



THE
MENTORING
PROJECT

ABIDING IN CHRIST



VINCE ANTONUCCI

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1

IN THE WOMB

*“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love”
(John 15:9).*

What does God want from you?

Some say *religion*. I don't. I think we can make a better case that Jesus came to destroy religion than to establish one.

Others say it's not religion; God wants *relationship*. I believe that is true. I just don't think it goes far enough.

One time Jesus said,

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. (John 15:5–9)

To “abide” means to live within. Jesus says he wants you to live inside of him, and that he will live inside of you. That sounds like more than a relationship to me.

Let's say you interviewed a baby inside his mother's womb and asked, “Do you have a relationship with your mother?”

I'm pretty sure the baby would give you a confused look. Babies in wombs look kind of like aliens, so you might not realize the baby looked confused, but he would.

The baby would say, “Yes, we have a relationship, but it's much more than

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that. You may have noticed that *I live inside her*. You may not get it, but I actually *can't live without her*. I am *completely dependent on her* for everything that keeps me alive.

“So, yes,” the baby would say, “we *do* have a relationship, but just calling it a relationship seems to be a colossal understatement.”

If you were to ask God if what he really wants is a relationship with you, I can imagine him saying, “Call it what you want, but what I’m inviting you into is *much* more than a relationship. I’m offering to be the womb you exist within, and the blood that flows through your veins. I want to be the umbilical cord that brings you the fluids that sustain you, and I want to be those fluids that sustain you. I want to be the breath that enters your lungs, and I want to be your lungs. What I want is for you to find your life inside of me. My desire is for us to be *one*.”

Relationships are nice, but they’re off and on, we move in and out of them. We need something deeper with God, something more constant.

We need that because we were made for it. Without it, we have a sense of emptiness.

We also need it because it’s the only way we can live the life we were meant to live. We are meant to be like Jesus, to live holy and fruitful lives. We would be incapable of that on our own, but we have God living inside us (and at the same time, we get to live inside him). God’s abiding in us is what allows us to live like him.

God has offered to abide in us. We need to make sure we’re abiding in him. Jesus didn’t say, “As you abide in me,” he said, “If you abide in me.” We have a choice. And he told us to make the right one: “Abide in my love.”

What would it look like to abide in Jesus?

I think it’s about:

- Getting other things out of the way, so I can let God have his way in me.
- Pouring my heart out to God and letting God pour his love into me.
- Trusting that if I have Jesus and nothing else, I have everything I need.
- Giving top priority to God instead of any other things.
- Giving up control and giving God control.

But how can we get to that place?

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Jesus was actually near a vineyard when he spoke about being the vine. I don't know if you've seen a vineyard up close, but the vine comes up from the ground, the branches grow off the vine, and the grapes grow off the branches. The branch has a life-giving connection with the vine. If it stays connected to the vine, the branch will get the nutrients it needs to bear fruit. If it's not connected to the vine, the branch can't do anything. It won't get nutrients. It won't bear fruit. The branch will be...dead.

As I mentioned, "abide" means to live in. You abide in your house or apartment. Jesus says in John 15:4, "Abide in me, and I in you." So, Jesus is saying, "I want you to live inside of me, and I want to live inside of you." Jesus is telling us that he is the source of life. If we want life, we have to stay connected to him.

So we must prioritize connection with Jesus above everything else. We prioritize spiritual habits or rhythms that connect us to Jesus, that allow us to abide in him.

One way to help us do that is to have a "rule of life."

I didn't say we need rules for life. There are "rules" for life. Some are helpful. ("Return borrowed vehicles with the gas tank full." "Say please and thank you often." "Leave the toilet seat down" — that seems to be my wife's favorite.) I've heard other rules for life that are...*not* so helpful. ("If you are being chased by an animal, lay on the ground for five seconds. The five second rule will keep the animal from eating you"—I'm pretty sure that's not true.)

Those are rules for life, but have you heard of a "rule of life"? Ever since Augustine wrote a well-known "rule of life" for Christians in 397 AD, many followers of Jesus have followed suit. What is a rule of life? It's not about rules. We get this word "rule" more from "ruler" than from "rule."

A rule of life is a set of intentional habits or rhythms that help us stay connected to Jesus. These can be spiritual, relational, or vocational practices. These practices help us align our deepest priorities, values, and passions with the way we actually live our lives. Having a "rule" helps us to overcome distractions — to not be so scattered and hurried and reactive and exhausted.

These are habits you are going to prioritize and do repeatedly because you know they'll help you stay connected to Jesus.

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Your rule will probably include practices that help build your relationship with God, like Scripture reading, prayer, giving, and fasting. It may include some practices that nurture your physical life, like sleep or sabbath or exercise. You may have some relational elements that focus on your friendships and family. You should also have some practices attached to your church involvement.

If you know you're a branch, and that Jesus is the vine — your source of life — you don't consider these spiritual habits optional. You have to stay connected.

Want to hear something fascinating?

Remember that Jesus said he is the vine, and we are the branches? If you look at a vineyard you'll see the vine and the branches and you'll see a trellis. Without a trellis, the branches will grow along the ground wildly. On the ground, they're more prone to disease and more susceptible to pests that want the fruit. Off the ground and supported by the trellis, the branches will grow healthier and produce more fruit. A trellis also makes for a more beautiful vineyard — instead of growing haphazardly along the ground, the vine and branches grow intertwined and vertically.

If you want healthy branches and a good crop of fruit, you need a sturdy support structure.

So, what's fascinating?

The word for “rule” as in “rule of life” comes from the Latin word “regula,” which means trellis.¹ Like a trellis, a rule of life creates a structure of spiritual practices. Instead of feeling chaotic, you live by a spiritual rhythm. You're less vulnerable, healthier, and will produce more fruit. You'll live a more beautiful, God-honoring, and people-loving life.

We all need a rule of life. A structure of spiritual practices we prioritize because they keep us connected to Jesus. And we need to stay connected to Jesus because he is the source of life.

So, how? How do we get to the place where we are abiding in Jesus?

We passionately pursue God, which is what we're going to think about in our next section.

We commit to consistently prioritizing certain spiritual practices that keep

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us connected to Jesus. We are going to consider three vital ones in sections three through five.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. God invites us into a “yoked” relationship with him, and to come to him so we can lay down our burdens and rest. What burdens are weighing you down? What would it look like for you to give those burdens to God?
2. When can you spend a few minutes of prayer time to go to God and hand your burdens to him? Try it.

2

GOD STALKERS

“Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you” (Ps. 73:25).

I want to encourage you to become a stalker.

That may sound odd, because we’ve all heard scary stories of people like John Hinkley Jr., who, because of his obsession, stalked the actress Jodie Foster and then tried to assassinate President Ronald Reagan to impress her.

There are other stories that are scary and weird. Cristin Keleher became obsessed with former Beatle George Harrison, broke into his home,² and while waiting for him, made herself a frozen pizza.³

William Lepeska was so desperate to see tennis star Anna Kournikova that he swam across the Biscayne Bay to get to her house.⁴ Unfortunately, he went to the wrong house, where he was then arrested.

There are scary types of stalking, but there’s also a less dangerous variety. I’m thinking of a thirteen-year-old girl who becomes obsessed with a boy at school. She thinks about him all the time. She writes his name all over her notebooks. He may not know she exists, but she’s already got their babies’ names picked out.

She times her entire day — how she gets to her classes, when she goes to the bathroom — so she can see him as many times as possible. This girl is obsessed with this guy, can’t stop thinking about him, has to see him, and feels like she can’t live without him. And so she stalks him.

God Stalker

A lot of people want God in their lives. Most people want God’s blessings. But what we need to want is God himself.

A God stalker is someone who seeks God more than anything, who wants more and more of him, who realizes God is what she needs, so she goes

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after him. A God stalker is not someone who achieves “super Christian” status. *Every* Christian should be a God stalker, according to what God tells us. For instance, “You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord” (Jer. 29:13–14), and “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30).

Every Christian should be a God stalker, and if we’re not, we’re never going to truly abide in Jesus.

Maybe the best example of a God stalker in the Bible is a guy from the Old Testament named David. He’s the one who took on Goliath and later became king. David was a God stalker. He wasn’t perfect. He messed up and sinned just like we do, but he knew God was his greatest treasure, so he’d get up and keep pursuing him.

Check out a love poem David wrote about God.

“O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.
Because your steadfast love is better than life
my lips will praise you.
So I will bless you as long as I live;
in your name I will lift up my hands.
My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food,
and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips,
when I remember you upon my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy.
My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds me.” (Ps. 63:1–8)

See what I mean?

Christians often talk about having a friendship with God, and it is true that God offers us friendship. But I’ve got lots of friends, and I don’t talk to any of them this way! I’ve never gone up to a friend and said, “Dude, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you. Because you are glorious. In fact, last

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night when I was in bed thinking of you, I just started to sing...”

This isn't friendship language; this is stalker language. And it doesn't end there. David also wrote,

Answer me quickly, O Lord!
My spirit fails!
Hide not your face from me,
lest I be like those who go down to the pit (Ps. 143:7).

Do you see why I call David a God stalker? And God called David “a man after my heart” (Acts 13:22).

That's what I want for me, and for you.

Here's the good news: God isn't avoiding us. In fact, God promises to be with us all the time (see, for instance, John 14:16–17 and Matt. 28:20.) So we don't need to go out searching for him — we just need to pay attention. People have called this “practicing the presence of God.” We remember he's with us, we train our minds on him, and we seek to stay in constant contact. We abide.

How? I love the advice Max Lucado gives in his book *Just Like Jesus*.⁵ He suggests that you first give God your *waking* thoughts. When you wake in the morning, focus your initial thoughts on him. Then, second, give God your *waiting* thoughts. Spend some quiet time with God, sharing your heart with him, and listening for his voice. Third, give God your *whispering* thoughts. Repeatedly offer up brief prayers throughout the day. You might repeat the same short prayer: “God, am I pleasing you?” “Am I in your will, Lord?” “I love and want to follow you, Jesus.” Then last, give God your *waning* thoughts. Talk to God as you're falling asleep. Review your day with him. End your day by telling him you love him.

That's something you can do. You can go after God's heart. You can be a God stalker. If you are, you'll abide.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. Read Matthew 13:44–46. Jesus is saying that if you had to give away everything to have God in your life, it would be the best trade you'd ever make. What have you had to give up to have God in your life? What might you? What would be hardest to give up? Why do you think God is worth giving up everything for?
2. Generally, we want to pray from our hearts with our own words. But

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some people find value at times in praying a prayer written by someone else. People have especially done this with the Psalms in the Bible. Today, pray Psalm 63:1–8 and/or Psalm 40, making the words your own and praying them from your heart.

3

LAY YOUR HEAD

“Praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints” (Eph. 6:18).

A Christian is someone who has decided to follow in the ways of Jesus. You choose to live life the way Jesus lived life. So, how did Jesus live life?

When you study his life, it seems there was nothing more important to him than connecting with his heavenly Father. Richard Foster writes, “Nothing is more striking in Jesus’ life than his intimacy with the Father...Like a recurring pattern in a quilt, so prayer threads its way through Jesus’ life.”

As we’ve said, Jesus called it “abiding” or “living in.” Jesus lived his life with such an intimate and constant connection with his Father, it’s like he lived life in him. Jesus abided in his Father, and he invites us to abide in him.

Jesus is inviting us to create a rhythm where we eliminate distractions and enter into silence, so we can focus on God. So we can talk to and listen to him. So we’re doing life with him. It’s not that we stop living the rest of our lives, but we learn to abide. We have a rhythm of praying, of stepping away from distraction to allow us to be nearer to God.

We see this rhythm with Jesus. I’ll show you one example.

We don’t know much about Jesus’ first thirty years on earth, but then he steps onto the public stage and declares who he is and what he’s come to do.

Then Jesus is baptized. At his baptism, God speaks from heaven, affirming that Jesus is his Son.

And then...Jesus goes off and prays for forty days.

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He goes off into the wilderness, all by himself, and prays for forty days. That's not typically the way you launch something and gain momentum — by going off by yourself. Especially if you want to start a worldwide movement and you spent the first thirty years living in obscurity. You don't go back into obscurity for six weeks! But Jesus did. He starts with prayer. He went away to a place of silence so he could feel God's presence and pray. So he could commune with his Father.

Jesus spent time with his Father to ensure he was mentally, emotionally, and spiritually ready for what he was about to do. There was too much at stake for him to begin without starting on his knees.

Then he comes back, and in the first chapter of Mark, we find a description of his first day of ministry. He teaches people about God. He heals people.

Then he wakes up and...is it back to work? No. He wakes up and "rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed" (Mark 1:35).

To be clear: Jesus went to a place of silence for a month and a half, then comes back, has one day of activity, and then heads straight back to a place of silence — so he could abide, so he could feel God's presence and pray, so he could commune with his Father. It was intimacy with the Father that generated the intensity of Jesus' ministry.

We see Jesus do this over and over. It was a rhythm in his life. We could say it was the rhythm of Jesus' life.

It's like a car. If you didn't know anything about cars and saw someone filling one with gas, you might think it was a one-time thing. "Oh, you put gas in it and then it's good to go." But if you kept watching you'd realize, "Ohhhh. No. You put gas in. You drive it. You put gas in. You drive it...Without repeatedly filling it back up, it can't go." If you watch Jesus' life, you realize, "Ohhh. He lived a little. He sought silence to feel God's presence and pray; he filled up. Then he lived a little. Then he sought silence to feel God's presence and pray, he filled up. Then he lived a little. Sought silence to feel God's presence and pray, filled up."

That was his rhythm. And that needs to be the rhythm of his followers.

In fact, we see in the book of Acts that Jesus' original followers followed his example. Acts 2:42: "And they devoted themselves to...the prayers." In Acts, the believers prayed — for guidance in making decisions (Acts 1:15–26),

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for courage to share Jesus with nonbelievers (4:23–31), as a regular part of their daily lives and ministry (2:42–47; 3:1; 6:4), when they were being persecuted (7:55–60), when they needed a miracle (9:36–43), when someone was in trouble (12:1–11), before sending out people for ministry (13:1–3, 16:25ff), for each other (20:36, 21:5), and for God’s blessing (27:35). They prayed, and God released his presence and power in their midst.

Prayer was part of their “rule of life.” They pursued God, and prayer allowed them to live in him.

Prayer Is

Speaker and author Brennan Manning used to tell a story about a woman who asked him to come speak to her father, who was on his deathbed. Manning agreed to come right over.

The daughter let Manning in and told him her father was in his bedroom. When Manning walked in he noticed an empty chair next to the bed. He said, “I see you’re expecting me.”

The man in the bed said, “No, who are you?” Manning explained that his daughter had invited him to come over and talk to him about God.

The man nodded and said, “I have a question for you.” He explained that he had always believed in God and Jesus, but never knew how to pray. One time he asked a preacher at church, who gave him a book to read. On the first page there were two or three words he didn’t know. He gave up reading after a few pages and continued not to pray.

A few years later he was at work talking to a Christian friend of his named Joe. He mentioned to Joe that he didn’t know how to pray. Joe seemed confused. He said, “Are you kidding? Well, here’s what you do. Take an empty chair, put it next to you. Picture Jesus sitting in that chair and talk to him. Tell him how you feel about him, tell him about your life, tell him about your needs.”

The man gestured to the empty chair next to his bed and said, “I’ve been doing that for years. Is that wrong?”

“No.” Manning smiled. “That’s great. You just keep doing that.”

The two of them talked a little longer, and then Manning left.

About a week later the man’s daughter called him. She explained, “I just

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wanted to let you know that my father died yesterday. Thanks again for visiting him; he enjoyed talking to you.”

Manning said, “I hope he died peacefully.”

“Well, it was interesting,” the daughter told him. “I had to go to the store yesterday, so I went into my dad’s bedroom before I left. He was fine. He made a corny joke, and I left. When I came back, he was dead. But here’s the strange part, right before he died, he crawled out of bed, and he died with his head lying on that empty chair.”

Relationships are all about love and are based on communication. If we’re going to have a real relationship with God, if we’re going to abide, it’s going to be about love and based on communication.

Prayer is communicating with God. But it’s more. Prayer is love. God loves us, and his love for us calls for us to respond. Prayer comes not from gritting your teeth and engaging in a “discipline” — prayer comes from falling in love. Prayer is shared intimacy with God. Prayer is resting your head on your loving Father. It’s abiding in Jesus.

On one hand, prayer is as simple as that. You don’t need to read a book with big words; you just need to pull up an empty chair. You don’t need a bunch of seminars; you just need an open heart.

On the other hand, prayer is an unnatural activity in some ways. It’s talking to God, but we’re not used to talking to someone we can’t see. It’s letting God speak to us, but we’re not used to listening to someone we can’t audibly hear. I don’t want to make prayer more complicated than it is, but if you’re new to prayer or struggle with prayer, it can be a bit confusing. So let me share a few thoughts that have helped my prayer life.

Growing in Prayer

Prayer isn’t just a part of our day — it should be the air we breathe. The Bible says, “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17) and “praying at all times” (Eph. 6:18). Prayer is sharing our life with God, sharing our thoughts and our moments with God, so it’s something that we can and should do all the time.

However, we need to take some special time to devote to prayer each day. Why? Because fixing our focus on God will help us to keep our focus on him the rest of the day. And because we’ll go deeper in that special quiet time than we will in the hustle and bustle of the rest of the day. It’s the

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same as in a marriage. My wife and I might spend a whole day together and kind of talk about a thousand things, but until we stop doing something else and sit down and look at each other, we probably won't talk about anything of substance.

When should you do that prayer time? Well, it's the most important part of your day, so you should give it the best time of your day. Are you a morning person? Then spend time with God when you first wake up. Or does your brain not start functioning till after twelve cups of coffee? Then maybe lunch time would be a better choice. Some people prefer to devote the last part of their day focusing on God in prayer.

And you can be creative in that time. Sometimes I think my prayers. Other times I talk out loud. More often I write my prayers in a journal. I've also gone on prayer walks. And I've been known to put on some worship music and spend some of my time with God singing to him. What's important is love — that we're really connecting with God.

Experiment and see what helps you to really connect with God.

And if none of those ways work, you can always just pull up an empty chair.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. Read Matthew 6:5–13. Jesus gives us a model, or an outline, for prayer, not the exact words we're to pray. Our words shouldn't be recited but should come from our hearts. Read through Jesus' model prayer again. What types of things is he saying we should pray about?
2. Use Jesus' model prayer in Matthew 6:7–13 as an outline for your prayers today. Prayerfully read an idea (like "Father, hallowed be your name") and then take a moment to continue praying that idea in your own words.

4

FED FOR A LIFETIME

“For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food” (Heb. 5:12).

When I had the idea, I didn’t picture a burly Navy SEAL sitting in my lap, but that’s the way it turned out. And you know what they say: “When life gives you a Navy SEAL, feed him like a little baby.”⁶

It seems like there are people in every church who complain, “I’m not getting fed in this church.” I have a friend who replies, “There are only two kinds of people who can’t feed themselves — imbeciles and infants. Which one are you?” Pretty harsh, but he makes a point. Pretty quickly, children learn how to feed themselves food, and Christians should learn how to feed themselves spiritually.

That was the point I was making with the Navy SEAL. I was preaching a sermon and started with a baby in my arms and fed him. Everyone made, “Oh, that’s adorable” faces, and, “That baby is so cute in our pastor’s arms” noises. I gave the baby back to his mother and launched into a message on the importance of reading the Bible every day. I told everyone, “Give a man a fish, feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, feed him for a lifetime.” I ended the message by trying to illustrate how wrong it is for people who are no longer spiritual infants to rely on someone else to feed them. I asked for a volunteer and Mr. Navy SEAL raised his hand. The church I pastored in Virginia Beach had a bunch of SEALs, but it hadn’t occurred to me that one would volunteer. He came up, and I asked him to sit in my lap. I had a jar of baby food, and I asked him if I could feed him. And everyone made, “Oh, that’s disturbing” faces, and, “That muscular man is so awkward in our pastor’s arms” noises.

Is It That Important?

Is it really that important to read the Bible on your own? Yes, it is.

If you go to church weekly, isn’t hearing the sermon enough Bible? No, it isn’t. Not if you want to abide.

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It's *critical* that we read and study and know and apply the Bible. Why?

- First, because we love God and want to experience his love more. The Bible is like a letter God wrote to us. Can you imagine receiving love letters from someone and never opening them? The Bible says God is love, and we grow in his love as we read what he's written to us.
- The Bible also gives us guidance in life. It's so easy to feel lost or to lose direction. God gave us wisdom in the Bible that provides the direction we need.
- It's also important to read the Bible consistently because it helps us know what's true and what's not.
- Another reason we need to study the Bible is that it's a key to spiritual maturity. If you don't get into God's Word, you're stunting your own spiritual growth.

It's critical, but research tells us that one third of Christians never read the Bible, and one third read it only one to three times a week. But it's people who are in God's Word at least four times a week who grow. After years of research, that's the finding of the Center for Bible Engagement. For instance, someone who reads the Bible at least four times a week is:

- 228% more likely to share their faith with others.
- 231% more likely to disciple others.
- 407% more likely to memorize Scripture.
- 59% less likely to view pornography.
- 68% less likely to have sex outside of marriage.
- 30% less likely to struggle with loneliness.⁷

What Do I Do?

The Bible is a big book. Where do you start, and how do you read it?

I've always preferred reading through whole books of the Bible. Some people hunt and peck, but when you go through a book of a Bible, you're getting the whole context of what you're reading. You understand who wrote it, whom it was written to, what issues are being addressed.

I also suggest reading the New Testament before the Old. The Old Testament comes first chronologically, but it's more challenging to understand because it describes a time more distant from us. When we know the New Testament it helps us to understand the Old. And the New Testament is where we meet Jesus, and it's all about Jesus.

Before I read, I ask God to speak to me through his Word. I want to read

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the Bible with a humble spirit and get everything I can out of it.

As I read, I ask three questions.

First, *Say what?* My problem is that I tend to be in a hurry and can read a chapter of the Bible, then have no idea what I just read. But the Bible is too important for me to skim over. So I slow myself down by asking some “Say what?” questions like “What did it say?” “What did I learn about God?” “What did I learn about myself?”

Second, *So what?* Imagine someone read the same Bible passage you just did, then asked you, “So what? What does this have to do with life today?” What would you answer? What’s the life principle in the passage?

Sometimes this is easy. You read a verse that says, “Do not judge.” What does that mean for today? It means do not judge. Other times it’s not so easy. For instance, there’s a verse in the Bible that says not to eat meat that’s been sacrificed to idols (see Acts 15:20). I don’t think they sell that kind of meat at my grocery store, so can I skip that verse? Actually, no, I can’t. With a look at the context and a little digging, you’d discover that in the early days of Christianity there was a debate between two groups. One thought nothing of buying and eating meat that had been sacrificed to the god of another religion. The other thought doing so was the equivalent of participating in that other religion. The issue was taken to the church leaders, who finally laid down a verdict. They basically said that meat that’s been offered to idols is no different than what they put in a Quarter Pounder with cheese. Why? Because idols aren’t real; they just represent false gods. So, it doesn’t offend God that you eat meat that’s been sacrificed to them. *But* it does offend some people. By eating that meat, you are causing them to stumble in their spiritual walk. So just don’t eat it. Be willing to give up your freedom to help others (see 1 Cor. 8:4–9).

So, is there a principle in “Don’t eat meat sacrificed to idols”? Absolutely. And that leads to the last question I ask when I read the Bible.

Third, *Now what?* This goes beyond the universal lesson to *your* specific application. How should your life be changed based on what you read? With that verse about not eating meat sacrificed to idols, maybe you feel like it’s okay for you to have a glass of wine with a meal, but you’re having dinner with a friend who’s a recovering alcoholic. This verse would say you don’t have a drink because it might cause him to stumble. Or perhaps you have a revealing bathing suit you like to wear sunbathing in the backyard. But you’re going to a pool party with a bunch of guys. This

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verse would say you don't wear the bathing suit so as to avoid drawing too much attention to yourself. The “*Now what?*” question helps us to apply what we've read because obeying God by applying the Bible is the key to loving God (see John 14:15) and being blessed by him (see James 1:25).

If you have a Bible, you can feed yourself, and if you do your life will be changed.

Or...I can call you up on stage and shove a spoon of baby food in your mouth, but trust me, you wouldn't like that.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. Read James 1:22–25.
2. Say what? What does this passage say about not just reading, but applying the Bible to your life
3. So what? Why do you think applying the Bible is so essential in truly living for God?
4. Now what? What could help you to be more consistent in looking for the “*Now What?*” and applying it to your life?

5

WHERE YOUR HEART IS

“Don’t store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be” (Matt. 6:19–21)

Since having kids, my wife and I don’t exchange Christmas presents. I’m just too cheap. But before she gave birth to the fruit of my loins, we used to each have a hundred-dollar budget to spend on each other for Christmas. One year Jen told me she wanted a diamond tennis bracelet. I went to the store and the clerk showed me the diamond tennis bracelet I could get for \$100. I stared at it and asked, “Are you sure those are diamonds? It looks more like little pieces of...glitter.”

I bought it and gave it to Jennifer on Christmas morning. She exclaimed, “Just what I wanted, a glitter tennis bracelet!”

A few days later the clasp on it broke. I wasn’t surprised. I took it back in to get fixed. The day before, Jen’s grandma had given each of us a hundred dollars. It was her annual present, and the only money we each had every year to splurge on ourselves. As I waited for the clasp to be fixed, I noticed the \$200 tennis bracelets. You could actually see the diamonds!

A few hours later I handed Jen her tennis bracelet. She looked at it and asked, “Wait? Did the glitter grow?”

I smiled, “Actually, I got you a better one.”

She was confused. “Where did you get the money? Wait, you used my grandma’s money, didn’t you? Why? What...what made you do this?”

I told her the truth. “Love made me do it.”

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All Kinds of Reasons

I want you to think about giving. Like giving...money...to God, through the church. People don't like to hear about giving, but God talks about it...a lot. In fact, check out the number of times these important words appear in the Bible:

Believe: 272 times.

Pray: 374 times.

Love: 714 times.

Give: 2,162 times.⁸

And that's just the word *give*. Often the word you'll see in the Bible is *tithe*. The word *tithe* means "tenth"; to tithe is to give God the first tenth of whatever you bring in. You'll also see the word *offering*. An offering is anything you give to God *above* ten percent.

We're to give generously to God, and there are all kinds of reasons to do so. For instance:

It's God's money, not ours. We think of it as our money, but God says it's his.⁹ The only reason we have money is because he's given us the ability to earn it. So really, we're not giving God some of our money; God lets us keep most of his money, and we give him back a little of it.

God has commanded us to give money back to him. All through the Old Testament he commands people to give him ten percent.¹⁰ In the New Testament he sends his Son Jesus¹¹ to live and die for us and then commands us to give generously.¹² All along people had great reasons to give generously back to God, but now we have a *much* greater reason.

*God will bless you for giving.*¹³ If I have a choice of God's blessings or a portion of my money, I'm taking God's blessings every day!

Giving increases my faith. It helps me to trust in God more and in me less. It's scary at first deciding to live off of less than all of your income, but not only does it demonstrate faith, it grows your faith as you see how God provides for you.

Giving helps me face my mortality. It's so easy to live just for this life and the things of this world, but we're going to live for eternity. And only that which lasts forever *truly* matters. When I give, I'm acknowledging that there's something more important than my temporary life and investing my money into something that will have an impact beyond my years here on earth.

ABIDING IN CHRIST

Giving also helps set my priorities. God commanded ancient Israel to give him the *first* ten percent.¹⁴ Not our leftovers, but the first check we write. When we do that, it helps to clarify that God is most important in our lives.

Giving to God allows me to have an eternal impact with my money. I have lots of choices on how to spend my money. Most of what I spend it on ends up in a toilet or a trash dump. What I give to God through the church goes toward his mission of bringing his lost children home to him and to an eternity in heaven. *That* is what I want to spend my money on!

The Love Reason

There are all kinds of reasons to give generously back to God, but right now I just want you to focus on one I haven't mentioned yet: love. Giving expresses my love for God, it helps me experience God's love for me, and it grows my love for God.

That may sound odd to you, but it's straight from Jesus.

He says, "Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him" (John 14:21). We've been commanded to be generous toward God with our money. Those who love Jesus will "accept" and "obey" that command. And because they love God in that way, God's love will be revealed to them. Those who do it experience God's love.

Jesus also says, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:21). In other words, you put your money into what you care about, and you care about what you put your money into.

Isn't it true that you put your money into what you care about? In fact, I could know a ton about you by looking at your checkbook and your credit card statement.

And isn't it also true that when you put money into something you start to care about it more? Like if you have an old clunker car, you don't care about it. If you pick up your friend who has some food and asks, "Can I eat these fries in your car?" you'd laugh and say, "You can eat spaghetti with a spoon for all I care." But if you go out and spend some serious money on a new car you would tell your friend, "No, you can't eat in my car! In fact, I don't want you to even breathe in my car!" When your money goes to God, you care more and more about him.

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The inverse is true too. If we care so much about our money that we won't give it, then we lose a significant opportunity to connect with God and grow. In fact, it moves us in the opposite direction from God. Jesus says, "No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money" (Luke 16:13). The Bible even says that the love of money can pull us away from our faith: "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs" (1 Tim. 6:10).

Jesus said, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also," and I don't think it's much of a stretch to paraphrase that, "For where you put your money, that's where you'll abide."

Give generously back to God. Don't try to figure out the minimum you have to give him; see how *much* you can give him. You will be so glad you did. Other people might think you're crazy, but when they look at you funny and ask why, just smile and say, "Love made me do it."

Discussion & Reflection:

1. Read 2 Corinthians 9:1–15. What do you learn about giving from this passage? Take some time to create a plan for giving. How much will you give God? What is generous? When and how will you increase your giving?
2. Money often provides the most competition with God for our worship, and it is often the last thing people will really give to God. Take some time to pray about your finances. Ask God to reveal to you your heart and where it needs to change when it comes to money. Ask him to help you make him a higher priority than money and what you can buy with it.

6

CONCLUSION

You were meant to live above anxiety, with peace and patience and passion, without worry, feeling full, not empty, guided, not confused, purpose-driven, not bored.

If you are not living that life, the issue is that you are not abiding.

Abiding is the solution for your struggles. It's the life you were meant to live.

Nothing is more important than you living that life and becoming who you were meant to become. That's what will give you real life in this life and what you will take into eternity.

Jesus is inviting you into something better. He's inviting you into himself. That is the most astounding invitation ever offered. Say yes. Choose to abide in Jesus today, and then choose it again every day the rest of your life.



ENDNOTES

1. <https://biblegeeks.fm/podcast/daily-43>
2. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/6224725.stm>
3. The weirdest part to me is the thought of an ex-Beatle purchasing or eating a frozen pizza.
4. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/kournikova-stalker-given-warning/>
5. Max Lucado, *Just Like Jesus* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), 70–73.
6. I may have just made that up.
7. https://bttbfiles.com/web/docs/cbe/Scientific_Evidence_for_the_Power_of_4.pdf
8. These numbers may vary a little bit from one translation to another, but you get the idea.
9. For instance, see Ps. 24:1 and 1 Cor. 4:2.
10. See, for instance, Lev. 27:30.
11. Jesus, by the way, affirmed tithing. See Luke 11:42 and Matt. 23:23.
12. 2 Cor. 9 is one example of this.
13. For instance, see Deut. 12:6–7; Mal. 3:10–12; and 2 Cor. 9:6.
14. See, for instance, Prov. 3:9 and Deut. 18:4.



THE
MENTORING
PROJECT

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