

I N V I T A T I O N
TO THE
JESUS LIFE

EXPERIMENTS IN CHRISTLIKENESS

JAN JOHNSON

NAVPRESS 

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To the “council”:

*Jane,
Keith,
Becky,
Bill,
and Dallas*

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Foreword

Confidence in Jesus himself, an awareness that he truly is the Master of the Universe and knows with absolute clarity what is real, good, and right, draws us to him as Savior, Lord, and Teacher, all in One. That is whole-life faith in Christ. It naturally leads us into longing to do what he says, and, so far as possible, to be what he is, by receiving his life in us. For many professing Christians, however, that longing leads only to a life of frustration and disappointment, for they lack adequate practical teaching on how to go about it. Many simply give up and wait for heaven after death, developing a theology of sin and salvation to meet the failures they perceive as a necessity. Others struggle onward, but with small progress judged in terms of the clear benchmarks of the New Testament — say, 1 Corinthians 13. Still others turn aside from faith in Christ, convinced that it “just doesn’t work.”

The familiar question “What would Jesus do?” is by now notorious for failing to lead people into routine, easy obedience to Christ. Most of those who could sincerely ask the question already have a pretty good idea of what he would do in given circumstances, though there are cases of real doubt. Often they clearly *know* the answer to this question but have no idea of how to put it into practice or of how

to live a life of regular practice. Indeed, it would be instructive to pay attention to what is really on the mind of one who asks that question; but it is, in any case, certain that the question “What would Jesus do?” will be of little benefit to serious seekers until they link it to the deeper question “*How* would Jesus do it?” Answers to the former question will prove baffling, and very likely disastrous, if put into action without detailed answers to the latter.

Finding out *how* Jesus would do what Jesus would do is the gift that comes to us as we go to what Jan Johnson calls “soul school” with Jesus. There we learn through patient practice with him the inner texture of the experiences involved in becoming and in being one who reliably does what Jesus said and did in the manner he did it. The manner is, of course, everything, and it alone, when right, can save us from life-destroying legalism and pharisaism, by opening the fountains of intelligent grace in our souls and bodies. In soul school with Jesus we learn what actually goes on in the person who is receiving the grace of God as he or she does the things Jesus told his followers to do. And we learn specific ways of becoming one who does that. It isn’t impossible, and, indeed, it isn’t even particularly hard, except for those who try to do it without integrating Christ the Savior and Teacher into the occasions and moments of action. For them it *is* impossible. But his yoke is easy and his burden is light, and under them we find rest through goodness and strength. So he invites us to come to him and learn of him.

An unsuspecting reader of the New Testament might think that this is precisely what the Christian life is all about. You might get the same idea from looking at those who have actually found their way into effective Christlikeness. The witness is clear to those who will consider it. But the “how” of it all is currently obscured. Thus, what we routinely do in church is not, to say the least, emphatically focused on the transformation of attendees into Christlikeness, from the inside out. While we have, for the most part, just drifted into our distracted condition, moving out of it and making such

transformation our overriding aim is a choice we can make. But we need specific, practical instruction as to exactly what we are choosing.

Jan Johnson is a careful student of the biblical texts who knows how to lead us into the experiences that make the Christ-life real in the concrete circumstances where we live. What is it like in our real life, for example, to attend to people as Jesus did, to live without fear, to serve as he served, to die to self, and so forth? She has a deep knowledge of Scripture, on the one hand, and of spiritual life in Christ, on the other. The first application of this knowledge is always to me, the individual, drawn to Christ and intent on becoming like him as his student in kingdom living. But of course this student status is necessarily a life in community with others, some of whom may have other things on their minds or may care nothing at all for Christ, regardless of what they profess. As I learn to open my moments and hours to him, he intermingles his life with mine in all contexts and shows me how to orient every aspect of my being toward him, no matter what is going on around me.

But we are also called by him to lead others into discipleship and then to teach them how to live that same kind of life: “Teach them to do everything I have told you,” he said (Matthew 28:20, CEV). Really! It seems to me that, today, very few people know how to do that, and perhaps fewer still see that as *the* task of God’s people in our world. You can judge for yourself concerning this matter by observing what our various Christian gatherings and churches actually do or try to do. If in our Christian group, whatever that may be, we were to decide to actually do what the Great Commission says (Matthew 28:18-20), we would need to know how to go about it. We would have to deal with the fine texture of the inner life, the spiritual, psychological, and social dynamics that actually move us in what we do and do not do. How, then, could we set up our Christian activities actually to accomplish what the Great Commission calls for?

Jan Johnson gives a substantial answer to this question, and

one that I think is without parallel among contemporary writers. Many older writers, such as Jeremy Taylor and Richard Baxter, to name only two of the most outstanding, also provided answers to this question, in a day when it was assumed that Christian ministers would do so; but they are almost totally inaccessible to the contemporary reader. Jan Johnson has written a *Holy Living* (by seventeenth-century author Jeremy Taylor) for our time, and anyone who understands and does what she says will find such living, as promised, to be easy and light, full of goodness, grace, and strength — regardless of circumstances.

—*Dallas Willard*

I Soul School: Will I Ever Change?

“What would Jesus do?” is a good question. As a teen I read that phrase over and over in Charles Sheldon’s book *In His Steps*. I loved this story of how people changed to become like Jesus, but it seemed like a fairy tale. Many lovely people at my church went the extra mile, forgave terrible people, and died to self, but I was mostly concerned with having a blemish-free complexion and getting A’s (in that order). As I grew older, I didn’t change much. I wanted to have a meaningful job, be a good wife and mom, have a nice house, and live a life free of major tragedies. When I had time, I’d help people.

To even think about the question “What would Jesus do?” seemed futile because the gap between the person I wanted to be (because I truly admired Jesus) and my everyday self seemed too wide to manage. I *knew* what Jesus would do — compassionate and courageous actions — but I struggled just to be nice to people. I felt almost as inadequate as my son, Jeff, did when as a teen he told me it was easy to know what Jesus would do — the opposite of whatever he, Jeff, would do in any given moment.

Merely *knowing* what Jesus would do is never enough. What I

longed for was to become the kind of person who deeply loved the outcasts and freed those whom other people chained up — as Jesus did. I wanted to be kindhearted, authentic, and selfless, but I couldn't imagine this ever happening. I wanted to follow Jesus, but the trail seemed impassable. I wanted to take up my cross and follow . . . well, I wasn't sure I really wanted to do *that*.

Certain truths were dead to me: Living an eternal kind of life is possible here and now; traveling the journey of transformation toward Christlikeness is realistic; connecting with God could not only change me but bring that oneness with God described in Scripture. I now see that I was only half-alive.

AN ETERNAL KIND OF LIFE NOW

Most people view eternal life simply as existence that starts when you die and never ends. In reality, eternal (*aiionios*) life begins now and refers not only to *length* of life but also the *quality* of life in which we experience wholeness and union with God. In such a life, we “experience here and now something of the splendour, and the majesty, and the joy, and the peace, and the holiness which are characteristic of the life of God.”¹ An eternal kind of life is one of tasting daily the love of God — a love that “is a *divine life*, an *infinite energy*, an *irresistible power*”² that you and I are invited to participate in (see 2 Peter 1:3-4). It is “Christ *in you*, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27, italics added). It is “nothing else than the life of God himself” in you.³

Jesus defined eternal life this way: “Now this is eternal life: that they may *know you*, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3, italics added). These days “knowing Christ” is often restricted to being able to say, “I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.” But the word *knowledge* (*ginosko*) as Jesus used it in John 17:3 “doesn't mean a mere acquaintance with facts nor an intellectual acceptance”; instead, it means “a complete

devotion of the life in harmony with the revealed will of God and an intimate fellowship with Jesus.⁴ It is not just mental assent to Jesus' divinity. It refers to personal fellowship.⁵ God wants to have an *interactive relationship* with us. This personal interaction is what we see people in the Bible experiencing: God surrounding humans with hidden protection, God coming alongside them in battle, God wanting to hold their hand, and God initiating good things in people's lives, including correction (see 2 Kings 6:17; 2 Chronicles 20:17; Isaiah 42:6; Nehemiah 9).

God fervently desires to have this interactive knowledge with us: "I will give them a heart to *know* me, that I am the LORD. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart" (Jeremiah 24:7, italics added). The Hebrew word for "know," *yada*, is "more than intellectual, emotional knowledge, [but] to enter into deep commitment so profound that Yahweh *enters our experience with us*."⁶ Jeremiah knew God this way: "Yet you *know* me, O LORD; you see me and test my thoughts about you" (Jeremiah 12:3, italics added).

Our relationship with God moves far beyond any human relationship, similar to but even more in depth than what ancients called a soul-friend relationship, in which "two hearts are united in one."⁷ While such earthly soul-friendships are rooted in God, God invites us beyond this into a transforming, soul-friend relationship with his⁸ unseen self who "knows my inward unseen life, the life that I never show another, . . . below the levels plumbed by our most intimate friends."⁹ We can build this transforming soul-friend relationship with God even as we live here on Planet Earth because we were "made for heaven"¹⁰ after all. This friendship with God is what we've been looking for all our lives.

Compare such richness with the now-prevalent "spirituality of *me, here, and now*. Self-centeredness, self-preoccupation, self-preservation. These familiar dynamics haunt many families and places of work, many church groups. The destruction is everywhere to be

seen. . . . Self-interest is the operative ethic. . . . The point of one's life is the maintenance and refurbishing of oneself"¹¹ — diet and exercise, health and happiness for my family and me, becoming a better Christian, self-improving my way to heaven.

By contrast, Jesus taught us that it's not just *me*, but God and God's kingdom; it's not just *here*, but the world God "so loves"; it's not just *now*, but the communion of the saints throughout history, including wise ones of the past and those we need to build for in the future (see John 17:20-26).

TRANSFORMATION IS POSSIBLE

Because this life of union with God is available, we are not doomed "to live in Romans 7," as a colleague once grumbled to me. He quoted verse 15 to describe the state of his soul: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but *what I hate I do*" (italics added). For this fair and wise businessman, it was shocking to think we can live in Romans 8 — living in terms of the Spirit and having our minds full of what the Spirit desires (see verses 5-6).

Jesus described how obedient, transformed behavior naturally flows from a life of abiding in the vine: "Abide in me as I abide in you" (John 15:4, NRSV). That mutual indwelling provides us with the juices to bear fruit such as love, joy, and peace (see verse 5). But without such nourishment, we as branches wither and die (see verse 6). Abiding in Christ's love, however, creates obedience (see verses 9-10) because deep devotion to Jesus gives us the desire to obey and sustains us when we might otherwise have second thoughts. This abiding life of "absolute dependence and perfect confidence" occurs because "a branch . . . is of the very same nature as the vine, and has one life and one spirit with it."¹² Andrew Murray warned of the "unspeakable danger of our giving ourselves to work for God, and to bear fruit, with but little of the true abiding, the wholehearted losing of ourselves in Christ and His life."¹³

As we abide in Christ, we find ourselves more and more able to live in the power of the invisible kingdom of God, to become people who

- Live with joy and gratefulness
- Bless enemies (difficult people)
- Don't hold grudges
- Are not resentful
- Care deeply about others
- Don't run off at the mouth, but offer caring words
- Go the extra mile
- Live with purposeful intentionality
- Are humble (letting go of pride, not grabbing the credit or engaging in power struggles)
- Never, ever judge (that's God's job) (Matthew 5–7)

This kingdom life is the “life from above” of which Jesus spoke (John 3:31). It is lived in conversational relationship with God in which we “nourish ourselves on the person of God.”¹⁴ This journey of connecting with God, abiding in Christ, and living in terms of the Spirit is what we might call “soul school.” It causes us to change inwardly, which is the key. We have problems with obedience when we try to change our outward behavior only, because we need to be transformed in our hearts. Trying to do good things that good people are supposed to do is misguided. God helps us change on the heart level because we behave according to what's in our hearts. The inner life of the soul must be transformed so we “become the *kind of person* from whom good deeds naturally flow”¹⁵ rather than trying to be good and do everything right. Discipleship is not about going through a class or completing a course (though those may help). It's about letting the Spirit form in you a good heart that is devoted to God (see Galatians 4:19) so that you follow Jesus with great joy.

How does a change of heart occur? We increasingly have

interactive, face-to-face encounters with God: moments of conviction, moments of truth quietly spoken to us, moments of clarity (“Okay, now I get it!”), and moments of comfort and encouragement. In these moments we connect with God and learn to live a lifetime of such moments.

CONNECTING WITH GOD

To facilitate this life with God, we become willing to do whatever we need to do to connect with God in the next ten minutes — even if it looks very different from what the people around us do or what has been described in a book. As we connect with God, we change.

For example, when I first began volunteering at the Samaritan Center, a drop-in center for the homeless, I worked well with the clients except when they yelled at me or were sarcastic.

Then I snapped back. I felt terrible because I was supposed to be serving them. I finally forced myself to stop snapping back, but I kept thinking hot retorts in my mind, and these leaked into my facial expressions and tone of voice. Once when holding back an angry reply, I found myself saying, “I was only trying to be polite.” The client responded, “Yes, that’s very obvious. You were only *trying*.” It hurt because he was right.

Finally it occurred to me to implement the spiritual discipline that is most basic to my journey with Jesus because I learned it when my children were small: practicing the presence of God.¹⁶ So as I folded towels, I prayed for the clients around me, remembering situations and issues they’d confided in me. As I handed towels to clients, I greeted them by name and prayed for them. As I did laundry, I imitated Brother Lawrence, who was happy to pick up a piece of straw for the love of God.¹⁷ Because my mind was filled with concern for the clients, I stopped taking things so personally.

Then one morning a few years ago, I saw clearly how it worked. I noticed that Donna, one of the clients, had two black eyes, and then

I found out that Tessa¹⁸ had beaten her up. As I stood at the counter doing paperwork, two hands slammed down on the surface across from me. I looked up: It was Tessa. She was mad. She began telling me off about a certain procedure she didn't like. As I looked at her, I practiced God's presence by praying this breath prayer: "Show me this person's heart." When she said all the clients thought I was rude, I almost protested — they tell me I'm the most fun volunteer! But I stayed quiet, trying to see her heart. Finally, Tessa paused, quieted herself, and whispered that she knew the other clients were mad at her because of "what happened with Donna. So I decided that when I came in here to talk to you, I would be calm. I wouldn't get mad."

Immediately I patted her hands and replied, "You're doing a good job, Tessa. You're speaking very quietly and staying calm. Keep it up."

She grinned at me and said, "I thought so." I'd seen her heart — someone working on her temper — and so I could encourage her.

A little later, I reflected that I must be nuts. How could I encourage someone who had yelled at me? What had come over me? But I saw that the Holy Spirit had been working in me as I connected with God by practicing God's presence. *Let it alone*, I told myself. *It was a beautiful thing*. In fact, I had unintentionally blessed my enemy (a difficult person). A very different me finally stood behind that counter than the one who had begun volunteering years before.

In the beginning kindness seemed impossible. But following my longtime spiritual practice helped me connect with God, which caused compassion and kindness to flow better than before. When we put our effort into *whatever it takes to help us connect with God*, we quite naturally do good things without thinking about them. In such "accidental obedience," we obey out of a personal connection with God, not because we ordered ourselves to do it. That's how life with God works: You do the connecting (with God), and God does the perfecting (in your behavior).

The distinction of where to put the effort is crucial: not in trying to be good (or do what Jesus did) but in connecting with Jesus himself. A seminary student once explained to me his confusion that weekly chapel speakers seemed to contradict one another. One week someone pleaded, “Try really hard to be good.” The next week another urged, “Let go and let God.” He wondered, *Which is it?* He said to me, “Now I get it. I ask God about what practices I might do to connect with God and then I put my effort into doing those practices. Then I let go and let the Spirit work in me.”

When we cooperate with God this way, we know it’s not about us because it’s so clearly *God’s work* in us (see Philippians 1:6). C. S. Lewis described this process when he said that God doesn’t love us because we’re good, but because God loves us, God *makes us good*.¹⁹ That changed heart is the Spirit’s work in us, making us good in the moments we least expect it. Goodness flows because we’re abiding in the Vine.

Moments of connecting are more likely to occur as we practice spiritual disciplines or exercises (such as practicing the presence of God). These practices are described in the Bible, especially in the behavior of Jesus. The key word is “practice.” They’re intensified moves, such as playing scales on the piano or practicing a serve in tennis. We do the same movements over and over behind the scenes when no one is watching. Then when it’s time to play the piano in a recital or serve a tennis ball in a match, the fingers or arm flies with precision. In the meantime, spiritual practices help us stay in the flow of the Spirit so that we live an interactive life with God.

The catch is that we must first *become willing* to do whatever we need to do to connect with God. Sentimental longing will not do; we have to want it more than we want anything else. When we decide to become a disciple of Jesus—to be his apprentice in all matters of life—we also decide to set aside many other wonderful things, much to other people’s dismay. We become like that pearl merchant working online all night until she finds that perfect pearl

she's been seeking. Then she sells the house, the car, the boat, even her bed, and rearranges her whole life to purchase this treasure (see Matthew 13:45-46). Everything is set aside to respond to that invitation: "Follow me."

THIS BOOK AS "A CURRICULUM FOR CHRISTLIKENESS"²⁰

This book does not focus on helping you to change your behaviors or to practice spiritual disciplines, but it places Jesus in the center of your vision and lets Jesus lead you into this eternal kind of life. In each chapter of this book, I present a characteristic of Jesus that we often overlook or take for granted, yet when we examine Jesus this way we are astonished and drawn to him. We also explore these aspects in today's terms: How would Jesus live his life today if he had my life as a journalist, a computer tech, a hairstylist, a school crossing guard, a CEO of a start-up company? At the end of each chapter, I suggest experiments for connecting with God — spiritual practices you might use (as the Holy Spirit leads) to follow Jesus into this way of being. You, no doubt, might have many others to suggest. As you review the suggested practices (specific versions of spiritual disciplines), consider these cautions:

Disciplines are not just for elite Christians. Everybody performs disciplines, but they don't call them that. For example, many people employ the discipline of "study" for shopping. My friend "studies" bargains, and so she informed me that a popular restaurant puts its premium pies on sale twice a year: February and October. I benefit from her discipline of "study."

Disciplines are not necessarily heroic. Disciplines work best when they fit within the ordinary fabric of our everyday lives. For example, I noticed many years ago that I complained about people a lot. So I made a decision that every time I complained about someone out loud or in my mind, I would pause and pray for the person. Usually I prayed something along the lines of Philippians 3:10 — that they

would “know Christ” in a deeper way. Eventually I skipped the complaint and went right to the prayer. It was no big deal — just a few seconds now and then.

Motives matter. It’s easy to do spiritual practices for the wrong reasons, especially to be a better Christian or to be holy. The goal of doing a spiritual discipline is to help you *connect* with God — abide in Christ, live in terms of the Spirit. This union with God then transforms you into Christlikeness. Doing these disciplines equips you to love God and love your neighbor (the Great Commandment). As you “train yourself to be godly,” you “share in the life of Christ”²¹ (1 Timothy 4:7).

But focus and motives easily go astray. For example, as some people read the Bible every day, they become eager to check off that task to get it done or because they hope it will help them have a better day. Such motives cause them to read the Bible primarily to finish the task. But if their goal in reading is to connect with God, they won’t focus on getting to the bottom of the page. They take time to pause in the middle because they sense God speaking to them. As they linger over the text — maybe even every day for a week — they find themselves doing the good things mentioned in the passage without even realizing it. Because they are abiding, they bear fruit and obey. The more they bear fruit and obey, the more they want to abide.

Forget What You Think You Know . . .

As you read each chapter, it may help if you decide now that you’re willing to take a fresh look at Jesus, which may mean you need to set aside certain preconceived ideas. N. T. Wright warned us, “Don’t come with a set fixed idea of who God is, and try to fit Jesus into that. *Look at Jesus*, the Jesus who wept at the tomb of a friend, the one who washed his followers’ feet, and you’ll see who is the true God.”²² The Jesus you meet in the Gospels is your best clue about what God is like. By saying, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9), Jesus was telling us to “forget everything we think we

know about the nature of God and lose ourselves in this picture of our Father.”²³

May you find great joy in your vision of life with Jesus in the kingdom of God.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. Read again the list of phrases that describes life in the kingdom of God (under “Transformation Is Possible”). Choose a word that describes what it would feel like to live such a life.
2. What would be the best thing about oneness with Christ (union with God)?
3. When have you had an interactive, face-to-face encounter with God? What was it like? If you’ve never had that experience, what do you think it might be like?
4. In what area(s) of your life would you like to see genuine change?

