

a publication of Life Action Ministries

# revive

Volume 47, Issue 2

THEY HEAR MY VOICE AND THEY

# FOLLOW

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### GIVING UP CONTROL

Trusting Jesus as Lord means heart-level surrender to His will instead of our own. Do you have a “yes mentality” in your relationship to God?



### OBEDIENCE IS ROOTED IN LOVE

Why do so many believers fail to obey Jesus even though they've claimed Him as their Savior and Lord?



### LIFE IN THE ZONE

When we are absorbed with instantaneously doing God's will, we are in the “obedience zone,” where God's glory and our good flourish together.



### TIRED OF TRYING

Willpower can only restrain sinful behavior for short periods of time. Discover a better way toward a life of obedience to Jesus than trying harder to be good.



# GETTING IN SYNC WITH GOD

► God wants us to walk with Him. But we can't keep in step with God if we're going our own direction.



## SPIRIT OF REVIVAL

**Byron Paulus**  
Executive Director

***The greatest deterrent to experiencing God's presence in revival and spiritual awakening is disobedience.***

 @ByronPaulus

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Byron'.

**I still remember** a piece of parenting advice my wife and I received early in our family life: “If your children learn to obey between birth and five years of age, the rest of child rearing pretty much takes care of itself.” Profoundly simple counsel, but as the ensuing years with our children quickly taught us, very difficult to get right!

The reason obedience is so important is that it keeps a parent and child in sync with each other. Ironically, the primary beneficiaries of obedience were not us as parents, but rather our children. Their obedience enabled the blessing of our parental wisdom and resources to work on their behalf.

The same principle is true in our relationship to our heavenly Father. As we submit to the authority of the Word of God, the lordship of Jesus Christ, and the leadership of the Holy Spirit, we are the glad beneficiaries of God's blessing and guidance. Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice . . . and they follow me” (John 10:27).

I am convinced that the greatest deterrent to experiencing God's presence in revival and spiritual awakening is *disobedience—not out in the world, but inside the church!* In fact, of the thousands of churchgoers who rightly affirm the inerrancy of the Scriptures, how many of those same people functionally neglect the *authority* of God's Word over their everyday lives?

I guess that shouldn't surprise me. The greatest struggle I face personally isn't acquiring more truth, but learning to obey the truth I already know. From Lucifer's refusal to obey God in the heavenly realms, to Adam and Eve's refusal to obey God in the Garden, the urge to go our own way is our biggest obstacle.

Disobedience stands in the way of our fulfilling the purpose of our lives. It stands in the way of our fellowship with God. And, obviously, it stands in the way of revival!

As A. W. Tozer boldly asserted, “Revival will come when even prayer is no longer used as a substitute for obedience.”

Don't skip over what is perhaps the most important question you will ever be asked: “What is the one area of your life that, if you fully obeyed, would tear down all barriers between you and God's fullest blessing in your life?”

A youthful Evan Roberts stood up in 1904 before a Welsh congregation that seemed hard and distant. After a long pause, he put away his notes, believing that one more message would not penetrate hearts that had grown so cold, calloused, and carnal. Instead, he spoke just four words: “Obey the Holy Spirit.”

When Roberts sat down that evening, God stood up. Revival swept Wales and moved throughout the world in a remarkable and unstoppable fashion.

It is time for us to sit down so God can stand up. It's time to obey God.

Of all songs ever sung during our Life Action church events over the years, this children's song has received the most response:

Obedience is the very best way  
to show that you believe:  
Doing exactly what the Lord  
commands, doing it happily.  
Action is the key, do it immediately—  
joy you will receive.  
Obedience is the very best way  
to show that you believe.

Obedience is doing what God says to do, when God says to do it, with the right heart attitude.

Are you ready to obey?

**DISCOVER EVENTS**

**DESIGNED TO**

**HELP YOUR CHURCH**

**SAY “YES”  
TO GOD**



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To learn about our multi-day renewal events,  
and how you can host one in your church, visit  
**[LifeAction.org/events](https://LifeAction.org/events)**

# THE COST OF (NON) DISCIPLESHIP

► Is following Jesus hard or easy? Obeying Jesus demands our total allegiance, but a lifestyle of discipleship brings the joy of life as it was meant to be.



## CONVERSATIONS

**Del Fehsenfeld III**  
Senior Editor

***If Jesus is right,  
then failing to follow  
Him will cost the very  
things that He alone  
can bring.***

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Del'.

**Jesus said**, “Take up [your] cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). But He also said, “My yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:30).

So which is it? Is a life of discipleship a comfort or a crucifixion?

C. S. Lewis points out the seeming paradox. On the one hand, Jesus proclaims the delights of discipleship; on the other, the seemingly crushing cost.

Faced with the high cost of discipleship, many Christians compromise by attempting to ensure their self-interests while still trying to be good. But a halfway approach to discipleship is impossible:

Christ says, “Give me All. I don’t want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don’t want to cut off a branch here and a branch there, I want to have the whole tree down. . . . Hand over the whole natural self. . . . I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself.”\*

Jesus says, “No one can serve two masters” (Matthew 6:24). There will ultimately be a conflict of interest between self-will and God’s will. A choice will have to be made between surrender and self-rule.

With this tension in mind, it is vital to reexamine the emphasis of the Great Commission. Jesus tells us to make *disciples* who learn to do all that He commanded (Matthew 28:19-20).

However, what it means to be a Christian has taken on a different definition in many Western church traditions. It has usually come to mean someone who has agreed to a set of beliefs about Jesus, or has become a member of a church. What is omitted is the necessity of actually following Jesus (apprenticing ourselves to Him).

The result is that churches are full of members who have affirmed the tenets of faith in order to get to heaven, but have no intention of obeying Jesus on earth. Ironically, these converts feel prepared to die, but they are not equipped to live.

Many church members would be shocked if confronted with the necessity of a life of continual obedience to Jesus, since that is not what they signed up for at their conversion. Could it be that this is what Jesus meant when He described masses of self-professed Christians coming to the end of their lives only to stand before God and be told, “I never knew you” (Matthew 7:23)?

The heart of true discipleship is a settled intent to become like Jesus. A disciple is like the man who in his joy went and sold all he had in order to buy the field with the great treasure (Matthew 13:44). Disciples gladly rearrange everything in their lives around Jesus because of a firm persuasion that He is everything they want.

So, is it hard to follow Jesus? Yes, because He demands total allegiance. Only those who give all to Christ find all. This is the paradox of Christianity.

But disciples of Jesus obey Him because they believe He is the way of eternal life. Their confidence in Jesus and the joy of life with Him greatly outweigh the price.

Consider for a moment the alternative—the life of non-discipleship. If Jesus is right, then failing to follow Him will cost the very things that He alone can bring: peace, love, hope, power for good, and life with God, now and forever.

It turns out that the life of non-discipleship is the costliest life of all.

\*Taken from “Giving All to Christ” in *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis.





# GIVING UP CONTROL

GOD ISN'T JUST MY CO-PILOT,  
OR MY ADVISOR FOR LIFE'S CHOICES;  
HE IS MY LORD—THE LORD OF THE UNIVERSE  
AND THE LORD OF MY LIFE.

BY MIKE LEE



my heart, though.

Years ago, I may have said yes in a few small ways—here and there, giving God what I thought He wanted, a hat tip of generosity or praise now and then. I was living the life I thought I'd always wanted, but the Holy Spirit wasn't willing to leave me in that place of self-sufficiency or inner pride. You see, He didn't have the one and only thing He really desires. He didn't have my heart.

And when He doesn't have our hearts, He doesn't have us.

I suppose it should go without saying that a “lord” would be a person we'd obey, particularly if we were voluntarily declaring him as such. Obedience wouldn't be a matter of convenience for us, as if in certain moments we could look a “lord” in the face and say “no.”

Instead, to trust Jesus as Lord would mean a heart-level surrender, to His will instead of mine. That's what I was lacking, and it could only mean one of two things—either I was directly rebellious, or He really wasn't the Lord of my life.

Jesus Himself pointed out this paradox in what has become one of my favorite Bible verses to preach. It just asks a question, and the logic here is difficult to shake: “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord’ and not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46).

Is it possible to call Jesus *Lord* but not have a *yes* mentality to Him? If you think about it, “Yes” is what you say to someone up a chain of command from you. “No” only flows downward, from the person who's really in charge. As long as I reserve the right to say no, then who do I really think is my lord?

For Christians, the logical expectation is that Jesus has authority over them; He owns them; He has the right to tell them what to do. These things are true, of course, for everyone else in the world as well. Jesus is Lord of *all*, whether or not they realize it yet. But for Christians—of course, obviously—they will obey the Lord they follow. Won't they?

## A Different Kind of Life

On our own, we can craft quite a blueprint for our lives. I had a host of hopes and dreams for my business career and my family. I wanted to be wealthy enough to do whatever I wanted wherever I wanted. I had studied up on what it would take to be a millionaire by the time I was forty, and I was aggressively climbing the corporate ladder, always looking for the next promotion, the next job, the next company. By the world's standard I was living large, and planning to live larger!

But for all the “living” I was doing, I didn't have real, abundant life—the life Jesus died to provide. I had settled for a sad substitute, where pride and materialism had taken the place of humility and eternal purpose. Church? Yes. Surrender to Jesus? No. I had faith in my own understanding rather than faith in Him.

You can look all the way back to the Garden of Eden and see a clear pattern throughout the ages: Disobedience to God leads to conflict, confusion, and curses; obedience to God always brings blessing.

- Noah's obedience saved his family from the flood.
- Abraham's obedience resulted in his becoming the father of the great nation Israel, God's chosen people.
- Moses' obedience led the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt.
- Joshua's obedience won the battle of Jericho through following God's supernatural strategy.
- Paul's obedience led him to take the gospel to the unreached Gentiles.

Quite obviously, obedience and faith are closely related. Why did Noah obey? He had faith. Why did Joshua obey God's somewhat unbelievable plan to defeat Jericho? Faith! The people who have faith are the ones who obey. Living by faith, and “the obedience that comes from faith” (Romans 1:5 NIV), is the path to true life—the kind most people miss out on. Except for the grace of God, I would have missed out as well.

## What God Can Do

My life took a big turn when a Life Action team visited my church in 1997. I began that two-week period thinking that other people needed revival, but not me. Slowly, the scales fell

off of my eyes. I realized that my life was very self-centered and I was living in pride.

I really thought I had things figured out. I was a Sunday school teacher, a deacon, and the chairman of our church's finance committee. I had a wonderful wife and children, and we showed up every time the church doors were open. But honestly, I still had one foot in the world, and the Holy Spirit revealed that to me. I saw how prideful I was to think I could serve two masters.

That honesty led me to some painful confessions. Not only was I full of pride, I wasn't being a good spiritual leader in my home. I wasn't giving God anything of my real heart or resources. I had fallen into pornography, I was wearing a mask on Sundays, and I wasn't taking eternal life seriously.

Another point of conviction came during that Revival Summit when I realized I hadn't shared my faith with my parents. How could that be, that my own parents wouldn't know I was a Christian? One night the Summit revivalist asked if anyone had a testimony to share, and I went forward, thinking about telling my story of pride and humility.

Unbelievably, when I stood up there and looked out over the crowd . . . there was my mom, in the back! I hadn't invited her, but she was there. That's when I knew what my obedience step would be. I needed to share the gospel and my testimony with my mom, right then and there, from the platform. I publicly asked my mom to forgive me, and she got up and came to hug me.

We cried and prayed, and I was able to lead my own mom to Christ that night. Three weeks later, my dad came to Christ as well. When I said yes to God in that moment, my whole family was transformed!

Another key moment for me occurred after I became the Director of *Life Action Camp*, and I was evaluating what we call our "core message." That led me to reopen the *Seeking Him* study, one that Life Action uses frequently for those who wish to seek God personally and experience a revived life in Christ. One concept after another—humility, honesty, repentance, forgiveness, obedience—flooded into my soul and brought me to the next level of *yes*—a renewed start to the commitment I'd made fifteen years prior.

Three questions have been helpful to me in evaluating my own level of Christian obedience:

1. Is there anything God wants me to start doing?
2. Is there anything God wants me to stop doing?
3. Is there any reason not to do what God wants?

These questions were first set before me during the Revival Summit at my church, and then again when I sat down with the *Seeking Him* study. I learned that the Christian life is all about humility, faith, and prayer. It isn't just about my activity for God; it's about my relationship with God.

Obedience isn't that complicated, after all. Many times we hope God will show us some new truth or give us fresh insight, even though we haven't obeyed the truth we already know or gone in the direction He has already pointed!

That's where I usually begin when speaking with someone concerned about God's will for his or her life. They might be afraid they'll miss the mark somehow, take a wrong turn, go to the wrong school, even marry the wrong person. And God may have something to say on all those specific issues in our lives, but I doubt we'll get very far if we haven't first said yes to what we already know He wants us to do.

I know for me, saying yes to God hasn't always been easy. My life has gone dramatically off course from where I thought I'd be

## I don't want to forfeit the abundant, purposeful life Jesus died to provide.





and what I thought I'd be doing. That's the nature of Christian obedience. A *yes* to God means I'm not the captain of my own ship anymore. God isn't just my co-pilot, or my advisor for life's choices; He is my Lord—the Lord of the universe and the Lord of my life.

When He speaks, we as Christians must obey. And where He directs, we gladly follow.

### But What About . . .

Before I surrendered my heart to God's direction, my "yeses" to God were temporary, and they were qualified. But now I recognize that my Lord is asking me to say Yes with a capital Y. Not just yes to a specific step of obedience, but yes to His will altogether, wherever that may lead.

This attitude of obedience flows directly out of the Greatest Commandment, wherein I'm told to love God with all my heart. If I love Him as Lord, I'll obey Him as Lord (John 14:15).

Of course, there are still temptations. There are still areas of our lives that are more difficult to get under control (or to give up control) than others. Kind of like, "Lord, what about my marriage problems? Or my addiction? Or my lust? Or my bitterness? I do wish I could obey You, but what about \_\_\_\_\_?"

At Life Action we have an oft-repeated line that we should say yes to God in every category of life: family, relationships, money, character, dreams, habits, witness, work—*every* category. As A. W.

Tozer, a famous preacher of the last century, was known for saying, "If Jesus is not Lord of all, He is not Lord at all."

So, are you ready? Are you ready to bow and confess what every tongue in heaven and on earth will one day confess? *Jesus is Lord.*

His role is to command; my role is to obey. The sooner I can make peace with that, in every category of my life, the better!

### Some Practical Advice

I'm nowhere near graduation from the school of Christian obedience. I want to follow Christ with all my heart, but I'm painfully aware there is more work to do in my life. I'm leaning into the promises Paul wrote to Titus: "The grace of God . . . teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope" (Titus 2:11-13 NIV).

We can pray for God's grace to obey—His power to both *want* to obey, and to actually act according to His purposes. Here is my advice to fellow students of Christ, as those seeking to be His obedient disciples:

1. *Begin with what you already know from God's Word.* Your primary next step is not to learn something new, but to obey something you've already learned. Think about it. How many of Christ's commands are you already aware of? How could you better prioritize those in your life today?
2. *Say yes to the next obedience opportunity.* At some point today or tomorrow, you'll encounter your next opportunity to say yes to God, whatever that might be . . . Witness to a neighbor. Give a word of encouragement. Go out of your way to serve someone. Help your spouse. Spend quality time with a child or grandchild. Prioritize something regarding God's kingdom. Say no to a distracting sin and yes to focusing on what matters most.
3. *At the next T-intersection, go God's way.* You might say, "Mike, I have so far to go in my Christian walk, I don't even know where to begin or what to tackle first." My encouragement to you, my brother or sister, is to simply plan on obeying God at the next fork in the road. You'll know it when it comes—when you could go either your own way, or God's way. In that moment, choose God's way!

There is so much joy to unlock in the Christian life, so much potential each of us has for doing His work in the world, so much opportunity to share Christ with others . . . and frankly, I don't want to miss it. I don't want to forfeit the abundant, purposeful life Jesus died to provide simply because I'm bogged down by disobedience. I'd much rather bow before Christ, my Savior and my Lord, and pledge my heart to Him.

He is the one Lord worth obeying! 🙏

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Mike Lee is Executive Director of Life Action, a division of Life Action Ministries, and also serves as Director of Life Action Camp in southwest Michigan.





# OBEDIENCE IS

***Revive* editor Del Fehsenfeld interviewed Ryan Loveing, lead revivalist on one of Life Action's church event teams, regarding why so many believers don't obey Jesus even though they've claimed Him as their Savior and Lord.**



**Del:** Jesus asked His disciples an obvious question in Luke 6:46. "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?" So, here we are, nearly twenty centuries later, and still many who call Jesus their Lord don't really walk with Him, or follow Him. Ryan, in your experience preaching and counseling in hundreds of churches as a Life Action revivalist, why don't people obey the One they call Lord?



**Ryan:** I believe the greatest hindrance to obedience for most believers is that we've failed to grow in intimacy with God. We don't make time to grow close to Him, and we give our best efforts to other things.

If you think about it, to be human is to have limited energy and availability. We each get to decide how to use those resources, to spend ourselves on the things we believe to be most necessary or worthwhile. And let's be honest, the majority of what most people spend their limited attention focusing on is not their connection to God.

This is why our lusts ultimately have so much power over us. We are deprived of actual intimacy with Jesus. We are not walking with Him, in His strength, totally depending on Him. Often we don't even notice, until a major failure like looking at pornography, having an affair, losing our marriage, or having one of our children rebel reveals that something isn't working.



# ROOTED IN LOVE

## *An Interview with Ryan Loveing*

**Del:** So our failure to obey Jesus is related to failure to grow in love for Jesus? That's interesting, especially since Jesus gives a very similar diagnosis: "All who love me will do what I say" (John 14:23 NLT). Then why don't we love Jesus more?

**Ryan:** One of the main culprits is forgetfulness. I've been struck by how often Jesus asked His disciples why they didn't remember. For example, in Mark 8, Jesus asked them why the miracles of His feeding thousands of people on two separate occasions with a few loaves of bread hadn't sunk in to their belief system.

We are exactly like that! God does miracles in our lives, but we have amnesia. Just a few days later, not only are we not grateful, we are fearful and anxious. Our eyes are on our circumstances, not on Jesus. We aren't going to grow in love for Jesus if we don't rehearse the incredible record of grace in our own lives.

Another reason is *drift*. It's like a marriage relationship. You start out supercharged with connection to each other. Out of that intimacy comes all kinds of creative action, including children and all the work that goes with supporting a family. So if marital closeness is not intentionally renewed, all the *activity* that was *originally birthed out of love* becomes the focus, instead of the relationship itself.

I think ultimately, apart from intentionality, all relationships can drift toward isolation. Before long, we have lost our connection. It's the same in our relationship with God. Most of us don't crash out, we drift away.

**Del:** Do you struggle with any of this personally?

**Ryan:** Sure. My intentions are often very noble. But I'd confess that the "tyranny of the urgent" has often gotten the best of my time. And I can't let myself believe that wanting to be close to God is the same as actually being with Him.

This process for me is very simple, but also surprisingly subtle. It's simple because I naturally pursue those things I believe will provide worth and gratification. Many things provide immediate gratification. They have quick payoff, like food, sex, and entertainment. But the one that seems to get me most is the approval trap.

For example, someone comes to me for counsel, and I have the immediate gratification of being needed. That feels so good! It

fills me up. Then, if I give counsel that helps them, I feel even better. Even though my desire at one level is just to be helpful, I find myself using service for self-gratification. Instead of loving God by loving people, I'm using people to prop up my sense of worth.

This is a common trap for pastors and ministry-minded laypeople. We end up serving for the wrong reasons, then get home after a long day of helping people to find ourselves totally spent. For me, I can say that at the very times my wife and children need my attention, I often find myself withdrawing. I want to be with them, as an ideal, but I haven't allocated the energy it would take to be with them in reality.

The same thing happens with God. I have given my best energy to others and found satisfaction in other places, and I don't have anything left. Not only have I used people and situations, I am progressively growing more disconnected from God when I operate this way.

**Del:** What would be the alternative?

**Ryan:** Love is not simply avoiding the things we shouldn't do; it is doing the things we should do. It's like going to my wife and saying, "You ought to love me because I haven't cheated on you. I haven't emotionally or physically abused you." But none of us would say that is enough!

What about the positive aspects of love: praying with her and for her, communicating with her, sharing in the things she loves? Not doing things that betray intimacy does not mean I have *pursued* intimacy.

We can do the same thing with God: "God, I haven't robbed a bank, I haven't broken the Ten Commandments (lately), I go to church, I give You money, and I try to help people a lot. So, God, that means I deserve the benefits of intimacy!" But just like your spouse, God wants more. He wants a *relationship* with you.

**Del:** So it's possible to expend lots of energy in doing right things, but not be interested in God?

**Ryan:** Of course! That's why it's such an easy mistake to make. Let's compare the dynamic to marriage again. I don't mean to be coarse, but it's common for a man to be very focused on

**IF WE STRIP EVERYTHING**

**DOWN TO THE ESSENCE OF**

**THE ISSUE, GOD DOESN'T**

**WANT OUR SACRIFICES;**

**HE WANTS US.**

the “high” of having sex with his wife. But if his goal becomes more about that than an actual relationship with his wife, the whole activity becomes self-focused. In fact, it’s possible to have sex and not really be interested in your spouse. This is a short-cut to intimacy that is interested in the benefits, not the relationship.

Or consider the wife who finds her joy in her children or the security that marriage provides, and substitutes that for relational closeness with her husband. It’s the same thing—the importance of marital closeness has become secondary to the benefits that come out of the marriage. The marriage has become primarily a means to an end.

It can work the same way in our relationship with God. We feel we are working pretty hard to be good. We’re not out there doing whatever we want and abandoning self-restraint like many of our friends or neighbors. We’re going to church and even serving in different programs. Surely God understands and will give us the benefits.

But are we truly interested in God? Do we genuinely love Him, or do we simply expect to use what He provides? Are we using God for our own ends?

Revival in our relationship with God is an interaction of love. It doesn’t just mean we stop doing sinful things. It is renewed pursuit of friendship with God. It is delighting in God, meditating on His words, confessing and aligning our lives with what He loves. It is endeavoring to walk with Him in His righteousness.

**Del:** What can we do if we realize we love other things more than God?

**Ryan:** If we strip everything down to the essence of the issue, God doesn’t want our sacrifices; He wants *us*. The “sacrifices” make us feel good and can be used to differentiate us from others who aren’t doing as much. But God couldn’t care less, if He doesn’t have our love.

I remind myself constantly that although I live in a trailer and raise my children on the road in order to minister in churches across America, I can easily do what I do in order to be filled by the gratification of people’s praise or my own sense of doing something worthwhile, but care little about an interactive, close relationship with God.

For me, fasting has been a great aid to cut through all the illusions and help me repent. Food is what most of us run to for comfort, but fasting could also include anything else we turn to for satisfaction. When we fast, we put food—or whatever allures us—aside for a period of time.

This is an effective way to help us experience that these things aren’t necessary for satisfaction. It makes room to find out that the Lord Himself will meet our needs. I am grateful for this practice that opens me to God’s power to change my core beliefs about what can satisfy.

**Del:** It seems clear from statistical data that there are growing numbers of people who don’t want to associate with religion at all; at least, this is a trend in North America. Further, “cultural Christians” seem to be abandoning ship. Are you worried about this trend?

**Ryan:** I actually think this is a good thing. Christianity has been widely reduced to gathering to receive information about God once a week. We are throwing Bible verses at deep-rooted issues that have absolutely capsized lives and our culture. If we have to have a winnowing or paring down of the church to re-evaluate and return to a more rigorous core of Christians—believers who are totally abandoned to God and who will do anything it takes to develop intimacy with Him—then let it be.

I am not discouraged. I am meeting more and more people who are looking desperately for more than their current Christian experience provides. This encourages me, because hunger and thirst prepare people for radical and real relationship with God.

That’s what Jesus told us it would take. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” (Matthew 5:6). Desperation is an essential part of change and revival. ☪

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*Del Fehsenfeld III and Ryan Loveing have both traveled across North America sharing the call to spiritual renewal and revival, and today they serve on Life Action’s leadership team. To learn more about them and the wider ministry team, and to learn how Ryan or other Life Action revivalists could visit and challenge your church, visit [LifeAction.org](http://LifeAction.org).*



# MY UTMOST FOR HIS HIGHEST

## QUOTES FROM OSWALD CHAMBERS ON OBEDIENCE

**All of God's revealed truths are sealed until they are opened to us through obedience.**

*If you obey God in the first thing He shows you, then He instantly opens up the next truth to you.*

**You could read volumes on the work of the Holy Spirit, when five minutes of total, uncompromising obedience would make things as clear as sunlight.**

*It is not study that brings understanding to you, but obedience.*

**The smallest bit of obedience opens heaven, and the deepest truths of God immediately become yours.**

*God will never reveal more truth about Himself to you, until you have obeyed what you know already.*

# LIFE IN THE ZONE

PARTIAL OBEDIENCE IS  
DISOBEDIENCE. WE'RE  
EITHER ALL IN FOR  
CHRIST, OR WE AREN'T.

BY STEVE CANFIELD

If you've ever watched the NBA basketball playoffs, you've likely been impressed by some superstar player, like Michael Jordan or LeBron James. At times you may have heard an announcer say, "Wow, he's really in the zone!"

When a player is *in the zone*, and that individual gets hold of the ball, it's going in the bucket. Chalk it up to skill, momentum, passion, or even luck, but they're just producing and winning in that moment!

Now, I love playing an occasional game of basketball myself, and I can tell you what it's like to be out of the zone. You're kind of oblivious to what's going on, your mind isn't in the game, you miss shots and forget plays. We sometimes say a guy like that is "zoning out!"

I believe obedience is the "zone" God wants us to live in.

There's not much glamour in the actual definition of obedience, which sounds something like, "*submitting to the restraint or command of an authority.*" Who's interested in that?





God is, and He has given us commands, for His glory and for our own good. Our first and only response to God when He gives us direction should be, “Yes, Sir!”

## LIFE IN THE OBEDIENCE ZONE

There’s no such thing as being partially obedient. You don’t measure obedience in percentage points. You can’t say, “Well, he was 90% obedient” . . . because *partial obedience is disobedience*. We’re either all in for Christ, or we aren’t.

Remember in 1 Samuel 15 where Samuel was talking to King Saul, and he said, “To obey is better than sacrifice”? In that account, Saul had been instructed very specifically to destroy all of the wicked Amalekites.

We often hear critiques of God’s command regarding this story: “How could that be just?” etc. But what I like to zero in on is Saul’s response. He didn’t question the justice of God’s plan, but he also didn’t fully implement it. If you recall, he had his army sweep through the city and do *almost* what God had commanded—perhaps even 99% of the command.

But Saul didn’t obey. He took the command of God, reprocessed it in his own understanding and for his own benefit, and only carried out some of what was asked. You can call that a lot of things, but you can’t call it total obedience!

That’s why he felt ashamed to talk to Samuel; that’s why he tried to make excuses and deflect blame. God didn’t ask Saul for partial compliance, and He wasn’t even satisfied with 99%. Obedience doesn’t talk back to God; it doesn’t pick and choose; it just says yes. *God, I will do exactly what You’ve asked me to do.*

I wonder how many times we’ve thought it sufficient to mostly obey God, or to assume that we’ve done more than most would do, so we must be covered.

## THREE REQUIREMENTS OF BIBLICAL OBEDIENCE

When our Life Action teams teach on obedience in churches across North America, we work hard to make sure every member of the family hears the message. For children, we ask them to memorize a very simple definition: *Obedience is doing exactly what God says to do, when He says to do it, with a right heart attitude.*

I’m pretty sure that definition works for us adults as well. If we want the blessing of God in our lives, either on earth or in eternity, we have to obey Him. Obedience is discipleship, just as Jesus indicated in the Great Commission!

So, let’s break down that obedience definition and consider what the Holy Spirit might want to show us about our responsiveness to Him.

**1.** *Doing exactly what I’m told to do.* In order to obey God, we have to attentively listen, and we have to listen in a continuous fashion.

Once, a missionary translating the New Testament into the language of a tribe he was working with discovered they did not have a word in their language for *obey*. It wasn’t a very elevated virtue in their culture, so he couldn’t find a word to translate all of the biblical calls to *obedience*. One day while walking through the village, he whistled for his dog, and his dog immediately came running to his side. One of the locals said, “Your dog is all ear.” And the missionary thought, “That’s it! That’s the phrase I’m going to use!” So he translated obedience as “all ear.”

**2.** *When I’m told to do it.* Our definition of biblical obedience includes a time qualifier. It’s not enough to say to God, “Sure! I’ll obey . . . later.” That’s still not submission. That’s still reserving the right for ourselves regarding when and where we will comply with divine authority. That’s still thinking we know best!

One father tells the story of his son never getting around to cleaning his room. He’d be told to do it, and readily agree . . . but then time would slip by, and the job wouldn’t get done. This son graduated from high school and went off to join the Marines. He came back after boot camp on his first leave, and his dad asked, “Son, what have you learned in the service?” He said, “Dad, I’ve learned what NOW means.”

Some of us have never learned what *now* means. We’re not *hearkening* to what God tells us to do—in other words, listening carefully and submitting immediately.

**3.** *With a right heart attitude.* The third aspect of biblical obedience might be the hardest to maintain. It’s one thing to comply outwardly, but inwardly, what is our heart saying? Are we glad to serve God? Are we glad to uphold His moral standards or His priorities, rather than our own?

In the North Pacific there’s a little volcanic island called Iwo Jima. They used to do exercises for moon walks there, because it’s so like the surface of the moon. As an island, it’s pretty irrelevant in itself, but years ago it was very strategic in America’s fight to liberate the Pacific during World War II.

America lost 21,000 men in the battle to wrest control of that island. Those soldiers charged the hill and were shot down right and left. But at that moment they weren’t concerned with whether they were adequate or inadequate, with whether they had courage or lacked it; they were simply obeying the command, for better or for worse. Their authority said *go*, and they went. *Get out of the boat, march up the hill, charge the machine gun nest, do whatever you need to do.* And 21,000 men were killed because they were obedient!

I use this “negative” illustration here because we often only have a good attitude about obedience when we are in agreement with the logic—when we see what God sees, when we approve the course of action.

But what happens when God asks us to make a sacrifice, or to risk something of great worth for His kingdom cause? In that moment, will we obey, not only on the outside but also on the inside? Do we have that much faith in God’s ultimate plan?





## THE BEST MOTIVATOR OF ALL

While raising our children, my wife and I were very interested in their purity of heart. We sheltered them from a lot of the early-age temptations young people are faced with, be it through school, media, or otherwise. I recall one day when I was dropping off my 15-year-old son at someone else's home. We knew they weren't Christians, and they probably had very different standards of behavior than my children were used to.

So I asked Steven, "If you guys get out there driving around, and your friend pulls out a pornographic magazine and shows it to you, what are you going to do?"

Steven said, "Well, if I'm walking in the Spirit, I'm not going to look at it because God doesn't want me to. If I'm not walking in the Spirit, I'm not going to look at it because *you* don't want me to."

I was so glad to hear that he was making the faith his own. He was transitioning from the conviction of Dad to the conviction of the Holy Spirit. Because, of course, Dad's not going to be with him all of his life!

And that's where I think repentance enters this equation. In order to trust that God's way is really the best way to walk, I have to repent. I have to turn from my way and embrace His.

It could be that we sometimes try to get people to jump from disobedience to obedience without that important step—the moment they make it their own, the moment they really repent. We're trying to say, "You've been doing this; now you need to start doing that," rather than saying, "Is God bringing conviction to your life?"

Have you agreed with what God says about your sin? Have you gone to Him in confession? Have you asked forgiveness of others you have wronged? Have you turned from your way and started walking His direction? Have you cried out for God's grace and power to help you overcome sin and live for Christ?

That's really what is involved in accepting God's authority over our lives. As long as we still hold on to our self-will, I don't think we'll be able to obey . . . at least, not the 100% obedience God expects.

Jesus said it this way: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27).

Are you following? Are you obeying? Are you in the zone? 🏀

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*Steve Canfield has served as a Life Action road team Revivalist for more than forty years.*



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# WHAT TRANSFORMS?

► We all want a quick fix for our sin problems. But obedience to Christ is a process that requires faith, perseverance, and discipline.

**“Do not conform** [any longer] to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2 NIV).

Recently I ran into a woman I had not seen for several weeks. Her hair, usually blonde, was completely white. She looked like a different person. All it took was 40 minutes and some bleach!

If only spiritual transformation were that easy. Just read a book, attend a conference, resolve to be different, shed tears at an altar, memorize some verses . . . and, *presto*, out comes a mature, godly Christian.

To the contrary, the experience of many believers looks like this:

**Commit. Fail. Confess.**  
**Re-commit. Fail again. Confess again.**  
**Re-re-commit. Fail again. Give up.**

After all the struggle and the effort, we tend to want a “quick fix.” We want someone to hand us a once-for-all victory so we won’t have to keep wrestling with the same old issues. In my own walk with God, I have discovered some helpful principles about how spiritual change takes place.

1. *Deep, lasting spiritual change is a process.* It involves training, testing, and time. There are no shortcuts.

When we hear of people being dramatically delivered from drug or alcohol addiction, we may wonder, “Why doesn’t God do that for me? Why do I have to struggle with my sin?”

Occasionally God does grant instantaneous victory; but more often He leads us through a process that requires obedience, faith, discipline, and time as He works to win and develop our hearts and character.

2. *Spiritual change requires desire.* How important is it to me to be like Jesus? What price am I willing to pay? Deep within God’s

children is a desire to please Him. That desire is nurtured by acknowledging our dependence on Him and by meditating on Christ, the object of our desire.

As I read the Scriptures and gaze on the Lord Jesus, I long to be like Him. When our desire to be holy is greater than our willingness to stay where we are, we have taken a big step toward spiritual transformation.

3. *Spiritual change flows out of an intimate relationship with Jesus.* We want to please those we love, and we are grieved when we offend them. The more we love Jesus, the greater will be our motivation to obey and please Him.

4. *Spiritual change requires discipline.* Discipline for the purpose of godliness is not the same as self-effort. Rather, it means consciously cooperating with the Holy Spirit—yielding to Him so He can conform us to the image of Christ. The problem is, we want the outcome without the process. We want victory without warfare.

Praying and hoping for spiritual change is futile if we sit glued to a television set or neglect the means God has provided for our growth in grace. Bible study, meditation, worship, prayer, fasting, accountability, and obedience are disciplines that produce a harvest of righteousness.

5. *Spiritual change is brought about by the Holy Spirit, as we exercise faith and obedience.* True spiritual change is initiated and enabled by the indwelling Spirit of God; it is all of grace, which we receive as we persevere in humility, obedience, and faith.

Sanctification is a lifelong process. But we have the confidence that one day the transformation will be complete, and “we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2 NIV).



## FROM THE HEART

**Nancy DeMoss Wolgemuth**  
Revive Our Hearts Radio Host

***The more we love Jesus, the greater will be our motivation to obey and please Him.***

 @NancyDeMoss

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Nancy".



## YES, LORD!

When I first receive Christ, I begin a lifelong journey of obedience to Him. I learn that my new Lord asks for the whole of my heart, and I gladly give it to Him, in response to His grace:

*"[Christ] died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for themselves. Instead, they will live for Christ, who died and was raised for them" (2 Corinthians 5:15).*

## MY NEXT STEPS

Christian obedience isn't a single decision; it's a direction that defines my every step forward. My growth continues as I keep taking next steps toward Jesus:

*"Supplement your faith with a generous provision of moral excellence . . . knowledge . . . self-control . . . patient endurance . . . brotherly affection . . . love for everyone. The more you grow like this, the more productive and useful you will be in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:5-8).*

## MY LIFE: REDEFINED

Growing in Christ means I can increasingly see His Word shaping my behaviors, my words, and even my character. My roots grow deeper into biblical wisdom, and my life starts to blossom with spiritual fruit:

*"We ask God to give you complete knowledge of his will and to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding. Then the way you live will always honor and please the Lord, and your lives will produce every kind of good fruit. All the while, you will grow as you learn to know God better and better" (Colossians 1:9-10).*



# GROWING UP IN CHRIST

Just as you accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord, you must continue to follow him. Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness (Colossians 2:6-7 NLT).



## STAYING TRUE TO MY LORD

Christian growth requires grit and determination. The road ahead won't be easy! But through grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, I can persevere:

*"I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us. Let all who are spiritually mature agree on these things" (Philippians 3:13-15).*

## COMPLETE IN CHRIST

My maturity is best demonstrated by my growth in love, for God and for others. My life becomes more and more about His glory, His mission, His love, and what He can do through me:

*"I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. . . . May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God" (Ephesians 3:16-19).*

# IAN OBEDIENCE





## WHAT IF I CHOOSE NOT TO OBEY GOD?

*The Bible outlines  
three separate  
consequences we  
all face when  
we disobey God.*

DR. RICHARD FISHER

**W**hen I was just ten years old, I remember contemplating a large-scale adolescent rebellion against my dad and his leadership of our home. I didn't like the way he bossed me around! (He even thought he had the right to spank me on occasion. Of all the nerve!) I thought life would be better if I were in charge.

So I got my courage up, and I talked to him about it. I demanded more individualized playtime, and I was flatly rejected. He said, "Richard, tomorrow, I want you to mow the field before I get home from work." Of all the nerve! Then I demanded that I be allowed to stay up past 10:00; but it was already too late. He grinned and almost laughed. He just said dismissively, "Off to bed with ya', young prince." Of all the nerve! *There was just no reasoning with this authoritarian.* So I decided not to obey him anymore. I ran away.

All was well till about 5:00 p.m. Then the consequences of my rebellion and disobedience became very clear, as my stomach started to growl for dinner. Then I remembered . . . it was Friday night—game night at our house. No! I would miss supper *and* game time? Disobedience seemed like such a good choice *four hours ago*. Now, the real-life consequences were starting to outweigh the fantasy rewards.

With 20/20 hindsight, such disobedience appears foolish to me. What was I thinking? Yet I find myself still drawn to that course of action, tempted by my inner, self-centered deceiver . . . only now I'm an adult!

Romans 7:21-25 addresses this inner struggle, as told by the apostle Paul. James 1:13-15 gives the end of the story—death, every

time. Proverbs shows what happens when we enter what I like to call the “disobedience pipeline.” It starts with the *simple* man, who is enticed with sin. The simple man becomes the *fool*, who ignores wisdom and pursues the advice of the world. The foolish man becomes the *mock*er, who scorns the wisdom of God. The mocker then enters the ranks of the *wicked* (Psalm 1).

It is a sad road, and many of us have walked on it.

### THREE CONSEQUENCES

The Bible outlines three separate consequences we all face when we disobey God; and I sadly can report some personal knowledge of all three of them. (1) We miss out on God’s best for us. (2) We experience the worst side of life, i.e. the judgment of God. (3) We discover what God has chosen to do about it.

#### 1. What We Miss Out On

The general word for *sin* in the Greek New Testament means “to miss the mark.” Romans 3:23 explains it concisely: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Our selfish pursuits apart from God always come up short—not only of God’s vision, but even of our own dreams—leaving us frustrated, confused, and short-changed.

*Most of all, in disobeying, we miss our destiny: eternal life.* “God’s Word does, I believe, promise that he will infallibly bring to eternal glory those who are truly his. But the Word also makes clear that our eternal glory is contingent on a life of obedience” (Douglas Moo, *The NIV Application Commentary: Romans*, p. 109).

#### 2. What We Experience

Genesis 3:1-21 recounts the story of humanity’s rebellion against God, and His subsequent judgment. The passage exposes the relational breakdown that disobedience (sin) produces. It destroys marriages; it ruins families and friendships. It invites the judgment of God.

The Mosaic Law is very clear: “If you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God . . . all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you” (Deuteronomy 28:15; Jeremiah 3:12-15, 25; 9:12-14; 11:7-8). Instead of blessing, we reap what we sow; and in extreme cases God may even “give us up” to our sins, and to all the destruction that follows (Galatians 6:7; Romans 1).

#### 3. What God Has Chosen to Do

After the first disobedience, God came into the Garden (Genesis 3:8), seeking Adam and Eve. When He found them hiding and covered in fig leaves, He called them to give account (3:11).

Mixed in as part of invoking sin’s curse and judging Adam and Eve for their disobedience (3:12-19), God promised to send a Savior who would stand in mankind’s place against the forces of evil and rescue us (3:15). Our disobedience evokes an unexpected and undeserved response from God—love! Who would have seen that coming?!

God’s judgment in Genesis was not ultimately about destroying us; it was about saving us. The whole Bible, then, is actually the account of God’s unfolding plan of redemption:

“Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

“God so loved the world, that he gave his only [uniquely begotten] Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

“God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

“He appeared in order to take away our sins . . . to destroy the works of the devil . . . [to lay] down his life for us” (1 John 3:5, 8, 16).

“[Jesus] is the atoning sacrifice [dying in our place] for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2 NIV).

When I got home after my half-day run-away experience, I found out something about my father. When he got home, he was first disappointed in me that I wasn’t mowing the field as instructed. But then, when I didn’t show up for dinner, his anger gave way to real concern. He went out looking for me!

My eyes still moisten with tears as I think of what that meant. *My dad actually loved me*, always doing what was best for me.

His training, his punishments, his rewards, his encouragements, his scolding were all part of a bigger plan to bring me to maturity. He had invested too much to let me go so easily. He sought after me.

Ironically, it was in my disobedience that I saw how much my father cared, and to what lengths he would go to find and restore me.



*Dr. Richard Fisher retired from Moody Bible Institute as a Professor of Biblical Studies. He presently serves on the pastoral staff of Grace Church near Akron, Ohio.*





# SIMPLE CHOICES CAN LEAD TO BIG CHANGES

*These stories have been compiled from Life Action church events across North America, where we pray for big changes and call people to make some simple choices. Greatest of all? Humble yourself before God, and say YES to His will instead of your own!*



## MY REPENTANCE WENT PUBLIC

**A**s an engineering supervisor with one of the largest defense contractors for the U.S. government, I had top-level security access. But during a Life Action revival meeting, God convicted me that I had been dishonest years ago when I checked “no” on my security clearance forms regarding pre-application drug use. I had used drugs repeatedly in college and on a few isolated occasions after that, but I thought if I told the truth, I wouldn’t get the job. So I lied.

God convicted me of this during the message on pride and what it meant to have a clear conscience. Immediately this situation

came to mind. But I was scared. The form made it clear that any willful false statement could result in imprisonment of up to ten years and a fine of up to \$10,000! I thought if I came clean, I would lose my job and possibly go to prison.

I lay awake for the next few nights trying to negotiate or justify something else I could do to appease my conscience. I had so much joy from my new connection to God, but I knew that if I refused to obey, that joy would be gone. I finally decided that obedience to God meant more than my job or even my freedom. I contacted my job and explained the situation, asking for

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forgiveness, and told them how sorry I was that I had lied. A week later, my boss took away my security clearance and moved my desk into the hall. This actually gave me the opportunity to share my situation and ultimately my faith with scores of coworkers who were curious why I had lost my security clearance!

Nine months went by with no word from the investigators. My boss called me into his office one morning to inform me that my clearance had been reinstated. The level of clearance was the first step toward getting back onto the classified project I had been working on.

I was soon transferred to another project, however. A few months later, I learned that the funding for the original project I'd been on was cut, and 3,500 engineers had been laid off.

I had been certain that telling the truth would cost me my job, but the Lord used it to put me in a place of safety. My obedience also affected my children, who have since put their trust in Christ.

*(Rick, from Texas)*

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## I CHOSE RADICALLY NEW PRIORITIES

I love my wife and daughters, but since I'm a doctor, I had the typical physician's life. Long hours in the operating room and office meant that I left home early and returned late. I also served as the chairman of the deacons at my church. My life was full and busy—the kind of busy that can keep one from realizing that all is not well.

When our pastor told us that Life Action was coming, I immediately came up with a plan where one member of my household could be at each service, “to give the right impression.” But, of course, God confronted me and began speaking very personally and deeply to me the first Sunday evening.

I remember a point the revivalist made, and I thought, “Well, I hope my wife heard that, or maybe that couple next to us.” Then

suddenly it seemed that God shook me and asked, “Do you realize how I see you?!” and I started to see myself as God saw me. I also saw God for who He is, and that I had been marginalizing Him in my life. It had been more important to me to have a successful business, and to pursue the material things that go with that. But in that moment, Christ became the most important thing in my life.

Once I chose to put Christ first, everything changed. My family noticed the change, as well as my patients, which gave me the opportunity to share my story with them. Because I obeyed God, I had a chance to tell others about a relationship with Christ.

*(Fay, from Arkansas)*

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## I OBEYED, AND MY FAMILY WAS CONVERTED

I became a Christian in my 30s—a mother of three who had been through a lot before I found Jesus. My life did change at that time, but not like it has now. I still held the ball in my court, tossing it to Jesus every once in a while. I had not turned my life over completely.

Then Life Action came to our church. I felt the Spirit working in and through me. I realized that I hadn't fully surrendered myself to God, and that He was calling me to take that step. I gave Him control of my life and asked to be totally cleansed and made whole in Him.


God gave me boldness to share what He had done in my life. I went to my sister's home for the Christmas holidays. During my

time there, my brother-in-law, mother, niece, and nephew and his wife were all saved!

When I returned home, my daughter and her fiancée, daughter's friend, fiancée's sister, granddaughter, son, and son's fiancée and daughter were saved. All of these people in my life came to know God through me after I surrendered and become an obedient servant to Christ.

*(Marge, from Florida)*



A person with long brown hair, wearing a brown sweater and glasses, is seen from the back, looking down in a field of tall, golden grass. The background is a bright, overcast sky.

**Unless desires  
are transformed,  
willpower will  
only restrain us  
for short periods  
of time.**

# TIRED OF TRYING

by Del Fehsenfeld III

I

n the process of raising four children, I've read a lot of children's books. Among my favorites are the *Frog and Toad* stories by Arnold Lobel.

In one memorable tale, Toad bakes cookies for Frog. Of course, then they can't stop eating them. "What we need is willpower!" cries Frog.

"What's willpower?" asks Toad.

"Willpower is trying hard *not* to do something you really want to do," answers Frog.

The rest of the story recounts the comical lengths Frog and Toad go to in order to stop eating cookies by using their willpower, including putting the cookies in a box and tying string around it, and then getting a ladder to put the cookies up on a high shelf. But nothing works. Finally, in desperation, Frog gives up and feeds the cookies to the birds.

The story ends as Frog and Toad sadly realize they have no more cookies—but "lots and lots of willpower." So Toad heads home to bake a cake!

Frog and Toad's adventure reveals a very important principle of transformation:

Willpower is very useful in human life, but it is a limited resource. Unless desires are transformed, willpower will only restrain us for short periods of time.

This is why willpower is a very poor strategy for the ongoing transformation of our character in the Christian life. We need a strategy that goes beyond "trying really hard not to do what sinful desires entice us to do."

But, tragically, willpower remains the most employed strategy to overcome sin. As a counselor, I have spent decades watching people rely on a doomed strategy for change—waiting until the moment

of temptation and then trying hard not to give in to passions. I suspect you inhabit the body of someone who might have tried this as well!

What follows could best be described as a kind of insanity—continuing to do the same thing despite a cycle of repeated failure, intense shame, guilt, and frustration, usually followed by the "skids" and eventually (hopefully) tearful remorse, self-recrimination, and recommitment to . . . (sigh) try even harder.

## TRAINING VS. TRYING

It's no surprise that some eventually quit the battle altogether, convinced that the Christian life is impossible for them. Others quietly participate in church but resign themselves to hiding the lack of power in their personal lives. Some even begin to assume that lack of transformation is actually the normal Christian experience.

So is there an alternative to the futile cycle of trying harder to be like Jesus?

*We will not be able to do what is right in the moments of temptation if our inner beings have become characterized by ruined thoughts, feelings, and habits. That's why the goal of the Christian life is much more than "not sinning." Disciples of Jesus are learning from Him how to develop the inner thoughts, feelings, and habits that come out of continuous relationship with the Father.*

What we need is a lifestyle of *training* as students of Jesus who systematically and progressively rearrange their lives in order to imitate Him. This involves not only His teachings and the things He did, but also the way He organized His life with God.

The importance of Jesus' practices for life with God cannot be over-emphasized. They were part and parcel of what enabled His life to be saturated with the Spirit and infused with the power and grace that characterized His daily life. Jesus *learned* obedience (Hebrews 5:8). And so must we, with Jesus as our example and guide.



## HOW IS TRAINING DIFFERENT THAN TRYING?

A life of training for Christlikeness is based on the understanding that there are many Christlike things we cannot now naturally and habitually do, especially under stress or trial (exemplified by the many times we have tried and failed). Transformation of our inner life is still needed before Christlikeness characterizes our external behavior.

In a life of training, we use our limited willpower to engage in practices that bring us before Jesus so He can change our inner character (desires, thoughts, feelings, and automatic responses). In this process, Jesus forms His character in us, enabling the capacity to be truly good (doing the right thing, at the right time, in the right way). This process of spiritual maturation involves labor pains “until Christ is formed in you” (Galatians 4:19).

Note here the *principle of indirection*. We do not yet habitually think, feel, and act like Christ. No amount of direct effort (trying harder) can change this fact. Yet we can choose to engage in practices that help us draw near to God, who alone can change our hearts by the transforming work of His Holy Spirit.

## IS TRAINING OPPOSED TO GRACE?

A common objection to this concept of training in Christlikeness is that the word *training* sounds to many like a works-based, self-improvement project. Some think of an intentional and systematic plan, and the effort involved, as being like legalism as opposed to grace. After all, if Jesus accomplished everything for our salvation, how can transformation depend on a life of discipleship?

However, I would argue that this objection is rooted in a limited definition of grace. Grace is not opposed to effort—it is opposed to *earning*. How else do we explain the admonitions throughout the New Testament for us to take earnest and forceful action to put off sin and put on righteousness? We are commanded to “fight the good fight of faith,” to “discipline my body” and to “press on” for the prize (1 Tim. 6:12; 1 Cor. 9:27; Phil. 3:14).

The fact that grace is not opposed to effort is made even more clear when we consider that grace is in fact *desire and power* provided by God. It is the fuel we burn in the Christian life. This is why Paul could say, “For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me” (Colossians 1:29), because he knew that grace was God doing in and for him what he could not possibly do for himself. Grace was, in fact, enabling him to give maximum effort.

Grace is for much more than forgiveness of sin. It is also energy to obey God. That’s why saints use more grace than sinners. Saints are drawing on God’s energy to be transformed into Christlikeness and to do His work in the world.

## THE RIGHT USE OF WILLPOWER

The difference between training and trying is one of attitude and direction. In trying, willpower is used primarily in moments of temptation in an attempt to keep from doing what is wrong.

In contrast, a life of training focuses on using willpower to imitate practices we learn from Jesus (and His followers) that cultivate our life with God, thus enabling us to obey from the inside out.

So what about you? Are you trusting Jesus not only to provide for your eternal destiny after you die, but also to equip you to live as His disciple? The change we seek lies beyond the limits of trying harder. It is the Spirit-driven process of transformation into Christlikeness as students of Jesus.

## TRAINING EXERCISES FOR OBEDIENCE TO JESUS

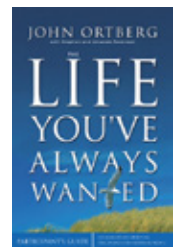
1. *Begin with what Jesus said.* Go through the Gospels and carefully record what Jesus said to do. If we are going to take Jesus seriously, we need to first know exactly what He instructed, with a settled intention to obey all He commanded. Review this record regularly.
2. *Meditate on Jesus’ view of God.* Notice Jesus’ attitudes and beliefs, especially about God the Father. The single most important thing that fills our mind is our images of God. Replace false ideas and images of God with the ideas and images that filled the mind of Jesus.
3. *Memorize key Scriptures.* The ultimate freedom we have as human beings is deciding what our minds will dwell on. Memorizing concentrated Bible passages is a critical way to realign our thoughts with God’s. (Suggestions: Psalms 1; 23; Matthew 5–7; Romans 5:1–8; 8:1–15; Colossians 3:1–17.)
4. *Practice self-denial.* Self-denial is an essential part of life with Jesus (Matthew 16:25) and the first principle of holiness (Romans 12:1–2). Practice looking out for others vs. yourself, trusting that God will take care of you. (Hint: Begin in less demanding situations!)
5. *Earnestly pray.* Transformation of our inner being is the work of the Holy Spirit. As you train, ask repeatedly for God to work directly in your heart to enable you to obey.

### Helpful Guides on Practices for Life with God

Resources by  
John Ortberg



The Me I Want To Be



The Life You've Always Wanted

*Ideas for this article were informed by Spirit of the Disciplines and Renovation of the Heart by Dallas Willard.*

*Del Fehsenfeld is the Director of Pastoral Services at Life Action Ministries and the Senior Editor of Revive magazine.*



## SAYING YES TO GOD

*According to Jesus' parable in Matthew 7:24-27, the wise man is the one who not only hears God's Word, but the one who makes it personal through obedience.*

Words I would use to describe my obedience in the past three months (*circle any that apply*):

|          |              |              |              |             |             |             |
|----------|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Complete | Joyful       | Faith-filled | Half-hearted | Intentional | Disciplined | Biblical    |
| Growing  | Hypocritical | Spirit-led   | Loving       | Reserved    | Partial     | Sacrificial |

### Who Is Lord?

*Evaluating our level of obedience to the Lord starts with a heart check regarding who's really in charge of our lives.*

Am I still reserving the right to make the final decisions about what I will or won't do? Yes No

Why or why not? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Have I put my faith in Jesus to save and transform me, and do I trust Him fully? Yes No

Have I repented of my sin so that I can follow Jesus? Yes No

Do I seek out my Lord's instructions in the Bible regularly so I can obey them? Yes No

Do I pray about decisions in life, seeking my Lord's direction on important matters? Yes No

Have I surrendered every category of my life to Christ's leadership? Yes No

### The Link Between Love and Obedience

List key concepts you discover in each of the following verses:

John 14:23-24 \_\_\_\_\_

1 John 2:15-17 \_\_\_\_\_

1 John 3:7-10 \_\_\_\_\_

Here are some ways I could better show my love for Christ through obedience in:

My family life \_\_\_\_\_

My work life \_\_\_\_\_

My dreams for the future \_\_\_\_\_

My media choices \_\_\_\_\_

My finances \_\_\_\_\_

My thought life \_\_\_\_\_

My witness to others \_\_\_\_\_



# HIGH ADVENTURE

► Our willingness to take risks for Christ opens the door to incredible opportunities we would have never imagined.



## NEXT STEP

**Dan Jarvis**  
Managing Editor

***I want the adventure  
of my lifetime to be  
about Him rather  
than about me.  
Because that's a  
life worth living.***

 @DanJarvisUS

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dan".

**To most people**, the phrase “high adventure” conjures up images of mountain biking, deep sea diving, or a once-in-a-lifetime safari across the African plains. That all sounds exciting, but there is one adventure that outdoes them all: the life of obedient faith.

High adventure in God’s kingdom is life as we were designed to live it, and it’s the kind of life I see described in Hebrews 11. The famous “faith chapter” highlights the lives of men and women who offered an unqualified YES to God. These were people

who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured. . . . They were put to death by stoning, they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. . . . They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith (Hebrews 11:33-39 NIV).

Yes, *that’s the faith adventure*—fraught with risk, filled with joy, sometimes painful, and never as mundanely predictable as worldly pleasures and pursuits. Just look at Paul’s report on his own life after he became a Christian:

Three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits . . . in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea” (2 Corinthians 11:23-28 NIV).

My own journey with the Lord bears this out as well. I haven’t been shipwrecked (yet), but I have gotten to see and be a part of things I’d never dreamed. I’ve seen God provide when I was most in need. I’ve seen Him change the story in situations where no hope remained. I’ve seen lives transformed by the power of the gospel.

I always enjoy being able to go back through my family pictures and see all that God has done and the many things I have to be thankful for. I think about places I never expected to be, people I never expected to meet, even impact I never imagined myself having. As I look at those pictures and reminisce about those moments, it strikes me: “I’m so glad I said yes to God.” And even more: “I’m so glad God said yes to me!”

How did I end up greeting a small church on a mountaintop in Maharashtra? I look at this amazing moment—including being about as far away from my home as I could possibly be on this earth—and I think about how I got there. Yes, there was a long plane ride, followed by a very long bus ride, and even a few kilometers of hiking up a dusty mountain path. But before any of that, there was a yes—a yes to God’s call to care about global missions, a yes to breaking out of my comfort zone, a yes to the Great Commission.



Or I think about my family, and in this picture, our crazy misadventure to a children's ballet. I'm not much for ballet myself, but the tickets were donated to us, and we decided to give it a go. I ended up sandwiched into a very tiny wooden balcony seat overlooking "Miss Spider's Tea Party," trying to keep my children quiet so as not to disrupt more serious spectators. And I wondered in my heart, "How did I get here?"

Well, I said yes to the free tickets (which may have been a mistake, in retrospect); but the real striking feature of that moment wasn't about the ballet, but about the people I was with. My wife, my children—how did they all get into this picture?



Once again, there were some "yeses" to the Lord. Yes to waiting for God's best in terms of marriage. Yes to signing up for foster parenting classes. Yes to each individual child God brought into our home, and the ones we were eventually able to adopt. If on any of those days I'd been feeling selfish or proud, or even just grumpy, I suspect this picture would look different.

Another picture in my album comes from summer Family Camp here at Life Action. I count it such a joy to work here, to serve in ministry along with my friends, to play a part in *Revive* magazine, to be able to serve churches and love people. All of this fills my heart with gratitude. Again, if I trace the story back, I find its inception in some key yes moments—and faith moments—before the Lord.



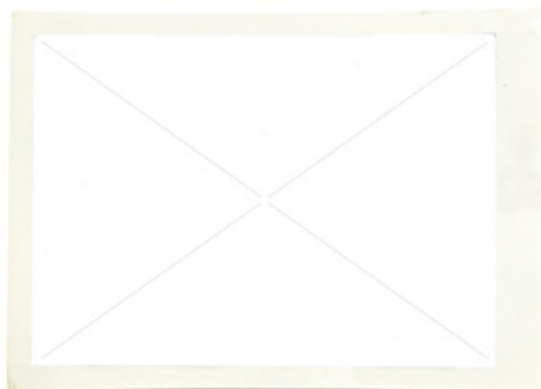
I'm pretty sure that if we opened up your photo album, we could find a similar pattern. You probably have stories to tell about how God has blessed you, how He's worked in your life, the steps you've taken and the adventures you've lived. I'm guessing we could trace a lot of the good in your life back to a yes as well—a moment you decided to do things God's way, a moment your will became subservient to His will.

This is one picture that bothers me. It's from a time I said *no* to God.

Was there someone I was supposed to share God's love with? A place I was supposed to be? A friend I could have made, or a way I could have served? Were there people I could have loved or ways I could have glorified my Lord?

I don't know.

I know we shouldn't live in regret, and I don't. But that doesn't stop me from being honest. I haven't always obeyed. And I know this for sure: I don't want my life's photo album filled with blanks—missed opportunities, moments when God wanted to work in and through me but my resistant *no* quenched His Spirit's work.



Instead, I want to live the life Jesus died and rose again to provide. I want to obey His call, fulfill His purposes, and live by faith every step of the way. I want the adventure of my lifetime to be about Him rather than about me. Because that's a life worth living. And to that sort of life, I'm saying YES!



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