



EVERYDAY PRACTICES  
FOR A VIBRANT FAITH

*AFTER*  
**I BELIEVE**

JAMES EMERY WHITE

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of Compassion International

# ***AFTER* "I BELIEVE"**

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**JAMES EMERY WHITE**



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James Emery White, After “I Believe”

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# INTRODUCTION

*Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.—Jesus, Matthew 11:28–30*

When I was twenty years old, I had several close friends who knew I was very, very far from God, but they cared about me. I remember how one night when we were together, one of them told me the story of their faith journey to Christ. It came out very naturally in the course of our conversation together. It was interesting, parts of it were convicting, and (admittedly) parts were uncomfortable at times. What was clear was that I wasn't ready. They would invite me to church or to a campus Christian ministry they were a part of, and I would always say no.

I had been raised by a PhD father and a schoolteacher mother. Reading and books, intellectual conversations and debate had been the wallpaper of my life. In our family, Christianity as a belief system was embraced, though we were largely unchurched throughout my childhood. I would have told you I was a Christian because of what I believed, but I wasn't one based on how I

behaved. The divide between knowing and doing, believing and behaving—the idea of Savior and the reality of Lord—was stark.

There were moments this was revealed to me in very pointed ways. For example, one late night in college, after more than my fair share of beer or whiskey or whatever my choice had been for that night, I got into a debate with someone who was a Mormon. I've always been disciplined about research and study, and I loved to debate people. We were talking, and I was slicing and dicing through the historicity and theology of his religion. He remained silent until I was done with my tirade and then had just one question for me in response: "How can you say anything to me about what's right or wrong with how you live?"

He was right. It stung, but not enough.

Then I went through a summer that was . . . awful. The details aren't important, but I hit rock bottom in all kinds of ways. For the first time in my life, I was open to God, open to spiritual things—just open to change. I didn't like where my life was heading. At the start of the new school year, friends again invited me to go to a campus Christian ministry meeting with them. You could have knocked them over with a feather when I said okay.

It was a disarming experience. There were two hundred or more students there, and students I recognized. Athletes, people from student government, people I knew from class. Normal people. People I knew and liked and respected. The music was not like anything I had ever heard in church the few times I went as a kid. It was led by students playing guitars and came dangerously close to actually having a beat.

Then came the talk.

A twenty-something leader served up Jesus and the Christian faith raw and unfiltered. It was direct, challenging, and clear. I was talked to and with—not at. And it was on what I needed more than anything—someone confronting me directly about where I stood with God in terms of both head and heart. At the end,

there was a challenge to accept that for my life—for Christ to be my Leader and Forgiver.

I did. I went home on cloud nine. I had truly crossed the line of faith. There was actually a lot I didn't know. I knew a fair amount about Christ, a disproportionate amount for a new Christian, but virtually nothing about the Christ *life*.

This is a book for those who have crossed the line of faith and become a Christian on how to become Christlike. To truly engage the Christ *life*. To *grow* in that faith. It is a companion to *Christianity for People Who Aren't Christians*, a book designed to help those exploring the Christian faith for their life. This book is designed to help those who have chosen Christianity as their faith to develop themselves spiritually in light of that choice. This is not unlike developing yourself physically. If you want to develop your physical life, you invest in exercises, activities, and pursuits that will develop your body. Developing a spiritual life also involves certain exercises. You will find these exercises, along with other activities and relationships, experiences and investments, in each chapter.

There is an important distinction, though, between spiritual development and other areas of self-improvement. If I work out to improve my physical life, I am *being* physical. If I engage in a book discussion group to develop myself intellectually, I am *being* intellectual. Not so with our spiritual life: Spiritual exercises are *not* the same as *being* spiritual. By themselves, spiritual activities lead to nothing but lifeless religion. The heart of authentic Christian spirituality is relational, not institutional, nor—a surprise to many—simply experiential. True Christian spirituality is intimacy with God and an ongoing transformation into the likeness of Christ. In other words, much of what we will explore together are the means to an end—a deeper, more intimate relationship with God through Jesus.

I had many people invest in my own journey of spiritual growth and life as a follower of Christ. It is my hope and prayer that this book, in some small way, pays their investment forward.



# IDENTITIES, DECEPTIONS, AND MYTHS

*The words “You are my Beloved” reveal the most intimate truth about all human beings.—Henri J. M. Nouwen<sup>1</sup>*

*New.*

It’s an amazing word, and there’s rarely a time we don’t like it. A new car, a new year, a new baby, a new . . . you. That’s the promise of the Christian life. A new *you*. The way Paul describes this in his letter to the Corinthian church in the New Testament almost bristles with excitement: “Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun! And all of this is a gift from God, who brought us back to himself through Christ” (2 Cor. 5:17–18 NLT).

## **Your Identities in Christ**

Understanding this newness is at the heart of developing your life in Christ. If you do not understand your new identity and new position, you will never be able to grow into who you have been called to be. Your new life in Christ *is* this new identity. And it begins with your new identity as a child of God.

## *You Are Adopted*

When you became a Christian, you entered into that relationship with God through adoption. You became a son or daughter. That is who you are in Christ. In the book of John, the Bible says, "Yet to all who did receive him [Christ], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (1:12). In Galatians, we read, "For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (3:26 NLT). This is important. When we come to God, we aren't just saved from some kind of punishment, given a set of creeds and doctrines, or given our marching orders and told to fall into line. We are adopted into his family as children!

Now, in one sense, Christian or not, we are all God's children. He created all of us and he loves all of us. But when we live apart from him, we break off that relationship and, as a result, separate ourselves from God. It's as if we abandon the family and legally change our last name. But as Christians, we have received forgiveness for anything we have ever done that is wrong or hurtful in God's eyes and have come home and entered into the intimacy of God's love for us as Father to child. We then continually drink from that forgiveness and acceptance and grace. We have become adopted, welcomed back, into his family. We have come home and become who we were meant to be—prized sons and precious daughters in an intimate relationship with our Father God.

When we come to God as Father through Jesus, we hear from God the same thing Jesus heard as his Son. Did you know that? When you emerge from the waters of baptism, the Father says the same thing to you he said to his Son, Jesus, at his baptism: "And a voice from heaven said, 'You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy'" (Luke 3:22 NLT). David Taylor writes that this is our baptism name. We are named "The loved one—Beloved." Of all the things God could have said about the Son, he said, "You are the beloved." And when we are baptized in Jesus's

name, we hear the same whisper from the Father, calling us our truest name: the loved one.<sup>2</sup>

Being a son or a daughter isn't just a title—it becomes the very beating of God's heart toward us. Or as the apostle John wrote, "Consider the incredible love that the

Father has shown us in allowing us to be called 'children of God'—and that is not just what we are called, but what we *are*" (1 John 3:1 Phillips, emphasis mine). There's nothing you can ever do to make him love you more, and there's nothing you can ever do to make him love you less.

As the apostle Paul taught, "May you be able to feel and understand, as all God's children should, how long, how wide, how deep, and how high

his love really is; and to experience this love for yourselves, though it is so great that you will never see the end of it or fully know or understand it" (Eph. 3:18–19 TLB).

But that's not all. Not only does God offer us that identity, he wants us to live in light of it. This is key, because a change in identity doesn't mean anything if it isn't allowed to speak to how you actually live. God wants us to *live* as sons and daughters, and to let that new identity form the deepest understanding of who we are and how we relate to him! Again, being a son or a daughter isn't just a title—it's a new status. It's how you can now *relate* to God—how you are *supposed* to relate to God.

Jesus went out of his way to teach this, to show that this is how relating to God was meant to be. We see an example of this in how he taught his followers to pray. Back in Jesus's day, many of the varying religious sects and groups were *known* by how they prayed. That is how they were marked. So it was very natural for the followers of Jesus to say, "So what kind of pray-ers are we?"

*"Consider the incredible love that the Father has shown us in allowing us to be called 'children of God'—and that is not just what we are called, but what we are" (1 John 3:1 Phillips).*

What will mark us when we pray? What defines our movement? Teach us." Jesus agreed and said, "This is how you should talk to God the Father." Then he gave them the suggested outline. It was not a verbatim set of words to parrot back. It was similar to "Pray like this . . . pray along these lines." It was more the *way* to talk to God, the things you should talk to God about. And it began in a most startling way: "Our Father in heaven." When Jesus began with that, the mouths of the people listening dropped open. If they were standing they surely sat down. It may have been the most startling thing they had heard from him to that point.

Why? Because he used the Aramaic word *Abba* for "Father." No one had ever used that word for God before, much less as a way of addressing him. This was spiritual history being made. *Abba* was the most intimate family term there was, used between a very small child and their parent.<sup>3</sup> In contemporary English, it has often been suggested that the best translation would be "Daddy." Some linguists even go so far as to say it should be translated "DaDa," like the very first words that a baby might say while being held in the arms of their father.

His point? We should live and talk and interact and grow in our relationship with God in just this way. As the apostle Paul wrote, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, 'Abba, Father'" (Rom. 8:14–15 NLT).

### ***You Are a Saint***

But you are more than a son or a daughter. As his child, God has also declared you to be a saint. If you are in a relationship with Christ as your Forgiver and Leader, you have been declared, positionally, by God, to be a saint. He now wants you to become what you have been named.

This idea of sainthood was so clear to the early church that it was one of the most common ways for them to refer to each other. They would call each other saints. Notice how the apostle Paul opened his letter to the church at Ephesus: “From Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the *saints* [in Ephesus]” (Eph. 1:1 NET, emphasis mine). He didn’t say to the “people” in Ephesus or the “church” in Ephesus, but the *saints* in Ephesus.

I know, you don’t feel much like a saint. Neither do I. Saints are supposed to be these holy, almost-perfect people who have committed their entire life to doing the work of God in a spirit of humility under great persecution. Not many of us fit that bill. You may have even come from a background where saints were figures from history that the church recognized as people to be venerated, even prayed to. So what does it mean that those of us who are Christ followers are called saints? And not just some of us, but all of us?

The word *saint* means “those who are set apart,” meaning someone who has been freed from the chains of sin, not to mention the consequences of sin. Biblically, a saint is someone who has been made holy. The moment you trust Christ, coming to him for forgiveness and leadership, the very nature of your spiritual state is radically altered. God’s forgiveness moves you from a state where you are under the full weight and penalty of your sin, to a state where that weight and penalty has been removed. This is what becoming a Christ follower—becoming a Christian—is all about. It’s not about getting your act together. It’s not about following a bunch of dos and don’ts. It’s about accepting this radical gift of forgiveness that you could never earn and never deserve. It’s letting what Jesus did on the cross begin the transforming work in you—letting his death take the place of your death, his sinlessness cover your sinfulness.

*When you become a Christian, God has a very clear agenda for your life: it’s to make you like Jesus.*

God doesn't just declare us saints positionally; he also wants to develop us into saints *functionally*. When you become a Christian, God has a very clear agenda for your life: it's to make you like Jesus. It's to take your life and have you become the person he has declared you to be. It's as if God says, "You're a saint—now live like one! Let's start the process and go to work." But that's not all. He also says, "And I'll show you the way."

Imagine if Michael Jordan, the greatest player in NBA history and now owner of the Charlotte Hornets, came to you and said, "You're on my team. You are now officially a member of the Charlotte Hornets basketball team. Here's your uniform and your locker. It's official. You are now a Hornet."

Jordan then goes on to say, "And don't worry—your status as a member of the team has nothing to do with your basketball ability. I am just choosing to accept you, to bestow this identity upon you. You are a Hornet. But here's what I want to do: now that you are on an NBA team, I want you to let me develop you into a professional-level player. I want you to become who I have declared you to be."

So let's explore how to become the saint God has declared you to be as his child. But first, we have to name some deadly deceptions and do away with some spiritual myths.

## **Deadly Deceptions**

If you are going to understand the nature of almost all deceptions related to spiritual growth and development, you will need to understand that, in truth, there's no such thing as a spiritual life. There's just life, and it's meant to be lived spiritually. That's not particularly original with me. It's been the headline for what the Christ life is all about for more than two thousand years. The very word *Christian* means "little Christ," meaning someone who is living like Jesus lived. So your spiritual life is not a compartment or area of your existence. It's meant to permeate every fiber of your being.

The great spiritual deception is thinking that the *appearance* of spirituality is spirituality itself. I once heard of an eastern holy man who covered himself with ashes as a sign of humility and regularly sat on a prominent street corner in his city. When tourists asked permission to take his picture, he would rearrange the ashes to create the best image of destitution and humility. Was that true humility? Was that true spirituality? Of course not. But you'd be surprised how many people fall into this trap—not in crass, hypocritical ways like rearranging their ashes to look like they're closer to God, but in well-intentioned ways, confusing appearance with reality.

Two substitutes for authentic spirituality are the deadliest.

### ***The Deception of Religion***

The first of these deadly deceptions is religious activity, or just religion itself. The deception of religion is thinking that when we go through certain religious rites, rituals, or membership processes, or when we attend certain services or ceremonies, we are being spiritual. The more revealing name for this is *legalism*.

As I have written before, legalism is putting a bunch of dos and don'ts on people to follow, in the name of God, that God did not say they needed to follow.<sup>4</sup> It's a religion of added rules and regulations, standards and stipulations, codes and conduct, contrived by someone to determine who is, or who is not, spiritual. It's being asked—if not forced—to measure up in a way that can be binding and brutal, discouraging and defeating. It rightly feels about a million miles away from anything authentic, anything life-changing, anything . . . freeing.

Legalism is actually what set up the tension between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day—the “teachers of the law” and the group known as the Pharisees. They were very religious and considered to be the holiest people of the day. They took the Old Testament and calculated that it contained 248 commandments

*Christianity  
is not about  
religion,  
it's about a  
relationship.*

and 365 prohibitions, and they lifted those out and vowed to obey every single one. To make sure that they didn't break one of those rules, they made rules about the rules they made and laws about the laws! In fact, they came up with more than 1,500 additions.

So how do rules about rules about rules play out? To avoid taking the Lord's name in vain, they refused to ever say God's name, even in honor and respect, worship and prayer. To avoid committing adultery, they would lower their heads whenever they passed a woman so that they wouldn't even look at her, because if they looked they might lust. This is why the most holy of all were known as "bleeding Pharisees" because they were lowering their heads so much they were always running into walls.<sup>5</sup> To properly follow the command to rest on the Sabbath and not work, they decided they needed to figure out how many steps you could take on those days without it becoming labor. For whatever reason, they calculated that to travel beyond about a half mile on the Sabbath was work and, therefore, violated the law. They also decided that on holy days, a person could eat but not cook, could bandage a wounded person but not apply medicine. And if you were a woman, you couldn't look in the mirror because you might see a gray hair, and if you saw a gray hair you might be tempted to pluck it out, and plucking out a gray hair was considered work, and you couldn't work on the Sabbath.<sup>6</sup>

But Christianity is not about religion, much less its accompanying seduction into legalism; it's about a relationship.

### *The Deception of Knowledge*

A second deception related to spiritual growth and development is the deceit of knowledge. This is the idea that all you need is to know and believe the right things: intellectual assent—embracing Christianity on a philosophical level. But knowledge alone is

meaningless. I can believe in a lot of things, but that doesn't mean those beliefs impact my life, much less reflect my life. As Thomas Kelly once observed, the heart of spirituality has less to do with "knowledge about" than it does "acquaintance with."<sup>7</sup>

I spent about three weeks in Moscow in the spring of 1994 at the Moscow Theological Institute as part of a teaching team that went to work with Russian pastors who had never received any theological, biblical, or pastoral training. It was an interesting time to go to Russia. It had been only a few years since the fall of Communism, under which Christianity had been outlawed and Christians had been routinely persecuted and imprisoned. Freedom was something new and something not wholly trusted to last. Many of my students still bore the scars and serial-number tattoos from the gulags and prisons where they were imprisoned for their faith. One of the churches I spoke at was a former underground house church that had met and worshiped together secretly for years under Communist rule. Their faith was deep, infectious, and authentic.

I once read of a similar house church that met in small groups at night throughout the week in order to avoid arousing the suspicion of the KGB informers. One of the underground small groups began to softly sing a hymn together, when suddenly two soldiers walked in, pointed their guns at the group, and announced, "If you wish to renounce your commitment to Jesus Christ, leave now!" Two or three of the members of the group quickly left and, after a few more seconds, two more.

Then one of the soldiers looked at the remaining group, pointed his rifle, and said, "This is your last chance. Either turn against your faith in Christ or stay and suffer the consequences." And when he said that, he pulled the bolt back on his gun to make it ready for fire. Two more people slipped out into the night. No one else moved, including parents with small children trembling by their side, each one expecting to be gunned down or imprisoned. Then one of the soldiers shut the door, looked back at those who

stood against the wall, and said, "Keep your hands up—but this time in praise to God. We too are Christians. But we have learned that unless people are willing to die for their faith, they cannot be fully trusted."<sup>8</sup>

Whenever I think of that story, I am reminded that many people claim to believe in Jesus, but true belief is more than just saying that you accept the facts. Believing is giving your life over to what you say you believe. Believing is commitment. In very direct terms, James, the half brother of Jesus, wrote, "Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? . . . Do I hear you professing to believe in the one and only God, but then observe you complacently sitting back as if you had done something wonderful? That's just great. Demons do that, but what good does it do them? Use your heads!" (James 2:14, 19 MSG).

So how do you experience an authentically spiritual life, one that results in real life change that reflects the Jesus you follow? Now that we've addressed the deceptions, let's clear away the myths.

## **The Myths of Spiritual Growth**

Comedian Yakov Smirnoff immigrated to the United States in 1977 not knowing any English. He joked that when he first came to the United States from Russia, he wasn't prepared for the incredible variety of instant products available in American grocery stores. "I'll never forget walking down one of the aisles (of the grocery store) and seeing powdered milk; just add water and you get milk. Right next to it was powdered orange juice; just add water and you get orange juice. Then I saw baby powder, and I thought to myself, *What a country!*"<sup>9</sup>

### ***The Instantaneous Myth***

The first misunderstanding about the nature of the spiritual life is that spirituality happens—instantly—at the moment you enter

into a relationship with God. This false belief is that when you give your life to Christ, you experience an immediate, substantive, in-depth miraculous change in habits, attitudes, and character. Just add God, and you get a spiritual life. The truth is that entering into a relationship with God does nothing more than begin the ongoing development of that relationship.

C. S. Lewis explored the intricacies of spiritual growth in his masterful work *The Screwtape Letters* under the guise of correspondence between two demons over their “patient” on earth. Early on in the book, the human who had been the demons’ subject of temptation becomes a Christian. The elder demon, named Screwtape, counsels his young nephew, Wormwood, not to despair, saying, “All the habits of the patient, both mental and bodily, are still in our favour.”<sup>10</sup> The insight of Lewis’s Screwtape is profound. Deep, lasting life change does not often happen at the moment your relationship with God begins. The Holy Spirit can do whatever he wishes, but even the most casual of observers would quickly note that he hasn’t often desired to work instantaneous, miraculous life change in a new believer’s life.

When you begin your relationship with God, your eternal destiny is altered and you experience a radical reorientation of priorities, a new life purpose, and the power of God in your life. But rather than instant communion with God at the deepest of levels, you experience the beginning of a new relationship that develops in intimacy and depth over time. And rather than the immediate liberation from every bad habit or character flaw you’ve ever possessed, the experience is more like an army that lands on a beachhead

*Rather than the immediate liberation from every bad habit or character flaw you’ve ever possessed, the experience is more like an army that lands on a beachhead and then begins routing out the enemy as it moves inland.*

and then begins routing out the enemy as it moves inland. This is why the Bible instructs Christians to “let your roots grow down into him and draw up nourishment from him. See that you go on growing in the Lord, and become strong and vigorous in the truth you were taught” (Col. 2:7 TLB). The language is important. You have to *let* your roots grow; you have to *draw up* nourishment; you have to *keep on* growing; you have to *become* strong and vigorous. Spirituality isn’t something that just happens; it’s something to be nurtured, and you have to be intentional about that nurturing. Becoming a Christian is just the beginning of the journey; it’s the start of a life that follows Christ. That life is meant to deepen and grow. As Richard Foster has written, “Superficiality is the curse of our age. . . . The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.”<sup>11</sup>

### *The Time Myth*

Yet while Christianity is a journey, it is not *merely* a journey. Another myth is that true spirituality is simply a by-product of time. Being a Christian does not automatically translate into becoming Christlike. This is why a five-year-old Christian will not necessarily have five years’ worth of spiritual maturity. This is a very important dynamic to understand, so let’s come at it in a different way to drive it home.

I first picked up the game of golf when I was in graduate school. I took two lessons from a course pro, bought a set of the cheapest clubs I could find (I did mention I was in graduate school), and began to play. Initially, I made quick progress. But then I began to play with less and less frequency. Soon, I only played at the annual Christmas gathering with my wife’s family. As you might expect, I played about the same each year—translation, it was rough (and in the rough)—because I hadn’t played since the previous year. I have since started to play with more regularity, and my game has improved. But if someone were to ask me how long I’ve played,

the answer would be deceiving. I could tell them I've played for more than three decades, but that doesn't mean anything because I haven't been intentional about my game during that time. People who have been playing only a year but have developed their game through lessons and practice could easily outplay me.

This is a crucial understanding. I can subscribe to golf magazines, purchase golf equipment, live by a golf course, wear golf clothing, watch golf on TV, and hang out at the golf clubhouse and never improve my game! Simply being exposed to something has little bearing on whether we become proficient at it. Again, while your spirituality takes time, it is not simply a by-product of time. The writer of the book of Hebrews told a group of Christians that "though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again" (5:12). That stings, but it's true. I can be exposed to any number of Christians and dynamics of Christian culture but not be affected by them. Yet I can be deceived into thinking I have been.

### ***The Effort Myth***

Another myth is that spiritual growth is attained through effort. The idea is that people must simply decide to be spiritual, as though spiritual living is essentially an act of the will. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are believed to be matters of *effort*. While spiritual development demands intentionality, merely trying to experience life change can never bring about life change. Again, let's come at it from a different angle to ensure we don't miss the nature of this myth.

I mentioned Michael Jordan earlier. A whole generation of basketball players grew up wanting to "be like Mike." While names like LeBron, Kobe, Steph, and Zion have since emerged, few deny that Michael was arguably the greatest of all time. People still want to shoot like he did, jump like he did, jam like he did and, most importantly, have their tongue hang out like he did. And they try!

Hard! But few come even close to mirroring Jordan's level of play. Why? Because you don't play like Jordan by trying; you play to his level by *training*. And not just any training, but the training regimen he followed to play the way he played.<sup>12</sup>

The heart of Christian spirituality is to be like Jesus. To be like Jesus you don't merely try either—you train. You do the things Jesus did in order to live like Jesus lived. That's why Jesus once said that "everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher" (Luke 6:40). Or as the apostle Paul wrote, "Train yourself to be godly" (1 Tim. 4:7). "Anyone who is not a continual student of Jesus, and who nevertheless reads the great promises of the Bible as if they were for him or her," writes Dallas Willard, "is like someone trying to cash a check on another person's account."<sup>13</sup> The key to a spiritual life is to order your life around those activities, disciplines, and practices that were modeled by Christ in order to accomplish through training what you cannot do by trying.<sup>14</sup>

### ***The Solo Myth***

A fourth myth is that a *personal* relationship with God through Christ is synonymous with a *private* relationship with God through Christ. Think about the following phrases:

"It's not what you know, but who you know."

"It pays to be well-connected."

"It takes having friends in high places."

"She has a great support network."

"He's got a good supporting cast."

"They were well coached."

Then there's the opposite:

"I don't think he had anyone helping him."

"Nobody had his back."

“She didn’t know the right people.”

“He tried to do it by himself.”

What do all of these sayings point to? One thing: the power of people in our life. Sadly, a recent LifeWay study found that less than half of all Christians active in church spend time with other believers to help them grow in their faith.<sup>15</sup> The younger the age, the more individualistic they are. Two-thirds say they don’t need anyone in their life to help them walk with God. The truth, however, is that becoming a truly spiritual person is a team sport.

This insight is taught throughout the Bible. In Proverbs, we read that “as iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another” (27:17). The writer of Hebrews said, “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another” (10:24–25). Throughout the Bible, in the lives of those who developed their faith in God, you see strategic relationships. Jethro mentored his son-in-law, Moses. Moses then turned around and made a relational contribution to the life of his successor, Joshua. The prophet Elijah poured his life into Elisha. Mary, the mother of Jesus, turned to her older cousin, Elizabeth. And Jesus set apart twelve men in order to invest his life into theirs. His disciples followed suit, with Paul taking Timothy under his wing, and Barnabas and Peter doing the same for Mark. Investing through relationship was the anvil on which spiritual growth was forged.

*“As iron sharpens  
iron, so one  
man sharpens  
another”  
(Prov. 27:17).*

### ***The Transformation Myth***

The final myth is one you will want to continually remind yourself of throughout the course of your life. Let’s call it the transformation myth. This is the idea that transformation is an

achievement, or something you attain. Like a light switch, once you turn it on, it's on. The truth is that your spiritual growth will often be a process of three steps forward, two steps back. This has been called the "law of undulation." To *undulate* means to move in waves, to go up and down in terms of your progress. This is simply the normal process when it comes to the flow of our spiritual lives. It is the nearest thing we humans have to normalcy.<sup>16</sup>

Not only is this true in terms of actual spiritual growth, but also in terms of how you actually *feel*. Many people believe that true spirituality is gauged by feeling. Do I *feel* close to God? Do I *feel* spiritual? The reality is that authentic spirituality, while a dynamic enterprise that involves your entire being, has more to do with how you respond to your emotions than it does with your current emotional state. There will be times you feel up or down, high or low but, in truth, your feelings may have very little to do

*The state of your spirituality does not rest on how you feel, but on who you are—and who you are becoming.*

with the actual state of where you are with God. The state of your spirituality does not rest on how you feel, but on who you are—and who you are becoming.

All to say, God is in the soul-making business, and he does promise to transform you! You don't have to transform yourself or generate feelings of transformation. As God said through the prophet Ezekiel, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezek. 36:26).

### **Becoming a Disciple**

The key idea is becoming a disciple. In Christian circles, we often talk of "discipling" someone, "being" disciplined, or going to a church where there is a strong emphasis on discipleship. The problem is that most of the time, that means going where you will be

spoon-fed or bottle-fed. Where someone is actively teaching while you are passively taking notes. Someone is discipling you, which means how it affects you is based on whether they are a good discipler, or whether the church is effective in terms of discipleship. In other words, discipleship is something you receive.

This is why people talk about being fed or complain that they aren't being fed. Discipleship isn't really about them, it's about something that happens *to* them. There is an active discipleship force and they are the passive recipients. But if that's the way it works, why aren't more people like the disciples we read about in the Bible, particularly when, in truth, there is greater access to gifted teachers (online) than ever before?

Our confusion stems from the fact that this is not what discipleship is about. The word *disciple* is from the Greek word *mathetes* and literally means "learner." You can only be a learner if you are the one doing the learning. The point is that you, as a disciple—as a learner—are to be actively engaged in learning. It is *your* responsibility to take up the mantle of self-development.

Think about how this worked with Jesus. He invited a very select group of men and women to do life with him for approximately thirty-six months. Formally, there were the twelve disciples, but there were also women such as Mary, Martha, and Mary Magdalene whom he invested in as well. Theirs was an invitation to learn—not to enter into a passive process of being fed. We certainly know that not all of the twelve took this invitation to heart; one in particular didn't seem to learn much of anything. If discipleship was simply something "done" to you or for you, Jesus failed epically as a discipler with Judas. Anyone want to say that Jesus was not a good discipler? Then get that understanding of discipleship out of your head.

Here's the truth about being a learner: growing spiritually is something that can be served by other people but ultimately must be owned personally by you. Too many followers of Christ view discipleship as something that is done to them and for them,

almost like a personal enrichment program or getting a life coach. No. That's why in the New Testament book of Hebrews we're told that people who keep looking to get "fed" are in a state of arrested development. They're like babies who never grow up, always wanting their bottle. If you think I'm being sarcastic in how I paraphrase it, read it yourself:

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have *trained themselves* to distinguish good from evil. (Heb. 5:11–14, emphasis mine)

Growing in your faith is not about finding the best teaching, making sure you land in the best small group, and taking the best classes or seminars you can. Those are all fine add-ons, but the heart of the challenge is for you to become an active, self-motivated, self-feeding learner.

## **First Steps**

So how do you begin to change? If transformation is not instantaneous nor merely a product of time, how do you enter into training? Two ways will provide the backdrop for the rest of this book: cooperation and investment. Let's begin with cooperation.

### ***Cooperation***

One of the ways I worked my way through graduate school was by coaching basketball. Some of the kids on my team had incredible talent and seemingly unlimited potential. I knew that if they would follow what I said, and follow much better coaches than

me in the years to come, they could channel that skill and talent into a team effort on the court, and begin a path that could take them all the way to college competition—maybe even to the NBA. Here’s what happened: Some kids cooperated with my coaching effort and others didn’t. At the end of the season, some of the most talented kids on the team were no different than when they started, while others had developed tremendously as players.

This is the nature of the work of the Holy Spirit. He wants to coach you. That’s why the Bible says in 1 Thessalonians 5:19, “Do not hold back the work of the Holy Spirit” (NCV). And in Ephesians the Bible says, “Let the [Holy] Spirit change your way of thinking and make you into a new person” (4:23–24 CEV). Circle that word *let!* One of the wonders of the Christian life is that the Holy Spirit actually takes up residence inside of you. He enters into your inner world, your moral conscience, and your spirit. That’s why Scripture says in Galatians 5, “Let us follow the Spirit’s leading in every part of our lives” (v. 25 NLT). God wants to transform you. He wants you to come to him as you are; receive his gifts of grace, forgiveness, and love; and then let him begin the process of molding you and developing you into all that you were created to be and do. He’ll use everything from prayer to relationships, from the Bible to key events. Make no mistake—you will be actively and supernaturally coached.

But our metaphor breaks down if we make it nothing more than coaching, because God will simultaneously do a work of creation in your life as you cooperate. Our life in Christ is something that is given and developed through our relationship with him. We must never reduce our spiritual life to something we develop on our own—it is the work of God in us.

### ***Investment***

This brings up the second way we enter into training: *investment*. You have to take the coaching you receive and the creative

work God wants to perform and make the kind of investments necessary for that creative work to reach its maximum potential. Think of a mutual fund. You open the fund with an initial investment, say \$1,000. If that is all you ever invest, then the amount of growth in your mutual fund will be very minimal and very slow. You must make continued investments for the fund to move forward and begin to generate the kind of dividends and growth you desire. Or more to the point, think of a new relationship. Say you meet someone at a party and have instant chemistry and many shared interests. But if you never connect with that person again, or at best, do so sparingly, then the hope of that relationship will never reach its potential.

You can become a Christian and never become a disciple. You can begin a life in Christ and then never develop it. “Most of us turned to Christ when we realized there was a difference between Christianity as a religion and Christianity as a relationship,” writes Ken Gire. “Sometime after entering into that relationship with Christ, we realized something else. That there is a difference between a personal relationship with Christ and an intimate one.”<sup>17</sup> You must cooperate with God’s leading and direction in your life and make the necessary investments to position yourself for his ongoing work in your life. While living life spiritually consists of being, not doing, there are things you can *do* that will help you *be*! The goal of this book is to help you explore those “doings” for the sake of your being, beginning with God’s manual for spiritual living—the Bible.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Do you truly see yourself as a son or daughter of God?  
How about as a saint?
2. With which deception of spirituality do you most identify?
3. Which myth did you most believe?

4. How susceptible are you to tackling the Christ life alone?
5. Have you fallen into the trap of thinking that discipleship is something you receive?
6. In what areas do you need to cooperate more with the work of the Holy Spirit? Where do you need to make more of an investment in your relationship with God?