

FIVE DIMENSIONS OF DISCIPLESHIP

**Nehemiah 8:10 and 12; John 8:31;
14:12-13, 15 and 21; Romans 10:9-11;
12:18; 14:17-18; 1 John 2:12-14**

**The Progression of Life in the Kingdom of
Christ**

By

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Opening.

As we work our way through 1 John 2:12-14, we can identify at least three levels of intimacy with God. John says, **“I write to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of His name. I write to you, fathers, because you have known Him who is from the Beginning. I write to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, dear children, because you have known the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you have known Him who is from the Beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the Word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one,”** {NIV}.

First of all, John speaks to the young in their faith, the **“little children”** {*teknia*} in v. 12; then in v. 13 he uses a word for **“children”** {*paidia*} which speaks of one inexperienced, one in need of training and instruction. The children know the basics: your sins are forgiven and God is your Father {critical components of a Life with God}. This is the place from which we all begin. You simply must start there because nothing is more crucial than the recognition of relationship with the Father of Heaven and Earth.

Next, he moves on to the **“young men,”** the adolescents; they’re not full-fledged adults just yet but they’re strong because the Word of God abides in them and they are *overcoming* the Evil One. They are discovering what it takes to be victorious in the Battle.

Finally, we meet the **“fathers”** {or, in a woman’s case, the ‘mothers’} and these are not the old and the aged. It’s important to understand this has nothing to do with age. The **“fathers”** are spoken of as those who **“know Him who has been from the Beginning.”** The beginning of what? Time— Creation— the Universe? Pick your beginning, as far back as you want to go, into the farthest Ages of Eternity {before angels even existed}, and Jesus Christ was there. The fathers and mothers of the Faith know Him and know Him well; they walk in a deeper way with the Lord Jesus Christ. All of life, without exception, is submitted to His rule. And not once upon a life, but every day, again and again, as often as it takes to stay in a stance of surrender to the Son of God.

In Jesus’ ‘Commencement Address’ to His disciples {John 13-17}, His first set of apprentices in a Life that moves beyond the walls of this world, He laid down for a second time— after 13:34-35— the all-inclusive command **“that we love one another just as He has loved us,”** 15:12. After clarifying for us in the very next verse that this included “laying down our life for our friends” {Jesus being, hopefully, at the top of that list}, He makes this beautiful observation: **“you are My friends if you keep this command,”** v. 14. See that? This is an incredible change of status, a great move up the spiritual ladder. Based upon what? The *progress* of the apprentices, the deepening desire for Him which He could clearly see in the lives of His disciples. **“I no longer call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing** [they have no idea what their master is thinking or planning, they simply do as their told;

that's the job of a slave]. **But now you've become My friends because under My teaching and instruction you've been let in on everything I've heard from the Father,"** v. 15.

Notice how the relationship has moved into a different arena: one of mutual cooperation in a shared enterprise... lovingly entered into by both parties. It can exist now— in this arena— because God's aims have become our aims, and our hearts are now in harmony with His Kingdom and with everything He longs to do both *with* us and *through* us. Are you seeing this? Scottish pastor and poet George MacDonald put it this way in his book *Unspoken Sermons*. He said:

To be a child is not necessarily to be a son or daughter. The childship is the lower condition of the upward process towards the sonship, the soil out of which the true sonship shall grow, the former without which the latter were impossible. God can no more than an earthly parent be content to have only children: he must have sons and daughters— children of his soul, of his spirit, of his love— not merely in the sense that he loves them, or even that they love him, but in the sense that they love *like him*, love as he loves. For this he does not adopt them; he dies to give them himself, thereby to raise his own to his heart; he gives them a birth from above; they are born again *out* of himself and *into* himself— for he is the one and the all. His children are not his real, true sons and daughters until they think like him, feel with him, judge as he judges, are at home with him, and without fear before him because he and they mean the same thing, love the same things, seek the same ends. For this we are created; it is the one end of our being, and includes all other ends whatever.

Essay— Five Dimensions of Discipleship.

As disciples of Jesus, those following in the footsteps of the Master, we should be awake to and aware of five dimensions or progressions of Life in the Kingdom of Christ.

1. *Trust in and reliance upon Jesus as the Son of God and Savior of Man:* the One who came **“to seek and to save that which was lost”** {Lk. 19:10}, the only One appointed by the Father to deliver us from the darkness of death.

Romans 10:9-10 tells us, **“that if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord** [*Kurios*- ‘master’ ...savior ...God],’ **and believe in your heart** [there’s the *faith*] **that God raised Him from the dead** [there’s the *fact*], **you will be saved** [and there’s the *result*]. **For it is with your heart that you believe** [notice the source from which faith comes: ‘your heart’] **and are justified** [declared righteous in the sight of God: His work, His righteousness, given freely in grace], **and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved,”** {NIV}. The confession is merely the outward demonstration of the inward reality, the faith already exercised in the heart. If you had no faith, you could confess any number of things all day long with no attendant result.

To proclaim Jesus Christ as **“Lord”** is as natural as breathing to one who has truly trusted Him with their life. **“For the Scripture says, ‘Whoever believes in**

Him [anyone, anywhere, anytime] **will not be disappointed,**” Romans 10:11. Anyone willing to reach out in faith and take hold of God’s grace gets in on the Life of God. And what a glorious thing that is.

2. *This confidence in the Person of Christ naturally leads to a longing to be His apprentice in living all of life in the Kingdom of God.* Which in its simplest form is His rule over all of Creation. Listen closely: If this is not our desire and never has been as His child, there is something unnatural about that! Here’s what Christian author Dallas Willard had to say along these lines:

Only a sustained historical process involving many confusions and false motivations could lead to our current situation, in which faith in Jesus is thought to have no natural connection with discipleship to Him.¹

Our discipleship to Jesus Christ means that we live within His Word, that is, we put His teachings into practice. Jesus said in John 8:31, **“If you abide in My Word** [His Word, by the way, is never separated from His *love* shown forth in relationships: the cataclysmic conclusion that we can love God, or Christ, or His Word, and treat people how we like— with disdain, contempt, arrogance, anger, control, belittlement, shame, as animals to be abused or robots to do our bidding— is, in a word, *horrific*; here’s what John say’s about that: ‘If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother whom he *has* seen, cannot love God whom he has *not* seen,’ 1 Jn. 4:20; ‘but if you live, if you dwell, if you make your home within My Word’], **then you are truly disciples of Mine.**” What this is meant to do is *integrate* our entire existence into the glorious reality of Eternal Life. Because **“the Son makes us free,”** and more and more so as we walk with Him, we become **“free indeed,”** v. 36.

If your theology, which is your approach to *Abba*— you won’t live beyond what you believe, that’s the way the soul works— is not setting you free: from fear, from sin, from guilt, from shame, from the chains of the past or the captivity of the present, then something is *radically wrong* with your theology. Jesus’ teaching is never separated from a Life of courage and conviction, love and laughter, joy and generosity. Nor is that of any of the men who wrote down what He gave them. They’re meant to coexist, to flow from one hand to the other. If what you claim to believe about God is an oppressive burden of unending legalisms, dragging you down into cycles of shame, you might want to reconsider your approach to the Almighty, and rethink whether your theology is as accurate as you think it is.

3. *The abundance of Life {Jn. 10:10} which comes to us through apprenticeship to Jesus leads us to obedience.* And it is obedience not out of duty, but desire. You *want* to walk with God, you *want* to obey the Savior of your soul, knowing that you don’t *have* to. But in a relationship built on love, you desire to! Can you see the incredible difference between a rule-ridden perfectionism and a Life built on love?

We come to love Jesus, His Father, and His Spirit because as John say’s, **“He first**

loved us,” 1 John 4:19. And so we long to obey Him, even when we don’t understand or even ‘like’ what that entails. **“If you love Me,”** He said in John 14:15, **“you will keep My commands.”** And, **“He who has My commands and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me** [who ‘lives a lifestyle of loving Me’] **will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and reveal Myself to Him,”** v. 21. Love for Jesus— not as a principle or proposition but as a living, breathing Person— sustains us through the path of discipleship and training that makes obedience a first response as opposed to a last resort. Without love, we will never stay to learn; we will never accept an ongoing initiation into the larger world of our God! Make sense?

4. *Obedience— and all it requires in life— both leads to and flows out of a pervasive transformation of the human heart* {the restoring of our souls: Psalm 23:3}. Paul said in Romans 14:17, **“For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men,”** v. 18.

The Kingdom of God as Paul describes it in Romans— **“righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit”**— is a *spiritual reality* with tangible results in the physical realm. **“Righteousness,”** e.g., is an observable action in a person’s life. You can see it in experience; you can benefit from it at the hands of another. How we treat other people is the second most important aspect of our holiness, our character in Christ Jesus— cf. Colossians 3:12-17.

“Peace” is a word in Scripture that speaks of being at peace with God and at peace with man. Peace with God is a matter of choosing humility over arrogance, a choice to surrender your soul to the rule and authority of God’s Kingdom, to live like God really is God and Jesus really is Lord. Paul said in Philippians 4:6-7, **“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding [is beyond all human comprehension], will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus,”** {NIV}.

What about peace with man? Romans 12:18 and the injunction that, **“If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men,”** is found in a beautiful section of Scripture which paints for us a very clear picture of Christianity in Action, the Kingdom of God at work. The idea is that sometimes it does *not* depend on you, and peace may not be possible. But if it *is* and if it *does*, then you are to do everything in your power and exercise every possible avenue under your immediate control **“to live at peace with everyone.”** You are called by Christ Himself to **“love one another, even as He has loved you,”** regardless of what kind of problems you may have had in the past. If you are presently ‘at war’ with someone, hot or cold, now is the time to take the initiative toward peace. Don’t let it wait.

So, **“the Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of**

righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,” joy in the Spirit of God—Romans 14:17. Do you know how hard it is to live with joy in a World unceasingly at War? Nehemiah 8:10b says, **“Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”** Strength, wow, most of the time it’s not even a daily boost. Nehemiah, on the day that the Law of God was read so that all could understand, has said to the people of Jerusalem, **“Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”** It says in v. 12, **“Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.”** That may be part of the problem right there, as to why so few of us live with anything even closely resembling joy. Joy comes from God, joy comes from our *knowing* His Word and *obeying* His will. I don’t mean knowing about Him; I mean knowing Him daily as powerful and present, intimately involved in every arena of our lives. Joy flows out of our relationship with God. And the deeper the relationship, the more joy we begin to experience and the more strength it fuses into the soul.

Returning to Romans 14, to **“righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit:”** meaning through the Holy Spirit, by means of the Holy Spirit. The point is that our lives are consecrated to the Spirit of Christ, set apart for the sole purpose of walking in **“the Way”** *He* sets before us. And no other. As we move along the Path of Life, again following in the footsteps of the Master, this becomes the ever-present reality of a disciple: **“holiness in right action, a soul at rest, and Jesus’ joy in the Spirit,”** {RR Exp.}. **“The fruit of the Spirit is Love,”** Paul said in Galatians 5:22, and that love is genuine to the core of our being. They’re called His **“fruit”** precisely because they are not the results of our efforts. They are brought forth within us as we watch, listen and learn from the Master, i.e., as we admire and emulate Jesus Christ our Lord and do whatever is necessary to learn how to obey Him. And if we’re not prepared to do ‘whatever is necessary to learn how to obey Him,’ it naturally follows that we will see very little fruit by way of the Holy Spirit.

5. And finally... *there is power* {in His Resurrection} *to live, love, and labor just as Jesus did.* Let that soak into the soul. You are lacking nothing in Him, except maybe the motivation to get moving on the Path of Life. Even that part of the relationship God often supplies; and He does it not through *information* but through *inspiration*. He gives us a glimpse of His glory and grace and we are in-spired to press in, to push through, to move. Get this. A true lover of the Lord will never, ever be satisfied with the status quo, the ‘as is.’ She will always long for more with the Lover of her soul!

Let’s go back to the words of Christ in John 14:12, **“I tell you the Truth, He who believes in Me, the works I accomplish he will accomplish also; and greater works than these He will accomplish.”** Wait. *Greater works* than the Son of God? Are you kidding me, that’s possible for a follower of Jesus? Yes, **“because I go to the Father,”** and when I go Home to the Father’s embrace He will send the Spirit to be **“with you forever”**— v. 16. The works of a believer under

grace are greater in extent {geographical scope} and effect {numerically, at least} because we ask for them in His name. And **“whatever you ask in My name”** {v. 13} and **“according to My will”** {1 Jn. 4:14-15}, **“that will I do... so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.”** It glorifies the Father to give us the power and authority of the Son— which is the culmination of Paul’s Message in Ephesians 1. Authority, by the way, is the *right* to rule, power is the *ability* to rule. And you have both of these in unlimited measure seated with Christ **“at the right hand of the Majesty on high”** {Heb. 1:3}; but you have to choose to exercise them! It’s time we used what is ours. Dr. Robert P. Lightner, in a section of his book *Evangelical Theology* titled ‘Saved to Serve,’ wrote:

One of the major purposes of our salvation is so that we might love and serve God. Indeed, the saved one is **“God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works,”** {Eph. 2:10 NIV}. Jesus’ Himself said, **“By their fruit you will recognize them,”** {Matt. 7:20 NIV}. ...As evangelicals we must all agree that the child of God is to serve in the power and strength of the Holy Spirit. *The idea that salvation is simply a free ticket to heaven and the assurance of missing hell is foreign to the Bible.* Good works in the life of the believer are... a natural expression of gratitude to God for his great salvation.²

Keep in mind the fallen world we live in desperately needs the labor of the Lord to be done. What was it Jesus said, **“the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few,”** Luke 10:2a? Don’t end your life in Time as one of the “many”— wishing you hadn’t waited so long to step up and step in to the Cause of Christ, to engage a wounded world in the Cause of your King! There is no moment like the present to do what needs to be done. Or to do what should’ve been done a long time ago. It is not too late for you. That’s a lie the enemy uses to deceive the elder children of God, those seasoned citizens of His Kingdom. “As long as you’ve been a believer, as long as you’ve been a member here, and you’re still not serving ‘the Cause,’ still not sharing your ever-elusive ‘faith,’ still not fighting for the hearts of others. You’ll never do it now.” Notice the atmosphere of shame— utter and absolute shame— that permeates his accusation? Do not, I repeat, do not fall for it! Like everything else he offers, it’s a lie.

Great power demands great humility if it is to be a blessing and not a curse. And that kind of solidity of soul is something we grow into day by day. Yet it is *Abba’s* intent that in His Kingdom we will have as much power for good as we can possibly bear. The power itself is unlimited, unimaginable. The question is: How much of the Holy Spirit’s power can you really handle? We’ve seen in the recent past that as the healing of the soul becomes greater, the Spirit’s work becomes deeper, and on and on it goes, with more realms of our hearts open and free to experience His presence.

Now, notice once confidence in Jesus— not just as Savior but as the unrivaled Master of all Life {that includes Oprah and Dr. Phil}— is alive and well within us we must be actively and intelligently engaged in every dimension {2-5}, every progression that follows our entrance into the relationship. We are not mere passive participants in

some vague and unrecognizable way, we are *actively engaged* with God in every dimension of discipleship. Got it? Good. Don't ever let it go.

How Grace Actually Works.

I want to clarify a concept related to grace that desperately needs clarification. I hope you set this down firmly and faithfully in your souls. We've bought into this idea, somewhere along the line, that somehow a Life of grace means now I sit down in the Chair of Jesus and things just start happening *in* me and *to* me. Magically, mystically, changes begin to be made, life starts falling perfectly into place, the past is healed, the future is bright, the present secured *separate* and *apart* from any effort, energy, or even involvement on my part. That is a falsehood and a fallacy. **Grace is opposed to an earned righteousness, to a works-oriented righteousness, grace is *not* opposed to effort.** Grace is incompatible with the "I did this for God, now God owes me" mentality; grace is not incompatible with effort in our spiritual lives. If you're going move forward in your relationship with the Trinity, if you're going move through these progressions of Life in the Kingdom of Christ, you're going to have to put forth some effort. Plain and simple. Life in the Spirit of Grace, and a deepening of that life, requires mental, physical, emotional and spiritual effort. In our service to the Cause, e.g., what is done is done by His strength, by the Spirit's power, but somebody must do it. And that's the point. We are not passive participants, we are actively engaged with God in every aspect of Life in His Kingdom. Holy Spirit, let us see this clearly.

Paul said, **"For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace to me was not without effect** ['not without results']. **No, I worked harder than all of them** [the other apostles]— **yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me,**" 1 Corinthians 15:9-10 {NIV}. The word Paul uses for **"worked harder"** is *kopiaō*, and it means- 'to labor to the point of exhaustion,' in this case **"with"** God's grace. We labor together *with* the grace of God, *in* the power of God.

Relentless Surrender: How to Do What We Know to Do.

How do we do what we've laid out here in these five dimensions of discipleship, these five progressions of Life in the Kingdom of Christ? By relentless surrender to Jesus' right, Jesus' rule, and Jesus' authority over every avenue of Life; by following Him into His lifestyle, His practices, His prayers; and by adapting these into a 'framework of faith' around which our entire Life can be restructured. And however old or young you are, I'm speaking to you— a *re*-structured Life, centered on and around the Person and priorities of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is how **"by the Spirit we put to death the misdeeds of the flesh... and live"** freely {Rom. 8:13}; this is how we **"lay aside the old self with its evil practices and put on the new self being renewed"** in the image of its Creator {Col. 3:9-10}. While we cannot do it by ourselves,

that is in human strength, it is nevertheless something *we* must do. You've got to ask yourself: How am I doing at this {or am I doing this at all?}; where is my heart in this; what are the idols I've erected in place of Christ? **I can't do this for you.** I can lead you to it, I can offer you insight and hopefully encouragement. I can lead you to the Water of Life, but I cannot make you drink it.

You're going to have to develop a course of action based on your priorities, a simple set of spiritual disciplines, spiritual realities, which *you* can live from. This is going to look a little different for each and every one of us, which is what makes it so profoundly personal. Again, it's a question we've posed many times in the past. How bad do you really want the Freedom and Life offered you by the Son of God? A relationship of intimacy with Him, one built on loving Jesus with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, is the only place you'll find it. There is no other Source, no other Stream, no other River of Life from which we can drink and find our raging thirst quenched.

Finale.

Let me offer you a bit of insight from Dallas Willard, Professor of Philosophy at USC. In his brilliant book *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life In God* he says,

History has brought us to the point where the Christian message is thought to be *essentially* concerned *only* with how to deal with sin: with wrongdoing or wrong-being and its effects. Life, our actual existence, is not included in what is now presented as the heart of the Christian message, or it is included only marginally. That is where we find ourselves today.

...When we examine the broad spectrum of Christian proclamation and practice, we see that the only thing made essential on the right wing of theology is forgiveness of the individual's sins. On the left it is removal of social or structural evils. The current gospel then becomes a 'gospel of sin management.' Transformation of life and character is *no* part of the redemptive message. Moment-to-moment human reality in its depths is not the arena of faith and eternal living.³

And I can tell you that is most assuredly not how it was intended to be by the Author of All that Is.

¹ : Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, p. 367

² : Robert P. Lightner, *Evangelical Theology*, p. 214

³ : *Ibid.*, p. 41

➤ A hearty thanks to Professor Dallas Willard of USC's School of Philosophy for providing the structure for this essay in his book *The Divine Conspiracy*, in a section entitled 'Overview of Progress from Here to Forever,' pp. 367-369