

TUTORIAL
7.16

A relationship with Jesus

This tutorial looks at the first question in the area of *Life*: ‘Are they experiencing a deepening relationship with Jesus, learning to depend more completely on Him in different areas of their lives, and gradually seeing their values and behaviour change as a result?’

Last time

We started into the third area of the W.I.L.D. framework, *Life*. We noted the failure of definitions of “life” that don’t involve the One who *is* Life and the Life-giver. By contrast, our attempt to encapsulate what Life actually is, focused on God and what He reveals through His Narrative about the life He wants His image bearers to have. We found Him creating plant and animal life, then breathing life into the otherwise inanimate body of Adam. Then, later we saw Him graciously providing a provisional way for fallen humans to still be connected to His Life, with His glorious presence even coming to “dwell” among His Covenant people. But what went before was only preparation, pointing towards the essence of Life, Jesus Christ, who through His death and resurrection created a permanent way for humans to experience authentic life, individually, as local bodies, and as one Church.

Before we consider some specific questions to help us picture and evaluate real life for God’s people, there are a few points worth noting:

1. We cannot hope to be exhaustive here. In some ways “life” is a term we use to describe our entire experience of reality, so there’s really no end to the issues we could consider. We’ll have to be selective and try to pinpoint what will be most helpful.
2. The ability to evaluate, or even to picture, authentic spiritual life depends to a large degree on our own experience of that life. So we need to approach this with real humility, asking God to deepen our own experience and understanding of the life He has given us in Christ.
3. As Paul reminded the Romans (14:10), none of us is in a position to condemn or look down on other believers because each of us will stand before God to have the fruit of our own lives exposed to the light of His scrutiny.

The first question under “L” for *Life*

- Are they experiencing a deepening relationship with Jesus, learning to depend more completely on Him in different areas of their lives, and gradually seeing their values and behaviour change as a result?
- Are they gaining clarity about the true purpose for which they exist, and are they increasingly able to identify those things that hinder their life in Christ?
- Are they increasingly able to make good decisions based on their understanding of God’s local and global purposes, and to use their time, money and other resources accordingly?
- Are they learning to shape the *form* of what they do to serve whatever *function* they are convinced will lead to the *fulfillment* of God’s objectives?
- Are they growing in their commitment to reproducing the life they have in Christ, are they equipped with the resources and skills to do so, and are they prioritizing opportunities where there is real need and hunger?

A deepening relationship with Jesus

So what does a *deepening relationship with Jesus* look like and what are the results, the fruit? Paul talks to the Ephesian church about Christ making His home in their hearts (Ephesians 3:17). The result of this warm companionship, he said a few lines later, is an experience of “all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.” (Ephesians 3:19). Elsewhere he encourages the Colossians to let their “roots grow down into Him [Jesus]” (Colossians 2:7). As for outcomes, he says that their faith will grow strong in the truth and they’ll overflow with thankfulness. Further on he describes some tangible fruit that will result if they’ll allow Christ’s rich teaching to become a significant part of their life as a church: they will have the wisdom to teach and encourage each other, and their gratitude will result in heartfelt communal praise to God (Colossians 3:16). Writing to friends in Philippi, he reflects on his own relationship with Christ and how life really has become all about Him. In fact, he has come to know and love his Saviour so much that if there’s no work left for him on earth, he’s more than happy to die and go to be with Jesus (Philippians 1:21). In this same letter he hard-wires knowing Christ with an experience of “the mighty power that raised him from the dead” (Philippians 3:10).

From these few samples and the whole of God’s Narrative, we can summarise just some of the results we should expect to see from a “deepening relationship with Jesus”:

- A sense of purpose and completeness rather than futility and emptiness.
- An inner strength and calm that is different from self-assertiveness and false optimism.

- A stability that is not at all the same as inflexibility.
- An understanding of Truth that is authentic and not just theory or knowledge.
- The ability to help others - through words and actions - to know Jesus more deeply.
- A sense of gratitude and thankfulness rather than a sense of entitlement.
- A readiness to praise God as a response to His revelation of Himself.
- A sense of hope about an eternity with Jesus rather than fear of the future or a preoccupation with the physical reality of this world.

Learning to depend on Him

Along with *a deepening relationship with Jesus*, this first question (under “L” for *Life*) also poses: *learning to depend more completely on Him in different areas of their lives* as a hallmark of real spiritual life. The consequence of not depending on Him is also true. Human existence since the Fall has been defined by our ancestors’ choice *not* to live in dependence on the Creator, and the default of every human heart since has been *away* from reliance on God. That initial choice opened the door for death and innumerable smaller choices since have allowed it to dominate over life (Romans 5:12).

It’s impossible to overstate just how thoroughly conditioned people are to depend on something or someone other than God. Individual worldviews and the societies that give them a communal expression are elaborate structures that help people avoid any sense of need in their lives for the true God. Created originally to be dependent on Him, people instead turn to other lesser “gods”, or to each other, to ideas, cultural narratives, religious practices or physical things; and most of all, to themselves. If their cultural traditions include a knowledge of the true God and any sense of His righteous claims, their self-dependence “DNA” will always compel them to look for ways to appease and approach Him through their own efforts. This also holds true when people are exposed to His Narrative for the first time. But when it is communicated clearly, He uses His Word to demonstrate the futility of those efforts, leading them to put their complete dependence - their faith - in Christ. As a result, He turns off their bogus life-support system that has kept them reliant on everything other than God, and the line on the screen goes flat - they die. They’ve been “crucified with Christ”, as Paul so vividly described it to the Galatians. Their new lives, by complete contrast, are then *ontologically* (i.e. in their very being) hooked up to His eternal life, designed and recreated now for complete dependence on Him (Galatians 2:20 and 6:15).

The problem, of course, is that old habits die hard. Even with God’s life coursing through their spiritual veins, the “muscle memory” imprinted by years of not relying on God still causes them to compulsively find their security

elsewhere. Some of the more obvious dependencies are recognised, even by the wider society, as unhealthy addictions. Others, often related to sexuality, are not even viewed as harmful obsessions by many cultures, but just as a matter of personal choice. In some instances people are miraculously freed from these enslavements at salvation, but often they need very specific and long-term help that allows them to truly deal with their addictions in light of their new life in Christ. But even though these dependencies might be the easiest to recognise and have the most visibly devastating results, in essence they share a great deal in common with the life-long challenge all believers face: learning to trust God completely for every aspect of their lives.

How deeply God's Truth has impacted someone's life, and how far they've come in their journey towards true dependence on Him, is often most visible in times of crisis or change. We can observe how they deal with upheaval, with sickness, danger, loss, financial difficulties. Also when they are dealing with hurt and disappointment in relationships or facing unjust criticism. How do they handle a major decision or cope with sudden life changes? Where do they turn in these situations? Is it gradually becoming a habit of life to turn to God as their ultimate security, comfort, friend and guide? Not with demands that He makes them or their children healthy; or with a false hope that He will ensure their financial prosperity; or the assumption that He will fix every relationship problem; but in the quiet confidence that no matter what the circumstances, He will do what's best for them and others as He pursues His just, gracious purposes in the world. Obviously growth and maturity in these areas is *not* about a fake silver-lining optimism and denial of the realities that are part of living and dying in a fallen world. There is always a battle, a need for every believer to constantly remind themselves of God's promises, to discipline their minds and wills to actively depend on Him. Maturity comes by habitual "use" or "through training", as the writer of Hebrews puts it, (Hebrews 5:14) and it's evidence of this that we should be looking for.

Dependence on God in the life of a church

Clearly, we've barely scratched the surface of what *dependence on God* looks like in someone's life, but before we move on we need to briefly make some observations about how this plays out in the corporate life of a church. Just as for individuals, how much a body of believers is depending on God for their life together often shows itself most clearly in challenging circumstances; when an influential leader leaves, when there's external threat, when finances for church programs are tight, when numbers are in decline. But there are also other indicators. For example, we can ask ourselves:

- Is there a confidence in God's Spirit speaking through the lives of members and His Word as the *primary* way He attracts and integrates people into the life of the church...or is the *focus* on personalities, entertainment, marketing and creating a pleasurable experience for anyone who might come along?

- Is the tone of the prayers and testimonies of the church body one of gratitude and praise for all God has provided spiritually as well as physically, and a recognition that He is sufficient for all needs...or is there a sense of entitlement and a preoccupation with Him meeting their earthly expectations?
- Is there a willingness to interact with other believers who hold different perspectives, and engage in authentic ways with the majority culture...or is there a feeling of being under siege and a reluctance to believe that God can keep them from error and help them to be truly *in* the world without being defined *by* it?
- Is there a sense of vision, of facing challenges together in God's strength, of taking up opportunities...or is there a dominant voice of caution, of preserving the status quo, an unwillingness to use resources without ironclad guarantees that they'll be replenished?

Changing values and behaviour

The other point this first question (under "L" for *Life*) makes, is that if God's Word is being effectively shared with an individual or group, we will be *gradually seeing their values and behaviour change as a result*. The order here is of critical importance. If we are imagining teaching God's Word in a church planting context, for example, part of our mental picture will almost definitely include people moving away from destructive behaviour after conversion so they can live in ways that are pleasing to Him. Or, if we are already involved in sharing Truth and discipling others, then very naturally we'll be eagerly looking for signs of change to indicate that our partnership with God's Spirit is bearing fruit. We're right to think that way, but the challenge, as we noted in Tutorial 7.8, when we were discussing how the *authority* of God's Word plays out, is that there are all kinds of motivations for behavioural change. In our quest to work effectively alongside Him in His purposes for His children and His church, we don't want to be part of forcing people to change or even providing them with the wrong motivation. We want to be able to encourage and celebrate authentic spiritual growth and not to "enable" the old addiction of self-dependency by advocating change that's the product of anything other than Christ's own life.

And so, as we noted, the order in which the change takes place is critical: first people's values are changed by God's Word, then their behaviour will follow suit. Paul explained to the believers in Rome that God would transform them into new people by changing the way they thought (Romans 12:2), or as he put it to the Colossian church, Christians can live in ways that are consistent with their new natures as they get to know their Creator and become like Him (Colossians 3:10). Peter described it yet another way: as God's children learn to depend on what He promises, they can share in His own character and be free of the corrupting influence of their own desires (2 Peter 1:4).

Of course it's tough enough to accurately evaluate our own motivation, much less someone else's. But with God's help in avoiding harsh judgment, we should be able to discern something of what is real and what is not. For example, it's troubling when we see a new believer suddenly assume the look and mannerisms of "Christianity", when they are obviously trying to live up to an external set of expectations. It should also raise red flags when we see behavioural change in someone who we know has not yet had sufficient teaching or discipleship for that change to be based on. Or when we know they have been exposed to a perspective of God and His Word that puts them under condemnation and implies that they can somehow please God through their own efforts to improve. On the positive side, we can be reassured when we hear an individual or group of believers speaking of God's grace in their lives, when they have been taught about who they are in Christ and we begin to see small choices made in His strength that are gradually becoming habitual.

Some extra questions

To go along with the first question in the area of *Life*, 'Are they experiencing a deepening relationship with Jesus, learning to depend more completely on Him in different areas of their lives, and gradually seeing their values and behaviour change as a result?', we can also ask:

- *Is their relationship with Jesus producing thankfulness, stability, authenticity, a willingness to serve others, and confidence about eternity?*
- *Are they able to identify old habits of dependency that get in the way of completely relying on Christ for their standing in God's eyes and for all their true needs?*
- *Is the direction of their lives gradually changing, not through their own efforts to try to be "Christian", but as the Spirit teaches and equips them to live out the attitudes of Christ in valid ways?*



DISCUSSION POINTS

A relationship with Jesus

1. Is the question of whether your own relationship with Jesus is continuing to deepen something you ask yourself regularly? If not, why? Do you have a reason (e.g. you don't think it's possible to know, or the idea of evaluating spiritual life has some bad connotations from your past, etc.)? OR, is it just not something that you've thought about much? If so,

- (1) How do you tend to gauge it? (2) Do you feel your ways of measuring are valid?
2. Do you think that someone with an addiction or a diagnosed psychological condition like depression should be freed from that at salvation? Please explain your answer. If you *don't* think so, in broad terms describe the kind of help that a new believer wrestling with an issue like that needs. Would you recommend them getting clinical therapy or only Christian counselling? What part should church leaders/shepherds have in a situation like that?
 3. As you're getting to know a young believer, what kinds of things might cause you to wonder if they are falling into the trap of trying to conform to a set of standards they associate with being a "Christian"? Given the opportunity, how would you try to help them?