

### ***Note to the Reader***

Hello Friend,

If you have picked up this booklet and are reading this letter, you're probably interested in becoming a follower of Jesus. Maybe you know lots about Jesus; maybe you know nothing at all. Maybe you've already made the decision to become a 'Christian'; maybe you're still hesitant and skeptical. Maybe you love Jesus but don't know about the church; maybe you love the church but don't know about Jesus.

I know this might sound crazy, but I think God wants this booklet in your hands. I believe that God is always very near to us, and I believe that he is constantly calling out to all of us – yourself included – and drawing us closer to himself. I know God wants you to know about Jesus, about how in and through Jesus God has personally invited us to become a part of his story, his kingdom, his world.

In this booklet are a series of short meditations designed to answer two questions: (1) When we choose to become a part of this Jesus thing, what are we signing up for? (2) Supposing we have made this decision, what should we do next? Following Jesus is both simple and complex, easy and difficult, fun and frustrating, messy and beautiful. The first part of this booklet is designed to stretch your imagination, to help you think about what you're doing, maybe even to inspire you a bit. The second part is practical – I want to help you reorient your everyday life around being a follower of Jesus.

My hope is that we will spend the rest of our lives journeying together as a community of faith, always learning from one another how to be more faithful to the vision of life God has for us all. And I am confident that God will be with us to the end.

I do have one (semi-strong) suggestion. I don't recommend reading this booklet alone. Following Jesus is a way of life, not a set of words on a page. And it's not something we can do alone. So I suggest you find a guide – a person you trust who already follows Jesus. Ask them to read through the booklet with you and to help you reflect on some of the ideas within it. I will provide questions for the two of you to consider together. Okay, enough babbling. Let's get to it.

Michael DeFazio  
Real Life Church

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***Part 1:***  
***What am I signing up for?***

## **1.1 – God’s Story**

Let’s start with a question: What is your favorite story? Could be a book. Could be a movie. Could be a play. Could be the story of a great sports team or a powerful country. Could be the story of a horrible sports team or a weak country. Whatever it is, chances are that all of us can come up with one or two stories that we love and enjoy.

Love for stories seems to be written into the fabric of being human. Whether its gathering around a campfire in Native America, coming together at an outdoor theater in ancient Greece, or filling theater seats across the globe in the twenty-first century, we have always filled our lives with stories.

You have a story too, of course. Right now you are wherever you are (both literally and figuratively), but you haven’t always been there. You didn’t just drop out of the clouds. You came from somewhere and from someone. You have done things (some good, some bad), and things have been done to you (some good, some bad). You have been shaped by countless influences – family, friends, culture – and you have no doubt enjoyed some influence of your own. And what’s more, you’re going somewhere. You’re constantly re-defining, changing the way you relate to people, becoming who you will one day be. You have a story.

And right now your story is beginning to intersect with God’s story. That’s right, God has a story too. Jesus has a story. He didn’t just drop out of heaven one day. In fact, God’s story stretches way back beyond the creation of the world. God has been patiently and persistently working to liberate the world from the mess we’ve made. You will learn lots more about God’s story, but for now the key thing is to know that God has been seeking for a long time to heal and transform the world.

What does this have to do with you? If you decide to do this Jesus thing, to become a God-follower, to say yes to God’s invitation, you are identifying yourself with God’s story. In simple terms, you are saying to God, ‘I want to be written into your story. I want to be healed and transformed myself. I know that right now I am not fully who you’ve called me to be. I like to do things my way, but I know your way is better (for you, for me, for the world). Now I want to do things your way. I want to align with what you’re doing in the world. I want to know you and help others know you. I want my story to become an active part of yours. I want to help move your story forward.’

Spend some time reflecting on these words. Ask yourself if you can make this prayer your own. Talk to God about where you’re at with all of this (it feels weird, I know, but I promise he hears you).

Ask your guide to share their story with you. How did they become a follower of Jesus? What are some significant markers in their journey to faith? How would they summarize ‘the story of God’ in the Bible?

## **1.2 – God’s Kingdom**

You might be surprised to hear what Jesus talked about more than anything else. It wasn’t love. It wasn’t heaven or hell. It wasn’t money. It was something he called ‘the kingdom of God’ (see Mark 1.14-15). Jesus claimed that God was becoming King in and through Jesus’ own life, death, and resurrection. In one sense, the whole story of God is about the entire world coming back under the loving reign of God.

When we look at Jesus, we see what the world was supposed to look like. We see what God is like, and what we’re called to be. Most of you probably know that one of the main things Jesus did was perform miracles (or signs and wonders, as the Bible calls them). Sometimes people say that Jesus did miracles to prove that he was God. But that’s actually not how the Bible describes Jesus’ acts of great power and love. In the Bible, Jesus’ miracles are manifestations of this kingdom of God that he was always talking about. When we look at the miracles, we see the world being restored to what God originally intended for it. (That’s why the Bible calls them ‘signs’ more than anything else – they point to or signify this great thing called the kingdom of God.)

Take the collection of signs found in Mark 4-5, for example. Jesus tells the stormy sea to chill out, and it does (4.35-41). Next he casts some demons out of a man being driven mad, and reconciles him to his family and community (5.1-20). Then a guy whose daughter is sick approaches Jesus (5.21-24); on the way to their house, Jesus (accidentally!) heals a woman who had a twelve-year hemorrhaging disease (5.24-34). By this time the little girl has died, but that doesn’t stop Jesus! He goes to her house and brings her back to life (5.35-43).

Now I know that these things seem strange to our scientific mindset, but let’s put them back in their first-century context for a minute. What do these accounts tell us about God’s kingdom? They tell us that when God fully reigns, nature is no longer destructive, evil is removed, relationships are restored, sickness is no more, and even death is overcome. The kingdom of God really is a beautiful vision of the world as it was meant to be, the world as what it will be when God is done with it. And we are invited to become part of this beautiful vision!

To become part of this kingdom is to acknowledge that only God is qualified to call the shots, and that when he is in charge, the world is as it should be. It is to join God’s great rescue operation, his plan to heal and transform all things. It is to allow God to begin this healing transformation process in your own life. And it is to commit to doing all we can to work towards this vision of God once again lovingly ruling over all creation.

Reflect with your guide about what the world would like if everyone (and everything) surrendered to God’s loving leadership. What if we all let God call the shots? Begin to reflect on your own role in all of this.

### **1.3 – Following Jesus**

Let me state what might be obvious. The heart of being a Jesus-follower is following Jesus. The centerpiece of being a '*Christian*' is that you live according to the teachings and example of Jesus *Christ*.

The truth is, no matter who we are or how independent we think we might be, we're following *somebody*. Some person or institution or culture is telling us who to be, and we're listening. We're being told what's important, what's true, what's worthwhile, what it means to be good or successful or authentic, and we are allowing these voices to shape our lives. This isn't necessarily bad. It's just a fact of life. Even if our goal is to 'be ourselves' and not let anyone tell us what to do, we still got *that* idea from somewhere, didn't we? And if most of the people around us are trying to do the same thing (which they are), then we'd be wise to admit that we didn't come up with this on our own.

So we're all *following* someone, so to speak. And to be a follower of Jesus is to allow him to shape and form how we live our lives – what's good, successful, or authentic. This really is radical. We must be willing to let Jesus have his way. Read the stories of Jesus' first followers in Mark's story (1.16-20). Jesus approaches two sets of brothers, both of whom were professional fishermen. Jesus says, 'Come follow me', and they do it! They literally leave their nets in the boat to become his apprentices. Imagine walking away from everything you know – your livelihood, security, etc – and saying to Jesus, 'I'm all yours'.

People always talk about how they love Jesus, how Jesus is such a nice guy, such a great 'moral teacher'. Sometimes I wonder if they've ever met Jesus or read about him. Jesus is crazy! He asks a lot of us. Listen to something he says later on in the story: 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it' (Mark 8.34-35). 'Taking up your cross' means refusing to play the world's game – even if doing so gets you killed! See what I mean! Jesus is for real.

I'm not saying you have to be perfect (none of us are!). I'm not telling you that *right now* you must give up *everything* for Jesus. I'm just saying that we'll never experience the joy of following Jesus unless we're ready to go all in. We should begin the journey with a clear idea of how much it might cost us. It all boils down to trust. Who are you going to trust? Being a follower of Jesus means trusting that God sent Jesus, and that living according to Jesus' teachings is worth it. Take a few minutes and read through Matthew 5-7. Here you'll see a vision of the life Jesus is calling us to live, the pattern he's calling us to follow.

Ask your guide what s/he finds most challenging about Jesus. Talk about areas in both of your lives where it might be hard to follow Jesus. Also reflect together on your favorite things about Jesus.

#### **1.4 - Forgiveness**

Guilt and shame are as old as humanity. Ever since we as a human family – and each of us as individuals – have done things we knew were wrong, we've tried to prove our innocence and hide our shame.

We know the world is not as it should be. We know we are not as we should be. You may not be a murderer or a predator (or whatever else seems *baddest*), but you're no saint either. We've all done some things we regret. We've used words (or fists) to tear other people down. We think much more about our own happiness than serving others. We turn a blind eye to the poor and those in need. We gossip, we slander, we disrespect, we embarrass, we mock. We take advantage of people – sexually, emotionally, relationally. You get the point. Something has gone wrong with the world, and we're part of the problem.

And yet not many of us spend a lot of time thinking about *sin*. Sin sounds archaic, religious, threatening. Surely we've evolved beyond such childish concepts, right? Well, one look at the nightly news might suggest otherwise. Our world is broken, and the human family stands at the center of the brokenness. As capable as we are of great and beautiful achievements, we are haunted by the atrocities we're equally capable of committing, by the evil in our hearts and our institutions.

So think about this: If it is true that there is a God who created all things, and if he put us here to love and care for one another, and if this God has a sense of justice and a desire to judge evil and reward good, *he would be right to condemn us*. I'm reminded of words from an ancient poetic prayer: '*You are right in your verdict, and justified when you judge*' (Psalm 51).

But here's the good news. Because of what God has done in Jesus, taking upon himself the consequences of our hatred and sin, *we can be forgiven*. Forgiveness is about being *released* from sin. First, we are released from the *guilt* of sin. God does not hold our rebellion against us. We are no longer defined by past mistakes or present weaknesses, but instead by the radical love of the God who suffered and died on our behalf. Second, we are released from the *grip* of sin. God makes his personal empowering presence – his 'Holy Spirit' – available to us so that we might lead a truly good existence. Though we currently feel powerless to avoid giving in to temptation, being forgiven includes starting to break free from this bondage, breaking free to live a new life. Following Jesus is the path to true freedom – freedom to be loved and transformed, freedom to grow in character and selflessness, freedom to become who you were made to be. Do *you* want to be free?

Ask your guide to share some 'sin' they've struggled with in the past, and how Jesus has enabled them to begin overcoming them. Ask them what God's love means to them personally, and what it's like to belong to a God who loves us even though we don't deserve it.

### **1.5 – A Place to Belong**

More people are alive today than ever before in the history of the world. It's been estimated that each of us experience direct contact with at least twenty people on a daily basis. We see people on the sidewalks and at work and the grocery store and home. We probably see more people in a year than some in ancient civilizations would have seen over a lifetime. There are lots and lots of people in our world.

And yet many of us are lonely.

Pollster George Gallup once claimed that 'Americans are among the loneliest people in the world'. Comparing data from 1985 and 2004, a recent study shows that the amount of people Americans can discuss important issues with dropped by 33%. The amount of people who have *no one to talk to* about important matters doubled (up to 25%).

Many of our lives are disconnected, fragmented, lonely. We yearn for a place to belong. We long for deep friendship, for authentic connection, for a place to be fully known and fully loved. We want people we can live, love, laugh, and lose with. We hunger for true community, for a spiritual family we can both help and be helped by. We know that there is something good in us waiting to be unleashed and offered for the healing of people around us. And we know that we, too, need the wisdom and care of other persons if we are to be truly healed.

We seek a community like the one in Mark 2. There was this paralyzed guy who needed help, and his friends believed Jesus could help him. But when they carried him to the house where Jesus was teaching, it was full. What could they do? Refusing to be denied, *they climbed up on the house and cut a hole in the roof!* Can you imagine this? Jesus is in there teaching, when all of a sudden dust particles begin falling on his head. He stops. He looks up. And he sees these four guys lowering down their friend's mat with ropes. I'm sure Jesus was amused, and impressed! Immediately Jesus healed the guy, restoring him to full life.

That's the kind of community we all want – friends who will find healing for us even when we can't find it on our own. That's the kind of community God invites us to be part of. Sometimes you'll be the friend tearing through a roof. Sometimes you'll be the guy on the mat. Either way, this is 'the church' at it's best. When you sign up to follow Jesus, you become a part of this community called church. We're not perfect, by any means! But in and through us God offers all people a place to belong, to connect, to love and be loved, to heal and be healed.

Ask your guide what difference it makes to have a place to belong. Ask them about the joys and struggles of actually doing life together with other people. Have them tell you about one or two Jesus-followers they really respect and admire, or who have really helped them live well.

## **1.6 – Finding Purpose**

You need to know something from the outset. The invitation you are considering is about much more than just you. It's about much more than getting our individual spiritual needs met. God isn't inviting you to a new form of selfishness, one in which you let him (rather than money or sex or power or reputation) stroke your ego, support your selfish habits, etc. God is calling us to step outside of ourselves. God is calling us to participate in his mission to lovingly redeem the entire world.

Some of you have always had the sense that you should care about something other than yourself, something big and life-transforming. You've always wanted to 'change the world', to leave this planet a little better off for your having been here. Others of you are more practical, focused on the little things here and now. You're good at getting things done, taking care of the things you over which you have some control.

God invites all of us – dreamers and planners alike – to become part of a movement to spread God's healing love throughout the world. When you walk through the door and begin journeying with Jesus, you are not only invited to receive love and grace from God, you are sent out to extend the same love and grace to the people around you.

Let's think of it like this. All of us crave a sense of purpose in life. We want to know that our lives count, that we're contributing to something worthwhile. This explains much of our action. It explains why some people get so involved in their careers or social activism – because they want to be successful, to achieve great things, to help people. It explains why some people love sports or *American Idol*. Even if we can't perform impressive athletic or artistic feats, we love identifying with some person or team who has the chance to make it big, to succeed on a world stage. It's why we like movies and TV shows about saving lives and finding love and a host of other things – we love getting caught up in the powerful drama of a life lived to the fullest.

God put in us this desire to be part of some adventure bigger than ourselves. And the offer to follow Jesus is an offer to become part of the greatest mission in history – God's mission to reconcile all things to himself. Here's the really crazy part: You can start participating in this mission *right here and now*. God wants to work through you right where you are – in your workplace and family and neighborhood, at your corner coffee shop and grocery store. The best way to understand this is just to start doing it. So think about how you might be able to bless people, how you might show them God's love. Even if you aren't sure what God's love is, go for it anyway. (Besides, we really don't understand God's love until we start reflecting it to others anyhow.)

***Part 2:***  
***What do I do next?***

## 2.1 – Read the Bible

Most people know that ‘Christians’ or Jesus-followers have this big strange book called the Bible (a.k.a. ‘Scripture’). Truth be told, the Bible has played a pretty important role in the history of our culture. Did you know that the following popular phrases come directly from the Bible: ‘by the skin of my teeth’ (Job 19.20), ‘at their wits end’ (Psalm 107.27), and ‘blind leading the blind’ (Matthew 15.14). Movie characters like Ben Wade (*3:10 to Yuma*) and Jules (*Pulp Fiction*) quote the Bible regularly. These are just a few examples, but you get the point. The Bible has played a huge role in our culture.

But most of us don’t really know much about it. One of the best ways to begin taking steps forward on your faith journey is to start reading and reflecting on Scripture. But it’s so hard to know where to start, or how to read it! So I want to go over some basics with you, and then suggest a start-up plan. Simply speaking, the Bible tells a story about God rescuing the world from the effects of rebellion and sin. This story centers on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

There are two main parts of this story – the Old Testament (or OT) and the New Testament (or NT). Each ‘Testament’ is comprised of ‘books’: 39 in the OT, 27 in the NT. (See the table of contents for page numbers.) The OT has three types of books: *history* (Genesis—Esther), *poetry* (Job—Song of Songs), and *prophecy* (Isaiah—Malachi). The OT focuses on God’s dealings with Israel; God chose to bless and save the whole world through this one people group. The Old Testament story points forward to the coming of Jesus.

The NT is made up of three main types as well: (1) The ‘*Gospels*’, or stories about Jesus: Matthew, Mark, Luke, & John. (Luke has a part two about the church called ‘Acts’.) (2) *Letters* to the churches (Romans – Jude). (3) The book of *Revelation*. All this is designed to teach and guide followers of Jesus to faithfully fulfill God’s calling on their lives.

One more thing: The Bible is divided into smaller units called chapters and verses. People who quote Scripture will often cite a ‘reference’ – like John 3.16 or Psalm 119.105. When you see this, you know that we’re talking about the book of John, chapter three, verse sixteen. This should help you locate things in the Bible.

Sorry for being a bit dry about all this. The Bible really is an exciting, strange, fantastic, frustrating, interesting, disturbing, inspiring book. Parts may seem dull to us, but other parts are downright fascinating. I suggest that you start by soaking yourself in one of the stories about Jesus – probably Mark or John to begin. Then read one of the letters (start with James or Philipians) and some Psalms. Ask questions as you read: What does this tell us about God, people, our world? What does this call us to think or do? Share what you’re learning with your guide, and ask them any questions that come up as you read.

## 2.2 – Pray

Have you ever tried to pray? Probably so, I'd guess. Studies suggest that about two-thirds of us pray on a regular basis. That's a lot! For some people, prayer can be a strange and frustrating experience, while for others it is an absolute delight. However we *feel* about prayer, it's impossible to deny that one can hardly 'do life with God' without it. Prayer has been a central practice of human beings throughout history.

So if you want to 'walk through the door' and become a follower of Jesus, it's important to start praying. But what is prayer? And what does it mean to pray as a student of Jesus?

Put simply, prayer is communicating with God. When most people think about prayer, they picture someone looking up into the skies (or bowing their head and folding their hands) and telling God about what they need or what they're thankful for. This is certainly part of prayer. Perhaps you also picture someone sitting in silent meditation, or someone claiming to have 'heard God'. Again, also part of prayer (though prone to abuse!). Prayer is talking and listening to God.

But how does prayer fit into all of the other things we've been talking about? We've discovered that God has invited us to join his agenda to bring healing and transformational love to the whole world. We are on a mission with God, and each of us plays an important role in our own little corner of the world. We also learn that when we look at Jesus, we see a God who loves us deeply and willingly suffers with and for us.

This should impact our prayers in two ways. First, we shouldn't worry about whether God wants to listen to us. Of course he does. God came a long way to meet us, and he loves when we come to meet him. Even when it feels like God isn't listening (and it might feel like that a lot!), we trust that God really does care about us. Second, we should see prayer as part of this whole mission thing. Prayer is communicating with God *about what we are doing together in the world*. God wants to be involved in every area of our lives, and prayer is a key part of that.

So how do we pray? Well, we start by just talking to God about what's going on in our everyday life. Thank him for good things. Apologize when you do silly or harmful things. Ask him for what you need. (Be prepared for him to occasionally disagree!) Tell him what you think is wrong with the world. Ask him how you can be something right with it. Pray for other people, asking God to bless them and to help you do the same. When you read the Bible, ask God to show you what you need to see. The key thing is just going for it, even if it feels odd at first!

In addition to this free-flowing kind, it's a good idea to set aside some time each day for focused prayer. Pray the words of prayers in the Bible, like Matthew 6.9-13 or Psalm 31.1-5. Ask your guide to share what prayer means to them, and spend some time praying with them.

### **2.3 – Be Baptized**

Throughout history, human beings have marked significant moments with special rituals or ceremonies. Perhaps the most obvious ritual is a wedding, the celebration that marks the beginning of a new marriage. At weddings we act and speak in ways that are not 'normal' to our everyday lives, but that doesn't mean they're disconnected from real life. Not at all. Special moments like this deeply impact our day-to-day existence, even if we don't often think about them.

Other examples are childbirth, Bar Mitzvahs, going off to college, and funerals. We sometimes call such activities 'rites of passage', which means they mark the transition from something old to something new. In some cultures young boys will spend a night alone in the woods as part of the process of 'becoming a man'. In other cultures initiates will endure mild forms of harassment in order to become part of the fraternity or sorority. In each of these cases, the rituals draw a line in the sand between who we were and who we're going to be.

Since the beginning of 'Christianity', the transition from non-follower of Jesus to follower has been marked with a similar 'rite of passage'. That ritual is baptism. I hope you're not put off by the term 'ritual'. We tend to be a bit anti-tradition, so we shun things like rituals; but if we stop and think about it, rituals really do make an experience richer. There's something special about a wedding celebration that captures the joy of a new marriage. There's also something right and good about honoring the passing of a loved one with a funeral. The events behind the rituals would still happen without the rituals themselves, but they would lose something of their ability to stick in our minds and our memories.

Baptism is the same way. You can start following Jesus without doing it (you may already have). God's not going to reject you simply for not jumping through the right hoops. But something is lost in the whole experience without it. Like all helpful rituals, baptism is highly symbolic. In the same way that the exchanging of rings represents a couples' exclusive commitment to one another whether apart or together, being lowered into and raised out of water represents our new commitment to Jesus. In fact, Scripture tells us that baptism represents the dying of the 'old you' and the coming to life of the 'new you' (Romans 6.1-11). Baptism symbolizes the very real transformation that is taking place in our lives when we die to worldliness and begin living for Jesus. You were once caught in sin; now you are free. You were once dead to God; now you are alive to God. You were once an orphan; now you're part of God's family. And so forth. And here's the really cool part. Baptism is symbolic, but it's not *just* symbolic. Just as a wedding actually changes who we fundamentally are, baptism really does make us new persons. God is now alive within us, animating us, living through us to love others. If you have not been baptized but you're ready to be a follower of Jesus, don't put it off any longer! Talk to your guide (or LG leader) about making it happen. Enjoy this wonderful gift God has given us!

## **2.4 – Practice Community**

Sometimes people approach the idea of following Jesus as if it's totally personal, even private, as if it could possibly be done alone. It can't. You can't have Jesus without 'the church', not because God is mean and exclusive but because what Jesus calls us to be and do can't be accomplished alone. This is why one of the core elements of Real Life Church is something we call 'Life Groups'. Life groups are a place where we simply do life together. (You don't even have to be a 'follower of Jesus' yet; it's a great place to see what faith looks like in action.)

So it's important to join and participate in a Life Group (or continue in one). If you're not ready for that yet, find a few Jesus-following friends to take this faith journey with you. Whatever your expression of spiritual friendship looks like, there are four activities you must focus on. Without these four practices, your faith will remain stagnant (if it ever gets off the ground).

First, eat together. There is something significant that takes place over a meal that just doesn't happen anywhere else. Mealtimes are when we share our stories and talk about what's going on in our lives. Eating together is becoming a lost art in our society, and we must restore it if we want to experience true friendship and community.

Second, pray together. This doesn't have to be super spiritual or weird; just talk to God together. Ask God to help each other be wise, faithful, and loving. Pray for other people, for your families, for our world.

Third, learn together. This is vital to any growing friendship, especially one centered on faith and following God. On our own we can never fully understand God or what's right and wrong; we need each other's perspectives and insight and experiences. So talk about important issues, questions you're having, etc. Read the Bible together and have conversations about what God might be doing in your lives.

Fourth, play together. Generally speaking, playing together is either way overdone or way underdone. We've all had friendships that were about an inch deep because all we ever did together was play – only fun all the time. We've also had relationships that are only serious all the time. Neither kind lasts long. Since so much of what we've been talking about seems pretty serious, let's be clear on this: God is joyful (not gloomy!), and he wants us to enjoy life. So go to sporting events or the theater together, have game nights, go to the beach, etc.

The important thing is that you take active steps to participate in intentional friendship with other people who share your faith (or the faith you're considering). If you're interested in finding out more about Life Groups (the best place to take part in these activities), email [mhan-son@reallifechurch.org](mailto:mhan-son@reallifechurch.org) and let us know.

## **2.5 – Trust God, Love People**

'The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love'. Those are the words Paul wrote to a struggling church in the first century (see Galatians 5.6). This church was wrestling with faith and culture. Can different kinds of people find common ground in following Jesus? When you're in a situation like this, you're not worried about the details. You want to focus on what matters, what's really a big deal. And here Paul says that what matters is faith and love. The core of our new life is to live out our faith in God by loving other people.

So what does that look like? We might say it means replacing old habits with new ones – new ones that show love to others. There is a great example in another of Paul's letters: 'Those who have been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need' (Ephesians 4.28). My guess is that most of us don't steal on a regular basis, but we can nevertheless detect a pattern here that applies to us all. We aren't generally wired to care about others. There are certain activities we engage in for nothing but our own benefit. We spend our time, money, energy, and resources on ourselves – what makes us happy, healthy, and secure. Being a follower of Jesus is about replacing those self-centered habits with others-centered habits. It is about caring for others above ourselves and helping those in need.

This will look different in each situation. Truly listening to other people is a great place to start, whether your spouse, child, friend, neighbor, or co-worker. Listening takes time and energy we normally reserve for our own concerns. Perhaps you need to view co-workers with less competitiveness and more compassion. Maybe you have destructive relational or sexual habits that take advantage of other people (often without knowing it!). In all these cases, what you need to do now is replace these old selfish habits and practices with new selfless ones.

So what does this all have to do with faith? Well, the bottom line is that it's hard to love people. It's hard to sacrifice our own status or wealth or safety for someone else's sake. We might get burned. And if we don't have God's promise to work things out in the end, then we have to protect ourselves. But if we can trust God to keep us ultimately safe in the next life, we can live risky, self-sacrificially loving lives in this one. God will not abandon us. And because God will not abandon us, we can love everyone radically – even those who ignore us, those who attack us, those we consider 'enemies'. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. If we get this right, we can be confident we're moving in the right direction.

Spend some time reflecting alone and with your guide about how you can put these things into practice in your own daily life. What old habits do you need to be rid of, and what can you replace them with? What are some practical ways you can show God's love to those around you?

## 2.6 – Share the Story

If you're still reading at this point, I'm assuming you've either walked through the door, you're walking through it now, or you're very close to taking that last step into the other side. I hope you're excited, and I'm sure you're a little scared. It's hard to know what this all entails. You still have unanswered questions. You feel like you know so little, or that there's so much work to be done for you to become like Jesus.

Let me just tell you: We're glad you're here! We believe that Jesus was sent by God to reconcile us to God and show us what it means to live a truly human life, a life that honors God from top to bottom. We believe that while the church can be hypocritical and downright weird at times (it'll always be full of people, of course), it answers our deep desire for community and spiritual friendship. We believe that God is alive and active among us, drawing people closer and empowering us to faithfully witness to what he has done for the whole world in Jesus.

Think about the word *witness*. A witness is a person who sees an event and then tells others what happened. A witness is someone who says, 'So and so did such and such, and should be praised (or punished) accordingly'. We talk about witnessing crimes, witnessing miracles, witnessing wedding ceremonies or sporting events, etc. The job of a witness is simple: experience something and then tell others about it.

Before Jesus left this earth, he said to his followers, 'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit teams up with you, and *you will be my witnesses* to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1.8). This brings us to our final answer to the question, 'What should I do next?' If you have walked through the door, you not only became a much-loved child of God, you also became a witness of God's great love displayed for us in Jesus.

And now your task is simple: Tell others what you've seen, what you've experienced, what you've come to know. I don't mean knocking down doors or approaching strangers. I'm talking about your friends and neighbors and coworkers. You probably won't have to even bring things up yourself, at least not at first. They will notice that something about your life has changed. You care about people (about them perhaps) in a way that you never did before. Your life has changed not just on Sunday morning but all week through. They'll wonder, 'What's going on?' And they'll ask. And when they do, all you have to do is share the story that is now both yours and God's. Just tell them about your journey and how you've come to where you currently are. You don't have to worry about having all the answers. This isn't about pressuring people to accept our 'religion', but rather inviting them to look into this Jesus thing for themselves. Jesus once healed a guy born blind and then people started asking the guy all these questions about Jesus. His answer was simple: 'I don't know about those things. But I do know this: I was blind but now I see' (see John 9). If that's all you have to say right now, that's enough.