring me to *things*- things which move me to godly pursuits- are not religious in any way. By religious, I mean two things. First is that which is typically viewed as spiritual, and second are those things done out of habit. Not all habits are bad, but I have found that when we do things ritualistically, or out of habit, they can often lose the meaning for which they were initially started. When this happens, our rituals can become ruts in which we get stuck. Many things have inspired me to move deeper into relationship with Jesus: time spent in nature; lyrics to a song; a touching moment with my kids; a fragrance that evokes a memory; meaningful conversation with my wife when we have alone time to talk on a road trip; an unrushed conversation with a good friend. These all require me to slow down and experience the moment. Interestingly enough, in the parable of the sower, Jesus speaks of the seed that is sown among thorns and the weeds that rise up to choke them out. It represents someone who hears the kingdom message but is overwhelmed by the worries of this life and the things they feel they have to do so that the seed is unproductive, and nothing comes from it. It seems that business and worries can thwart (I love that word) the message of God’s grace in your life. In our fast-paced society, demands for our time scream at us from every direction. The rise of the electronic age is both a blessing and a curse. The iPad on which I write this book is also filled with apps that will allow me to stream on demand thousands of hours’ worth of shows I didn’t even know existed before. In addition, there are apps that will allow me to keep up with what’s going on in everyone else’s lives without ever lifting a finger to live my own.

The temptation for busyness doesn’t only come from the advance of the digital era. For many parents, the temptation for busyness comes as their kids are drawn into non-stop, year-round extracurricular activities. Quality activities that used to be seen as options for developing a more well-rounded child or as opportunities to expose your kids to a variety of things so they could discover their passions and gifts have now become incredibly demanding. A variety of sports, some of which seem to start while the kids are still in diapers, are seen as essential if your child is going to get a scholarship to play at college or have the possibility of going pro one day, and they now dominate the year-round free time of not only our children but parents as well. I feel for parents who get caught up in this non-stop practice and game schedule trap. Even well-meaning coaches can put way too much pressure on kids to perform instead of just having fun. And let’s just put to bed the false hope that many parents have about getting their kid a scholarship or into the pros one day. If you added up the number of hours spent by the parents of child athletes shuttling kids and watching practices and

games for the thirteen to fifteen years they play sports, I bet it would be astounding. Let's say, for sake of reference, that a parent with a couple of kids spends ten hours a week in these activities over the course of the fifteen years their child athletes are active. Ten hours a week multiplied by fifty-two weeks is 520 hours per year and 7,800 hours over fifteen years. And we often fail to see the value of our time. Were you to get paid for those 7,800 hours at a rate of \$15.00 per hour, that would total \$117,000.00. Add in compound interest, and you could easily pay for those children's education yourself. Or why not work five hours a week on the side doing something your kids could help you with? You could be teaching them valuable life lessons (the kind we often say our kids will miss out on if they don't play organized sports). You could spend your newfound free time recreating with your kids instead of outsourcing this part of your parenting. Think about how many parents miss out on much needed down time or Sabbath rest because their free time is sucked away by the ongoing need to transport children from place to place. And it isn't only sports: dance; gymnastics; music lessons and competitions; Scouts; Brownies; 4H... and the list of opportunities goes on. I'm not suggesting that these activities are bad in limited scope, but when multiple activities for each child are committed to, things can easily get out of hand.

My thing growing up wasn't sports. It was church activities and involvement. The opportunities became obligations, and I remember quite well when my dad intervened and reminded me that what was best for the family was more important than what was best for the church. It was then that I remember us taking a step back and choosing on occasion to miss an activity.

Some of the best memories of my childhood revolve around us playing games around the kitchen table or time spent round a campfire, time spent hiking in the mountains, fishing at the lake, or taking road trips to see things I had never seen before, all with my family and sometimes close friends. None of these activities screamed for our attention or expected involvement, but built into them were virtually every life lesson I ever learned. Absent from them was the sense of drivenness and preoccupation with competition and the vicious cycle of busyness that would have kept us from finding the unique inspiration God had planted deep inside of us. Busyness can steal away the joy that life is supposed to bring simply by displacing from our lives the still time we need to get our moorings or to better chart our course.

As parents, it is our role to train up our kids in the way they should go, not in the way our culture thinks they should go, or in the opposite way that we went, or even in the exact way that we went. And many of us need to train ourselves up in the way that *we*

should go. Self-parenting is a great course of action when you recognize that some part of you has yet to mature.

Busyness isn't just about the kids' schedules or our entertainment mindset; it's also about not trusting God to provide and instead working so many hours and not revising our standard of living a bit so that less work will be necessary. It's about the organizational church that keeps us busy without really building relationships and makes us feel like we're doing something good even though it may not be beneficial.

"Who am I" and "Why am I here" are huge questions that everyone needs answered. Unfortunately, they are questions that rarely get asked because the enemy of our souls tempts us with a lot of things that seem important but ultimately prevent us from doing what's vital. It's horrible to think about the truth from the parable of the sower that the abundant life gets choked out and stripped away by the trappings of a busy one.

### Conclusion

I believe that every life has a grand purpose, that each of us was designed with specific gifts, talents, and abilities. I believe that when we follow the desires God puts in our hearts, it leads us to our destinies. I believe that when we dedicate the time necessary to pursue, experiment, and dream that we will find a life of adventure, excitement, and fulfillment- an abundant life that Jesus intended for each one of us to live. I also believe that much, if not much of "modern Christianity" unintentionally strips away the motive, resources, and freedom necessary for becoming who God intended us to be.

Jesus said it best: "Are you tired, weary, burned out on religion? Come to me, walk with me, work with me, let me show you the unforced rhythms of grace."

The way of Jesus is simple, but not necessarily easy. What he intends for us is a life of love lived on purpose with an uncomplicated movement toward being who he intended us to be in the first place. Grow, change, move forward with the Holy Spirit guiding you. Have the courage to boil down your religion without watering down your faith. Dream big dreams. Take ten minutes today to "imagine"- that is, meditate on what life could be like if you dare to be simple like Jesus. Then I believe you will be on your way to the life you always wanted but never believed you could live.