



**EXPERIENCING THE
BEAUTIFUL LIFE**

SHINING FORTH THE KINGDOM IN EVERYDAY LIFE
A Six-Week Devotional Guide

by Scott Boren



Copyright © 2006 Woodland Hills Church

Published by Woodland Hills Church
1740 Van Dyke Street
Saint Paul, MN 55109
651-487-0001

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the Holy Bible, Today’s New International Version™ TNIV®, Copyright © 2001, 2005 by International Bible Society®
All rights reserved worldwide.

Visit www.whchurch.org for more sermon, devotional, and discipleship resources.

Acknowledgements:

Thank you to Scott Boren for the outstanding job he did writing the content for this book and envisioning our church’s first 40-Day Adventure. Thanks also to Tyler DeArmond, Kevin Callaghan, Mary Van Sickle and Annie Perdue-Olson for their input. Specific thanks to Dwayne Polk for his detailed editing and the prayers that he wrote while working through the material. Also thanks to Sue Yonker for her fine-tuning eye. Lastly, our appreciation to Jim LePage and Becky Coté who, along with a slew of volunteers, have miraculously produced a beautiful book in record time.

– Greg Boyd, Janice Rohling and Paul Eddy, Woodland Hills Executive Team

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Be Beautiful (note from Greg Boyd) 5

Introduction 7

Week 1, It’s A Beautiful Life 10

Week 2, The Fast Food Life..... 22

Week 3, The Search For Beauty..... 40

Week 4, A Place To Belong..... 52

Week 5, Giving Beauty Away..... 66

Week 6, A Beautiful Tomorrow..... 78



BE BEAUTIFUL

Jesus left the splendor of heaven, entered the ugly war zone of our fallen world, became a humble human being and finally suffered a shameful, excruciating, God-forsaken death on a cross. He did this to rescue a rebellious race of people who couldn't have deserved it less. Most amazingly, he didn't make this supreme sacrifice reluctantly or out of necessity. In his unfathomable love, God considered it a joy to suffer on our behalf (Heb. 12:2).

This, folks, is an outrageously beautiful love story. It is, in fact, the single greatest love story that has ever been told, or that ever could be told! Yet, it is important that we realize this love story has not yet come to a conclusion, for you see, it's not simply a love story about a beautiful king, it is also a love story about a king who is building a beautiful kingdom. With his life, ministry, death and resurrection, Jesus planted the beautiful domain in which God's love rules, but the goal from the start has been to have this beautiful domain expand through the earth, captivating and transforming one life at a time.

You see, God doesn't want us who have been captivated by his love to simply be hearers of a great love story that happened "once upon a time." God wants us to be participants of a love story that continues to unfold at this very moment. He calls us to not only be recipients but also conduits of his

beautiful love. We are not merely to be spectators of a beautiful king, but co-builders of a beautiful kingdom and the way we do this is by allowing the love of the king and the beauty of his kingdom to permeate and shine through every aspect of our lives. The whole of the kingdom life could be summed up by the call: “Be Beautiful as He is Beautiful.” In a world that is full of ugly darkness, we are called to be light.

In the next six weeks we’ll be examining what this looks like and discussing in very practical terms how we can grow in this direction. I am delighted you’ve decided to enter this adventure with us and I encourage you to prayerfully and passionately invest yourself in it. Together, we want to reflect the beauty of the king.



Greg Boyd,
Senior Pastor, Woodland Hills Church



INTRODUCTION

The Kingdom of God looks like Jesus. This statement relates to the core of Christian reality. The ultimate goal of human life is for human beings to become more and more like Christ. Jesus came to usher in a new human race, a human society that is empowered by the Holy Spirit to live in love day-by-day. This new humanity exercises power and authority in a different way than the world usually does. Instead of seeking to control others, our new humanity seeks to lovingly serve others. We read about this in Matthew 20:25-28: “Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’”

This life that Jesus describes is inviting, attractive, and welcoming. One might even call it beautiful. In living his life, Jesus was the manifestation of beauty. As God’s children, we are invited to participate in the beautiful life of Jesus. Paul writes about this: “Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children, and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God”

(Ephesians 5:1). The love of Christ that we experience changes us so that we are empowered to walk in this same kind of love.

These thoughts sound great when we hear them in sermons or read them in a book. They challenge our thinking and may even change how we view God and ourselves. However, there is a problem that many people encounter in North America that hinders their ability to actually experience this beautiful life. Most people's lives are so packed with stressful complexity that there is little time or energy available to participate in this kingdom beauty.

The common way of living today can be illustrated by a page within a book. Imagine if this book were formatted so that each page held as many words as possible. There would be no white space or "margin" on the edges of the page. The words would be much smaller and little space between the lines. If you were to open this book and see such pages, you would most likely put it down and leave it unread. You might even describe it as an unattractive book. Unfortunately, this lack of "margin" steals the kingdom we beauty are called to display.

The Apostle Paul shared this advice for those searching to add beauty to their lives:

All of you, slave and free both, were once held hostage in a sinful society. Then a huge sum was paid out for your ransom. So please don't, out of old habit, slip back into being or doing what everyone else tells you. Friends, stay where you were called to be. God is there. Hold the high ground with him at your side. ... I do want to point out, friends, that time is of the essence. There is no time to waste, so don't complicate your lives unnecessarily. Keep it simple—in marriage, grief, joy, whatever. Even in ordinary things—your daily routines of shopping, and so on. Deal as sparingly as possible with the things the world thrusts on you. This world as you see it is on its way out. —1 Corinthians 7:23-24 & 29-31 (The Message)

Believing that the kingdom of God is beautiful, winsome, welcoming and attractive is a necessary starting point. We need to talk about such things;

however, thinking this way about the kingdom will not necessarily get you on the inside of the beauty. We must choose to rearrange our lives so that we have enough space or "margin" to invest in kingdom activities that will promote the kind of beauty that God desires for our lives.

As you work through the daily readings in this book, I pray that you will discover what beautiful life can look like. Hopefully, this work will help you see the commonly accepted form of life that the world hands us for what it is, as destructive and ultimately ugly. As a result, you will be challenged to reformat the pages of your life. But the greatest thing that I pray you will find as you work through these daily readings will be an encounter with Jesus. As you meet with him, he will show you practical things that you can change that will add beauty to your life. As you do this, you will advance the kingdom of God in this world.

Father,

I want to live in such a way that I can manifest your beauty. I invite you to lead me into this beauty. I ask you to guide me into a fresh life rhythm that allows your glory and kingdom nature to shine through me. Fill me with new hunger for you. Challenge me to step out and follow you. Overwhelm my heart with passion for you and your life. Be glorified in me. Amen.

To go deeper on this beautiful adventure you can check out the following resources:

Making Room for Life: Trading Chaotic Lifestyles for Connected Relationships by Randy Frazee (This book can be purchased from the Resource Center.)

Invitation to Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God's Transforming Presence by Ruth Haley Barton

Freedom of Simplicity by Richard J. Foster

Ordering Your Private World by Gordon MacDonald



The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to ... provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes.

—Isaiah 61:1a, 3a

Beauty describes something that captures our senses and imagination in a way that makes our lives interesting, joyful, and fulfilling. When something is “beautiful,” it’s more than just “nice,” “cute,” or “pretty.” Genuine beauty makes an impression and impact on a person. For example, I am writing this on a “beautiful” day. It is hard for me—a transfer from Texas—to believe that I can take a walk on a sunny afternoon and enjoy a cool breeze in the middle of summer. As I look out the window, my mind wanders to what the St. Croix River might look like today; the view might be described as deeply captivating and satisfying.

There are many different perspectives about what are considered objects of beauty. For some people, the sound of a finely tuned car is “beautiful.” Others describe a great movie as a “beauty.” The miracle of holding a newborn child is an experience of overwhelming beauty. A song or poem may move some people to experience a fulfilling sense of beauty. For the married person reading this, I hope that you see your spouse as a beautiful person. Truly, many things have been observed and found to be fulfilling because they add beauty to this world. Quite often, many of us don’t think about our lives being one of those things. We just live life, going through the regular routines of the day, week, and year. The highs and lows of life come, but we don’t necessarily see the rhythm in which we live as a way to add beauty to this world.

How would you define beauty?

Scripture says that God wants to replace the ashes (a biblical symbol of death and ugliness) in all of our lives with breath taking beauty. God does this for a wonderful purpose: he wants to recreate the beautiful life within us so that we might be a source of joy, love, and fulfillment for others. It can truly be said that the greatest source of beauty in this world is God’s people!

What would a beautiful life look like to you?

Spend some time praying that God would grant you more of his beauty.

A working definition of Beauty: The quality that gives pleasure to the mind or senses and is associated with such properties as harmony of form or color, excellence of artistry, truthfulness, and originality.

God,

When I hear the word “beauty,” some thoughts and feelings go through my mind. Some of these are clear. Others may need more processing. One thing I can say is that I really want more beauty in my life. As I am reading that you want to give me more of your breath taking beauty, I feel somewhat conflicted. I really want to deeply understand beauty, but I also want to be able to enjoy beauty, perhaps without fully understanding it. I pray that your Holy Spirit would work with me this week to both understand and enjoy your beauty in such a way that I become transformed more and more into the person that you know that I can be. Amen.



A KINGDOM OF BEAUTY

*The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn ...*

Isaiah 61:1-2

Today's scriptural reference is among the most famous passages found in the Bible. Why? Because Jesus quoted these verses when he began his ministry in his hometown of Nazareth! In Luke 4:18-19, we find the story where Jesus quotes from the book of Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth. Then he followed the Isaiah reading by saying, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21b). With this, Jesus announced that he was the Messiah, the person anointed by God to present the Kingdom of God and its work of restoring, redeeming, and saving.

When words like restoration, redemption, and salvation are used, we most often associate them with the work that God does with the "spiritual" part of us. Because many tend to divide the "spiritual" from the "secular," some have been taught that when they got "saved" their inner spirit was made new. With this inner transformation comes the promise that one day God will receive them into his heavenly presence after death or when he returns for his church, whichever comes first. But if we carefully read the passage above, we learn that Jesus' salvation was not limited to the "spiritual" part of life.

According to Isaiah 61:1-3, how does Jesus' salvation extend beyond the bounds of the spiritual/secular divide?

The kingdom work that Jesus does in our lives cannot be contained by modern definitions of what is spiritual and what is secular. Jesus came to restore justice to this world, which of course impacts the way we live. This kind of beauty infiltrates the everyday things of life in order to transform the way that we see ourselves and our life situations. Kingdom beauty sneaks up on us and enters into our lives in the unexpected places, the parts of our lives in which many don't typically see God having an interest. Nothing is off limits in the kingdom, not work, finances, family, friendships, social problems, illness, or global violence. God desires to bring beauty to every aspect of our lives, not just the spiritual stuff we do at church services or when we read the Bible. In other words, kingdom beauty is very practical. It has a this-worldly application, even though it is other worldly.

In what ways has God brought beauty to your life?

How has God given you a desire to bring beauty to a world that lacks it?



OUR CALLING INTO BEAUTY

*The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me to ...
provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes
the oil of joy instead of mourning
and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called mighty oaks,
A planting of the Lord
For the display of his splendor.*

—Isaiah 61:1a & 3

I remember when I first gave my heart to Jesus. I had been lonely and depressed. Some later told me that I had been acting rather mean and judgmental. But something happened to my life, my entire life, when I humbled myself before God. I had joy. I had a reason to praise. I had hope. And on a very practical note, I had real friends who embraced me. This was my first encounter with a taste of beauty.

Isaiah does us a favor. He provides some further explanation of the practical ways that beauty can be shown in the world.

Read the lines following “beauty instead of ashes.” What does the crown of beauty look like?

This is good stuff—joy replaces mourning, praise steps in for despair. To be called a “mighty oak” might not seem like a cool thing while walking down the hall at school or standing around the coffee maker at work, but when Isaiah wrote these words it was like saying, “You’re awesome. I can count on you.” In some modern-day churches, it would be like saying, “You are

such a blessing.” To be a “mighty oak” is to be someone who is rooted and grounded with depth in such a way to give life to others (See Psalm 1). This stands in contrast to the “ashes,” which are little more than burnt, used-up wood. It is a supernatural exchange, trading life for no life.

Who would not want to receive this from God? If there is a good gift under the Christmas tree with my name on it, I am going to tear into it. However, we often go through the motions of life without living. We settle for ashes, mourning, and despair. Perhaps some don’t believe that having a beautiful life is really possible.

The reasons for settling for less vary from person to person. For instance, we sometimes complain about our lives to get attention; therefore if we choose to walk in beauty, this way of getting attention would disappear. I have fallen into this trap at times. Don’t wait for someone to mention your source of settling for less. Allow God to challenge you to receive what he has for you.

Do you think you settle for less than what God has for your life?

What do you think keeps you from fully receiving God’s beauty? Take a few minutes and ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you about this question.



THE SOURCE OF BEAUTY

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked.

—Luke 4:21-22

At this point, a reader may easily see the need to be a beautiful person and wish to live life in a way that inspires others to impact the world positively. Someone may further decide to act upon this need by, perhaps, studying a biblical character like David, Paul or even Jesus. She could make a list of all of their "spiritual" attributes and behaviors...and then set about working hard to change her behaviors to match those of the biblical characters.

Why is it so natural for people to focus on external behaviors?

However, this focus on changing behaviors alone will only lead to a confining legalism that will not develop true beauty. We might be able to look differently for a short period, but the change will only be external. Beauty comes from the inside and then shows up on the outside. God is not interested in only changing external behaviors so that we can impress others. He wants to develop beauty within us so that it flows out of each one of us naturally.

Jesus did not give us a list of things to do to be beautiful. After Jesus read the scripture from Isaiah 61, he proclaimed that he was the fulfillment of what he read. God came to earth to be the beauty that people could not be. Jesus entered the inside of the world in order to change the world from the

inside out. The people of Nazareth did not expect this. It was too different, too radical, and too gracious. Could God really come in such a humble way? After all, he was the son of a simple carpenter.

Still today, Jesus comes into our lives to change us from the inside out. He seeks total change, not just behavioral change. True beauty only comes through the life of God living through us by the Holy Spirit. God is beauty, and we grow in this beauty as we invest effort into our relationship with this God. There is no "magic bullet" or perfect pattern to copy. God beauty is manifested in us as we open our lives to God's leading so that we respond with obedience.

Read Psalm 40 aloud. What does this chapter say about how God changes us?

Spend a few minutes in prayer, asking the Lord to prepare your heart to receive what God wants to do in your life. Write a few lines of this prayer below.



When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

—**Luke 3:21-22**

Jesus, the Son of God and second person of the Trinity, descended from heaven and took on flesh so that he might bring beauty to this world from the inside out. In this verse, Luke makes it very clear that Jesus did not do this alone. The third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, came upon Jesus. The Holy Spirit is the manifest personal presence of God who empowered and led Jesus.

Read Luke 4:1 and 4:14. What did the Holy Spirit provide Jesus after his baptism?

We have been referring all week to Jesus' quote from Isaiah that opens, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me ..." Jesus understood that he needed God's personal and empowering presence as his source of life and beauty. However, mere knowledge of presence of the Holy Spirit is not the source of beauty. It is found in experiencing the presence of God that is nothing less than a display of ultimate beauty. When I first started sensing God's presence, it was a great joy, but also a little scary. I did not understand all that was going on. One time, I was worshipping and praying in a small group. At first, I was skeptical. Up to this time in my walk with God, I was more comfortable thinking about God than I was with meeting him. After two hours of God's beautiful intimate presence—where we wept, sang, prayed, and just told God we loved him—I realized that God's presence is

not something I use, but in God's presence, I experience my ultimate calling and destiny. When I make the active choice to meet with my Father, through the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit, I begin to live in God's beauty. I live in more and more beauty as I continue to meet with God.

Spend some time worshipping God right now. Take two minutes and reflect on who God is. Then take two minutes and tell God what you think of him. Here is a prayer to get you started:

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

I am humbled and honored to speak to you today. As the three persons of the one triune God, you have given humanity a strong foundation for beauty. Father, your desire to give us "beauty for ashes" lets us know how beautiful you actually wish for us to be. Lord Jesus, your self-sacrificing life and mission enables us to enjoy more freedom than we ever thought possible. Holy Spirit, your presence empowers us to live in your truth and love. Triune God, you have done so much for us! I just want to be with you and take time to thank you for this week. I open myself to meet with you right now. Amen.



Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

—Matthew 6:25-28a

In the early 1990s, it seemed like every other song played on the radio was *Don't Worry, Be Happy* by Bobby McFerrin. For those who missed this experience or don't remember it, it was a song with an uplifting beat and a positive message that left you with a smile...at least for the first 20 times you heard it. While it was not meant to have a deep message, it did fail to address the true nature of happiness. It only promoted a veneer of joy, a superficial sugar-coated-topping appearance with little real happiness. The message of the song ignored the fact that a smile on my face will not deconstruct the issues within my life that cause frustration and pain.

The opposite of beauty is ugliness. Because this term is usually used to describe that which is externally displeasing, another term is needed to help us see that ugliness, like beauty, starts from the inside and works its way out. This term is "chaos." Chaos explains what makes ugliness ugly. Chaos describes the experience of confusion, disorder, and disarray. One experience of chaos can be seen in your home. Just go one week without cleaning or picking up anything around your house. Watch chaos take over.

In the same way, unless we steward our own lives well and tend to that which lies beneath the veneer, chaos will rule more and more of our hearts. We will feel pulled, pressured, and worn out. Worry sets in because we cannot keep up with chaos' power. We will become overwhelmed with confusion and disorder because our hearts have been caught up in the whirlwind

of chaos. Then when we look at our lives, we don't like what we see. Instead of finding instances of beauty, we will find traces of ugliness taking over.

Read Genesis 1:1-2. What impact does the Spirit of God have on chaos?

Take some time and think deeply about your life. Where do you see areas where there may be "chaos" at work in your life?

What does this do to your relationships with God and others?

To change the ugliness of ashes to the beauty of an oak tree (See Is 61:3), we cannot look at the superficial top layer of our lives. We must look beneath the surface and get honest about what we see there. We must face the chaos of our lives and confront it with truth.

Most of us are not accustomed to doing this. The world promises us easy answers to complicated problems. Life today is complicated, challenging and even chaotic. Many don't expect to address issues like this in the church, but why shouldn't the church provide alternatives to chaos? Isn't it reasonable to believe that God has the resources to address the normal, yet overwhelming, issues that we face everyday?

Jesus spoke to the chaos of life over 2000 years ago. His message was quite practical. He explained how God has a way out of the chaos of worry and striving.

Meditate on Matt. 6: 25-27.

In what ways do worry in life promote chaos?

Lord Jesus,

When I read the Scripture where you tell people not to worry about daily needs for life, I sometimes think about my life, with its busyness and complexity. Afterwards, I sometimes find myself asking an uncomfortable question: "Lord, are you serious?" I mean, there is enough change, work, and concern in my life to last me a lifetime...and you tell your people not to worry? The more I think about my busy, misunderstood life situation, the more impossible I find it to do what you've asked. Lord, I humbly ask for your Holy Spirit to help me discern how I can grow to live more like you would have me to live. I want to live more beautifully, but I need you to help me grow toward that. I commit to be open to hearing what you speak to me this week. Amen.



So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.

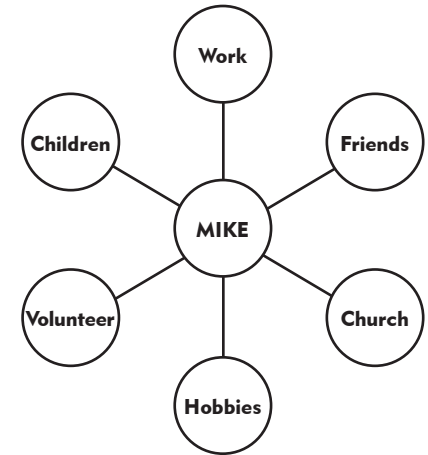
—Matthew 6:31-32

As human beings, we are born into various social settings that already possess basic patterns within them. These patterns explain to us how life works. Rarely do we question the patterns that these social settings teach us. For instance, we accept the customs of those who raised us (parents, grandparents, etc) many times assuming that what we learned from them is the only “right” way to do things. We operate with the rules of these patterns even though they are most often created by powers that do not belong to the kingdom of God. I'd like to give an imaginary example of what this may look like in our American context.

Imagine Mike. He is a busy man who works hard as a sub-contractor, building cabinetry for new homes. It is common for his days to extend until after dark because his job takes him all over the Twin Cities. He needs the extra money from the work, but it causes stress for him because he often misses dinner with his family. Actually, the kids he lives with are not his. John and Jenny, busy teenagers who are working hard in high school to qualify for athletic scholarships, are the children of his second wife, Sandra. He has one son of his own in college and a daughter working, but he has not lived with them for over ten years since the divorce from his first wife. On the side, Mike is a volunteer fireman, something he loves because he can serve the community and connect with other service-minded people like himself. He loves to fish, but he spends more time fixing his boat than actually using it. Sandra is equally busy. She has several siblings and her parents are getting old. She is the primary caretaker, which she does around her job as a customer service manager for a department store.

Mike and Sandra appear to have a good life. They seem to be doing all the right stuff to be “successful.” To most, they may even seem really happy, but when you look at the way they live their lives, it becomes quite clear that chaos has taken over. One way of illustrating this is with a diagram.

This is a Life Pattern Diagram. It provides a picture of how chaos can consume our lives without our even knowing it. Every time I present this diagram to a group of people, I see jaws dropping because it describes how they live.



Now take a few minutes and work on your own Life Pattern Diagram. Start by putting your name in a small circle on the space below. Think about your life and the relationships you manage. They might include work, church, family, school, kids, friends, etc. Draw a circle for each one.

Now that you have done this, review these circles and ask yourself if each of them is actually one set of relationships or many different sets. For instance, if your kids attend multiple schools, then draw a different circle for each school. Most likely your work includes multiple groups of people with whom you must relate on a consistent basis. If your children are involved in extra-curricular activities, then add circles for those. What about extended family? Your spouse's work?

When I first developed my Life Pattern Diagram, I was quite discouraged. It was like picking up a magnified mirror that pointed out all my blemishes that could easily be ignored in normal mirrors. However, looking honestly at my life has been one of the best things I have ever done. It stirred deep dissatisfaction with the status quo and caused me to seek God for a better way.

Take a few minutes and ask the Lord to take you on a new journey beyond your current pattern.



And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?

—Matthew 8:28-30

Yesterday, we drew a diagram to illustrate how chaotic life can be. Now let's think about another aspect of this chaos. Look again at Mike's diagram. All of the circles around Mike illustrate all of the different parts of his life that he must manage. He has lots of people in his life, and the circles that he has to manage overwhelm him. In fact, he has so many circles that all of his time is consumed with managing surface relationships. He has no time for deep committed relationships. He even struggles to find time to just hang out with his wife. In his book, *Making Room for Life*, Randy Frazee calls this "crowded loneliness."

Look at your Life Pattern Diagram. Do you have so many circles that your life would be characterized by "crowded loneliness?"

What impact can crowded loneliness have upon your spirit?

In addition, for most people the circles are often independent of one another. Few of the individuals in the circles have any connection with any of the other circles. They are called linear relationships because all the lines

that connect the circles are tied to the person in the middle. Randy Frazee explains it this way:

To capture just how disconnected these worlds can be imagine yourself inviting just one person from each world you manage to your next birthday party. You will go to bed that night utterly exhausted. Why? Because the only thing these people have in common is you. One lady recently did this and confessed to me that it was like keeping twenty separate plates spinning as she moved from room to room and person to person, trying to keep everyone happy.

The most damaging aspect of the linear friendships is that no one really knows the real you. This can even include your mate, as he or she is often completely out of the loop on significant relationships you manage. I'd like to offer this thought: a person doesn't really know you unless they know most of the people in your other circles. Why? Because the most important thing about you is the relationships you have—your relationship with God and your relationships with others.

Take some time and examine your Life Pattern Diagram again. Are your circles disconnected from each other?

Offer the reality of your life up to God right now. Ask the Lord to continue revealing truth so that you might be prompted to seek him for more change.



*But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness,
and all these things will be given to you as well.*

—Matthew 6:33

Refer back to Mike's Life Pattern Diagram on page 29. Now let's imagine that Mike is a committed Christian. Let's say that he attends Woodland Hills Church regularly and volunteers where he can. Seeking God is very important for Mike, but he is under duress because there are things that he feels led to do, which he cannot because of the relational commitments that he already has. About a year ago, he heard a sermon that caused him to rethink how much he offers his life to serve other. He committed to serve in the children's ministry, but he never acted on it. Now he feels guilty for not following through with this commitment.

I have been told many times that seeking first God's kingdom is all about priorities. The opinion about what the order of priorities varies. For the most part the order is God first, family second, church third and then work. Practically, this means that Mike looks at all of his circles and ranks them in the order of importance. Because God and church are high on the list, it seems that Mike is seeking first God's kingdom.

The reality of Mike's life is that he is playing "add-on" Christianity. He is adding God, church, and ministry to his already over-stressed, over-complicated and chaotic life. He feels guilty because he cannot do more, but guilt does no good. Unfortunately, Mike doesn't realize that God is not interested in adding more circles. Instead, God seeks to challenge the center from which Mike lives.

Mike lives within a world where he seeks to make things happen. He is required to manage his circles. God challenges Mike, and the rest of us, to set Jesus in the center and allow Jesus to live the Kingdom through us.

Instead of managing the circles to please the people within those circles and make sure we do our part to make those circles work correctly, we live from a divine center that is based in the presence of God.

This might sound like an impossible dream or a something only possible by those with money or retirees. Actually, most people who have money and/or time remain de-centered and controlled by chaos. Having money and extra time does not automatically produce a beautiful life. The enemy of our souls would love to keep us entrapped in our current life situation through myriad excuses.

What reasons are coming into your mind right now that serve as excuses for your not being able to change your life?

Offer these excuses to God right now. Tell him that this idea sounds too good to be true. Be honest with what you feel. Then acknowledge God as your center. Invite him to lead you to set him at the center of your circles.



“If you decide for God, living a life of God-worship, it follows that you don’t fuss about what’s on the table at mealtimes or whether the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body. Look at the birds, free and unfettered, not tied down to a job description, careless in the care of God. And you count far more to him than birds. Has anyone by fussing in front of the mirror ever gotten taller by so much as an inch? All this time and money wasted on fashion—do you think it makes that much difference? Instead of looking at the fashions, walk out into the fields and look at the wildflowers. They never primp or shop, but have you ever seen color and design quite like it? The ten best-dressed men and women in the country look shabby alongside them. If God gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers—most of which are never even seen—don’t you think he’ll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you? What I’m trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with getting, so you can respond to God’s giving. People who don’t know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don’t worry about missing out. You’ll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don’t get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.”

—Matthew 6:25-34 (The Message)

Reflect on these verses again. What do you sense the Spirit saying to you through these verses?

Let’s briefly think about our “Mike” example. Why does Mike live the way he does? Is he seeking to get ahead? To attain more stuff? To please other people? To do the right thing for his family? No one can identify the motivation for the life he leads other than Mike.

Jesus revealed some common motivations for worry and concern that lead to chaos. Worry about money is one of the biggest stresses of modern life. It’s one issue with which people from all sectors of society seem to struggle. Whether you live in a huge house in the suburbs or in a subsidized apartment in the city, on a family farm or in a high-rise apartment, chances are that you have, in some way, been affected by worrying about finances.

Why do you think the concern of having enough money consumes so many people?

If we are going to change how we live, we must heed the teaching of Jesus. We cannot change unless we discover that Jesus will take care of us. Fretting to make life work better only adds pressure and creates more problems. In fact, if we continue in the pattern of adding more to get more, ultimately we might add another circle of a recovery group or a weekly visit to a counselor.

We have a choice to make. We can either trust Jesus to do the impossible, or we can continue down a path of slow and silent decay over time. Like termites that slowly destroy a house while no one sees it happening, we can lose our lives while we worry and fret over trying to save our lives.

Spend a few minutes before the Lord. Imagine that he is sitting next to you. Listen to him say, “All things are possible with me. Trust me. I love you enough to get involved in the everyday stuff that you face. Will you walk with me on this journey?”

Write out your response to him. Use this prayer to get you started.

God,

Wow. Throughout this week, I have had a good chance to get a lot of awareness on just how complex and fragmented my life may really be. I'm actually a little more stressed than I was before! I think I see how our society helps creates lots of "Mikes" of all types who barely even have time or energy to think straight...let alone become more like Christ. I'm more aware of things, Lord, and I'm concerned, to say the least. But, I am going to trust that this is a part of the process that you are going to use to make me beautiful...just like Jesus is. And because of that, I am grateful to you for the work that you are doing in me. Amen



“Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.”

—Psalms 46:10

Making Jesus our divine center will not occur just because we acknowledge the need for it or have a passion for it. The way of life that we have received from our culture has shaped us for too long. One writer puts it this way: “This kind of living communion does not just fall on our heads. We must desire it and seek it out. Like the deer that pants for the flowing stream, so we thirst for the living Spring. We must order our lives in particular ways. We must take up a consciously chosen course of action that will draw us more deeply into perpetual communion with the Father.”

In other words we must create “God space.” For most of us, there is little to no room for God. There is no down time, no designated space carved out for God. And when we do have leisure time, we often fill it with nervous activity.

How do you typically respond when you have extra time on your hands?

The only way you and I will discover who God has made us to be is by being with Jesus. He is the only one who can reveal our identity. Jesus is the only one who can show us who we are in this world. Only Jesus can ground us on a solid foundation so that the chaos of this world does not consume us.

Try this: Next time you are at home and you have some extra time, refuse to turn on the television or radio. Just sit and breathe deeply. Don't think

about what you should be doing or could be doing. Just sit and say, “Hello, Jesus ...”

If you don't plan your God space, you will lose it. Undirected time will always flow toward other things. Because you are reading this devotional, you probably will spend some time with God after you read the next few lines. I want to encourage you to take this one step further ...

Imagine what you will be doing tomorrow. How might you fit some time with God into the day?

Be realistic. If this is new to you, set aside 10 to 15 minutes. Don't block out huge amounts of time at first. I remember when I was challenged to meet God for 15 minutes a day. At first I was counting the minutes, but it was not overwhelming. Then from there it grew naturally in quality and quantity. As you learn to meet with him, you will discover that this God space is the most beautiful part of your day.

Holy Spirit,

It seems like we are talking about “God-space” now. It's one thing to just talk about you. It's a whole other thing to be intentional about BE-ING with you. God, you know my life. You know how hectic and busy it can be. I'm asking you, Spirit, to open my heart and mind to what you want to share with me this week about creating time for you. Allow me to learn what I need to learn in order to truly spend time with you. I want to see your beauty clearly. Help me do that. Amen.



FREEDOM TO SAY NO

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

Genesis 1:1-2

Do you ever feel guilty when you have to say “No” when someone asks something of you? Your boss asks you to take on one more project without considering that you are overwhelmed already. Your friends invite you to play pool. Your in-laws ask the family over for dinner and games. Your son’s teacher needs a parent to chaperone a field trip. Your church asks for help running a new ministry. When you examine each opportunity on its own merits, you can easily see all of them all worthy of your time and effort. But you cannot do everything. The needs of the world will never go away.

Thomas Kelly wrote a classic book on the topic of making God the center. He offers, “We have seen and known some people who seem to have found this deep Center of living, where the fretful calls of life are integrated, where No as well as Yes can be said with confidence.” A former boss of mine used to say, “Whenever you hear a clear ‘Yes’ from God, you will have the freedom to say ‘No’ to five other things.”

When we don’t live from the Center found in the God space, we end up pulled in hundreds of different directions. We feel pressured to say “Yes” to every good opportunity that comes our way. Thereby we continue adding circles to our Life Pattern Diagram.

Refer back to the Life Pattern Diagram you drew on page 29. In prayer offer this representation of your relationships to God. Ask him to help you recognize what is important in his eyes. Ask him to show you those that he views as priorities. When you sense God’s leading, mark those three circles with a 1.

To help you think through all of your commitments, ask the Lord to help you see all of your circles according to his priorities. Then rank each circle in the following way. Use a different color to mark the circles with numbers.

1. Absolutely essential
2. Important but not essential
3. Helpful but not necessary
4. Trivial

I have found that committing myself to radical elimination or change never works. I say that I will change things, but the way we live life keeps me entrenched, no matter how I see God’s priorities. I have found it much more helpful to ask the Lord to bring about the change around the priorities of the kingdom. When I do this, the Lord is always faithful to lead me, showing me practical ways to eliminate unnecessary circles, to link circles together, and give greater emphasis to God’s priorities.

Take some time and offer these priorities to the Lord. Ask the Father to send the Spirit to bring order to your chaos.

To stir your faith, reflect again on Genesis 1:1-2. If God could bring order to chaos when he created the universe, how much more can he do that in your life?



Pray continually.

–1 Thessalonians 5:17

Creating God space by carving out specific time for God each day will change how you operate. God will show us what to do, bring peace to our lives, order our hearts and minds, and stimulate confidence.

Making room for God in our daily lives will help us see rightly who we are in him. We will find ourselves more confident because we have a clear sense of our identities.

The next step in creating God space is to practice the presence of God on a more continual basis. Spending time with God is not an obligatory activity. God invites us to be aware of the Spirit's loving presence in the ordinary stuff of life. We might pray as we walk down the hall at work. We might invite God's presence into our office or home while we work. We might talk with God as if he were sitting next to us while we drive.

One way to develop this God consciousness is illustrated by an experiment that Frank Laubach called a "Game of Minutes." Laubach wrote extensively about his experiments of creative ways to relate to God on a more consistent basis. He called this experiment a game because it was fun and delightful. I have heard many sermons on the instruction to pray without ceasing. I always felt guilty and oppressed because I never measured up. This little game has freed me from this pressure, while helping me follow its instruction. Perhaps it may be helpful to you as well!

It works this way: Choose an hour of your day today. See how many minutes during that hour that you can be conscious of God's presence. Laubach kept score. He would keep track of the percentage of time he was conscious of God. At first your score will be low. Don't worry about this;

God is developing a new mindset. You can do your first experiment during a worship service or during a Covenant Group meeting. As you practice this an hour per day, you will find that it will extend into other time very naturally.

One way to facilitate this consciousness of God is to thank God for others that you encounter during that hour. Pray a quick blessing over your boss' life when he calls you into his office. Silently offer a request for your spouse while you talk on the phone. Express your gratitude for your children while they do their homework. As I write this, I am doing this for the strangers that sit near me while I write at Panera.

You can try out this "Game of Minutes." Some will find it works quite well, while others will find it unnatural. The main thing is that you begin to imagine that God is near you no matter where you are and that he wants to converse with you while you walk through the ordinary stuff of life.



THE GOD SPACE OF SILENCE

Quiet down before God, be prayerful before him. Don't bother with those who climb the ladder, who elbow their way to the top.

Psalms 37:7

My life is noisy. I get in the car and turn on the radio. I arrive at work and there is not enough time to talk with all the people with whom I need to interact. I get home and connect with my family. I turn on the television and watch Sports Center because I must keep up with what happens each day in the world of sports. I watch a movie with my wife and then I go to bed. Last night I was so tired I fell asleep with the television still on and woke up to its noise at six this morning.

In his book, *Nurturing Silence in a Noisy Heart*, Wayne Oates says, "Silence is not native to my world. Silence, more than likely, is a stranger to your world, too. If you and I have silence in our noisy hearts, we are going to have to grow it. ... You can nurture silence in your noisy heart if you value it, cherish it, and are eager to nourish it."

What is Oates saying about how the noise of the world impacts our hearts?

Describe what a noisy heart looks like.

Think about your most prized possession. Think about its value to you. How do you treat it? If it is a nice car, would you let an irresponsible friend

with a questionable driving record borrow it? If it is a garden that you have spent hours tending, would you let a teenager with no gardening experience pull the weeds? Of course not. Why then do we let noise take over and drive our hearts, our most valuable possession?

What can you do this week to eliminate some noise in your life?

How might silence promote communion with God?



The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

-1 Kings 19:11-13

Elijah was a great and powerful prophet. When God needed to speak to him, he led him to a cave to wait on God in solitude. He had to prepare Elijah to hear what he had to say. He also had to prepare him for the way that he would say it. The Lord did not speak through spectacular ways, but through the silence.

In her book *Invitation to Solitude and Silence*, Ruth Barton writes,

To enter into solitude and silence is to take the spiritual life seriously. It is to take seriously our need to quiet the noise of our lives, to cease the constant striving of human effort, to pull away from our absorption in human relationships for a time in order to give God our undivided attention. In solitude God begins to free us from our bondage to human expectations, from there we experience God as our ultimate reality—the One in whom we live and move and have our being. In solitude our thoughts and our mind, our will and our desire are reoriented Godward so we become less and less attracted by external forces and can be more deeply responsive to God's desire and prayer in us.

Barton provides a few tips that will help us in our journeys of connecting to God:

1. Identify your God space and time. Find a place where you can consistently meet with God. For some this might be a special chair looking out a window, for others sitting by a lake. Find some place that works for you.
2. Begin with a modest goal. Ten to fifteen minutes is realistic.
3. Settle into a comfortable yet alert physical position
4. Ask God to give you a simple prayer that expresses your openness and desire for God. Such an act can create a doorway into his presence. Examples are "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me," "Worthy, worthy, worthy, Lord God Almighty," or "Lord, here I am. I need you." You can repeat this prayer phrase to deter distractions.
5. While sitting before the Lord, imagine that Jesus is near you because he is. Listen to what he might say to you.
6. Close your time in silence with a prayer of gratitude for God's presence with you, or pray the Lord's Prayer.
7. Resist the urge to judge yourself or your experiences in silence. Don't feel pressured to have some kind of grand experience. Let yourself grow in this connection with God.

God,

Silence. Solitude. Consciousness. These are just a few of the things that I've learned about this week. I think that I'm just scratching the surface of what I can do to simplify my life and spend more time with you. But I know that you are aware of my heart and the strength of my attempts. I ask you to continue being with me as I "work" to REST in the beauty of who you are. I pray that, as I go along in my life, I will be able to live this out to your glory! Amen.



A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

—John 13:34-35

In the world of managing circles, where people (like the example of Mike) feel compelled to juggle their activities and relationships, church is little more than another circle. It might be a top priority, but it is relegated to a meeting to attend or an activity on a calendar.

Jesus does not view church the same way we do. He told his disciples that the way his followers relate to one another is the key mark of discipleship. In other words, how Christians relate as members of Christ's body will demonstrate whether or not we are truly following Jesus. In another place, John tells us, "If we say we love God yet hate a brother or sister, we are liars. For if we do not love a fellow believer, whom we have seen, we cannot love God, whom we have not seen" (1 John 4:20).

How should the command to love others shape our view of church?

The most beautiful thing in the world is love. Think about it: how do you feel after hearing how a couple met and got married? What do you experience when you sacrificially offer yourself to another person? What is it like to share God's love with someone who has nothing to offer you in return? Love is beautiful, and the more you love, the more beautiful you become.

Therefore, one way that Satan seeks to hinder our experience of this beautiful life is by keeping us entrapped in our overwhelming circles, with no

space for relationships to keep covenant with God and others. We might attend a weekly Covenant Group or connect with others in the church, but do our lives have room for those people beyond the official meetings?

List the names of people in your life with whom you share God space. Don't worry about it if your list is short or even nonexistent. First of all, the list should not be long and if there is only one or none, you are not alone. Spend a few minutes praying for those you do list.

Lord Jesus,

In today's scripture, you gave the command to love one another. There, it seems like you basically said that loving relationships is how people will know we are your disciples. That's really saying something, Lord. Relationships are VERY important. But as I think about what I've recently learned about the busyness of my life (and Mike's life!), I'm wondering how it can be possible for me to give enough attention to my relationships with others...while juggling my responsibilities. I'm still learning to make more space for you, Jesus! But I give all of this wondering to you. I lay my questions and concerns at your feet and ask you to help me see what you see. I believe that as you show me what you see, my relationships will become what you want them to become. Amen.



*After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: ...
“My prayer is not for them [the disciples] alone. I pray also for those
who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be
one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in
us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”*

—John 17:20-21

Our American way of life is radically individualistic. One psychologist puts it this way: “Our greater autonomy may lead to increased challenge and excitement, but it also leads to greater isolation from others, more threats to our bodies and minds, and thus higher levels of free-floating anxiety.”

To live in the unity for which Jesus prayed radically opposes the status quo of individualism. Our radical individualism can cause us to use others. I can use my family and friends to promote my career goals. I can use relationships at the church to facilitate my selfish desires. Radical individualism promotes contractual relationships, whereby I relate as long as the other person is beneficial to my personal goals.

What impact do contractual relationships have upon friendships?

By contrast, God empowers people to live in covenant relationships. To covenant is to offer ourselves to another for the well-being of that person. When God made a covenant with the people of Israel, he committed his life to them even if they rejected him. He did not set up a contract which would allow him a way out if they did not keep up their end of the deal. Instead, he committed to them no matter how they responded to him.

As we covenant with one another, we are learning to be like our God who

lives in covenant with us. This is the reason we call our small groups Covenant Groups. While there is no expectation that the relationships formed in these groups will exist permanently—that would put undue pressure upon the groups—Covenant Groups provide a place where we can experiment with moving out of radical individualism and contractual relationships. We covenant with God and one another to relate through the ups and downs, allowing God to shape us through those relationships.

If you are a part of a Covenant Group, how has that experience reshaped how you relate to others?

If you are not part of a Covenant Group, how might the relationships found with a group like that reshape your life?

Do you currently have a set of relationships with whom you can enter into a covenant and meet as a Covenant Group?

In covenant relationships, we will find people who can speak into our lives and help us think through our Life Pattern Diagrams. We might be able to set priorities for how we want to order our lives, but we will be much more effective in this reordering if we have close friends who are willing to provide honest feedback.

If you were to redraw your Life Pattern Diagram, it might look something like this: *(see next page)*



If you are not currently connected to a Covenant Group, feel free to check out the open groups at the Community kiosk or on line at <www.whchurch.org>. If you are not ready to join a group, consider connecting to others in different ways: volunteer for a ministry team, attend a mid-size group gathering (Focus Fusion, Life Challenge, Breakaway for Women). If you are not ready for this, at least find a few people in your life with whom you can share some of what God is saying to you.



REPETITION OF CONTACT

When Jesus came into Peter's house, he saw Peter's mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever. He touched her hand and the fever left her, and she got up and began to wait on him.

—Matthew 8:14-15

Within the worldview of Mike's Life Pattern Diagram, church and even Covenant Groups are viewed as meetings. However, love cannot be confined to a meeting. Meetings can help facilitate love, but to truly know someone we have to relate to them in many different aspects of life. If we only relate to others within a religious meeting, then we probably don't know them very well.

For instance, if I really want to get to know a co-worker, I need to relate to them outside of the office. Recently, my team shared dinner at someone's house. I learned about how others relate in social settings. I saw how they interacted with their spouses. I saw how they lived life in a more full way.

Jesus related to the disciples in life: over the dinner table, at parties, in their homes, in religious settings, at their work. Creating an atmosphere of love—something that promotes a beautiful life—requires repetition of contact. This kind of contact cannot always be planned. This is illustrated by the scripture quoted above. Some of the best connections occur in the random unplanned interactions that happen at a store, while passing one another on the street, or through short phone calls just to say “Hi.”

While some of the best parts of life cannot be planned, repetition of contact does not come naturally to most people. Chaotic life undermines repetition of contact. We will have to make room for repetition of contact. In order to do this, we must be realistic. We cannot have repetitive relationships with everyone you know. In fact, Jesus set a realistic model when he related to 12 others in this way. Second, it is helpful when those in this

circle live in close proximity to you. The further they live from us the more we will have to plan our relationships. This is the reason we encourage Covenant Groups to be organized geographically.

Who are the people in your life with whom you would like to connect repeatedly? (These should be friends, not famous people or leaders with whom you have a distant connection.)

How might you facilitate more frequent connections?



OVERLAPPING CIRCLES

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.?

Hebrews 10:24-25

Randy Frazee, one of the pastors at Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago, prescribes a medicine to address the chaotic ugliness that undermines our lives:

What the busy modern-day person needs in order to bring a deep sense of belonging to his or her life is a circle of relationships—a collection of people of all ages and stages who daily flow in and out of each other's lives. One of the secrets behind the success of this model of community is that people not only know you but each other as well. It is an extended family of spiritual aunts, uncles, grandparents, nieces, and nephews who are committed to living out their faith in a simple, radical and intentional way. This circle of friendships can also include those who don't live by faith in God but still share in the daily life experiences of a person. Together they share in the mundane exchanges of life: taking out the trash, checking each other's mail when the other is out of town, sharing the rental fee on a rototiller, playing a game of kickball in the street, watching a classic movie together—the list goes on.

This kind of group serves as a primary center of relationships that can help deconstruct the chaos created by crowded loneliness. Instead of being spread thinly in many circles, one circle gets more attention, which is both intentional and random in nature.

Because this group serves as a spiritual family, the circles that we have in our lives begin to overlap with one another. Instead of doing a hobby alone,

we do them with a close friend. We find ourselves shopping together. We invite a friend to go with us to watch our daughter's basketball game. When we have such a group, life becomes fun; God works through it to turn ashes into beauty. We begin to taste how life was meant to be lived.

The vision of Woodland Hills Church is that our Covenant Groups would serve as a conduit for such a life. They are only a conduit because the group meeting can only act as an initiator for connecting people. After that, we must choose how we will connect. Will we go beyond the meeting and re-shape our life in community? Personally, I have found an inverse relationship between chaos and community. The more I connect with others in a primary group, the less chaos I experience. You and I have to make choices in order to eliminate the chaos, but as we do so our lives change and the beauty manifests.

What hinders you from connecting with others in a spiritual family?

If you are a member of a Covenant Group, how might you connect with others outside the meetings? (Don't wait upon your leader. He or she cannot do everything.)

If you do not participate in a Covenant Group, how might you connect with people who live near you to facilitate connections in your neighborhood?



Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

—Matthew 19:14

When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

—Mark 2:16

I have watched movies that depict Jesus as a somber religious man who was serious and heavy from the burden of being God. I could not relate to the Jesus depicted in these films. However, the stories of the Bible reveal Jesus to be one to whom children flocked and with whom sinners shared company. I have found that there are two types of people who don't like being around overly intense, serious religious people: children and the un-religious.

In addition, we have record that Jesus loved eating with people. Meals in the first century were times of extended conversation and casual connection. We know of two parties that he attended, and at one of them he extended the party by providing more wine, his first miracle.

If there is any group of people on earth that should be free to be playful, it is Christians. We have hope that God is at work in this world. He has redeemed us and set us free. Play should be part of our lives and part of our fellowship with one another. By this I mean that Christians should have the freedom to be light-hearted, full of joy and relaxed. When people get serious about their faith they often become too seriously minded. To be serious about our faith should free us to be free to enjoy God and one another.

Do you see play and leisure as a part of your walk with Jesus?

How can being consumed with spiritual intensity steal beauty from your life?

One way to promote this kind of playfulness in our lives is to eat with others. Sharing a meal with a few friends promotes life and beauty. Something happens when we eat together. Food in the hand frees people to share about their lives. It can also lead to other activities, like playing board games, watching a movie, or going for a walk.

What friend or family can you invite to a meal within the next couple of weeks? Hint for success: Keep the meal simple. Just involve whomever you invite into your normal eating routine. If you make it more complicated you will be less likely to do it again.

Father God,

Who'd have thought that your beautiful Kingdom was so practical! Your Son brought your Kingdom through his example and teaching. And this week, I've really gotten some practical ideas concerning Jesus's teachings that can help to bring me into a more healthy sense of community. Lord, call to my mind people in my neighborhood with whom I can share a meal or invite to my home. Father, I pray that you will send your Holy Spirit to help me, as I continue to live this community thing out. Amen.



SOMETHING TO OFFER

We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

—Romans 12:6-8

If we have Christ living within us, if we belong to the body of Christ, if the Spirit is alive within us, then we have something to offer others. No child of God can use the excuse that he or she has nothing that will be of benefit to others. To make that claim is more of a statement about God than it is about us. It is to say that God cannot move through us to bless others.

Paul says that each person has been given a gift (also see 1 Cor 12:12). Some people have very recognizable and public gifts: speaking, leading, teaching, etc. Most people don't possess gifts that the masses will see. However, this does not make some gifts more important than others. If you are an encourager, most likely your encouragement will happen in small groups or in one-on-one settings. The offering of mercy is often invisible to others, except to the one receiving mercy.

The gifts mentioned in Romans 12 are not meant to be an exhaustive list of the various ways God works through people. Paul simply listed a few samples to illustrate a point. He was trying to convey the importance of allowing the Spirit of God to work through us in whatever way fits how God made us.

The body of Christ needs all kinds of people offering their gifts. Every time someone withholds a gift, they are withholding a blessing from someone else. We have something to offer others, whether we are brand new Christians or longer-standing Christians with areas of struggle in our lives. God lives within us and the Spirit of God can move through us in spite of our weaknesses.

How do you respond to the statement: "You have something to offer?"

- a) I believe it because I have experienced this reality.
- b) I believe it as a fact, but I have yet to experience it.
- c) It sounds good, but I am not confident enough to be used of God.
- d) I don't feel that I have something to offer because I have failed to much in the past.
- e) I struggle with this statement because people have told me just the opposite.
- f) Other: _____

Write down a time when God used you to bless someone else or God used someone else to bless you.

What hinders you from offering yourself to be used by God?

God,

I am hearing that you have placed gifts inside of me that you want to see displayed in the world. I am also hearing that you've done this for every person who has Christ living in them. Hey, that's a lot of gifts! There are times I don't even see the gifts within myself...let alone seeing gifts within other people. I ask that you grant me the ability to clearly see what you want to show me through this week's teachings. I want to see myself as a part of Christ's body. I want to see OTHERS as a helping part of Christ's body as well. Give me the eyes of faith to see what you've seen in us all along. Amen.



*For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid,
but gives us power, love and self-discipline.*

-2 Timothy 1:7

Fear paralyzes. It freezes us from giving what we have to offer. Worry or concern stymies the work of the Spirit of God who desires only to move through us to bless others.

We experience many types of fears:

- Fear of failure
- Fear of rejection
- Fear of being wrong
- Fear of getting attention
- Fear of being corrected
- Fear of responsibility
- Fear of success (sounds unusual, but some fear this)
- Fear of self-sacrifice
- Fear of commitment

Whatever the type, the impact is the same. It blocks what you have to offer others.

Check any of the above that you encounter when you sense God asking you to do something. Write any additional ones below:

Describe a time when you felt like you wanted to bless another person but fear stopped you.

When we prayed that Jesus would be our Lord, he sent the Holy Spirit to live within us. The Holy Spirit is God among us and within us. He is God up-close and personal. The more we become in tune with the Spirit of God, the more he drives out this fear and overcomes it with power, love, and self-discipline.

When we are full of God's power, we will risk rejection of others because we are compelled within to offer our gifts to others. Every offering of love comes with a risk of rejection. However, God's power fills us with love so that the desire to bless them overcomes the risk so that we can radically offer ourselves to others.

Write out a prayer that expresses your desire for God to drive out fear and fill you with power, love and self-discipline.



Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If you speak, you should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If you serve, you should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

-1 Peter 4:10-11

An old saying goes, "The enemy of the best is often the good." Many times, the biggest hindrance to God moving through an individual is not a laundry list of bad things he or she is doing. Instead, the hindrance is a list of good things he or she is doing. If you were to analyze each of the activities individually, no one would have a problem with them, but when you put them together, then you realize that only a superhero could keep up.

The pattern of this world trains us to fill our lives with good activities. If someone asks us to volunteer for something, we say "yes" because saying "no" would make us feel guilty. Why say "no" to something that is good? Why not do something if there is an opening in the schedule?

Why is it so hard to say "no" to good things?

God has more for us than good things. He has God things in which he wants us to invest. He has gifted us in unique ways, giving us beautiful gifts which will bless others and advance the kingdom of God.

What types of opportunities to serve others get you excited?

If you had no fear of failure, and limitless time and resources what are the kinds of things you would hope to do?

God things will stir our hearts and inner beings because they fit how God made us. We often do "good" things out of a sense of obligation or because others are doing them. Look inside your heart and allow the Spirit to reveal how you are made. When you invest your time there, you will find that your life manifests more beauty and you may just have more fun.



Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ.

-1 Corinthians 12:12

I am administratively inhibited. A few years ago, I was leading a small group. I thought that leading meant that I had to organize everything. I took on the responsibility of organizing parties and even going to the grocery store to purchase snacks. After a mediocre social experience, one of the group members asked me, “Why didn’t you ask me to help?” I thought that serving others meant that I had to do what I don’t like doing. It never dawned on me that other people like organizing parties.

Doing things that are hard for me take at least five times as long as doing something that is easy for me. Now, I still have to do activities that I find quite unnatural, but I am in awe of how quickly others can do something that can eat up an entire day or evening for me.

If we are a finger in the body of Christ, it is easy for us to be a finger. If we try to do the job of the neck, it will be a lot more work. This is the cool thing about God’s grace. He wants to set us free to be who we are. We don’t have to become somebody else in order for the Spirit of God to move through us.

Read and reflect on 1 Corinthians 12:12-30

What stands out to you from this passage?

How does being who you are in the body of Christ benefit the entire body?

A common myth is that the way to improve ourselves is to work on developing the areas where we are weak. The problem with this is that it keeps us from doing what we are good at. It does not matter how hard I work on my administrative skills, I will only improve them marginally. And it will keep me from investing time in those things that will most benefit others.

How does investing time in doing things that are not your strengths consume your energy and time?



GETTING STARTED

Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade."

—Mark 4:30-32

The kingdom of God is much more than the big ministry activities that everyone sees. In fact, the kingdom of God is best described as being made up of many different mustard seed actions, small unseen contributions. When each of the body parts contribute what they have to offer—when analyzed alone does not seem very significant—they have life changing impact upon individuals and situations.

In addition, when we offer ourselves and what you are good at consistently, you are planting that small offering and who knows how big God might grow it.

One way to get started is just to offer ourselves, no matter how small. In fact, the best way to start is small. Don't start off thinking that you have to lead a mission trip to a foreign country. You could start praying for a co-worker, or mow your neighbor's yard, or invite a hurting friend to dinner.

Just allow the Lord to use who you are in the way that he designed you.

What is one mustard seed action you can take this next week for the kingdom? Offer that up to the Lord and ask for his direction.

Jesus,

It is so interesting to find out the freedom and power involved in just realizing that I have something to offer to you and your people. There have been times in my life where I've not felt so empowered. I give you thanks for showing me that I matter on such a deep level. As I try to walk this out, I pray that you would be there to pick me up when I stumble. I also pray that you would help me to be a person who encourages others to share their gifts. Take my life in your hands and use it to build your kingdom! Amen.

(Consider attending our next *Discover Your Gifts* class to further define the unique gifts and abilities God had in mind when he created you.)



CALLED INTO DESTINY

The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.

—Genesis 12:1-4

Abraham was a good man who was living a good life. Then God called him into a destiny. Little did Abraham know that following God's call would lead him to be a man of faith who would live in a way that was radically different from the world around him.

Now, our destinies most likely will not involve uprooting our families and moving to a new country, but there is a calling on our lives. God has called us to advance the kingdom in ways that only we can do. And this calling will lead us into fulfilling a destiny, where we do something that has the potential to change the world in which we live. Some people will do this through their work in a business or as a high school teacher. Some people will fulfill this calling through missionary or pastoral work. Some will serve as a Covenant Group leader or as a volunteer in Kid's Station.

When we begin to realize this destiny, all other good things pale in comparison. We don't want to waste your efforts on things that don't fit our callings. We become focused. Our time is not wasted with confusion about what we should or should not do. Clarity sets in and we know what we are called to do and what we are not called to do.

Write out a short prayer asking God to clarify his calling on your life.

If you know your calling, take a good look at your daily and weekly behavior. In what ways do your behaviors line up with your calling?

You might be a person who is just beginning on the journey toward understanding this calling. Don't let where you are on the journey become stressful. The key is not your location but your openness to listening to God's leading. Here is a prayer that you can offer to the Lord:

God,

It's breathtaking when I hear stories about people like Abraham who were actually called by God to do something special. It's almost too good to be true. But as I understand that you've called ME to do something special for your Kingdom too...I'm almost overwhelmed. I've learned how I have giftings, and that's great. But I'm really going to need your leading here to help me discern some aspects of your calling for me. I commit to being open and really hearing your voice. I realize that I cannot do this without you. Please continue allowing your Holy Spirit to work with me to grow me in this area. Amen.



Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. . . . By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

—Hebrews 11:1,8-11

Abraham is known as the father of the faithful (Galatians 3:7). In order to do what God called him to do, he had to have faith that God would fulfill what God promised. Any time God invites us on a journey, it will require that we have faith that God is able and will keep what he has promised to do.

Stepping out in faith involves two parts. We see this in the story of Abraham. First, he had to leave something behind in order to receive God's promises. He could not continue in his current activity yet still embrace the new ways of God. Over the last few weeks, we have been highlighting the importance of leaving behind the world's patterns of busyness, over-commitment, and unnecessary complexity. We have been seeking to understand how these patterns work against the beautiful life and create ugliness.

The second part of faith is the willingness to step out into the unknown. What does the passage from Hebrews 11 say about Abraham's willingness to step into the unknown?

Embracing a less complex way of life requires faith. For some, it might mean downsizing material possessions. For others, it might mean refusing a promotion because of the additional time requirements of the new job. For others, it might mean focusing upon a singular passion rather than volunteering for a bunch of different ministries.

When you step out, know that God is faithful to fulfill what he has promised. We are heirs of God's blessings. God takes care of his children. At first, the steps you take to simplify your life will feel abnormal and even risky. You will feel that you are going against the status quo; that's okay to feel because that's what you are doing. But know that God is excited about your simple steps of faith and he is pleased with your search for beauty.



Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

Philippians 2:3-4

Some have said that it takes 21 days of intentional repetition of a new activity to create a new habit. Hopefully, you have been reading the daily devotionals and that they have helped you establish a new habit of spending time with God.

In order to walk out the beautiful life of the kingdom on a consistent basis we need more than a new habit. We cannot successfully do kingdom beauty in isolation. We might experience some snippets of this beauty, but we won't enter into our destinies without the help of others in the body of Christ.

Why is the community of Christ important to your growth on the journey of beauty?

In order to discover your calling and destiny, we need the feedback of people who know us. It is not enough to pray and hear God by ourselves—even though that is crucial. One of the best ways to discover how God has made us is to ask feedback from those around us.

In addition, we need people who will hold us accountable to our commitments. This means that they care enough to challenge us when we get too busy at work and ignore our friends or family. They know us well enough not only to affirm our callings but also to support us as we move into them.

If there is one thing I have learned thus far in my journey with God it is that beautiful living is impossible as an isolated individual. Right relatedness with other people is intrinsic to the beautiful life. The people around us are not there just to help us live beautiful Christian lives as an individual. The way we develop beauty is by relating to them, and somehow the Spirit of God gets involved and we change. No, we all change together.

The Spirit of God moves through us with his God-love for one another. We learn to share life together as we consider others more important than ourselves. We find beauty as we invest in others' beauty. This truth is counter-intuitive, but it is the foundational truth of the kingdom. Jesus, the most beautiful person who ever lived, displayed his beauty as he loved others enough to share life with them.

Such a venture is risky. Others will hurt us. Some will reject us. Sometimes, small groups will prove disappointing. However, beauty, God's kind of beauty, is developed within us through these less than ideal circumstances. This was true of Jesus.

Take a few minutes and reflect on John 13:1-17. What do you sense the Spirit is saying to you through these verses?



... being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

–Philippians 1:8

Some things we can change quickly. If we want a new car, any dealership in town can set it up in just a few hours. People change careers without much notice. With modern medicine, we can even change the way we look within a few months.

However, God is not interested in external or cosmetic change. God invests in a much deeper kind of beauty. God's kingdom works from the inside out, and that kind of stuff does not always change quickly.

In the movie *What About Bob*, Bill Murray plays Bob, a psychiatric patient. He learns from his psychiatrist the importance of baby steps. The journey with God is not about monumental leaps that occur on occasion. It is about lots of baby steps strung together over a lifetime. While there will be a few significant moments that we will remember, the vast majority of walking with Jesus is found in the normal little things of life.

List some of the baby steps that you have taken over the last six weeks of this study.

What visible change have these baby steps had upon your life?

God is faithful to complete what he started. The journey of beauty will extend far beyond this six-week study. Most likely, God has started something new in you and he will bring that into completion.

What would you like to see God do next in your life to bring more kingdom beauty?



CONTINUING THE JOURNEY

*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race,
I have kept the faith.*

—2 Timothy 4:7

Paul wrote the scripture above late in his life. This is the last letter we have from Paul. He was imprisoned in Rome, and most historians believe that he died there. In this letter, he was encouraging his protégé, Timothy, to be faithful in following God into his calling. Paul says that this is exactly what he tried to do, and now at the end of his life he can look back and say that he had faithfully pressed on.

The journey into the beautiful life is not a 100-meter dash. We won't get there quickly. In fact, only when we enter into the heavenly presence of Jesus will we enter into complete beauty. But during this life, we are on a cross-country jog toward kingdom beauty. We are on a long-term journey that will progressively transform us into a beautiful bride that is prepared for the return of the bridegroom, which is Christ.

What do you think it will feel like to be able to quote the scripture above when you are an old man or woman?

How would it feel for others to say this about you?

The Bible refers to the church as the bride of Christ. In the first century, a groom would be betrothed to his bride. This was an official act that was

quite different than our engagement. A betrothal was almost equivalent to marriage in every way except that the couple did not live together. For about a year during the betrothal period, the bride would prepare herself for her bridegroom's return. While waiting for the marriage ceremony, the groom was preparing their home and organizing the finances. When the groom's father thought his son was ready, he would send him to his bride, without notice.

The church is waiting for its groom. Christ is coming for his beautiful, kingdom-focused bride. The question for us is whether or not we are going to cooperate with God as he prepares the bride for the group, continually advancing in kingdom beauty.

Father, Son, Holy Spirit,

Thank you for leading me and my church on this journey toward beauty. I've learned a lot, but I know that I still have a long way to go. I am so grateful for how you have been with me so far on this transformation process. You've seen my struggles, my pain, and my mistakes...but you've also reminded me of your love for me and encouraged me to keep going forward. And that's exactly what I'm going to do! With your help, I want to continue making changes in my life that will benefit your kingdom. I know as a result of your work that my life will not be the same. And I thank you so much for that! May your name be praised forever! Amen.