

PEACE LIFE

I grew up in a generation that used the word *peace* so often it lost all meaning and became lighter than a cheap paperback. We painted the word *peace* or the symbol of peace on tie-dyed T-shirts. We placarded the word on posters and paraded through major cities. John Lennon and Janice Joplin and Joan Baez sang about it. Overuse and misuse led to abuse. The word was used so often that the word fell out of fashion in Christian circles. But peace stands tall and proud in the Bible. We need to recover this sacred word and idea, because it is part of the word *kingdom* for Jesus.

The first thing we need to recover is the knowledge that peace *is a result and not a goal*. Peace is the result of years in a good relationship. Marriages shaped by love result in peace. Instead of focusing on having a good marriage, a husband and a wife who focus on loving one another will have a marriage of peace. Societies that are shaped by justice and love *become societies marked by peace*. Peace, then, should not be our goal; love is. Love is the hard gritty work; love is the way of the cross that produces peace. When we love, justice and peace bubble up *as the results of love*. People who want peace but who aren't willing to love will not find peace. People who love find peace, whether they think about it or not.

Two of our good friends got into a huge fight early this year. In April they still weren't talking to one another, and it made for some awful awkwardness when we were with them and they were in one of their snits. The man called me one day, and I asked him point-blank

if he wanted peace between them and if he wanted reconciliation.

"Yes, yes, yes," he answered to each question.

"Well, then," I said, "Do the loving thing each minute and ask for forgiveness when she walks in the room."

He thought about it and then said, "That's the part I'm not sure I want to do yet." Without the concrete behaviors of love, including forgiveness, there will be no peace.

The kingdom dream of Jesus leads to the Peace.Life.

At the core of the Christian life is a life devoted to peacemaking.

ELLIOT'S DREAM

One of my students, Elliot, told me that she went with her father, who is also her pastor, and younger brother to Honduras on a mission experience. "It was cool," she told me in my office one day, but I knew there was more to this story than being cool.

The year after that first trip, she said, her father made a decision to use the generous sabbatical his church gave him to take his family back to Honduras again. This time they stayed three months and those months changed Elliot's life and gave her a kingdom dream. On the island of Roatan, Elle—as she is known to her friends—encountered the kind of poverty that shocked her comfortable life in the U.S. Life, she learned, can be consumed by the struggle to survive. Forget pleasure and happiness and things—what she saw was that an impoverished life changes all of life.

When she returned from Honduras, Elle explained to me, she was "ticked" about the U.S. and especially her eighth-grade friends who wanted to do little more than go to the mall to shop. But she couldn't grip what it was that made her ticked off about the U.S.

She said these words to me as she sat in my office reflecting: "My thirteen-year-old body didn't understand that I had been changed by my time in Honduras."

Prior to the trip, she had been a consumerist; after her trip she was not. Elle admitted that she became judgmental of her friends and her country, but she got through that. Then she surprised me with what she said next, but she's thought long and hard about what she wants to do with her One.Life.

Elliot told me she believed God was preparing her to be a missionary. To do what? To become a nurse in Honduras. "I believe God wants me to be a missionary nurse. I want to help the poor in tangible ways. Yes, that's what I think God has called me to do."

So she's studying at North Park University to become a registered nurse. She's also filtering her future husband through the vocation God has given her: to serve the poor in compassion through her church.

This is Elle's dream and she wants to dedicate her OneLife to this peace dream. Anyone who loves others and serves others will bring peace into the world.

WHEN PEACE LIKE A RIVER ...

Perhaps you are wondering why I describe the (potential) impact of Elliot's nursing with the word *peace* instead of the word *justice*. Because the word *peace* in the Bible is a big word. Here again I'm convinced many don't even bother to read what Jesus (or the Bible) has to say about peace. Many associate peace with inner tranquility or spiritual calm. I'm 100 percent for spiritual turbulence giving way to spiritual serenity. I want the inner contentment found in the image of a glassy-smooth Wisconsin-summer-morning lake all day long, and you probably do too. I believe God wants us to have serenity, and serenity surely comes from faith in God and what God is doing in this world.

The word *peace* does describe things like tranquility, calm, contentment, and serenity. Randy Harris, a college professor in Texas, says you can have "feelings of peace and calm because you know in the end when sin and sickness, disease and death, war and plague, and the devil himself have done their worst, God has the last word."¹³ It is true, serenity emerges from the conviction that God can be trusted.

Yes, serenity is something to sing about. As a kid I learned to sing with gusto the hymn "It Is Well with My Soul."¹⁴ The opening verse and chorus express one's inner experience of contentment, and recently I heard Atlanta artist Todd Fields sing this song gloriously:

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,

When sorrows like sea billows roll;

Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,

It is well, it is well with my soul.
 It is well with my soul,
 it is well, it is well with my soul.

I'm all for inner calm and tranquility, and for peace in the soul. I love a quiet evening with Kris on our back porch. I like the sense of inner joy in reading the Bible and praying. I want my soul to be well. And I want to be at peace with God. If I'm at a church and they choose this hymn, I'll be the first to lift my voice.

But ...

Isn't Jesus talking about more than just inner peace?
 Isn't he talking about something bigger?

Which leads me to some more questions: Don't you think Jesus wanted peace between your mother and father, and between you and your mom and your dad, between you and your siblings or your friends or your employer or fellow workers?

Let's dig in a bit deeper: Don't you think Jesus wanted the poor to have food? Don't you think he wanted the impoverished to have health care? Don't you think he wanted the needy to have a safe refuge for a dwelling? Don't you think Jesus wanted countries to get along? If Jesus used the word *kingdom*, didn't he want peace between neighbors and tribes and counties and states and nations?

We have a tendency to reduce the word *peace* to meaning "It is well with my soul." And when we reduce the message of Jesus too narrowly, to an individual's *inner* peace, we cut short the kingdom banquet of Jesus and settle for dessert alone in our own little apartment. When I hear the word *peace* in the Bible, the first thing I think of is a big banquet with friends *and* enemies (now become friends).

Jesus' dream kingdom is one in which peace is central. "It is well with my soul" is one part of the story. In fact, you might even say it is a minor actor in the kingdom script. When I think of the movie *Titanic*, I don't recall the acting of Kathy Bates or Bill Paxton; I think of Leonardo and Kate—and so do you. (My apologies to those who specialize in minor characters.) And when we think of Jesus' vision of peace, inner tranquility is like a minor actor.

not only wanted individuals to be tranquil, he wanted (even more) for kingdom society to be at peace. For Jesus, *peace* was a big word.

Peace was at the core of what Jesus meant by kingdom.

Kingdom means love, justice, and peace.

Kingdom means love, justice, and peace in a society.

Kingdom means love, justice, and peace in a society on earth.

As in heaven.

Jesus prayed for this very thing.

We are to pray for love, justice, and peace in society every day.

The kingdom dream of Jesus is a dream for the Peace.Life, and he called you and me to give our One.Life to the Peace.Life. But what did Jesus mean by *peace*?

GOD'S PEACE IS VERY JEWISH

Once I was asked to participate in a media event where the host was about to interview me about my book *The Jesus Creed*. As we were about to begin the interview, the host made this observation. "I wasn't aware until I read your book that Jesus was even Jewish."

I managed to avoid rolling my (yougottabekiddin'me) eyes, because somehow I was not surprised. Why? Because Jesus has been captured and turned into an American. Jesus was as Jewish as *Saved by the Bell* is Bayside and *Harry Potter* is magic.

Jesus was a Jew and, when he thought of peace, he used the quintessential Jewish word *shalom*. Do you know what *shalom* meant for a first-century Jew? *Shalom* meant three things:

1. Material prosperity
2. Loving relationships with God, family, Israel, and other nations
3. Moral goodness and integrity

For a Jew of Jesus' day, you've got peace ...

When you've got what you need and need what you've got,

When you love those you're with and are with the ones you love,

When the ones you're with love you, and

When you are doing good to those who are doing good to you,

My favorite passage in the Bible about peace is found in that great prophet Isaiah, in his sixtieth chapter. He describes Jerusalem's leaders standing at the gates and being incapable of shutting doors, because foreigners are lining up to give them material gifts as global trade flourishes.

Your gates will always stand open, they will never be shut, day or night, so that people may bring you the wealth of the nations.

Isaiah 60:11

Israel will be the talk of the Mediterranean, and historians will say this was the greatest time in history to be alive! *Others* will say that Israel is "the everlasting pride and joy of all generations." Israel's prophets must have grown up wanting to be poets, because the following lines are gorgeous in imagery about the *moral integrity* of the people who are *so in love and at peace with God* that they praise him constantly:

I will make peace [*Shalom*] your governor
and righteousness your ruler.

No longer will violence be heard in your land,
nor ruin or destruction within your borders,
but you will call your walls Salvation
and your gates Praise.

Isaiah 60:17-18 NIV

Peace happens when your ruler has the name *Shalom* and your king has the name *Mr. Righteous* and when you name the walls around your city *Salvation* and when you name the gates to your city *Praise*. Isaiah saw a day when rulers and kings and walls and gates would have such names. That was the dream of *Shalom* that God gave to Isaiah, and when Jesus announced peace he was tapping into Isaiah's imagery.

Every Christmas we join with the angels to sing about "*shalom* to those on whom God's favor rests." When Jesus began his preaching, he announced God's special favor on *shalom*-makers, and when he ended his ministry the crowds sang: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! *Shalom* in heaven and glory in the highest!" Jesus wept over Jerusalem's response to him, because he was one of

them the only thing that could bring them what they wanted: "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you *shalom*."¹⁵

Jesus' dream kingdom was a *shalom* kingdom. One evening, during the last week Jesus spent with his disciples, he warned them of the turbulence to come and promised them an inner tranquility: "*Shalom* I leave with you; my *shalom* I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." Put it all together and you've got real soul peace and real social peace.

It may be cool to believe in peace and to claim we are for peace and to wear a tie-died T-shirt. But peace is hard work. Peace is the result of a life of steadfast commitment to work things out, the result of letting God's inner peace become God's outer peace.

PEACE TODAY

Peace is when you've got what you need and need what you've got, when you love those you are with and are with the ones you love, and when you are doing good to others and they are doing good to you. We need to put this together with Jesus' kingdom vision of peace. Followers of Jesus follow Jesus into a kingdom that is shaped by peace ...

But ...

We don't have what we need or need so much of what we've got: Between 12 and 20 percent of Americans live below the line of having what they need, and Christians don't care enough—the national average of giving is less than 4 percent of income. Every three and a half seconds someone in the world dies of starvation, and yet there is plenty of food for everyone. The World Bank defines absolute poverty as those living on less than one dollar per day and moderate poverty as those living on less than two dollars per day. In 2001, 1.1 billion people were living on less than one dollar per day and 2.7 billion people on less than two dollars per day. That means 3.8 billion of God's sixth-day "and it was very good" creation are living on less than two dollars per day. Take a look at your closets and your drawers and

your shelves and your walls and think of what would happen if you got rid of everything you don't need.

Is this peace? No.

But ...

We don't love the ones we are with and aren't with the ones we love.

About 50 percent of marriages end in divorce, and the divorce rate for those who claim to be followers of Jesus is statistically not that much better than it is in the total American population. Women are more likely to experience abuse in more hierarchical marriages, Christian or not. Racism, in spite of gains in the last century, isn't likely to go away any time soon unless something drastic happens. In 1989, Gallup did a poll that revealed 11 percent of Catholics and nonevangelical Christians objected to having black neighbors. That number rose with other groups: 16 percent of mainline Protestants, 17 percent of Baptists and evangelicals, and 20 percent of Southern Baptists.

Is this peace? No.

But ...

We are not doing good: In 2007, in New York City, a city of 8.2 million, there were 614 violent crimes and more than 1,800 property crimes. In Detroit there were 2,289 violent crimes and 6,772 property crimes. We could spread our net wide here. What about crime in Rwanda? Or is it even permissible to call genocide a crime? What about Darfur? What about Johannesburg, South Africa? What about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? What about North Korea, a country held under lock and key? What's really going on behind closed doors in Russia?

Let's dig a bit deeper into our own backyards. How integrated is your church? I've heard many times that the magic line is 20 percent. As in, when we get to a 20-percent minority population in our churches, then we are truly integrated. Is this true of your church? Another question: What is the reputation of your community of faith in your larger community? Do the poor seek out your church? Do the wounded? Do the needy? While churches do well at times, they don't do well often enough.

Is this the way of peace? No.

Jesus and peace belong together.

Followers of Jesus follow Jesus.
To follow Jesus means to pursue peace.
Kingdom. Life is Peace. Life.

How Jewish is your view of peace? It might be well with your soul and it might be well with my soul, but what about the poor kid in Mississippi? The abused boy in Florida? The neglected child in California? The abused wife in North Dakota? The ostracized black girl in the Chicago suburb? The robbed elderly woman in Dallas? The diseased man in Alaska who can't afford medical insurance? Jesus dreamed of a kingdom society, a society where God's good will is done on earth as it is done in heaven. He dreamed of a society that in its soul was shaped by loving God and loving others, by justice for all and by giving peace a chance. Peace flows from those who act justly and who behave lovingly. I believe if peace is going to get a chance today, it must begin with or include those who claim to be the followers of Jesus. Anyone who wants to follow Jesus must follow the King of Peace. One of Jesus' greatest followers, the apostle Paul, blessed the Romans with these words: "The God of *shalom* be with you all." And, one chapter later, Paul prayed that the God of *shalom* would "crush Satan" under their feet.¹⁶

AMY, MATT, AND DREW

Three students in the matter of one month told me their dreams, and what they planned made me grateful to be around them. Over lunch, I asked Amy and Matt what they were going to do when they graduated. Amy said something like this: "We're going to walk Africa."

After I attached my lower jaw to my upper jaw, I asked her to repeat herself.

"We're going to walk Africa."

I said, "Africa's a big place, you know."

So they described what they planned to do: Fly to Cape Town, South Africa, and walk from Cape Town up the eastern coast of Africa to Cairo and then over the top of Africa to Morocco ("Or close," as Amy said).

"Why?" was my question.

"To raise money for water." (Their walk is called Walk 4 Water.)¹⁷

So I pulled out my fatherly skills to warn them of the danger, and they looked through me like it was a waste of time and not a little paternalistic ... because these students have a vision, a vision of world peace and justice and they want to do something about it. I pray for them and I thank God for them.

In the same restaurant, another student, Drew, told me that he spent a summer homeless in Chicago to learn the plight of the homeless, and he produced a video on Vimeo.com to show what he learned.¹⁸ I asked him what he's going to do when he graduates.

No kidding, this is what he told me: "I'm going to buy a bus, convert it so it can run on vegetable oil, and then travel around and promote my video so I can get local churches more involved in helping the homeless and the marginalized."

I had no idea what he was talking about with the vegetable-oil-conversion thing, but he did and he explained it to me. So I chased that question (and moment of learning) down with another question: "Then what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to walk Africa too."

I'm praying for Drew.

One more time: I'm grateful to be around students who know that justice and love and compassion promote the Peace.Life in the world and that they want to make their One.Life count. To show how vital these sorts of actions are for our world and for following Jesus, I want to paraphrase a saying of Jesus with a slight twist. Jesus said, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink ..." (Matthew 25:35).

For Amy, Matt, and Drew, we could render this, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me some clean water to drink."

The kingdom dream of Jesus means devoting our One.Life to justice, love, and peace. We are getting closer to a complete answer to our question.

A Christian is one who follows Jesus by devoting her or his One.Life to the kingdom of God, fired by Jesus' own imagination, to a life of loving God and loving others, and to a society shaped by justice, especially for those who have been marginalized.

Interlude

The best word for Jesus' dream is that he wanted it to go *viral*. Jesus launched his kingdom dream at a wedding with friends and family. He didn't march into Jerusalem on a white horse or sail off to Rome to topple the powers that be. Instead, he set up shop at an ordinary house at an ordinary event, and he launched the kingdom dream with ordinary people.

When Jesus launched his justice vision, he summoned the sick and the blind and the wounded and the oppressed. When he called his followers to root everything they do in love, he was speaking to the ordinary relationships of ordinary life. When he launched his "community" vision, he chose to do so at ordinary tables in ordinary homes. When he showed what it was like to live in and pursue peace, Jesus didn't enter into the halls of laws in Jerusalem or reshape the law books in Rome—no, he just began living that way and asked ordinary people to join him.

Ever since Jesus, though, the Church has been tempted by another way: the way of power, the way of might, the way of violence, the way of coercion. There's another temptation as well, which is to bottle or package Jesus' kingdom dream into an institutional organization that can perpetuate his kingdom vision. But those ways don't work. The kingdom dream won't be realized by power and might and violence and coercion. That way ruins the dream. And the kingdom can't be contained in an institution or reduced to an organization.

84 ONE.LIFE

No, Jesus wanted his kingdom dream to go viral. He wanted you and me and ordinary folks like us to launch the kingdom dream in our lives. One day at a time. In ordinary ways. With ordinary people.

Why do you think we are so tempted to capture the vision of Jesus in an institution, as if it can be contained? Why do you think we are tempted so easily to coercion and force?

The Bible tells an old story in 1 Kings that is perhaps one of the best stories you will ever read. The Bible's story is about a young king named Solomon, whose father, David, was the first, most famous, and most powerful king in Israel's history. Just before David died he announced that his son Solomon would be the next king. Very early in Solomon's career God asked Solomon a question.

God: "If you could have anything you wanted, what would you want?" (Actually, *God's* question is even better than that: "I will give you whatever you want, so what do you want?")

Solomon: "Give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong."

Solomon, who can have anything he wants, asks for wisdom. God answers that request by putting on the table the things Solomon did not ask for.

God: "Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have [you] asked for the death of your enemies but for *discernment in administering justice*, I will do what you have asked. *I will give you a wise and discerning heart*, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be.

Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for—both *wealth and honor*—so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings. And if you walk in obedience to me and

keep my decrees and commands as David your father did, I will
give you a *long life*.

1 Kings 3:5-14

Tragically, what Solomon *asked* for and how he *acted* were poles apart. Solomon brilliantly asked for wisdom, but Solomon acted like a fool as he aged. Solomon's dream became unsustainable and it unraveled. He was the Enron of his day.

It's easier to ask for wisdom than to live it.

The God.Life is a life shaped by wisdom.

Wisdom isn't just for fifty- and sixty- and seventy-somethings.

Wisdom is now.

Chasing wisdom now creates the Kingdom.Life now.

Wisdom makes us slow down to ask the right questions.

Wisdom is the hardest life to live.

Give your One.Life to wisdom.

In our culture today there are so many examples of those who, like Solomon, begin well and seem to be going in the right direction, but whose moral life comes undone. What holds life together falls apart.

I think of some "Christian" celebrities, who seem to have it all together but whose lives unravel before the watching, gawking American public. From my generation (well, a bit older), I think of Chuck Templeton, who was Canada's leading evangelist, a spiritual leader and a confidant of the young Billy Graham. But Templeton's faith began to crumble, and he ended his life ranting and raving against the Christian faith. I think of the many young people I know who begin college with a vibrant faith and big dreams and all the potential in the world, and then I hear stories later ... and it makes me think of Solomon.

We need to slow down in life and let wisdom have its way with us. If we want our big dreams to become sustainable, and if we want to end our lives well, we will need to listen to the wise. And perhaps thinking for a moment of what attracts you to Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings* could help you refocus on the value of wisdom.

FIND A MENTOR

I was studying Proverbs chapter one and pondering the various words when an expression jumped off the page at me. Here are the words from Proverbs 1, and I want to focus on the words in italics:

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:

for gaining wisdom and instruction;

for understanding words of insight;

for receiving instruction in prudent behavior,

doing what is right and just and fair;

for giving prudence to those who are simple,

knowledge and discretion to the young—

let the wise listen and add to their learning,

and let the discerning get guidance.

Proverbs 1:1–5

What jumped off the page at me was the expression “for receiving instruction.” As I pondered especially the word *receiving* I began to think my way around Proverbs, and then wisdom as a general idea, and then I began to think about how James, the brother of Jesus, *received* from his brother. It dawned on me that the most important posture for the one who wants to be wise is to be *receptively reverent* toward those who *are* wise.

As I read carefully through the book of James something exploded from the pages of that short letter: everyone agrees. No book sounds more like Jesus than the book of James, but he only one time quotes Jesus. James was a wise man, because he *completely absorbed* what his brother, the Messiah, had taught.

Wisdom is about
the reverence
of receiving
the wisdom of the wise.

Solomon was the fool because he stopped receiving the wisdom of God. James was wise because he received the wisdom of the Wise One. That's the wise posture of a follower of Jesus. Wise people sound like their mentors.

Let me urge you to find someone who is wise, someone who is loving, someone who is just, someone who is peaceful, and ask them if you can regularly spend time with them. Tell them they don't need to pull out a "lesson" each day or prepare anything. Ask them if you can spend time with them and do life with them once a week or once a month, so you can hear their wisdom and absorb it.

Now the hard part. I'm going to ask you not only to find a mentor and listen to a mentor, but do everything you can to do what the mentor advises you to do. The wise are those who are receptively reverent enough toward the wise that they listen and do what the wise advise.

The Kingdom.Life is the Wisdom.Life.

I learned a fresh angle on the Wisdom.Life from Andy Stanley, pastor of the Atlanta-area megachurch North Point Community Church. Andy advises that we need to learn to ask this question: "What is the wise thing to do?"¹⁹ If you slow down enough to ask Andy's question about what you are about to do, it will illuminate everything you will ever do, and it will cast God's radiating light on all your paths. Before choosing a career, before choosing a mate, before choosing a party, before choosing friends, before having sex, before drinking, before spring break and during spring break and after spring break, before pressing on the gas pedal, before turning on the internet, before deciding which restaurant, and before choosing how to spend (or save) your money, the best question is: "What is the wise thing to do?"

I recently tried this question out. While writing this chapter and taking a break to run an errand, I drove to our local post office to send off two small packages. On the way there, I drove by a small deli that makes the world's best pastrami sandwich, Burt's Deli. As I drove by on my way to the post office, my mouth watered for that sumptuous pastrami with a pickle hopped-up with garlic, and (being that I'm overweight) I asked myself Andy Stanley's Best Question Ever: "What's the wise thing to do?"

I knew I would be coming back by Burt's Deli on the way home, so I had some time to decide. (Can you guess what I did?) That question, whether we do what is wise or not, is the way to approach

all of our decisions, and it alone can keep us grounded — unlike Solomon — in living the Kingdom.Life dream of Jesus.

JESUS

Jesus was the Wise One, and so what I'd like to do is suggest elements in Jesus' own life and teachings that can help us orient our lives toward wisdom. From a multitude of things we could say, I have isolated seven elements of Jesus' wisdom and want to sketch them briefly now:

#1: Orient each day toward God.

Jesus grew up listening to a famous, famous line from Solomon: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10). The word *fear* does not suggest cowering or cringing or buckling or breaking down, though some parents or preachers might try to force a decision in their favor by attempting to create that kind of fear. No, this fear means "awe." The sort of thing you may sense when you see the Grand Canyon or brush up against some artistic scene where rich colors and grand shapes combine to send a shaft of glory into the depths of your soul. To fear God is to begin and end your day, and every moment between, with a consciousness of living with and before God. Living before God is living with an awareness that someday we all will give an account to God of what we have done and who we have been. Awe of God transforms ordinary life into the Wisdom.Life.

#2: Ask the "good question" all day long until it becomes habit.

Ambition and primal desires, these are the two problems we all face. Ambition prompts us to pursue what we want before anyone else, and primal desires prompt us to pursue pleasure. (We'll talk about sex later.) A wise person stops, thinks, ponders, and probes into her conscience and then asks: "Is this the wise thing to do?" Jesus, who was wisdom itself, did what was good and right and kind and just and holy and loving. We can wrap all those words into one burrito and sum them up with the word *good*. If we ask ourselves the right question, we will do what is good.

#3: The daily leads to the dream.

Back to the importance of our dreams. Sometimes we get so living for our dreams so much — like the person we want to marry who is a long shot plus four, like the job that makes millions, like the house that overlooks Malibu Bay, or like the challenge of teaching inner-city kids — that we forget dreams flow out of what we do daily. Jesus' dream was the Kingdom. Life, and his dream was for the whole world. That's a big dream.

How did he go about his big kingdom dream? Did he march off to Jerusalem and say, "I want this throne!" Did he get in a big boat and head off to Rome and say to Caesar, "There is no Caesar but me!" No. That was how Solomon pursued things — he wanted everything now. Jesus' approach, wisely, was to take one step at a time, and it began in Nazareth and shifted over to the Sea of Galilee a few miles and then he gathered disciples. He helped and he healed; he taught and he mentored; he listened and he observed; he did kingdom living daily. One day at a time.

Andy Stanley expresses this principle in these words: "There is a cumulative value to investing small amounts of time in certain activities over a long period."²⁰

My way of saying this: Wise daily living will lead to the dream God has written into our hearts. If you neglect your daily assignments, if you fail to show up for work each day, if you fail to spend time with the one (or ones) you love, if you fail to do the ordinary task in the right way, you will get what you deserve and it won't always be good. But if you do the little wise thing daily, you will achieve the dream your life was designed to accomplish.

It works both ways:

Focus on the daily instead of the dream, but ...

Let the dream shape what you do daily.

#4: What you want to do over there begins here.

This is a variant of number three. I begin with Jesus. What Jesus really wanted was to rule as God's Messiah on the throne. The Thief understood this and that is why he offered Jesus the temple

and the world in the temptations of Jesus right after his baptism. Jesus' dream meant a throne in Jerusalem and then one in Rome. But observe where Jesus began. Jesus started in a next-to-nowhere place. There's a saying I once heard about North Dakota that I want to apply to Jesus' world: Galilee wasn't the end of the earth but you could see it from there. That's where Jesus began.

So many people have big dreams but don't realize something profoundly wise and simple:

If you can't get the job done at home
or in your neighborhood
or in your dorm
or with the folks you work with,
Then you won't do it
"over there" or
"out there" or
"in the big bad world" either.

Quite often I have students who tell me they want to pastor. If I know them and have time to build a relationship, I usually end up responding with this: If you want to pastor a church, tell me about the people you are pastoring now.

The point is simple. You don't become a pastor because some church hires you. You become a pastor because you are gifted to pastor. Some people want to pastor great big churches but show no signs of being able to pastor their children or their neighbors or the people they know well. (Or can't even get along with their closest "friends.")

Jesus started a revolution by gathering around him his personal family and local friends, and it grew from the small to the big. The wise thing to do is begin now with where you are and let that dream shape everyday living where you are. I suspect Jesus told the parable of the mustard seed — how it grew from a small seed into a bushy tree — because he knew the importance of doing little things well.

#5: Everyday people are to be everyday neighbors.

Who is in your dream? For Jesus, the ordinary folks of his day were part of his dream. I'm convinced many people begin living

around them because their ambitions and primal yearnings lead them to a future that is far off. Instead of being kind to the lady at the grocery store, instead of learning the neighbor's name, instead of treating a family member as a friend, or instead of seeing the one you work with as your companion, you may be tempted to live for a future with a group of imaginary people who neither exist now nor will exist then.

Everyday people became everyday neighbors to Jesus, because he loved every person he met. It is so easy to pass by those in our immediate circle (family, friends, neighbors) in order to show compassion to those in Africa or Southeast Asia or the inner city. But Jesus treated *everyone* as a neighbor. The wise thing is to see every person as someone loved by God, and that changes everyday people into your everyday neighbors. This is what Jesus' famous parable of the good Samaritan is all about. The question being asked in that parable is: "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus reframed it by asking, "Who's in your daily life?" That's your neighbor. Give your One Life to your neighbor.

#6: Discover who you are by loving others.

The Golden Rule, were we to live by it, would create the Kingdom. Life and the Justice. Life and the Peace. Life in fifteen minutes. At the time of Jesus there was a debate about how to find what was most central to the Torah, the law of Moses. A story is told of a Gentile's quest to become a Jewish proselyte. So he went to a famous rabbi named Shammai and said, "Make me a proselyte on the condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot." Shammai, known for being strict, was repulsed by the man's arrogance and drove him away.

So the student went to the more liberal-minded Hillel with the same request. Hillel responded: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor."²¹ That's Hillel's version of what Jesus said more positively: "Do to others what you want done to you." We call it the Golden Rule, and it is closely tied to what I call the Jesus Creed of loving God and loving others.

What life teaches us — if we are wise — is that by loving others we find ourselves, by giving ourselves to others we receive and bring

life, and by serving others we find ourselves at our deepest core. But if we think “me, me, me,” we diminish ourselves, we shrink our soul, and we find ourselves lonely in the midst of millions. That’s the life Solomon lived and it is unsustainable, both personally and globally. Jesus lived what one European theologian called “pro-existence.” That is, he lived *for* others and it was living *for* others that brought the Kingdom.Life. In relating to others we find ourselves; in hiding ourselves from others, we lose ourselves.

C. S. Lewis once reminded his listeners and readers that forgiveness was a lovely idea until you had someone or something to forgive.²² The same applies to loving others. Loving others is a great idea until the someone you are to love is a someone you don’t like. The Wisdom.Life is shaped by loving others—all others, including the someones you don’t like.

#7: Enemies can be loved easier than conquered.

Jesus extended love even to his enemies. Wisdom is known for seeing the hand of God in ordinary events in this world and in observing what today we call the laws of nature. Revolutionary words of Jesus were spoken into the pious-sounding but unsustainable conventional wisdom of his day, which was: “Love your [Jewish] neighbor and hate your [Gentile] enemy.” Jesus responded to that conventional wisdom because he dreamed of a different world:

I tell you,
love your enemies and
pray for those who persecute you,
that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5:44–45

Jesus was urging his followers to follow the way of God. If God cares for all, so ought we to do the same. If God loves all, so should God’s followers. Even enemies. That meant Romans for Jesus’ world.

Jesus watched the violence-oriented zealots foment hatred among both his fellow Jews and fear among the Romans in their midst. He heard stories about wars against Gentiles, and he heard dreams of tiny Israel someday regaining contr

way of victory and the way to gain the land and the way to bring about God's kingdom to be the way of *loving your enemies*.

An adjunct professor came to me in about the third week of classes to tell me about a student that he thought despised him. I asked him what the student's name was, because I had a suspicion. His answer: "I can't remember."

So here's what I said to him: "First, learn the student's name. Second, every time he comes into class, greet him by name. Third, before or after the next class make it a point to ask him about himself and learn what he likes."

In one week he told me he no longer had troubles with this student. In fact, he admitted, "I've gotten to where I like him and I know he likes me."

The way to make friends of your enemies is to love them and to pray for them. The way to keep them your enemies is to avoid learning their names and to avoid getting to know them. But if we pray for them, we will transform them from enemies into friends.

Jesus did the wise thing when he told his followers to love their enemies and sacrifice the temporary, unsustainable thrill of hatred on the altar of enemy-love. I can't think of a more profound illustration of the wisdom of Jesus.

IF YOU COULD HAVE ANYTHING YOU WANTED ...

There is so much more to be said, but it is probably not necessary here to sketch all of Jesus' wisdom. The real point here is to ask this question:

Is wisdom part of your dream?

Is the Kingdom.Life for you a Wisdom.Life?

There's so much, and so much good, about Jesus' Kingdom.Life, but you may be wondering how such a life is even possible. Our next chapter will examine the power of God available to use to live the Kingdom.Life.

Some of you may still be wondering what I ate for lunch that day. I asked myself the Best Question Ever three different times as I experienced the mouth-watering expecta-

and I drove right by good ol' Burt's Deli and did the wiser thing: I ate a turkey sandwich at home. (No pickle either!)

One more time, our question:

According to Jesus, what is a Christian?

A Christian is one who follows Jesus by devoting her or his One.Life to the kingdom of God, fired by Jesus' own imagination, to a life of loving God and loving others, and to a society shaped by justice, especially for those who have been marginalized, to peace, and to a life devoted to acquiring wisdom.

This, I believe, sketches what Jesus thought a disciple was. Accepting Christ gets it all going, and Bible reading and prayer and church attendance are the *means*, but the goal of all of this is to follow Jesus. Following Jesus is about these elements:

Kingdom

Love

Justice

Peace

Wisdom

When I gave my life to Jesus in high school, way back in the Fall of 1971, one of the first books I read was about how to live the Christian life. That book told me how to pray and how to read the Bible and how to live a disciplined life and how to avoid temptation and how to receive guidance and how to participate in a local church and how to serve God and how to evangelize. I drank everything up in that book, and I learned from it immensely, and I remain grateful for that book. I still have it and can see my high school underlining (with a ruler) and my marginal notes.

What surprises me about that book to this day is how little it had to do with the themes we have already sketched: kingdom, justice, love, peace, and wisdom. I've often asked myself why so many frame the Christian life in a way that has so little to do with the central themes of Jesus' own teachings and so few let Jesus' kingdom dream shape what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Sometimes I think the essence of the Christian life and the definition of a follower of Jesus are not the same for a lot of people.

I believe one reason why we frame things in a way that has so little to do with Jesus' teaching is so we can tick off the things we do well. For instance, I'm pretty good at Bible reading, so let's make that one of the central elements of following Jesus. (Never mind that Jesus lived in a world where only ten percent of the adults could read and where almost no one owned a Bible and where personal Bible reading hardly even existed.) Bible reading joins other things like

prayer and attending church because these are *observable behaviors*. If they are observable, we can tick them off and pat ourselves on the back and say, "What a good girl am I!"

Yes, I believe in these things, but I believe these are a means to prompt us to be more just, more peaceful, more loving, and wiser—in other words, prayer and Bible study are designed by God to guide us into kingdom living and kingdom living is about a society—other people—shaped by God's dream for us.

So, let me change this discussion. How are you doing when it comes to Jesus' kingdom dream? How are you doing when it comes to justice? To peace? To love? To wisdom?

These are the central ideas of Jesus' kingdom dream, and they are so big and so deep ideas that we can never stop to congratulate ourselves. Instead, this kingdom dream of Jesus is so deep and compelling we are drawn into it so that we give our One.Life to it and for it. And God's power is with us to make it happen.

For some this may be the hardest chapter to stomach.

The New Testament begins with four Gospels that tell the story of Jesus. Read these stories of Jesus through, and you are led to what comes next, the fifth book of the New Testament, which is the Acts of the Apostles. The Acts of the Apostles begins with a magnificent event called Pentecost. Someone long ago decided we'd call this book the *Acts of the Apostles* (Peter and Paul), but it would be more accurate to call it the *Acts of the Holy Spirit, Beginning at Pentecost*.

This has to be emphasized, because today too many of us emphasize kingdom but ignore the Holy Spirit and Pentecost and church—as if kingdom meant nothing more than justice and peace and love in the world (or in their country or in their state or in their local village). But that is not what Jesus means. Those terms might indicate little more than Western democratic liberalism. Now, I like Western democratic liberalism, but Jesus did not come to establish Western democratic liberalism.

One of my favorite kingdom preachers is Minneapolis pastor of Sanctuary Covenant Church, Efrem Smith. Recently I heard him make this set of connections:

We can't arrive at the beloved community
until we arrive at the beloved church,
and we can't arrive at the beloved church
until we find the beloved life—
the life of God's love for us in Christ.

and that is visibly seen in Jesus' giving his life for us.
Life of God, church of God, and the community of God.²³

Some people want the community of God without the Church and life of God. One more time now: The story of the New Testament leads us from the kingdom dream of Jesus in the Gospels to God's Spirit-created church community in the Acts of the Apostles.

There's more. Anyone who reads the Gospels through and ends up in Acts 2 observes one thing immediately: Peter was completely transformed. The message here is so vitally important. God's dream is the kingdom, that's already clear. But what is not always clear is that *God's kingdom happens when human beings are empowered by God's Spirit to do God's kingdom work in the shape of a new community.*

That is, when Pentecost happens, the Spirit of God ...

Transforms human abilities

and

Transcends human inabilities

so

Transformed people can participate

In God's kingdom community

In the here and now.

Something transforming and transcending happens immediately when you cross the threshold from the Gospels into that fifth book. Jesus' followers become the church community that acts like kingdom community. Why? The Spirit of God is present. The Gospels lead to the Acts, because the kingdom dream of Jesus forms Spirit-transforming communities.

Where the Spirit is, there is community.

Where there is community, there is Spirit.

The Spirit whispers *community* everywhere the Spirit goes. Where there is community, there is Spirit. Where there is no community, there is no Spirit. The Spirit brings love, justice, and peace—for all in the community. In fact, it takes God's Spirit to create community because we, no matter how hard we try, are unloving, unjust, and unpeaceful. We need the Spirit to live in community.

Before we take another step we have to face an issue. Jesus and the earliest followers were big on the Holy Spirit. They weren't weird and they weren't wandering ecstasies and they weren't mystical introverts. But they believed God both visited them in fresh power and indwelt them through the Holy Spirit. Some have ignored the Spirit so much that Francis Chan wrote a book called *The Forgotten God* to call our attention once again to the Holy Spirit.²⁴ Perhaps we can remind ourselves again of what happens when Pentecost happens: Community emerges because the Spirit is designed to draw us to God and to one another into a fellowship and community.

Some are afraid to ask God's Spirit to come down to empower us and fill us, but Francis Chan thinks the question is actually deeper: "The flip side of fearing that God won't show up is fearing that he will." And if the Spirit comes, community will come.

Please don't mistake what I'm saying. We are not talking about church as many have experienced it. We are not necessarily talking about denominations or church buildings or catechism classes or priests or organs or parking lots or anything like that. Some churches, in fact, are like shopping malls: people park their nice cars, enter the building, get what they want, get back in the car and go out to eat. But that's not community (and it's really not church either). The word we are using is *community*, and we dare not confuse community-less church or Christianity or religion or Christendom with what the Spirit creates. The Spirit creates community that makes church what the kingdom wants church to be. So, when I say "Church.Life" I mean that kind of community, but it is in a church where that community forms.

At the very core of the kingdom dream of Jesus there is a focus on God's society, the Church. The dream of Jesus never lets anyone dwell in solitude; the dream of Jesus never creates individualism. The dream of Jesus always creates kingdom community. Perhaps you had the community dream crushed from you by bad experiences or legalism or friendship cliques or weird, annoying people. It is just as likely that your community dream was crushed by your church being quintessentially boring. I experience these problems myself. To be honest, I have helped create that kind of church.

I have no desire to pretend the problems with churches are not real. But I'm asking you to take a good hard look at what Jesus (and his earliest followers) thought community was, and then to ask yourself if you might be interested in that kind of dream.

Before we go any further, a word of caution: Community is like peace in that it is a result instead of an action. Peace results from acts of justice and behaviors of love. Community also emerges out of loving behaviors—like compassion and an embrace and forgiveness—and out of acts of justice. Once again, many people say they want a genuine community but are not willing to lay down their lives in the pain of genuine relational struggle so that community will emerge as it did when Pentecost first happened. Which leads to this question:

WHAT IS THE CHURCH.LIFE?

Each of the four Gospels prepares us for a Jewish festival called Pentecost. On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit of God came rushing down like Zeus from Mt. Olympus and swarmed that little community of Jesus' followers who believed Jesus' dream. They all began to speak in "tongues," which means they lost control of their tongues and God used their tongues to declare the wonders of God. This may weird you out as much as it weirded out those who saw the spectacle. Regardless of your weird meter on this one, the big issue for us is what happened soon after that event. You can find the report at the very end of the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, one of my favorite passages in the whole Bible:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Acts 2:42-47

This is what community is and this is what church is and this is why we should be able to say "community" and mean "church." This is what it looks like when the Spirit overcomes a group of people. Pentecost can happen. This is what love, justice, and peace look like. Now the most important observation: This is the kind of kingdom society Jesus had in mind.

One of my former students, Amanda, and one of the finest I've had in my fifteen years at North Park University, is now in a very successful career. She finished off college with a flourish, went on to graduate school, and now has a dream job.

Amanda recently told me she gave up on church because she can't find anything about Sunday morning that (1) looks like what Jesus was all about or (2) holds her interest anymore. She can't think that Jesus' mission was to create one-hour services where pastors preach for forty minutes while passive parishioners sit (on hard seats) and take it all in as if it is designed for them. She can't think that spending thousands of dollars on pretty buildings is what Jesus thought should be done with the funds of his followers. She can't think Jesus would want God's called servants to spend their entire week gearing up for a one-hour performance.

She's right.

What many churches offer is not what you want to give your One.Life for. Where did we get the idea that church is a one-hour Sunday morning service at 11:00 a.m.? Not from Jesus, not from his dream parables, and not from his vision of the Kingdom.Life.

Many today are looking for connectedness in a common life, and many are willing to devote their One.Life to that kind of society, but what they are finding at that weekly gathering is a group of folks gathered but disconnected. The tragedy is that it doesn't have to be this way. Something can be done about it. It begins if we will return to the community vision of the earliest followers of Jesus and let Pentecost happen all over again. Notice what we see in this earliest of Christian communities, a life that can only be called Church.Life:

Life lived with others, regardless of who they are

Life shaped by the teachings of Jesus through his apostles

Life experienced by eating with one another

Life swarmed by prayer
 Life carried away in awe of what God was doing
 Life shared economically and materially
 Life welcomed by outsiders
 Life expanded
 Life unleashed

I think if more people were finding these things at the local church, they'd pitch in and say, "This is what Life-to-the-Full looks like and I want some of it!" I would characterize the community life of Pentecost with these words:

Friendship
 Teaching the faith
 Common meals
 Spirituality
 Worship
 Holistic care for one another
 Integrity
 Growth

What is the alternative?

Life lived alone and unsatisfied
 Life shaped by someone or something else other than Jesus
 Life experienced by dining alone
 Life with thick spaces between you and God
 Life noted by pursuing more and more stuff
 Life shaped by: "What's mine is mine!"
 Life unnoticed by others
 Life stunted by "groupishness" and cliques
 Life protected

As I wrote these last two paragraphs there was an ongoing conversation on my blog about a post called "iGens 10." We are conversing about Jean Twenge's powerful description of her own generation in her book *Generation Me*. A professor and researcher at San Diego State University, Twenge observes social generation trends. At the time of her research, she discovered that the current generation of eighteen

thirty-five-year-olds are marked more and more by anxiety and depression. Her explanation? There is too much of an expectation for iGens to stand alone. That is, they are taught to be independent, think independently, become financially independent, and make it on their own. She also observes that we are wired to love others and to need others.²⁵

A wise pastor near a major university, Jim Martin, just wrote a comment on the blog with these words:

I really believe that the next generation is looking for genuine fellowship. Between an individual person and another. In families. In clusters of people. For many of them, fellowship is not something lost. Rather, it has never existed in their experience. For many of them, it may have never existed in their family of origin nor have they even been able to observe it in families of their peers.

One challenge for churches is going to be to really see/care about this generation and be willing to adjust, mentor, and provide both models and the experience of some kind of authentic fellowship.

The irony grips me hard. What the Church is designed to be—a community, a society, etc.—is what the Church is not. What the Church needs to offer the next generation is precisely what it is not: a fellowship. What the next generation needs more than to stand alone is to stand with others, to experience fellowship, and it makes me ask if the Church is up for the challenge. The same generation that produced iGens who crave fellowship is the same generation directing the Church.

Somewhere along the line kingdom became personal spirituality and Sunday gatherings became services. Somewhere along the line the Church became a place where individuals could gather on Sunday for one hour and feed their precious souls. Somewhere along the line we converted Jesus' kingdom dream into a personal-spirituality dream. Somewhere along the line kingdom ceased being *society* and became *spirituality*. The impact is devastating for a generation that needs fellowship more than any generation in history. We are standing now, as individuals, at the onset of the twenty-first century, looking at beautiful buildings with a wonderful history, but, if we are honest, we are also wondering if the twenty-second century will even know who we are and what churches

In the summer of 2008, Kris and I visited Pompeii in Italy, the site of one of the most magnificent ruins in the world. Pompeii was destroyed when Mount Vesuvius exploded, burying the entire city and killing thousands and thousands of unsuspecting people. One of the most remarkable features of Pompeii is that it lay unnoticed for nearly 1,700 years. A village named La Civita had grown up on and over Pompeii. No one even noticed until in the late eighteenth century someone found some ruins. Someone else wondered if the ruins might have come from Pompeii. Someone else said, "Let's figure this out."

Today you can wander through those magnificent ruins for hours (and we did for almost five hours). I wonder if the twenty-second century won't walk all over the Church-ianity of our day and build its sites over the tops of our megachurches. And I wonder if some later generation will be the ones who discover the non-community form of life that used to be called "church." I really do wonder.

It could happen if the Church today doesn't wake up to the cry for fellowship and the mission to be community. The current generation yearns for this. In fact, we all yearn for it—but many of us have simply given up or caved in and settled for the Thin.Life or the Personal.Life.

But there is hope because we can enter into the kingdom dream of Jesus all over again by asking once again for the Spirit of Pentecost to fill us, to baptize us, to swarm us, and to revolutionize us so that we live as that early fellowship of Jesus followers lived. The Church.Life begins when we turn our minds, our hearts, and our hands toward God and ask God to flood us with the Spirit of God. Is that your prayer?

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

A Christian is one who follows Jesus by devoting his or her One.Life to the kingdom of God, fired by Jesus' own imagination, to a life of loving God and loving others, and to a society shaped by justice, especially for those who have been marginalized, to peace, and to a life devoted to acquiring wisdom in the context of a local church. This life can only be discovered by being empowered by God's Spirit.

So how do we get this Kingdom?

Interlude

I've been thinking of asking this question for a few chapters, so maybe I shouldn't wait any longer: Why is it so easy to work for kingdom purposes but ignore your local church? Why do we see kingdom work in such idealistic terms but look down our noses at our local churches? Do you think Jesus ignored the local in order to chase the kingdom? Or did he want us to be inspired to enter into the imagined life of his parables and then bring that back to the ordinary relations of our ordinary world?

This division between church and kingdom needs to be examined afresh. What Jesus meant by kingdom was the society where God's will is done. But any reading of the Gospels will show that he knew that the kingdom dream wouldn't happen all at once in a perfect and sudden way. He knew it meant hard work, struggles, and interpersonal conflict with real people in our own neighborhoods. He knew his own followers weren't perfect and their society wasn't living up to the ideal. His closest follower denied him; his specially chosen apostles were power-hungry and reputation-grubbing. Yet, those were his people and the ones he chose to concentrate all of his attentions on.

Local churches aren't perfect, and if you are looking for the perfect local church, you won't find it. But here's something I've learned: Local churches reflect the realities of real humans who participate in kingdom living in a world broken by sin and systemic evil. Kingdom life is designed to take root in local communities, and it is the vision

of Jesus for you and me to make our local community of faith our primary launching place for kingdom-dream living. Neither your local community nor mine will be the perfect one. Our challenge is to settle in and strive for the kingdom dream — empowered by God's Spirit — from the local community into the global village. It's much harder but it's the real world.

I wonder if the African word from a previous chapter, *Ubuntu*, shows us something here too. What makes *Ubuntu* so notable is the stubborn commitment of Africans to dwell with one another, to work with one another, and to be committed to one another even when they fall short of their own *Ubuntu* ideals.

So, Jesus' kingdom dream is meant for this world and is meant for folks like you and me. We fall short of our own ideals, and we dwell with others who fall short. Perhaps the commitment of "short-of-ideals" people to one another is the very heart of what Jesus means by kingdom living in the here and now. Which has taught me this: I owe my primary commitment to my local church, not because it is what I want and not because it is the ideal place, but because the only way for Jesus' dream kingdom to take root is when local people commit to one another to strive with one another for a just, loving, peaceful, and wise society, beginning at home, with friends, and at their local community of faith.

COMMITTED LIFE

Jesus was a zealot. Zealotry has its advantages when it is directed at the right object. Jesus was a *moral* zealot. He was an extremist, and I'd like you to consider the challenges he gave to his followers. The first thing I want to ask you, though, is to turn your gaze from the Church and turn away from everyone you know who calls himself or herself a Christian. I want you to do what Craig Keener, a devout follower of Jesus, once had to learn when he converted from atheism to Jesus. When he was an atheist, he said one of his nonscientific reasons for not following Jesus was that 80 percent of the people in his country claimed to be Jesus' followers, yet most of them apparently lived as if it made no difference for their lives.

Craig knew of some genuine followers of Jesus but, after studying the Gospels carefully, he came to this conclusion: "I reasoned that if I believed that there was truly a being to whom I owed my existence and who alone determined my eternal destiny, I would serve that being unreservedly." He reasoned further: "If [these] Christians did not really believe in Jesus, there was surely no reason for myself to do so."²⁶

Just read these words and imagine listening to them, believing them, and imagining what life would be like if you did them just as he said. First, three separate people draw out of Jesus (in bold) a response that summons them to follow him unreservedly:

As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

He said to another man, "Follow me." But he replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family." Jesus replied, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

Luke 9:57-62

These sayings of Jesus summon his listeners to the kingdom commitment, and an inner core of that commitment is holy indifference about what others think and about what others say and about what others do to you because of your kingdom commitment. Jesus believed in the Committed.Life.

Jesus' kingdom commitment turned everything upside down, including what we gain and buy and wear, and what we do with what we have and even how much we have:

Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.

Luke 12:33

In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.

Luke 14:33

And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?

Matthew 6:28-30

George Washington, our nation's first president, made an observation about what to wear: "Play not the peacock, looking everywhere about you, to see if you be well deck'd, if your shoes fit well, if

your stockings sit neatly, and clothes handsomely."²⁷ Jesus digs even deeper than Washington's concern with pomposity and pride.

Jesus digs into the inner chambers of the heart. The single-most glaring contradiction between Jesus' life and our lives today—and I'm speaking to the Western-world Christian—pertains to money and possessions. Jim Wallis captures it well when he says, "Because of our fascination with wealth, our economy has been sustained by buying things we don't need, with money that we don't have." And someone has added this: "to impress people we don't like with things that don't last." As seminary students Jim and friends examined the Bible to find every reference to the poor—and they found more than two thousand. In fact, they concluded one of every sixteen verses was about the poor. Then a zealous friend decided to cut out every Bible verse about the poor to see what the Bible would look like. As he tells the story, "that old Bible literally was in shreds. It wouldn't hold together. It was a Bible full of holes."²⁸

Recently I read the story of Andrea Jaeger, who rose as a teenager to be the number two tennis player in the world.²⁹ But Andrea Jaeger, though earning enough money to be set in opulence for life, was unsatisfied because of the kingdom call to compassion for kids with cancer. Today Andrea Jaeger is an Episcopal nun devoted to caring for suffering children. I suspect Andrea's choices have been closer to what Jesus had in mind than the mild "cutting back" and "giving" we find among Western Christians, and I say this to myself as much as to all of us.

What about these words from Matthew's fifth chapter? Jesus goes right to the heart of morality:

For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 5:20

Jesus is a moral zealot; he's relentless; he expects his followers to sell out to him and for him and to give him everything, including the deepest of passions. He goes to the heart of anger and tells his disciples they are to forgive and to work for reconciliation:

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Matthew 5:21-22

Forgiveness is hard, but I think Jesus expects his followers to work at it. Few have lived the pains and joys of forgiveness like the Rwandans, who, after experiencing the horror of genocide—some 800,000 Tutsi were murdered—have tried to put their society back together through a process called *Gacaca*, their ancient form of justice. Under the shade of their wild fig trees (*umuvumu*), trusted elders and women and men meet to hear cases—and they had to do this because it would have taken 200 years to hear the cases of the murderers and slaughterers in their legal courts. The law moved into the hands of the people, and justice is at stake. But forgiveness and grace, administered under the *umuvumu* trees, are creating a new day for Rwanda.

For an example drawn from thousands that are now being told, Gahigi was a Tutsi pastor who lost all but eight of the 150 members of his Tutsi family.³⁰ He survived by escaping to a refugee camp in Burundi. Healing over time and through months of painful prayer, Gahigi knew he was called to speak to those imprisoned for heinous crimes, some of whom had murdered those he loved. After he was done speaking to the prisoners one time, a prisoner approached him and said, "Have mercy, have mercy." Then the prisoner confessed to Gahigi: "I spent many sleepless nights over you. I searched for you so I could kill you. But have mercy on me and forgive me."

What's it like to face a murderer of your own flesh and blood? What's it like to face such a person who asks for grace and forgiveness? What does one say and do? Gahigi, tested to the deepest fabric of his soul, embraced the man and forgave him—and unleashed a cycle of grace that is spreading slowly but perceptibly into *shalom* in Rwanda.

Neither Jesus nor anyone today is suggesting forgiveness is easy or painless, but forgiveness and reconciliation lead us straight into the kingdom dream of Jesus where love and peace and justice flow.

Jesus goes on and now directs his words to the heart of sexual desires:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that **anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.** If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell."

Matthew 5:27-30

But Jesus goes beyond holy indifference toward others and toward things and toward our desires. He zooms in his favorite—love your neighbors as yourself—and applies it directly to those farthest from one's neighbors, and surely this is one of his most radical demands:

But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Matthew 5:44

G. K. Chesterton said, "The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because they are generally the same people."³¹ That's witty and true, but it's also not quite what Jesus was saying: he was telling his contemporaries that the way to deal with the Roman occupation and the way to conquer was the path of love. It's easy to love Israelites; it's hard to love Romans. Jesus called his contemporaries to love both.

So Jesus sums up his demand for his followers in just one line, a line that perfectly expresses the kingdom commitment:

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Matthew 5:48

Now for the hard truth: Jesus expected his followers to listen and do what he said in the Sermon on the Mount. Unfortunately, his invitation words coming at the end of the sermon are softened for so many who learned those same words in a cute little kids' song that we enacted by falling to the ground. "All fall down!" we said as we tumbled together to the ground in a bundle of laughter. But these words of Jesus are serious, serious words from a serious, serious man.

Therefore everyone who **hears these words of mine and puts them into practice** is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.

But everyone **who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice** is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.

Matthew 7:24-27

HE CAN'T BE SERIOUS . . .

Many have softened the blow of these words of Jesus. For instance, one of America's most famous world-religions experts, Huston Smith, a son of missionaries who later said, "I never met a religion I did not like," tones down Jesus' demands to this: "If you think Jesus Christ is special, in his own category of specialness, and you feel an affinity for him, and you do not harm others consciously, you can consider yourself a Christian."³²

Do Smith's words sound like Jesus' words?

Not to me. Ask the rich young ruler; I'm sure he thought Jesus meant what he said:

Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"

"Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. **If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.**"

"**Which ones?**" he inquired.

Jesus replied, "'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbor as yourself.'"

"All these I have kept," the young man said. "**What do I still lack?**"

Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

So we ask again, can Jesus be serious? I think he is. Pick up Matthew's gospel, open it up to chapter five and start reading for yourself. You tell me if Jesus is dead serious or not. (He is.)

He summoned people to do what he said.

He didn't summon people to do what he said *perfectly*.

He summoned people to follow him.

He didn't summon people to follow him *perfectly*.

Well, yes, I take that back. He did summon them to perfection, but the pattern of the best disciples, the twelve apostles, was that they followed him but did not follow him perfectly. When they messed up, Jesus rebuked them, told them to knock it off, and summoned them back to following him. Jesus' relationship with the apostles proves that he didn't demand sinless perfection. Instead, he demanded that his followers follow him. He expected them to follow him because he believed followers of Jesus really do follow Jesus.

One way of putting this is that Jesus wanted perfect commitment but knew that he would not get perfection from us. Perfect commitment means that we surrender who we are and all we have and all we want and all our plans to Jesus.

What Jesus meant by "be perfect" are like the words of the Grammy-winning song "Smooth," featuring Rob Thomas with Santana. In 1999, his song was number one for twelve consecutive weeks.

Give me your heart

Make it real

Or else forget about it

I can see Jesus using those very words to his disciples and especially to wannabe disciples. That's the way he was and that's how he talked because that's what he expected. Here's our problem today. Not only do we not like ultimatums, but we have too many Christians who have accepted Jesus into their hearts and who have been baptized and who have confessed their sins and who have joined the Church and who are in Bible studies and who are absolutely 100 percent convinced they are going to heaven, but who are not followers of Jesus.

There are many who haven't made it real. The mark of a follower of Jesus is following. The mark of a follower of Jesus is that she or he has given Jesus her or his heart. It's that simple. It's that demanding. It's that serious. Jesus was a moral zealot and he expected his followers to become moral zealots too. He wanted them to live the Committed. Life.

COWARD.LIFE

Richard Stearns is now the president of World Vision, one of the most visible Christian relief and development organizations in the world. Richard was a Christian but he admits that in his wildly successful and even opulent lifestyle he had become a "coward for God" until ...

A friend, Bill Bryce, was raising money for a top-notch seminary but had been offered a new job to raise money for World Vision. In making that decision, Bill asked Richard for his advice, and Richard thought it was a no-brainer — raising money for a dusty seminary versus raising money to save starving children was not a decision. Thirteen years later Bill, still with World Vision, which was losing its fine president, called Richard to tell him that he sensed God might be calling Richard to be the next president.

Richard laughed at him. His words: "I wasn't even interested or available. I had made it to the top, loved my job, loved my house and community, and had five young kids who attended a great Christian school, and I had no intention of uprooting them." His friend Bill pushed a little more and Richard got pushy himself, and closed the phone conversation with these memorable words: "If God wants me, He knows where to find me." After all, Richard reasoned, he was running a luxury business selling goods to the rich. But Richard Stearns faced the toughest existential challenge he'd ever met. It all came down to this self-pondering statement he had to face: *"You lack one thing, Rich. Sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."*

Richard confessed: "In my own life, success, the prestige of my career, the admiration I felt from others because of it, and the financial prosperity that had come with it had become more and

more important to my identity." It was a struggle because comfort and money and what Jesus called *mammon* has a way of suffocating our willingness to do what Jesus wants us to do. But World Vision knew Richard was the person for the job so they called. Richard interviewed; World Vision offered him the presidency. But Richard backed off and wobbled and gave lame excuses.

Then after a missions conference one night, Richard sat with his wife, Renée, in their kitchen when it all came crashing down on him: the needs of the children around the world and his intoxication with a career and the call of Jesus upon his life and the gospel of the kingdom that means more than fire insurance.

He broke down sobbing. God was calling. That April he accepted, in May he resigned from his business, in June he became World Vision's president, in July the movers collected his stuff from his two-hundred-year-old farmhouse on five acres, in August he was in the jungles of Uganda. He's been traveling the world for World Vision ever since.³³

THE SUM OF IT ALL

I've been teaching for more than two decades. I've been studying the teachings of Jesus as a professional, which doesn't make me perfect or mean my ideas are better, but it does at least mean I've been at this awhile.

There are a number of words that run like water through each of those sayings we have already quoted from Jesus. We can call this set of Jesus' teachings *holiness* or *righteousness* or *discipleship* or *kingdom vision*, but what we call them is not that important.

What is important is that we have two options:

You can dismiss Jesus' morally zealous words as unrealistic.

OR

You can take his words as a summons to give yourself to Jesus.

That is, you can take these words as a summons to love God and to love Jesus and to love yourself and to love others—totally. Jesus' teachings are not a set of morals or a set of teachings or even a lofty utopian law or a religion. They are profound, provocative, utterly (at

times) unthinkable and undoable challenges to get you to take a look at who it is that utters these words, to think about whether or not he's worth the effort, and a summons to give your entire self — heart, soul, mind, strength, body, and spirit — to Jesus himself.

They are a summons to love him and to give yourself to him
 The way a lover gives her body to the one she loves
 The way a man gives his body to the woman he loves
 In every act of love you either give your heart or trade your soul
 But ...

Jesus invites you to give yourself to him, an act of heart *and* soul

Yes, like in the lyrics of "Smooth," he invites you into two options: "Give me your heart. Make it real. Or else forget about it." Jesus is a love-me-completely zealot.

Jesus doesn't want just your talents. He doesn't want just your dreams. He doesn't want just your abilities. He doesn't want just your mind. He doesn't want just your job. He doesn't want only your grades. He doesn't want just your boyfriend or girlfriend. He doesn't want just your money. He doesn't want just your kids or your spouse. He doesn't want just your gifts.

He wants *you*.

He doesn't want something *from you*, he wants *you*.

He wants your One.Life.

He wants you to live the Committed.Life.

He isn't asking you to commit to a system or an idea or an ideal. He isn't asking you to throw yourself into a religion or a logical system. First and foremost, and without this the whole thing crumbles into a deconstructed myth, he wants you to commit yourself unreservedly to him.

If you give *yourself* to Jesus, he transforms your talents and your dreams and your abilities and your mind and your job and your grades and the relationship to the ones you love and your money and he converts them into kingdom explorations and kingdom challenges. When you give yourself to Jesus, your life becomes the Kingdom.Life. But the Kingdom of God is not a place where you give

yourself (your One.Life) to Jesus, and that means also to his kingdom dream and to those who are in that kingdom dream already.

His vision becomes real very fast. When Jesus speaks to us about our total life he means our body and sex and he means our job and what we give our life to on a daily basis. So I'd like to explore with you what a kingdom vision means for two of the most common dimensions of life: our love life and our work life.

Interlude

I've never met anyone who is against peace with God and others, and I've never met anyone against justice, and I've never met anyone who is really against love. In fact, it is not a stretch to think that the kingdom dream of Jesus puts into words the deepest dream of everyone. Which leads to the double-edged question:

Why is this dream still so much about the future and so little about what is going on now?

Let me stop what I think may be going on in the heads of many: the answer to that double-edged question is not to be sought in the faults of others. We can't stand up now and say, "It would happen if everyone in the world were like me." We can't point our fingers and say, "It's because of the Communists or the Marxists or the Democrats or the Republicans." We can't even point at our parents and say, "If only I hadn't had a cold and distant father."

I want to ask this question more directly now and I'm asking you to be deadly honest:

Why is this kingdom dream still so much about your future and not about what is going on in your life right now?

Why aren't you realizing this dream in your life? Why do you find yourself not at peace with God and with yourself and with others? Why are you not practicing justice everywhere you go? Why are you not loving some people but loving others?

Why do you want this dream but can't find it?

Why do you crave the Kingdom Life

single-time sexual activity with his girlfriend had consumed his soul and mind for three years. I was the first person he had told, and all he wanted to know was if God forgives sins of a sexual nature.

SEX AND THE KINGDOM VISION

In her mind-blowing survey of sexual behaviors on college campuses, called *Sex and the Soul*, Donna Freitas discovers two sorts of students, and the names this professor uses for them might surprise you. She's discovered both "godly" students and "secular" students. The first group fully integrates faith and their sexual behaviors—even when they don't live up to them—while the second group finds no (or almost no) connection between spirituality and sexual behaviors. The "godly" students do not believe sex is a personal decision but is instead "always religious" and it is always "other-centered."

Freitas discovered that their faith tells godly students to see things this way. The "secular" students, on the other hand, split sex and religion into two entirely separate spheres, according to Freitas. What they do sexually is "nobody else's business as long as everyone directly involved consents."³⁴ But it is not because the secular students are not spiritual; in fact, Freitas concluded that the secular students' spirituality simply says almost nothing about sex. For some of them, good sexual relations *are* a form of spirituality.

If you have One.Life, what do you want your love and sex life to look like when you look back on it when you are older?

Someone who follows Jesus and who gives her or his One.Life to the kingdom dream of Jesus, and that means surrendering to become a moral zealot like Jesus, asks yet another question: What does Jesus' kingdom dream—a kingdom marked by self-sacrificing love, justice, wisdom, and peace—have to say about the sexual culture of today? Where does sexuality fit into the dream kingdom of Jesus?

Besides the rather obvious point that Jesus grew up in a world marked by Torah, and a Torah that prohibited sex for anyone outside of marriage and yet showed that sex was a gift from God and therefore good, how does his dream for love, peace, wisdom, and justice impact sexual behaviors? What have you ever thought about sexual behaviors in light of Jesus' kingdom vision, but that

vision has much to say about sexuality — and sexuality today is on steroids.

THREE KINDS OF SEXUAL STATISTICS

There are three kinds of statistics about the actual sexual behaviors of young (and not always) adults today.

The first kind of statistics cover the *details*.

- By the time of graduation from high school, almost 75 percent of high school students have had sex.
- Adolescent females who are sexually active between fifteen and nineteen years old will have, on average, seven different sexual partners during their lives.
- Sixteen percent of high school students have had four or more sexual partners.
- About 70 percent of college students have had sex with at least one partner in the last year.
- Nearly 50 percent of college students have had oral sex in the last thirty days.
- Between 10 percent (females) and 17 percent (males) of college students have had three or more partners in the last year.

A second kind of statistics concern *attitudes and experiences*, and this evidence should deeply concern the follower of Jesus.

Only one-third of the females report that they really wanted to have sex the first time they had sex. (There's more here than just hesitancy about sex; many of these women admit to coercion and unwillingness to do what they did.)

"While two out of three young men said it was better to get married than go through life single, *fewer than half of the young women felt that way*" — so reports Laura Sessions Stepp who has become America's leading journalist on the sexual behaviors of young women. The subtitle of her book *Unhooked* reveals a powerful undercurrent in the hook-up culture: *How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love and Lose at Both*.³⁵

Sessions Stepp also tells us that in one study of 555 undergrads, almost four out of five had hooked up and that "half had been

their evenings planning to have some form of sex, with no particular person in mind."³⁶

Many who engage in sexual behaviors this way walk home that night, or the next morning, absorbed with a sense of shame.

Erwin McManus, pastor at Los Angeles's Mosaic, captures this thought perfectly: "There is no such thing as free sex. It always comes at a cost. With it, either you give your heart, or you give your soul." That is, "you can have sex without giving love, but you can't have sex without giving a part of yourself."³⁷

The results—the statistics above—show that many, if not most, of young adults dabbling in casual sex are profoundly dissatisfied with it, dissatisfied enough that they are calling into question the single most important institution in society: marriage.

The third and most important statistic in all of this though has to do with *the nature of the relationship*:

Almost none of these students is in a serious, long-term relationship with the one with whom they are engaging in sexual activities.

Few today would be surprised to hear that sex has found a way to break itself free from faith, but evidence now shows that sex has also lost its moorings to a serious relationship. Sex has become getting "hooked up" with those who are (relationally) "unhooked from" a serious relationship.

It is too easy to pull the heavy hammer out on this one and pound away with expressions like "it's wrong" or "purity matters" or "sex is for marriage"—all of which Jesus would have inherited from his parents and read in his Torah and absorbed in his culture. But evidence shows that the "it's wrong" strategy is not working, and so we want to go deeper and ask if words like *kingdom* and *justice* and *love* and *righteousness* and *wisdom* address these pervasive sexual behaviors today.

What kind of sexual relationships do you want in the One.Life you've got?

BEHAVIORS OF LOVE

One day after a session of my class Women, the Bible, and the Church—a class that explores both what the Bible says about women and a theol-

ogy of relationships—a young woman asked me if she could talk to me. In less than five minutes she said these things: "This class comes at the perfect time for me. I've been living with my boyfriend for a year. I never wanted to but he insisted, and a few weeks back he got mad and left. I've not seen him since. I need this class to think again about who I am and what it means to love a man. Thanks."

"I'm glad you are taking this class," I said.

And she walked away. It made me head back to my office pondering what my students might be going through—most of them in silence.

After interviewing scads of young women who opened up the closets of their hooking-up practices to her, Laura Sessions Stepp spoke of the damage this does to young women: "A girl can tuck a Trojan in her purse on Saturday night, but there is no such device to protect her heart."³⁸

In other words, there's more to sex than the body. Sex implicates the emotions. Because there is no prophylactic for the heart, many today suppress the emotions involved in a genuine relationship. A professor of health education at Indiana University asks this question: "Hooking up is purposely uncaring. If they turn off the emotional spigot during this time, what will happen to them as older adults?"³⁹

Listen to these words of a young woman: "You're supposed to know what to do and how to do it and how to feel during and afterward. You learn to turn everything off except your body and make yourself emotionally invulnerable."⁴⁰

And yet another woman expresses how she has learned to steel herself against the pain, but she makes her point in a question that reveals the self-inflicted wounds of our sexual culture: "Does that part of us that seeks connection eventually start to break down when we no longer associate sex with love?"⁴¹

After interviewing college students who had been involved in sex with partners to whom they were not committed, Donna Freitas observes, "After a few years of living in the environment they felt exhausted, spent, emptied by the pressure to participate in encounters that left them unfulfilled."⁴²

both generate the same dopamine experience. The pleasure of sex, therefore, is like the pleasure of an addicting drug. At its simplest, dopamine is designed by God to create the desire to have more sex. But there's more to sex neurochemically than pleasure.

The brains of both men and women release neurochemicals during sexual behaviors that also say: "I am bonding emotionally with you." Oxytocin tells a woman's brain that the man is hers and vasopressin tells the man's brain that the woman is his.

Here is an alarming medical conclusion: Bonding occurs chemically *whenever* sexual relations occur—not just when a person chooses bonding to occur and not just when a person is intimately in love with another person.

One more brain item: When anyone engages in sexual behaviors, the brain creates pathways of connection that render that experience easier to repeat and, in fact, that render that experience something the brain wants to repeat over and over. That is, synaptic pathways, or tunnels of sexual pleasure, are created in the brain simply by engaging in sexual behaviors.

Which leads to a problem. When a young man or a young woman begins to sleep around or share sexual experiences with more than one person, shame and feeling dirty result because our God-designed brain gets confused. That sense of feeling dirty is partly the neurochemicals in the brain saying, "I'm confused. Who is this new person you are having sex with?"

What we all need to keep in mind is that our brain and neurochemicals remember the synaptic pathways of former lovers. This is exactly what the comments of the young adults above were leading to. Those who engage in sexual behaviors are opening brain flow that can become massively complex and frustrating for the person who wants to create multiple bonding experiences. The question the young people I quoted above are asking is the right one: Does this behavior create obstacles for future healthy intimacy and obstacles for the possibility of long-term faithful, loving relationship?

The answer, according to science, is *yes*. Sex devoid of relational commitment confuses our brain's neurochemicals and begins to corrode our capacity for one of our deepest yearnings: the yearning for

commitment and faithfulness, or bonding with someone who loves us. Let me put this more forcefully:

It is impossible to engage in the hookup culture without damaging your brain's innate desire for healthy, faithful, emotional bonding.

Alicia makes this confession: "I also realized that hooking up had influenced my notions of self-worth, love, relationships and expectations of men in ways I hadn't realized."⁴⁵

I assure you, there's a better way. It's the kingdom way.

SEX AND LOVE

Jesus's view of sex and love were profoundly Jewish, and that means they emerged out of Israel's story and Israel's Scriptures, what Christians today call the Old Testament. In that context, love and sex were about consummating marriage, procreation, expression of love and pleasure—but all of this in the context of a rugged, realistic lifetime commitment where the body really does matter.⁴⁶

Let's begin with the idea that the body really does matter, because for some Christians the body is inferior to the soul or spirit or mind. Therefore, to them, what the body does doesn't really matter. That's a form of Gnosticism.

For others, while they think what they do with their body does matter, they can't integrate their spirituality into their embodiedness. So, instead of seeing their body as important to following Jesus, they let it tag along to the spirituality game they play but hope the body keeps quiet the whole time and perhaps sits in the corner without attracting attention to itself.

The one thing Jesus learned in the Jewish world was that the body isn't a container for the spirit but that the body is fully integrated with spirit. For Jesus, there is complete integration of body and spirit. So, it can be put this way: The reason Jesus and his Jewish world talked about sex and bodies so much was because the body was so important. Your body matters and what you do with your body is your spirituality!

Jesus' view of rugged, realistic commitment can be found in what he taught about divorce. At the time of Jesus there were two basic

views, as there are in most cultures on most issues most of the time. One group believed that divorce should be granted permissively and for any good reason, and that a permissible divorce meant a permissible remarriage. A famous rabbi, Hillel, is credited with this view. Another group, led by a rabbi named Shammai, thought the only permissible ground of divorce (and remarriage) was what Moses taught in Deuteronomy 24:1. The verse indicates that a man might become displeased with his wife if he "finds *something indecent*" about her. On those two Hebrew words, *erwat dabar* ("something indecent"), the fate of families hung. For Shammai, something indecent meant sexual immorality like adultery or incest. But for Hillel it meant whatever displeased the man — and the expansiveness of that was later illustrated to be as broad as: "Even if she burns your toast!"

In this context of a raging debate about permissiveness in divorce and remarriage, we get this report from Matthew 19:

"Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?'" (v. 3).

That is, they are asking if Hillel is right: Can you get a permissible divorce for most any reason you can find? Jesus' response astounded even his disciples, and he gives his answer in three parts, and these three all illustrate that Jesus believed that marriage was permanent and that sexual relations and love make sense only within that context:

#1: God makes the marriage.

"Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate" (v. 6).

#2: Divorce was only permitted due to sin.

"Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning" (v. 8).

#3: Marriage is permanent.

"I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery" (v. 9).

His disciples, because they had imbibed the permissiveness of their own culture, were shocked. They said:

"If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry" (v. 10).

So Jesus took their comment to the opposite, morally zealous extreme:

Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others have been made eunuchs; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.

(*vv. 11–12*)

If those words don't illustrate the moral zeal of Jesus and his belief that marriage is for keeps, then nothing does.

But this forces another issue to arise. "Okay," you might say, "I can see that Jesus' moral zeal led him to believe marriage was permanent and that sex only made sense within a context of rugged commitment to one another forever. I can see that. But where's the love? It's got to be more than just keeping the law."

You're right, and this is why we not only have to listen to Jesus in light of his historical context but also in light of his Bible.

The biggest problem with understanding sex today is that we don't understand what love is. Here's where we are headed: Love is not what we call romance, neither is it dopamine highs. Brain scientists will tell us right up front that both of those expressions are mostly chemical.

What then is love? Love is a rugged commitment to be with someone. "Being with" is what love is all about. And in a Christian context for someone who follows Jesus, love is being with someone as we both follow Jesus. The Bible sketches a wonderful view of love, and it's one we need to listen to more carefully.

Israel's story had one book that was devoted to this theme of rugged, committed love and marriage and sex, and it is a book that presents what can only be called a kingdom ideal of love, sex, and relationship: the Song of Solomon. This book, which is a series of beautiful, evocative, and erotic poems, shaped Jews to see that love and sex belonged together. This was in dramatic contrast to what they were finding in Greece and Rome at the time. The Song of Solomon reveals two humans—a man and his wife—who are obsessed with one another in rapturous love, who playfully delight in one another's presence and bodies, and whose words are so other-oriented

and vulnerable that one must describe this book as Songs of Delight
and Songs about Loving You.

It doesn't take much imagination to know what these two love-
birds are saying to one another as they coo love poems to one another
from Song of Solomon (Song of Songs) 4:16 – 5:1.

She

Awake, north wind,
and come, south wind!
Blow on my garden,
that its fragrance may spread abroad.
Let my beloved come into his garden
and taste its choice fruits.

He

I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride;
I have gathered my myrrh with my spice.
I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey;
I have drunk my wine and my milk.

Friends

Eat, friends, and drink;
drink your fill of love.

Or this from Song of Solomon 7:6–9, 10–12:

He

How beautiful you are and how pleasing,
my love, with your delights!
Your stature is like that of the palm,
and your breasts like clusters of fruit.
I said, "I will climb the palm tree;
I will take hold of its fruit."
May your breasts be like clusters of grapes on the vine,
the fragrance of your breath like apples,
and your mouth like the best wine.

She

May the wine go straight to my beloved,
flowing gently over lips and teeth.
I belong to my beloved,
and his desire is for me.

Come, my beloved, let us go to the countryside.

let us spend the night in the villages.
 Let us go early to the vineyards
 to see if the vines have budded,
 if their blossoms have opened,
 and if the pomegranates are in bloom —
 there I will give you my love.

In one of my college classes, after I read the last two chapters of the Song of Solomon in a dramatic fashion, one young man at the back of the room, with dopamine now at work in his system, uttered: "Man, am I glad this is in the Bible!"

The good news is that it is. The good news also is that it is designed to guide the sexual behaviors of humans. The Song of Solomon is ancient Israel's "love and sex" manual. But there is one thing that shapes the dopamine delights of this most sacred of sex manuals: a committed relationship that expressed itself in being "with" one another. These two poets come alive in loving one another. In other words, the themes are shaped by chemically induced commitments that are found in the release of vasopressin and oxytocin: "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine."

Sex is about relationship.

Sex is about love.

Without relationship and love, sex wounds.

Student after student tells me the same story, sometimes without even using words.

THE THREE HARDEST WORDS TO SAY TODAY: "I.LOVE.YOU."

Humans, Jesus' dream constantly affirms, are made to love one another, and only in loving others do humans become fully human. Humans are wired to connect with one another and in that relational connection the electricity of love flows and lights up the human being. (Sex is only one part of this electric connection.) But somehow four lies about love have been hoisted from the depths of nonsense and downloaded into the culture of our world. They are these:

I love you means ...

Lie #1: I am needy.

Lie #2: I am weak.

Lie #3: I am dependent (or codependent).

Lie #4: I lose my independence.

Our culture has rammed this list of system-crashing lies into the minds and hearts of this generation. Yes, some humans connect to others out of an unhealthy neediness or weakness and become codependent and lose their sense of self. But, God made us to love others and to connect to others and it is not wrong to be social and to fall in love so much that you feel like you can't exist without another person — I know I felt that way when I fell in love with my wife, Kris. I just didn't want to live without her (and still don't). I was fifteen and Kris was fifteen; we were sophomores in high school. I couldn't wait to see her between classes and after school and on the weekends. The world, so it seemed to me, wasn't complete unless Kris was in it.

We've been with one another for more than three decades, which means we've done lots of things together. Every evening for the last eight years, usually around 4:00 p.m., I make our dinner salad. I get out the spinach leaves and the cutting board and the knife and the bowl, and I wash the leaves and then cut the leaves carefully into smaller bits. Then I get out broccoli slaw and tomatoes and onions and Pecorino Romano cheese and dried berries and nuts and broccoli florets and carrots. Then I begin to chop away, and in about fifteen minutes the salad is ready.

You might be wondering why I've only been doing this for eight years, so I'll tell you: Kris and I had been married for twenty-eight years before it dawned on me to help in the kitchen. Kris is a psychologist, and she knew just how to handle my eagerness at that point. She encouraged me, and within two days the job was mine! What I'm telling you is that love is not simply about dopamine rushes and about special moments of intimacy. Love in the Bible is about being with someone in a lifetime commitment, and the routine activities of our days — like making salad — are

be *with* someone. I am with Kris in these sorts of ways, and it is this kind of "withness" that shapes our marriage and our love.

Many today think we have progressed beyond those days of rapturously loving another person so much we don't feel complete without them or committing ourselves to be with another person for a lifetime. Leonora Epstein, in a CNN.com column,⁴⁷ was speaking with her therapist about her struggles in relationships and thinking the feminist therapist might just delve into some "childhood father complex" when her therapist uttered these jaw-dropping words: "Some women are just happier in a relationship."

Epstein questioned herself: "Huh? Isn't the modern woman supposed to be totally amazing on her own?" Then she thought through her own story to discover this: "When in committed relationships, I was happier. When single, I was depressed." What was most jaw-dropping in her reflections was this conclusion: "And perhaps 'needing a man' is an indication of the more basic human instinct—not for reproduction, but for companionship." Leonora is not about to give up on her "better alone" thinking though: "The idea still doesn't sit right with me as someone who has put so much energy into making me happy."

The message of our culture is to do it on your own and to get your affirmations from yourself and your accomplishments: "Don't make the commitment for life but just see how long it lasts." So we have a generation of highly inspired workaholics who are struggling with the decision to avoid companionship as a central goal of life and, as other studies are showing, they are becoming more and more depressed because of the absence of committed relationships.

Instead of being taught that the aim of life is to love God and to love others, including (if chosen) a bonding relationship with one person as a commitment to be "with" that person for life, our culture teaches that committed love is a constraint on a life already full with all kinds of goals. Instead of being taught that sex flows from genuine love and that genuine love craves commitment, our culture hears that raspy voice of Tina Turner: "What's love got to do with it?"

For instance, a woman named Sienna said it this way: "Commitment to a boyfriend, carried out with honesty and like

one expectation too much."⁴⁸ That is to say, some believe they can't afford to invest time, energy, and emotion in a deep relationship. "Hooking up appears to be a practical alternative."⁴⁹

A young man named Tom, who likes sex, puts it flippantly because his focus is on other things: "I think that guys don't want to worry about having a girlfriend so much. It's, like, somewhat of a burden."⁵⁰ The burden or constraint of committed love, which alone satisfies human relationships, has become an optional part of life for many. Laura Sessions Stepp says this so well: "Sigmund Freud is said to have believed that a happy life is made up of two things: love and work. Society has asked [today's] young women to choose between the two, and they've chosen work, at least for the short term."⁵¹ The instinct to work is clashing with the potentially soul-satisfying demands of lasting love.

Our culture, and clearly this can be exaggerated, finds "I love you" to be the hardest three words to say. Why? This generation knows what real love costs and that it means committing to be with someone forever. A young Duke University woman named Anne Katharine Wales says this: "Somewhere along the line most of us have gotten really close to someone, maybe even fallen in love. . . . For some reason, this scares us beyond belief. Somehow this doesn't fit with our plan of achieving our dreams. We want to be independent; we want to go off and change the world in our own way. But we never planned on falling for someone else."⁵² The result is a generation that is wary and cynical and selfish and anxious about love. That wariness is wounding this generation deeply and hooking up is not satisfying its yearnings.

ROMANCE, ANYONE?

Studies show that the deepest kind of romance desired today is that a young woman wants a boyfriend and a young man wants a girlfriend, and they want to hold hands in public, going on official dates, and just plain talking with one another. In other words, they want someone who will be "with" them in a loyal way.

Donna Freitas interviewed a sexy young woman named Amy. She's hot and she likes to dress the part and young men like her

to be hot and dress the part. She knows it. It "helps me feel good about myself," she says. "I just want to be fun." Freitas observes that "being fun" has led Amy down a painful path, and she offers a potent observation that lies at the core of Amy's dream: "There is one major thing that the girl who seems to have everything is missing: a boyfriend." After getting to know Amy, Freitas says: "Amy really wants to find a boyfriend, someone who will love her. She's tried everything she knows: hooking up, being friends with benefits, playing hard to get. Nothing has worked." She continues: "[Amy wanted] a real boyfriend, one who loved her and respected her, and who would admit to their relationship in public by doing something as simple as asking her on a date or holding her hand while walking across campus."⁵³ What Amy wants is the norm, but our culture—your culture—works against it.

Donna Freitas discovered in talking to college students that the number one romantic experience was "just talking" and "talking for hours." In fact, Hephzibah Anderson, in her confession of a year-long commitment to chastity, described how relationships without sex were more romantic and emotionally satisfying, because, as she puts it: "When you've closed yourself off physically, it's easier to open up emotionally."⁵⁴

This is where a good dose of Jesus' kingdom vision deconstructs a culture gone terribly awry. For Jesus, the kingdom vision of love, justice, peace, and wisdom shapes everything. Personal relationships, because they emerge out of that vision, will also be shaped by love, justice, peace, and wisdom. Romance is a desire and love is a desire because God wired us to connect with others, and to connect deeply—emotionally, spiritually, physically, and sexually. But emotional, spiritual, physical, and sexual love only work well between two who are committed enough to start a family and to be with one another forever. (I'm not suggesting that singleness is wrong; I am saying that lovelessness, in the sense of lasting commitment, is contrary to how we are designed.)

When I was blogging about how love and sex have become disconnected and how love in our culture has become something to fear rather than something to pursue, I was told I was a "Militant liberal."

arts university, Anette Ejning, offered a set of stunning observations about what is going on with young women today in a world where sexual relations have hopped the rails of decency. She writes that what is being described in the hook-up culture "is a state of being no woman can sustain." With wisdom, Anette warns of the breakdown of love that will happen to those in the hook-up culture. She says:

It must [or, will] morph into something else, which could include the following:

- *Men cannot be trusted, I want to stick closer to my girlfriends than my male partners. Maybe I even want to explore sexual relationships with women I can trust because they also feel the same way.*
- *People cannot be trusted, so I would rather be an island unto others.*
- *I feel unworthy of someone's love, so I will not dare to hope in love (from a partner, or others).*
- *Depression! (It only takes a brief glance at stats on the use of anti-depressants among young adults and college students to realize this is happening a lot.)*

Sexuality is a much more integral part of who we are as human beings than we generally care to admit.

What would Jesus say? Jesus is weeping. Why? Not simply because purity codes have been crossed but because what lies behind the traditional Jewish (biblical) laws about sex express what matters most to Jesus: love, justice, peace, and wisdom. Our culture has distorted love from the inside out.

There's a better way.

THE KINGDOM CHOICE: CHASING ROMANCE OR SETTLING INTO FIDELITY?

We observed above that emerging adults today want romance, but I'd like to suggest that the word *romance* is not the right word because it doesn't go far enough. What emerging adults want, so it seems to me, is the fidelity inherent in a loving, faithful, intimate relationship. What they want is someone to be *with* for a lifetime. In fact, our culture confuses romance with love. Which leads me to one more fundamental idea about love and marriage and sex. Along about

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the medieval age love morphed its way into the Platonic, courtly romantic ideal where love became intoxication with the intoxicating feelings of loving another person.⁵⁵

Some married men and married women then had two kinds of relationships: one with a husband or wife and one with a lover (with whom they might never physically consummate their relationship). Instead, they tantalized and titillated themselves with the emotional surges connected to falling in love. Often they would put obstacles in their own paths in order to intensify their feelings, equating those romantic feelings with love itself. What mattered was the burning fire of feelings instead of the joy of the beloved.

This romantic theory of love, which finds its way into Hollywood and novels, distorts the rugged choice of settling into fidelity. This romantic theory of love puts emotions and feelings and (my) personal happiness at the center of what love is. In other words, romantic love more often than not *uses* another person to fulfill one's own desires and passions.

Jesus' world is against this romantic theory of relationships. What flows directly from Jesus' kingdom dream is a rugged and settled commitment to the other person rather than to my own swarming feelings and to my own happiness. Instead of loving love, as in courtly love, the kingdom lover loves the other and lives his or her life for that other—the way the lovers in the Song of Solomon take delight in the other. (Notice how often in the poetry from Song of Solomon the lovers speak of the other.)

Instead of loving the absence of the other, as is the case with romantic love, because it generates emotional yearning for the other, kingdom lovers delight in the daily, routine presence of one another, whether the emotions of romance are present or not. Eating together, walking together, sitting together, praying together, sleeping together, and living a life together is the way we settle into fidelity. There is only one guarantee for sustaining marriage in a kingdom way: the promise to stay married trumping emotional happiness. Why? Because the lover believes the other's good is the chief concern. One of the world's experts on the societal history of love is the French scholar Denis de Rougemont, who makes this profound

observation from the perspective of a man (whom a woman loves in return): "To choose a woman for a wife is to say to Miss So-and-So: 'I want to live with you just as you are.' For this really means: 'It is you I choose to *share* my life with me, and that [sharing of life] is the only *evidence* there can be that I love you.'"⁵⁶

As I write this paragraph, Kris and I have been married for thirty-six years. Recently my class was talking about wedding vows, and the subject of whether or not to use standard vows or to write your own vows came up. Which led us to read a traditional vow:

To have and to behold,
from this day on,
for better or for worse,
for richer, for poorer,
in sickness and in health,
to love and to cherish;
until death do us part.

As we were reading the vow and the students were discussing with one another what their views were, this came to my mind: Yes, that's our story, that's our vow, that's what Kris and I have lived. Ups and downs, good days and bad days, months when we hoped we'd have enough money and months when we relaxed. As I pondered these words and students were talking about whether they'd use traditional vows or write their own, I thought about what marriage was. In my view, only one expression can sum up the real story of marriage:

I will be with you.

Underneath the dopamine and beyond the neurochemicals is the commitment I made to Kris and that she made to me, and it is the commitment that has sustained us: it is the commitment to be with one another until the end. We now have a story to tell of our One. *Life with one another.*

The great Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard never married, but while engaged he contemplated marriage in ways that few can express. "What I am through her she is through me, and neither of us is anything by ourselves, but we are what we are in union."⁵⁷ Kierkegaard is like one of the doors to love: If we are humans

through other humans, we are lovers through loving the one we love and through receiving the love of the one who loves us. “I.love.you” will become our words when the *you* is what the *I* most cares about.

I contend that the kingdom dream of Jesus reshapes what love is, what intimacy is, what marriage is, and what sex is, because Jesus’ vision of the kingdom transforms the meaning of love.