



The Jesus Conspiracy II

L i f e o n t h e V i n e





The Jesus Conspiracy II

Life on the Vine

Daily Practices For Learning To Live and Love Like Jesus

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INTRODUCTION

You are created for a divine, abundant life. However, our busy and complex lives often keep us from fully entering into the “abundant life” Jesus promised. Week after week, “good church” people faithfully attend services and programs hoping and praying for a richer, fuller life asking, “Does God’s presence really change anything?” Jesus says, “I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly” (Matt. 11:30, *The Message*).

This can sound like a deal too good to be true, but I believe the desire and longing for a different sort of life comes from God - It is not an unrealistic dream that can never be attained. The reason we want more of God is because His Spirit is seeking us out. (John 15) The desire and desperation to “keep company” with Jesus is God’s work (His grace) preparing you to apprentice yourself to Jesus. A new life (transformation) awaits you as you *keep company* with Jesus.

How to use this guide:

The only way to experience the life God has in store for us is to pursue it. This is a 6-week guide that is filled with daily practices, designed to help you learn how to live and love like Jesus. It is based on a 5-day week because on the weekends you should just rest.

Here are some practical ways that you can use this booklet to help you in this journey of cultivating intimacy with God. These are not steps or answers but opportunities for transformation to take place.

1. Begin with a moment of silence and become aware of the presence of God.
2. Read the introductions for each day and read and meditate on the Scripture.
3. You may find it helpful to reflect and journal through the questions. Recording any thing that stands out for you in your time of prayer.
4. Consider experimenting with the practices that are provided.
5. You may want to journal your responses on the blog: jesusconspiracyll.blogspot.com. This can provide encouragement for the whole body as we journey together.



WEEK
1

ABIDING

Restored by God

Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

John 15:4-7

DAY
1

ABIDINGRestored by God

As followers of Christ we are to be imitators; imitating God and the life He lived through His son, Jesus. Developing a healthy rhythm of **Abiding**, **Loving**, and **Serving** is essential in the life of a disciple (a student of Christ).

God introduced a healthy rhythm when He first created Adam and Eve. On our first full day as humans we got to hang out with God the whole day. This models the idea that we ought to work from rest, rather than rest from work. Jesus also modeled this same principle in Mark 1:12-13. Before Jesus began His ministry, he spent 40 days with His Father and no one else. We should never expect to live this abundant life if we don't follow the same path Christ did.

Scripture:

- Spend some time slowly reading and meditating Mark 1:12-13 and John 15:1-8.

Reflection:

- When you think about “wasting time with God,” what fears do you have? Do you tend to work from rest or rest from work?
- What happens to you when you go without regular rhythms that allow you to rest in God?

Practice:

- You have probably already spent 5-10 minutes with God just by starting this first day of the devotional book, but plan on taking at least another 5 minutes and just sit silently with God. Start by reading John 15:4: *“Abide in Me. And I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me.”* If you find that you continue to be distracted just recite the verse again and return to resting in God. Set a timer so you do not worry about time.

DAY
2

ABIDING

Restored by God

“Christians feed on Scripture. Holy Scripture nurtures the holy community as food nurtures the human body. Christians don’t simply learn or study or use Scripture; we assimilate it, take it into our lives in such a way that it gets metabolized into acts of love, cups of cold water, missions into all the world, healing and evangelism and justice in Jesus’ name, hands raised in adoration of the Father, feet washed in the company with the Son.”
-Eugene Peterson (*Eat this Book*)

One way in which we *abide in Christ*, is to meditate on Scripture. Meditation is a method of reading the Bible in a devotional way (as opposed to literal, moral, or allegorical) believing that, because it is God’s inspired Word, it’s a living and active text that has something to say to each individual believer. Meditation assumes that, by entering deeply into the text of God’s holy Word, God will be made known to us, speak to us, and shape our lives. It is reading the Bible with no agenda, no presuppositions.

Scripture:

- Spend some time slowly reading and meditating on 2 Timothy 3:16-17 and Psalm 119:97-104.

Reflection:

- What is your gut reaction to the word *meditate*?
- Do you tend to rush through things and, if so, what effect do you think that might have on your ability to meditate on Scripture?

Practice:

- There are many ways to meditate on scripture. One way is to just begin to memorize verses and even passages. You may find it helpful to memorize John 15:1-8 over the next 6 weeks. As you memorize it, recite the passage often. Listen for specific words or phrases and ask God to reveal Himself through Scripture. This allows you to begin digesting and living out the words you read and hear.

How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour and that one is what we are doing. A schedule defends us from chaos and whim. It is a net for catching days. It is scaffolding on which a worker can stand and labor with both hands at sections of time. - Annie Dillard

Praying at fixed-times during the day can enable you to keep company with Jesus through out the day. It allows you to integrate your identity in Christ with your everyday tasks and work. Praying at fixed-times also allows you to detach from your own compulsions and remind you that, ultimately, your work and your day are completely tied to God. St. Benedict said, “To pray is to work, to work is to pray.”

Scripture:

- Take some time to look at these passages to see how praying at fixed-times has been a part of the rhythm of God’s people. Daniel 6:10; Psalm 119:164; Acts 3:1

Reflection:

- How do you remind yourself throughout the day that there is more to life than work, tasks, and transactions?
- How do you feel about memorized prayers or using prayers of others? What makes prayer authentic?

Practice:

- There are many ways to pray at fixed-times. If you already have one time of day at which you pray, consider choosing a second time and then maybe a third time. You can use this time to pray spontaneously, with scripture, or by using prayers of others (such as liturgy or the Daily Offices/ Hours). Praying with the Offices or the Hours you could use the resources from: www.northumbiracommunity.org/praytheoffice of the books *The Celtic Daily Prayer: Prayers and Readings from the Northumbria Community* or *The Divine Hours* by Phyllis Tickle. You may find that even just using the Psalms is helpful.



ABIDING

Restored by God

“Prayer is turning towards God, if you can’t pray just turn towards God.” - Thomas Merton

“We look upon prayer simply as a means of getting things for ourselves, but the Biblical purpose of prayer is that we may get to know God Himself.”
Oswald Chambers

Sometimes we tend to mystify the practice of prayer, as if it is some magical practice that, if done correctly, will allow a divine being to grant all of our requests. That is not what prayer is. Prayer is simply having a relationship with God. There are many ways to pray but only one God, and God never intended for it to be difficult to talk to Him.

Scripture:

- Spend some time slowly reading and meditating on John 17:22,23,26.

Reflection:

- What makes it difficult for you to concentrate in prayer?
- How do you tend to react to distractions in prayer?
- What do distractions in prayer reveal about your core identity and concerns?

Practice:

- The ancient Jews believed that prayer began with an intentional awareness of God's presence, "know before whom you are standing" (Berakhot 28b). Find a quiet place either at a park or in your home. Imagine God is sitting with you either in a chair or on a bench, give him a physical space to be. Just begin to have a conversation sharing all your hopes, frustrations, pain, and joy. What does God want to tell you? Ask Him questions and then just listen.



ABIDING

Restored by God

People in a hurry never have time for recovery. Their minds have little time to meditate and pray so that problems can be put in perspective. In short, people in our age are showing signs of physiological disintegration because we are living at a pace that is too fast for our bodies.

Dr. Archibald Hart

How often have you given time to pray or spend time with God in solitude and fallen asleep? Have you felt guilty? Could you be falling asleep because God is giving you the gift of rest? As humans we have limits - we can't say yes to everything. God created us in His image and He is a God who works and rests. It's important to view rest as a spiritual act and not just an act of laziness.

Scripture:

- Psalm 62:1, 116:7, and Deuteronomy 33:12

Reflection

- What exhausts you or keeps you working past your limits? What is it like for you to set aside time for yourself, whether it is rest or play? How regular is that time?

Practice:

- Intentionally place yourself in the presence of God, then do something you delight in: go for a walk, take a nap, talk to a friend, have a cup of coffee, play a game. Enjoy yourself in God. Receive the gift of rest. Tell God what happens in you as you try to rest.



WEEK
2

LOVE OTHERS

This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do what I command you.

John 15:12-14

LOVE OTHERS

I've heard a friend and pastor, Todd Hunter, often say, "Spiritual Formation is for the sake of the world." Having a relationship and abiding in Jesus is not just a private act. It is the way we share the life of God with others. We are meant to live in community because that is how God created us and because that is how God lives in His Trinitarian life.

"Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate." - **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**

Scripture:

- Read and meditate on 1 Corinthians 13:1-7.

Reflection:

- After reading 1 Corinthians 13:1-7, Is it possible to have these qualities or actions without love? Have you ever exhibited some of these qualities without love?

Practice:

- Look at 1 Corinthians 13:1-7. Since God is *love*, replace the word *love* and *it* with *God*. Which of these qualities do you appreciate most in God? How can you begin to live out this quality in your life? Consider all the struggles and fears that accompany this quality for you. Consider also how, if this quality becomes a part of you, it will affect those around you.



LOVE OTHERS

Written by Debbie Phares

As the head of a non-profit organization, one of the most critical decisions that I make is to hire the right person for the job. The team that I create is entrusted with our vision, our name, our key relationships and literally enters into the sacred space of people's homes and churches to represent us. It is completely impossible for me to be with my staff all or even half of the time. All of this requires that I hire my staff very carefully. I choose people that I believe in, whose potential excites me and that I trust.

The bible says that we are the “body” of Christ. We are his hands, feet, legs, eyes and arms to fulfill his mission of bringing God’s kingdom into our world. At SCC we recognize that mission as: **restore, love and serve**. We are the expression of Jesus in this world. Not just through you as an individual, but through us-collectively. Every time that you or someone in the Church steps up to the plate and gives, serves, challenges, or advocates for something good, Christ is acting through us.

Jesus doesn’t need to work through us, he chooses to. Just as I believe in and trust my staff, I believe that God trusts and believes in us. Within the church, this means that we experience Jesus’ presence through each other. Outside of the church, it means that the world experiences Jesus’ presence through us. To abide in Christ, in part, means to abide in the church. We can’t fully abide in Christ unless we are abiding in the church. We are going to spend the next week exploring what it means to abide in Christ through being his body.

Scripture:

- Read 1 Corinthians 12:27 and 12-13

Reflection:

- How does it make you feel to know that God believes and trusts in you? How have you experienced Jesus through the community at Sojourners? What are the ways that people can experience Jesus through our community? What are the ways that we could do better?

Practice:

- Find at least one person at SCC with whom you could share your idea of what Jesus' vision for our community would be. What ideas do you have about how we could reach that vision?

LOVE OTHERS

Written by Debbie Phares

As we watch TV, we see commercials flash across the screen that encourage us to “be an individual.” Stores have signs that implore you to “express yourself.” Magazines give you tips on how to find your “personal style.” Many options are offered to us to create our individuality: clothes, hair color, make-up, music, the list goes on. In our culture we elevate the idea of individuality to the point where we think that it is an end in and of itself. The more unique and different you are, the better. Individuality is the goal.

In the body of Christ, individuality is a means to an end. Individuality, in the form of different gifts and abilities, is the tool that God gives us to serve each other, work together and accomplish His purposes. Uniqueness is not something to be gained or worked towards. It is inherent in each person, a gift of God’s Spirit. You are already an individual, completely unique. In addition, when you became a follower of Jesus, His Spirit blessed you with special gifts. The task is not to make yourself into an individual, but to discover what kind of an individual God

has already made you to be—and celebrate that for God's purposes.

In the bible, Paul lists gifts like leadership, service, administration, discernment, tongues, faith and healing. I believe that God's Spirit still gives all of these gifts and that they are operating in the church today. However, I don't think that this list is comprehensive. I've seen other kinds of gifts at work within the church body. When I look around our church, I see gifts of honesty, humor, adventure, inclusion, and many more. These are unique abilities that different people have that build up our church body and, without which, we would not be the same.

When the members of the body of Christ know and use their gifts, the result is a unity that is born out of interdependence. Unity does not mean that we all have the same point of view, but that we value the importance of each other. Same Spirit, same purpose, different gifts—we need each other.

Scripture:

- Read 1 Corinthians 12:4-12

Reflection:

- What gifts do you see at work in the community at SCC? If you were to name what gifts you think you have, what would they be?

Practice:

- Make a list of 5 people in whom you see God's Spirit actively moving through the use of their unique gifts. Find some way to recognize what God is doing through them—make some phone calls, write some notes, or just give them a hug and a compliment on Sunday.

DAY
9

LOVE OTHERS

Written by Debbie Phares

I am always amazed at how different gifts are expressed in my Life Group. Each person brings something completely unique to the table. As we build relationships with one another these gifts automatically begin to emerge. One member of our group is a master encourager, another always makes sure that each person is included, another keeps us organized and on track, one constantly serves through donating time and still another gives wise counsel and advice. This process seems to be totally organic. As we engage with each other and learn about needs, hopes and opportunities, each member naturally lifts up and offers what she/he can. As our group has grown, we have considered splitting and becoming two groups. We can barely stand to entertain this option. Each of us hates the idea of missing out on the presence of any one person in our group, much less an entire half of the group! Our community would seem so incomplete.

God has created each of us with special and necessary gifts. If you are looking around beating yourself up because you don't act, think, or have gifts like other people you admire, you are missing the point. Your value does not come from conforming to others, it comes from the uniqueness that God has given you. No one can serve the body exactly in the same way that you can. If you are not involved in some way, shape or form, you are denying the body of certain benefits that only you can bring. That doesn't mean that there aren't times where we need to rest—the goal is not a constant state of flurry. However, the gifts that are God-given are so deeply a part of who we are, we will usually find that our efforts are life-giving and energizing rather than draining. The great thing about the gifts of people in my Life Group is that, most of the time, they don't even realize that they are giving anything. They are just being themselves, in genuine relationship with others, and God is using that to bless the people around them. Step into genuine relationship with others in the body of Christ and see what happens! You may be amazed to find out what God will do through you.

Scripture:

- Read 1 Corinthians 12:14-20

Reflection:

- Have you ever found that you did something that touched someone else's life and you didn't even know about it until after the fact? What are the things that you naturally find yourself doing that other people tend to appreciate about you? What things give you energy or joy?

Practice:

- Have a conversation with your Life Group or a friend or two. Share what unique qualities you see in the other person. What does this person bring to your life / Life Group that no one else does in the same way? How do you see God using that uniqueness?

LOVE OTHERS

Active helpfulness means individuals will come to know enough about one another to become significantly involved in each other's lives. It challenges the culture's assumptions of individual rights and private space in order to participate in God's work of bringing wholeness to relationships and healing to communities... Communal patterns of active helpfulness require frequent and sustained interaction.

- Dale A. Ziemer

Scripture:

- Spend some time slowly reading and meditating on Philippians 2:1-4

Reflection

- How can we be helpful if we do not spend enough time to come to know one another?

Practice:

Begin to listen deeply to the hurts and needs of those you do community with and those in your neighborhood. Prayerfully ask God to reveal needs that you can help with. Does a family need a meal delivered to them because of the busyness of their circumstances? Does someone who is ill or injured need the lawn mowed? Figure out the need and act on it.



BEARING FRUIT

Character

My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples. Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love.

John 15:8-10



BEARING FRUIT

Character

Written by Kelly Dagley

This week is devoted to exploring Character. Dallas Willard defines Character as, “that internal, overall structure of the self that is revealed by our long-run patterns of behavior and from which our actions more or less automatically arise.” Your Character is not static; it is changeable by both discipline and neglect. I like to think of my Character as my Masterpiece- it is a work of art I create with God over the course of my life, patterned on Jesus. We will be exploring this metaphor this week.

Today is the day to dream. What do I want the Masterpiece of my Character to look like? This can be an overwhelming task, but it can also be fun. What inspires you? As disciples (students) of Jesus, the Bible is the starting point of the inspiration for our Masterpiece as we are striving to become more and more like Jesus. But this is not the only place God can speak to and inspire us. Who inspires you? There are people in my life who make me want to be a better person. I have had experiences

that also inspire me. Songs, books and movies I love can help me envision who God is calling me to be.

Scripture:

- Read Romans 12. How does this inspire your masterpiece?
- Revisit any favorite scriptures you might have. They are your favorites because they inspire you. What is it that causes you to hold them dear?

Reflection:

- What are some events in your life that inspire you to strive to be more like Jesus? Who are significant people in your life that inspire you? What is it about their lives that attracts you to them? How do they make you want to be a better person?
- Do you have a favorite work of art, movie, song that inspires you? Maybe it is the physical agility of a favorite athlete. God uses these elements too! What might God be saying to you and calling you toward through these favorites?

Practice:

- Revisit something that inspires you. Listen to a song that made you dream of what your life could be like. Watch a movie that changed your

life. Read a chapter from a favorite book.
Get a group together to play your favorite sport.
Hike a favorite trail. Reflect on what gives these things a special place in your life and ask God to meet you there, to inspire you again as you experience them once more.

DAY
12

BEARING FRUIT

Character

Written by Kelly Dagley

The Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena has an unfinished painting by Rembrandt called “Portrait of a Boy.” (http://www.nortonsimon.org/collections/browse_title.php?id=F.1965.2.P) The painting shows Rembrandt’s working method, his use of jumbles and piles of paint, which make up the foundation of the boy’s clothes, hat, and the background. What is most striking is the boy’s eyes are very clear and detailed. The painting captures the moment when the artist’s masterpiece is just beginning to take shape. It shows where the artist began his work, with the face. Everything else in the painting flows from there.

This painting inspires me on many levels. First and foremost is the fact that it is unfinished, yet still priceless. This painting is imperfect but still brings joy and pleasure to those that view it. I think the same is true of our Masterpieces. We do not have to be completed to bring joy to others. We do not have to have everything together to be effective ambassadors for Christ. We just have to be “in process.” What makes us even more priceless than Rembrandt’s unfinished work is that we can continue our process and not stay in a static incomplete state.

Scripture:

- Philippians 2:3-16. This passage was probably a hymn sung by the early Christians, an artistic expression of Christ’s Masterpiece. As you read this, appreciate the pattern we Christians are to strive for.

Reflection:

- What materials do you have to work with for the Masterpiece of your Character? (your gifts, experiences, etc.?)

- Where are the beginning sketches already drawn? What is the current shape/state of your Masterpiece? (Where are you now?)
- Reflecting back on your inspiration from yesterday, where are you feeling inspired to begin or continue work on the Masterpiece of your character?

Practice:

- Solitude: Find some time today to sit quietly and ask God how He is uniquely calling you to work on your Masterpiece. Don't focus on your faults, but focus on how he has uniquely gifted and inspired you.

DAY
13

BEARING FRUIT

Character

Written by Kelly Dagley

Any artist needs to develop their craft, usually with years of training and practice in the basic skills needed in their medium. Just like an athlete must train their body with drills, conditioning, and practice, so must the artist practice to master their art. What are some skills you might need to practice in order to join God in developing your Character?

Many artists train in special schools or work as apprentices. Our church is a place of training. We come together to learn from those who are more advanced than ourselves and to practice with each other. Ephesians 4:11-13 says, *“The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,¹³ until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”* We are to be

resources for each other; our gifts to be used not just for our own benefit but also for the church as a whole.

Scripture:

- Philippians 4:4-9. Anytime we go about “doing” something, we need to be reminded that this “doing” is not done to put God in our debt. We are not earning anything. We do these things out of gratitude for what Jesus has done for us.
- John 15:1-17. Remember you do not have to do this on your own! In this process you have been abiding in Christ and becoming more aware of His presence and direction.

Reflection:

- Now that you have an idea of what the masterpiece of your character should look like, how do you plan on getting there?
- What drills or disciplines do you need?
- Who can you talk to in order to get help, advice, and encouragement?
- Reflect also on how God has already done some of this work in your life.

Practice:

- Visit the “Spiritual Disciplines” page of the Sojourners website. Explore the disciplines and pray about which one you might commit to



BEARING FRUIT

Character

Written by Kelly Dagley

Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but you are going to fail at some things. There is no doubt about it; failure is unavoidable. Personally, I am the type of person that if I know I'm not going to do something well, I want to shy away from trying because I don't like to fail. I have learned to go ahead and take the risk, but that tendency is still there.

As you begin using your skills in creating the Masterpiece of your Character, you are going to make mistakes. Think of it as practice not performance. We put a lot of pressure on ourselves if we think that once we begin this character work we will quickly be perfect examples of Christ. We can often be our own worst enemy when we make mistakes by dwelling on how we have failed God and those around us. When you make a mistake, take a cue from God- show yourself some grace and remember you are working alongside Him. Acknowledge that you have made a mistake, ask for forgiveness from God and any other offended party and then learn from it. Don't

let failure stop the work on your Masterpiece. If Michelangelo had let his failures on the Sistine Chapel ceiling stop him, we wouldn't have the glorious work it turned out to be.

Scripture:

- John 14:15-31- This passage is from the Last Supper. The disciples did not always understand Jesus and often failed Him. These are some of Jesus' words of encouragement to them on the night before He is crucified.

Reflection:

- Have you failed at anything lately? How does that affect you?
- Is there anything in your life that you have stopped working on or practicing because of failure?

Practice:

- Are there any messages you send yourself when you fail? "I'm so stupid" or "there I go again." I knew a woman who would say, "I just don't deserve to live!" Why do we beat ourselves up? These messages are not from God. Here is an

exercise to help you move past these messages. Prayerfully ask God to join you in these steps:

1. Identify one or two messages you might send yourself. (Ex: I'm a failure)
2. Then identify something that supports that thought- what makes this true? (Ex: I made a mistake)
3. Next, identify some evidence (and/or scripture/ biblical truth) that does not support that thought. (Ex: I succeed on many things)
4. Create some alternate statements based on the evidence that contradicts your original message. (I messed up once, but I most of the time I'm succeeding, or there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ)



BEARING FRUIT

Character

38

Written by Kelly Dagley

Matthew 5:48 says, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Think about that, “be perfect” as our heavenly Father is perfect. That is a lot to live up to. It helps to shed light on what Jesus is saying in this verse. To do that, look at the meaning of the phrase “be perfect” or *esesthe teleios* in the Greek. *Esesthe* means “you will be” and *teleios* means “unblemished.” It also means “mature.” Another translation of this phrase is “you will be mature as your heavenly Father is mature.” Jesus is using the future tense when speaking about us, and the present tense when speaking about our heavenly Father. We **will be** mature as God **already is** mature! I think it is also important that Jesus is not commanding us to immediately “be perfect.” The verb tense used is not one used for a command like he does when he commands his followers to “love your enemy” in Matthew 5:43. He is describing the process of maturing into being more like Him. We are to work toward becoming mature like God but he understands why we aren’t mature as God is in the present. I know I have felt this verse as a burden to

“be perfect.” In reality, Jesus is describing what a mature Christian life is to look like; a life patterned after God, revealed in Jesus, himself.

Scripture:

- Philippians 1:6 and Matthew 5:48. Read these verses over a few times.

Reflection:

- What words or phrases stand out to you in the above verses? What might God be saying to you through them?

Practice:

- Reflect again on where you are in this process of creating the Masterpiece of your Character with God. Where do you see yourself in this process? What one area can you focus on? Develop a plan and practices that will help you intentionally partner with God in the character transformation process.



WEEK
4

BEARING FRUIT

Active Participation

My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples. No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.

You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you

John 15:8, 15, 16

DAY
16

BEARING FRUIT

Active Participation

The Biblical understanding of salvation is that our lives become swept up into something larger and greater than ourselves, into God's purposes for the world. In other words, the receiving of salvation and the call to mission are not to be conceived sequentially, as if one followed the other. Rather, to receive salvation is, to be called into something larger and greater than we are, to be invited to participate in God's saving purpose and plan for the world. That is why the gospel is primarily about God, and only secondarily about us.

- Inagrace Dietrich

To understand the Gospel it is vitally important to understand the Kingdom of God. We often consider the kingdom of God as a destination, heaven, the place we go when we die. However, Jesus never talked about it in those terms. The Kingdom of God is His rule, His reign. God's kingdom is where everything He wants to happen is done. There are many kingdoms. In fact, each person has his or her own kingdom. People exert their control over some part of their life even when other kingdoms may overlap. Jesus' proclamation and invitation into the

kingdom is a call to us to reconsider how we've been approaching this life. God invites us into His rule and reign to be subject to him.

Scripture:

- Spend some time slowly reading and meditating on 2 Corinthians 5:17-20.

Reflection

- How do you respond to the words of Inagrace Dietrich (above) and the passage in 2 Corinthians?

Practice:

- Spend some time praying for those you know, who have not yet been “reconciled” to God. Pray that they may come to have a relationship with God. Ask and listen to how God may want you to reveal the gospel of reconciliation to them. Make yourself available to God throughout the day and look for how God may be currently reconciling those around you to Him. Participate in that ministry of reconciliation.

Ultimately, the church should emerge from mission, rather than the mission emerging from the church. Mission then is the context that influences the way the church gathers. When mission defines the church, it no longer attempts to “attract” or asks others to “come to us”, but it “goes” out and forms around others. Mission is not merely an activity of the church. Rather, mission is the result of God’s initiative, rooted in God’s action in human history. It begins with the call of Israel to receive God’s blessing, be formed into His people and be a blessing to all nations (Genesis 12:1-3). God is a God of mission and it is always his mission to reconcile the world to Him. We need to understand that the church is God’s “sent people.” The church does not “send” because it is already “sent.” This is the only biblical model of the “church.”

Scripture:

- Spend some time slowly reading and meditating on John 20:21 and Matthew 28:18-20

Reflection

- What does it mean that God sends you? How should you view your neighborhood, where you work, where you fellowship?

Practice:

- Set aside time daily, or as often as possible, to walk your neighborhood and prayerfully ask God, “How can I serve and embody your love for my neighbors?” As you pray and walk, listen for insight from God.

As we submit to God and His kingdom, our values change. We start to see others as dearly loved children of God. We see others who are neglected and marginalized by the world. We understand that true religion is worship revealed in action and we bring voice to the voiceless. We are no longer numb to the needs of those around us. We feel compassion and we are moved to act on that compassion. Just as Jesus is aware and embodies the hurt of others, we too feel and act in compassion.

Scripture:

- Spend some time slowly reading and meditating in Matthew 25:31-46.

Reflection

- How does this passage reveal what God considers allegiance in His Kingdom? Who's in and who's out?

Practice:

- Start by praying. Consider your responsibility before God and your role in His kingdom. How does it affect you to know how God views the

gifts he has given you? How can you begin to share your gifts with others? Could you tutor? Can you paint or fix things? Start by daily asking God how he wants you to help the marginalized and needy around you.

DAY
19

BEARING FRUIT

Active Participation

In Matthew 28:19-20 Jesus tells his followers that they are to “go” and make converts, saved people, new church members. No, this isn’t what God said. He asks us to be disciple-makers, who teach others how to live and love like Jesus. The agenda is much larger than “saving souls.” It involves helping others make the transformational journey into Christ-likeness. However, we cannot give away what we don’t have already for ourselves. We need to be on that same journey to fulfill this “Great Command.”

Scripture:

- Spend some time slowly reading and meditating in Matthew 28:19-20.

Reflection

- What is the difference between being a “Christian” and being a disciple/apprentice?
- How would you explain the difference between:
 - Intending to make disciples and letting converts happen (and)
 - Intending to make converts and letting disciples happen? (Johnson, Jan and Matthews, Keith, *Study Guide to The Divine Conspiracy*, p. 9)

Practice:

- Consider every aspect of your life (home, work, neighborhood, friendships) and how you are reflecting Jesus. What would you like others to learn about Jesus from you? How can you model the virtues of Jesus in all your relationships? How can you teach others to do all that Jesus did?

DAY
20

BEARING FRUIT

Active Participation

When we submit what and where we are to God, our rule or dominion then increases. In Jesus' words from the parable of the talents (Matt. 25), our master says, "Well done! You were faithful with a few things, and I will put you in charge of many things. Share what your Lord enjoys"; that is, share the larger direction or governance of things for good. For God's unlimited, creative will constantly invites us, even now, into an ever larger share in what he is doing. Like Jesus, we can enter into the work we see our father doing (John 5:17-19).

Dallas Willard

Scripture:

- Read and meditate on Matthew 25:14-30.

Reflection:

- Do you consider ministry or service as participation with God?

Practice:

- Meditate on Matthew 25:14-30 and ask God, “How are you inviting me to participate in your kingdom?” Seek God’s kingdom in every area of your life and begin to discern God at work in His mission. Express your desire to participate in his work.



RECEIVING LOVE

We go to church so as not to be alone—alone in our suffering, alone in the everydayness of our lives, alone in the important passages of our lives...We go to church to tell people we love them, and hopefully, to hear them tell us the same thing.

Ronal Rolheiser

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

Hebrews 12:1

RECEIVING LOVE

Written by Debbie Phares

There are many nights in my Life Group when I feel tears welling up in my eyes as it nears my turn to speak as we go around and share our prayer requests. In my mind I am thinking, “can I really share this need again? Are they going to get tired of hearing me struggle with the same issue over and over?” So often, I feel like a pest. I am afraid that people will get tired of helping me carry my burdens. It is humbling and scary to put your needs out in front of others.

One night I confessed my fear, “I’m sorry I keep bringing this up, I worry you are going to get tired of hearing this from me. Why am I still struggling with the same thing after all of this time?” Kim—the wise one—answered and reminded me that I was not alone in bringing up some of the same struggles time and time again. We all have our burdens that we help one another to carry. Kim, acting out of her strength used her gift of wisdom to open my eyes and give me comfort.

When we don't allow ourselves to need others, we are denying the inherent value that they bring to the body of Christ. We honor the gifts that God has given to others by seeking help, guidance, love—by opening ourselves up to receive from those in the church around us. It's important to note that allowing ourselves to need others does not mean that we approach church as a consumer—picking and choosing what we want to get. True community forces us to be much more vulnerable. When we confess our needs, we don't always know how, or through whom, God will provide. We just open our mouths and trust that God will.

Some of us, including myself, struggle with receiving help from anyone. But, have you ever considered that we are called to recognize the gifts, not only in those that we like or connect with, but from every part of the body? If God has given everyone unique gifts necessary to the healthy functioning of the body, that means that I need everyone. It's hard enough to be open to needing those whom I consider to be wiser, smarter or better than me—but what about the rest? For some of us, real community cannot happen until we go beyond playing the role of the 'benevolent servant' and admit that we need others as much as we like to think that they need

us. In the body of Christ, giving cannot be separated from receiving. We need both.

Scripture: Read 1 Corinthians 12:21-25

Reflection:

Reflect on times in your life when you have had to ask for help. What was the result? How did God work through that situation?

Practice:

Identify an unmet need in your life. Find a safe person and share this with him/her. Pray together to ask God to answer that need.

DAY
22

RECEIVING LOVE

We talk a lot about being honest with ourselves and with God. And we sincerely - sometimes desperately - try to do this in our times of Bible reading and prayer. But the kind of honesty and self-knowledge, which will bring about lasting changes in our lives almost always requires another person. It is when we disclose our true, private

selves to someone else that we fully come to know ourselves for real. Down deep we may dimly perceive the truth about our real selves, yet we go on denying or covering it with our superselves - even in prayer. However, once we have actually put the truth into words and shared with another, it becomes increasingly difficult to continue deceiving ourselves.

[David A. Seamands, *Healing Grace* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1988), 180.]

What happiness, what security, what joy to have someone to whom you dare to speak on terms of equality as to another self; one to whom you can unblushingly make known what progress you have made in the spiritual life; one to whom you can entrust all the secrets of your heart and before whom you can place all your plans. Aelred of Rievaulx (1109-1166)

Scripture:

- Read and meditate on Proverbs 27:17; John 15:15; John 16:12-15.

Reflection:

- Who do you talk to about your spiritual life? How has a discerning, encouraging, and challenging friend helped you in your journey?

If you have not experienced this, why? Do you tend not to be vulnerable in front of others?

Practice:

- Find a friend and commit to meeting at a neutral location where the two of you will spend several hours in solitude, silence, and prayer. Then at the end of this time, meet together to debrief and discuss how you sensed God working in your life. Or, find a friend to meet for lunch once or twice a month where a certain amount of time (e.g. an hour) is committed to discussing how each of you is sensing God work in your life.

By Michael Bischof

RECEIVING LOVE

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

Hebrews 12:1

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

James 5:16

One of the best ways to grow in journey towards Christlikeness is confession. Only God can forgive but Richard Foster shares, “It is God who does the forgiving, but often He chooses human beings as the channel of His forgiving grace.”

Practice:

- Choose a friend who knows you better than anyone else, one whom you trust. Discuss how you can begin to live out James 5:16 and Galatians 6:1-5 together. Share areas of your lives with each other and offer grace and pray for each other.



RECEIVING LOVE

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ
Ephesians 5:21

Submission is an unpopular concept these days. Submission reflected in Ephesians reflects a mutuality. Sometimes submission means giving and other times it means receiving. Sometimes it means leading and other times it means following. In every case there is always an element of self-giving. Submitting to God is rooted in love and grace. Submission should always lead to freedom not imprisonment. We can often learn to trust God and receive His love through others who we are in relationship with. I have never experienced more growth than when I have given others authority to speak into my life. It keeps one humble and allows for reflection.

Scripture:

- Read how Jesus submitted in Philipians 2:6-8 and John 3:30

Reflection:

- What experiences do you have in submission?
- Who is an example of someone you know that knew how to practice healthy submission? How has his or her life influenced you?

Practice:

- Start prayerfully considering those whom you respect their wisdom and maturity. Grant them authority to speak into your life.
- Ask friends or your Life group to identify an area you need to change in your life. Listen to what they have to say without arguing or justifying (Michael Bischof, *Journey in Community*)

RECEIVING LOVE

Written by Debbie Phares

“And so there is no division in the body, but all it’s different parts have the same concern for one another. If one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer with it; if one part is praised, all the other parts share its happiness.” What a beautiful picture of the body of Christ! I used to read the above passage and feel a sense of guilt. The truth is, I don’t always suffer when I hear about other Christians suffering and I am only mildly happy when I hear good things about other believers. I assumed that the above passage was a command and I would try to muster up a sense of joy or pain depending on the kind of news I heard. However, if you look at the text, you’ll see that it is not a command; it is describing the result of living out what the previous verses talk about.

Now that I am in deep, intentional relationship with others in the church, I see this happening in my life. Every week, we eat together, pray together, and laugh together. When someone shares his/her pain over a particular situation every week and it is resolved, I

rejoice. It is natural for me to do so. Likewise, when someone whom I have learned to love experiences tragedy, naturally, I feel heartsick and heartbroken to see them go through that pain.

When we share our lives with others and allow our lives to be intertwined, we cannot help but experience what 1 Corinthians describes. However, it takes hard work. It doesn't just happen. Only intentionally opening myself up to genuine relationship with others and inviting God's Spirit to be a part of that process can produce this kind of effect. It has taken years of investment and still requires weekly investment to be in true community. However, I can't imagine my life without it.

Scripture:

- Read 1 Corinthians 12:4-26

Reflection:

- What do you think are the fruits of true community? What kind of hard work does it take to see those kinds of fruits? What holds you back from investing in community? Invite God to help you overcome those obstacles.

Practice:

- Get together with a long-time friend or your life group. Reflect together on some of the ups and downs of your relationship. What were some of the obstacles? Good times? What has it taken to maintain this relationship? Take some time to pray, thanking God for your relationship and invite the Holy Spirit to continue to shape and mold your friendship.



RESTORATION

Discipline/Formation

I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit.

John 15:1,2,6

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Psalm 139:23-24

DAY
26

RESTORATION

Discipline/Formation

We often think of discipline as, “getting in trouble” or “suffering consequences”. Of course, there are always consequences for actions, but it is helpful to think of God’s actions as more formative. He desires transformation, and if we desire that same transformation we can submit ourselves to His hands and trust that *He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus* (Philippians 1:6).

Submission involves surrendering our will to God. In doing so, we consent to His supremacy - maybe with hesitation at first. We should first recognize his supremacy intellectually, and then we grant God full reign in practice. Parts of us may still resist and we may not always like it. But it is through submission and abandonment to God that one opens up him/herself to real transformation.

God works for the good of all those who love Him.
Romans 8:28

Scripture:

- Read and Meditate in John 7:17 and John 21:18.

Reflection:

- What are some contradictory things you desire?
For instance you want to show love to you family but also want to avoid more activity and being further drained.

Practice:

- Spend some time with God and journal. Try to identify an aspects of God's will that you are not yet able to do but you are willing to try.

DAY
27

RESTORATION

Discipline/Formation

We are so afraid of silence that we chase ourselves from one event to the next in order not to have to spend a moment alone with ourselves, in order not to have to look at ourselves in the mirror.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Psalms 139:23-24

Listening may be our greatest tool in learning to live and love like Jesus. However, it is a discipline that must be practiced often. We regularly go through a whole day and never notice that the God of the universe is actively pursuing us. The prayer of examen provides a way of noticing where God shows up in our day. The questions of examen open our attention to how God's internal movement is present in our daily lives.

Scripture

- Read and meditate on Philippians 1:9-10.

Reflection:

- How do you tend to recognize God's presence in your day? How do you respond to God's presence?

Practice:

- *Consider practicing this every night for one week.* Find some time at the end of the day when you no longer have any pressing responsibilities. Ask these questions (You may want to journal your responses):
 - Start with thanksgiving, noticing the moments that you were most grateful and least grateful for.
 - Ask when did you give and receive the most love today? When and where did I give and receive the least love today?
 - What was the most life-giving and life-draining part of my day?
 - When today did I have the deepest sense of connection with God? When today did I have the least sense of connection?
 - Where was I aware of living out of the fruit of the Spirit? Where was there an absence of the fruit of the Spirit?



RESTORATION

Discipline/Formation

Although we cannot always preserve our recollection, yet we must do so from time to time, and at least once a day either in the morning or in the evening. In the morning form your intention, and at night examine your conduct, what you have done, said, and thought during the day, for in each of these you may have often offended both God and your neighbor.

Thomas a Kempis

We can carry on through our whole day and never once notice how we did not reveal the love of God. We should not only notice but also intentionally try and change. Otherwise we are “like a man who looks at himself in the mirror, and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.” We should be like “the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.”

Scripture:

- Read and consider memorizing James 1:23-25.

Reflection

- Do you have trouble following through on plans?

Practice:

- Consider focusing on one thing you believe God would like to see transformed in your character and follow these steps:
 1. Label your sin or character issue.
 2. Reflect and discuss with God, your feelings and struggles with the issue.
 3. Ask God for a vision of the type of person you will be if He transformed you in this area. How would work, family, relationships, and ministry be different?
 4. Express your desire to live out God's vision for your life.
 5. Develop some concrete practices, things you can do, to enable you to partner with God in growing into the vision.

DAY
29

RESTORATION

Discipline/Formation

Lay your entire soul open before God. You can be sure the Lord will not fail to enlighten you concerning your sin. Your Lord will shine as a light in you: and through His shining, He will allow you see the nature of all your faults.

Jeanne Guyon

To safely examine our lives with God we need to trust Him. Trust that he will offer grace and love in the midst of our darkest times. Philip Yancey describes grace like this, “Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more...And Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less.” Know that God has deep care and hope for you, not because of you but because that is exactly who God is. Part of His Grace isn’t just his love and forgiveness but it’s God’s action in helping us in the midst of our transformation.

Scripture:

- Read Psalm 51.

Reflection:

- What do you need to believe deeply about God so that you can examine yourself and your motives without guilt or shame?

Practice:

- You can meditate in Psalm 51. What word or phrase stands out to you? Why? What does this word or phrase tell you about your desire to be restored God and His desire to restore you?



RESTORATION

Discipline/Formation

God has designed us to produce fruit. To live and love like Jesus we need to spend the proper time abiding, pruning, and growing. The natural outcome is bearing fruit in our lives. This is clearly stated in I John 2:6 “the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.” A healthy rhythm of rest and ministry should always be the pattern of a disciple of Jesus.

Scripture:

- Spend some time slowly reading and meditating in John 15:1-17 and 1 John 2:6.

Reflection

- What areas of formation: Restore, Love, or Serve do you need to pay more attention to?

Practice:

- Begin to calendar your journey with God. Schedule in time for Restore, Love, and Serve. Make sure you are living a balanced life and that you are paying attention to what season of your life you are currently in and where you need to move to next.