

# TAKING THE NEXT STEP



## IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

BY RANDY HARP

Several years ago, I read Max Lucado's book *Just Like Jesus*. Lucado repeats a statement throughout the book that has stuck with me ever since — "God loves you just the way you are, but He refuses to leave you that way. He wants you to be just like Jesus." It is a simple, easy-to-understand statement.

No doubt God loves each of us. Scripture is full of such expressions. It is easy to talk about God's love. It is comforting and reassuring. God's love is easy to embrace. Unfortunately, far too often we neglect the second half of Lucado's statement. We are not nearly as comfortable with change. It can be difficult to conform our lives, not to the world, but rather to the leadership of the Holy Spirit and obedience to the Word of God. But God loves us far too much to leave us where He found us at salvation. Salvation is simply the first step, albeit the most important step, in a journey that will last a lifetime. God wants you to continue to take the next step in your relationship with Him.

### OBSTACLES TO GROWTH

The challenge is that spiritual growth does not happen automatically. Simply because

we grow older does not mean we grow more spiritually mature. Several obstacles can slow a person's spiritual growth. One area many continue to struggle with is guilt over past failures. Even though God forgives us at salvation and scripture teaches our sins are removed as far as the east is from the west, we oftentimes still beat ourselves up over our past. So, if Jesus has forgiven you, who do you think keeps bringing up your past and causing you to feel guilty? I love Paul's wisdom in response to this very issue. In

1 Corinthians 6:9-10, he lists several types of individuals from those who are sexually immoral to thieves and idolaters. In verse ten he states, "And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of God." A person will never realize the great plans God has for him or her if he or she continues to carry guilt over past failures.

Another obstacle to growth is that some people do not fully understand what spiritual growth is. They may connect spiritual maturity with personal appearance. While I do believe it is important to maintain a certain level of appropriate appearance, that alone is

not a definitive indicator of spiritual maturity. Still others connect spiritual maturity with achievement or academia. Again, while these have value, they alone do not identify a mature Christ-follower. Unfortunately, many in our world lack a true desire for spiritual growth. They compartmentalize their faith and fulfill their religious obligations, but lack passion for the Lord. I heard a term "Christian athiest" recently, which sums up this type of person — someone who believes in God but lives life as if He doesn't exist. In other words, they lack a desire to take the next step in their relationship with Jesus Christ.

Others may not be growing in their relationship with Christ because they lack the tools needed for growth. They may want to grow but just don't know how. They have never been taught. My wife's testimony is an example of this. She did not place her trust in Christ as her Savior until after high school. After her conversion, she was clearly told how she should dress, what type of music she should listen to, places and people she should not be around, but she was never taught how to have a personal devotion. It wasn't until she attended Bible college that she was encouraged to read the Bible on her own and



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was given tools to help her grow in her own spiritual walk. In our world today, there are a variety of helpful resources in this area.

#### DEFINING SPIRITUAL MATURITY

So what do I mean by spiritual maturity? I would define it as both knowing more about God and acting more like Jesus. It is two-fold. You have to know it in order to act it, but knowing it is not enough on its own. I base this definition on two primary passages of scripture. Hebrews 6:1 states, “Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God.” In other words, let’s stop going over the basic teachings about Christ and let’s become mature in our understanding, not needing to start again with repentance and faith. Paul illustrates this idea as moving from milk to meat. As much as I love a good, cold glass of milk, I much prefer a New York strip steak from a prime steakhouse. As you continue to take your next steps toward spiritual maturity you should understand the deeper meanings of the Word of God.

The second part of my definition is based

on James 1:22, “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” Many Christians today only fool themselves because they do not do what they know the Scriptures teach. When I was pastoring, I would hear, “Great message today, preacher,” or “I needed that today, pastor,” or “I felt like you were talking directly to me today.” I appreciated the support, but oftentimes wondered what people would do with what they heard?

#### CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE

So, if God loves us just as we are, but He desires for us to change, what is it that causes us to change? I believe it was Charlie “Tremendous” Jones who first said, “We will be the same person in five years that we are today except for two things: the people we meet and the books we read.” I would add a third category — the experiences we encounter. Let’s take a closer look at these to see how they help us change.

Let’s first look at the books we read. I will be honest, I used to hate reading. (Yes, that is somewhat comical with the profession I have today.) When I was in high school, I loved math and science. Upon graduation, I pursued an engineering degree, which included

reading but consisted of much more math and science. When I enrolled at Baptist Bible College I literally prayed and asked God to give me a passion for reading. It worked. Today I have a goal of reading one book per week. There is an old saying, “Today’s readers are tomorrow’s leaders.” I believe that. I want my kids to be readers. I spend a lot of money on books for my kids. I consider it an investment.

Obviously the most important book we should read is the Bible. We should set aside time every day to read God’s Word. God told Joshua as he was preparing to become the new leader of the children of Israel, “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.” In order for Joshua to be the leader he needed to be, he had to spend time reading and meditating on God’s Word. Reading God’s Word changed his life.

Don’t misunderstand this next statement, but it is also important to read other books as well as the Bible. Obviously the Bible is the most important, but you can oftentimes glean new insights by reading what other authors have learned about the Bible. They may have a better grasp of the original languages or culture. They may have spent years pouring into a certain passage of scripture. The Apostle Paul was an avid reader. In his valedictory in 2 Timothy 4 he requests Timothy bring him “the books, especially the parchments.” One of my most prized possessions is my library. (I might not have said that a few months ago while moving boxes of books across the country, but I do today.) If you are serious about becoming more like Jesus, there must be a commitment to spend time reading.

People you meet are a second catalyst to change. The vast number of people God has allowed me to interact with over the past 20 years has been one of my greatest blessings. From fellow students I attended college with that have become life-long friends, to the staff and members at each church I have served, to all the friends and acquaintances I have made along the way, each has impacted my life to become who I am today. The reality is, you never know when

## SOMETIMES GOD SHOWS UP IN EXTRAORDINARY WAYS AND SOMETIMES HE SHOWS UP IN THE NORMAL ROUTINE OF LIFE.

you are going to meet someone who could end up radically changing your life, but you do have to be paying attention and you have to be prepared. An example of this is found in Acts chapter eight. This was a time of great persecution for the church, but God was using the persecution to expand His kingdom. An angel of the Lord spoke to Philip and told him to leave Jerusalem and head toward Gaza. As Philip began this journey he met someone unexpectedly. He noticed a carriage on the same route and the man inside the carriage happened to be reading from the prophet Isaiah. The Holy Spirit prompted Philip to go toward the carriage and Philip asked the man if he knew what he was reading. The man replied he could not unless someone explained it to him and invited Philip into the carriage. To make a long story short, Philip introduced this Ethiopian eunuch to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and even baptized him that same day. Both men experienced life-change this day. The people you meet and the people you spend the most time with will help you grow spiritually.

The third area that helps a person toward spiritual maturity is the experiences he or she encounters. This goes back to the James passage of not just hearing, but doing. Everyone has the opportunity to experience

the power of God firsthand in his or her life. Sometimes God shows up in extraordinary ways and sometimes He shows up in the normal routine of life. Shortly after graduating from BBC, I went on my first international mission trip to Costa Rica. Until then, I could probably count the number of states I had visited on one hand. Our trip theme was, “Look beyond what you see.” Those words could not have been more impactful as I saw beyond the challenges of a developing country to see the dire spiritual need of a people I did not even know. God used that experience to change me forever.

I often wonder what was going through Peter’s mind as he crawled over the side of that boat and walked on water toward Jesus. There is no doubt that experience changed him. Another example, which happened the day before, has always fascinated me. We know it as the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus asked His disciples how they were going to feed the large multitude that followed them. Philip went as far as to say it would take more than a half a year’s wages to buy enough bread for each person to have just a bite. I am not sure how he was discovered or if he spoke up on his own, but a small child happened to have five small loaves of bread and two small fish with him. This was not out of the ordinary until Jesus got involved. Jesus took this small boy’s offering and fed 5,000 men plus all the women and children who were there. Scripture does not record it, but in my mind I can see how this boy’s life would be changed forever.

Maybe your experience with God is volunteering to serve in a new ministry. Maybe your experience with God is walking down the street to introduce yourself to that new neighbor. Maybe your experience with God is volunteering to serve at a local homeless shelter. Maybe your experience is stepping out in faith and attempting to do something so big that if God doesn’t show up you will fail miserably. The experience is not the end; it is simply a means to the end, which is taking that next step toward spiritual maturity.

God loves you — with all your warts and scars and baggage, God loves you. But He loves you too much to leave you where He found you. He wants you to change, to become just like Jesus. Don’t remain where you are.