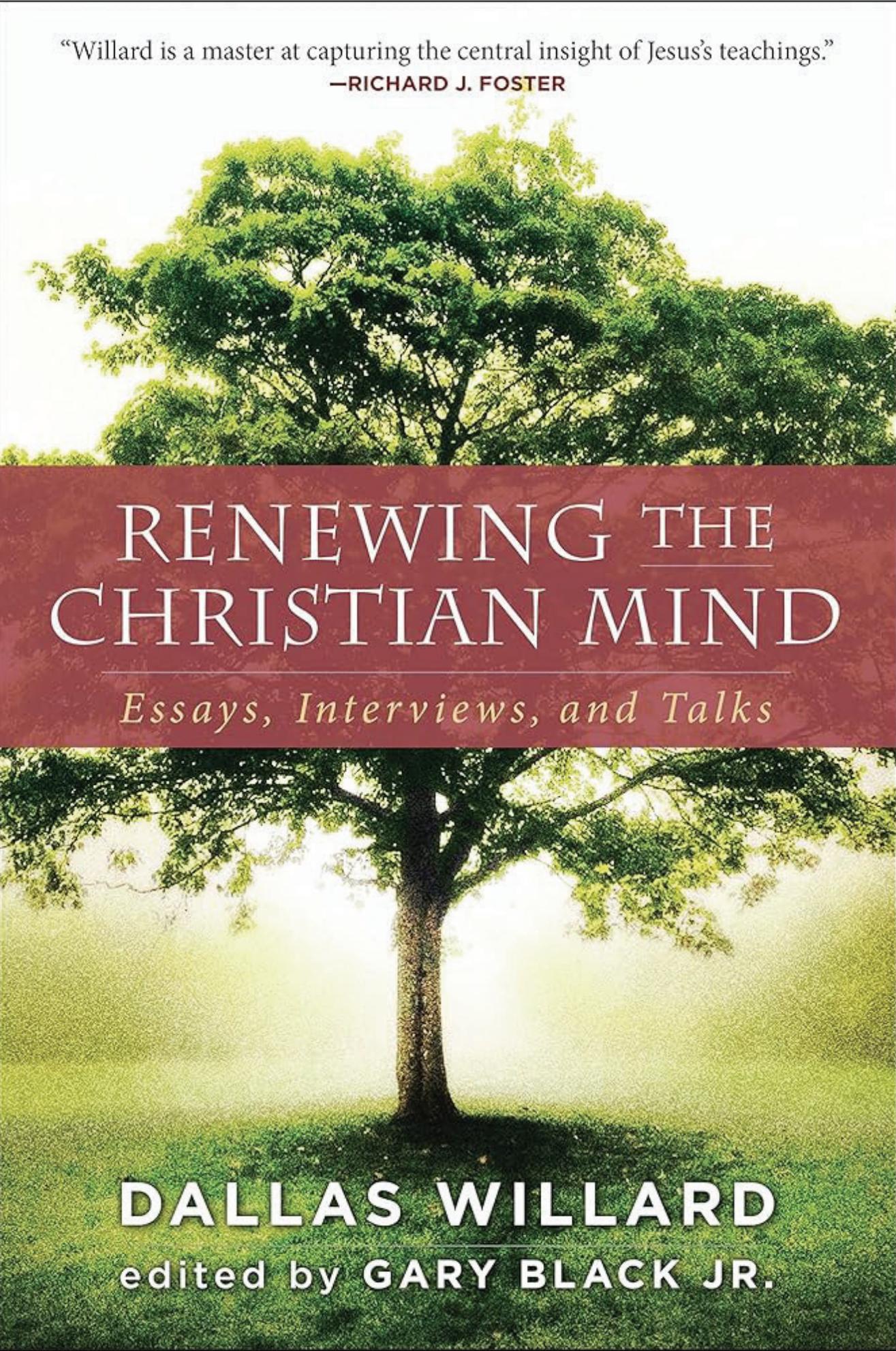


“Willard is a master at capturing the central insight of Jesus’s teachings.”

—RICHARD J. FOSTER



RENEWING THE  
CHRISTIAN MIND

*Essays, Interviews, and Talks*

**DALLAS WILLARD**

edited by **GARY BLACK JR.**

## THE NEW TESTAMENT PICTURE OF DISCIPLESHIP

Evangelicalism always looks to the Bible as the point of reference from which concepts are defined, practices legitimated, and principles adopted. So we must ask what can be made of discipleship and of the disciple of Jesus as seen in the life of the New Testament. Indeed, as it turns out, the New Testament "disciple" is by no means a peculiarly "Christian" innovation.<sup>10</sup> The disciple is one aspect of the progressive and massive decentralization of Judaism that began with the destruction of the first Temple (588 BC) and the Babylonian exile, and proceeds through the dispersal of the Jewish people among the nations that followed the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. During this period the synagogue emerges as the center of the local

Jewish communities, devotion to the Torah becomes the focus of the synagogue, and the rabbi or “great one” stood forth in the role of interpreter of Torah: “By degrees, attachment to the law sank deeper and deeper into the national character. . . . Hence the law became a deep and intricate study. Certain men rose to acknowledged eminence for their ingenuity in explaining, their readiness in applying, their facility in quoting, and their clearness in offering solutions of the difficult passages of the written statutes.”<sup>11</sup> The rabbi with his coterie of special students was a familiar feature of Jewish religious practice by the time of Jesus.

There was no one way in which to become a rabbi in the Jewish society of Jesus’s day. It is true that most of those who became rabbis did so by studying under a rabbi, and having a “formal” training had some obvious advantages. But there was no “licensing” process, and an element of the Old Testament prophet carried over to the role of rabbi. A rabbi could, like the prophet, be “from nowhere.” His was a performance-based status, and public recognition as a rabbi was a response to the power of the individual’s words and deeds, not to their “credentials.” The usual path of advancement seems to have been through the schools for young people around the synagogue. Some students did very well, memorizing huge portions of scripture and listening to interpretations by teachers. Then, if they wished, they might approach a rabbi, requesting him to take them as their disciple. If accepted, there would follow a lengthy period of close association with their rabbi—hearing, observing, and imitating. They were simply with their rabbi, serving him and becoming like him in thought, character, and abilities. Jesus’s observation that “a disciple does not rise above his teacher; but everyone after he has been fully trained will reach his teacher’s level” (Luke 6:40) was both a commonplace observation about the nature of the rabbi/disciple relation and—as the context makes clear—a warning about the limitations and dangers of that arrangement. (“Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit?” [Luke 6:39].)

## JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES

However, Jesus did not simply fit himself into the more or less standard model of the rabbi. He had no "formal" education beyond the synagogue schools and did not become a disciple of a rabbi. He did receive a (very unorthodox) stamp of approval from John the Baptist, but not as his disciple. He was known to the people around him as uneducated. Amazed at the depth and power of his words, they exclaimed: "How does this man have such learning, when he has never been taught?" (John 7:15). Also, Jesus did not accept disciples upon application, testing them to see if they were "worthy." He personally selected—though not from "the best and the brightest" in his community—those he would especially train. There was a larger outer circle of people who seem to have just showed up in his presence and received training of various degrees (the "other seventy" of Luke 10:1, for example, and the group in the "upper room" of Acts 1:13). Often would-be disciples were subjected to severe discouragement by him (Matt. 8:18–22; Luke 9:57–62; 14:26–33). He also leveled scalding criticisms at the proud practitioners of the law in his day (Matt. 23:13–33; Luke 11:39–52) and prohibited his followers from being called "rabbi" and using other "respectful greetings" exchanged among those who took themselves to be highly qualified as teachers (Matt. 23:1–12). He was not "one of the boys," nor were his disciples to be.

Nevertheless, the basic nature of the rabbi/disciple relationship of his day was retained by Jesus and his disciples and, arguably, remains normative to this day. That relationship is very simple in description. His disciples were with him, learning to be like him. "With him" meant in that day that they were literally where he was and were progressively engaged in doing what he was doing. Jesus moved about the Jewish villages and towns, primarily around the Sea of Galilee, with occasional forays beyond that and especially to Jerusalem. His main disciples ("apostles") were with him in all of this, and no doubt at considerable hardship to themselves and their families. Peter on one occasion plaintively remarks: "We have left everything to follow

you” (Matt. 19:27). It was no doubt a thought that often occurred to his disciples.

As they traveled about he did three things in the synagogues, homes, and public areas: he announced the availability of life in the kingdom of God, he taught about how things were done in the kingdom of God, and he manifested the present power of the kingdom by amazing deeds (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; Luke 4:18–44). Then, after a period of training, he set his disciples to doing the things they had heard and seen in him—continuing all the while to evaluate their work and to teach them as they progressed. This continued through his trial and death, and during his post-resurrection presence with them when he trained them in how he would be with them after his ascension, without visible presence. His instruction as he left was for his disciples to make disciples of all “nations”—of all types of people—and his promise was that he would be with them always until the end of the age (Matt. 28:19–20).

### **THE METHOD OF “BEING WITH” PASSED ON THROUGH DISCIPLES**

While the charge was to make disciples of Jesus and not of the disciples, the basic method—teaching, example, and imitation—remained the same as his immediate followers proceeded to do what he had told them to do. The method was to gather a group of people by telling the story of Jesus, featuring his resurrection and pending return; to show by example what it meant to live with him now, already beyond death; and to lead others into such a life of being “with Jesus, learning to be like him.” No New Testament text better fills out what this life of learning was than Colossians 3:1–17.

The role of example and imitation in the learning community of disciples is often stressed in the New Testament. Numerous statements from the apostle Paul concisely state the strategy of being and making disciples. In one of his earliest letters to groups of disciples he reminds the readers of how “our gospel [proclamation] did not come

to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all believers in Macedonia and in Achaia" (1 Thess. 1:5–7, NASB).

Paul proceeds in this letter to spell out how he and his fellow workers lived "pure, upright, and blameless" in their conduct toward the believers, and to encourage them to "lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory" (2:10–12). In 1 Corinthians he exhorts the believers to imitate him, to be "reminded of my ways which are in Christ" (4:16–17), and to "be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ" (11:1). In 2 Thessalonians he indicates that the readers "know how you ought to imitate us." He reminds them of how he led a disciplined life and worked hard to support himself, "not because we do not have that right [to support from them], but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you that you might imitate us" (3:7–9). To the Philippians he said: "Keep on doing the things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you" (4:9). He elsewhere reminds Timothy that he had "observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and suffering the things that happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra" (2 Tim. 3:10–11). And in an earlier letter he directed him to "show himself an example to those who believe" (1 Tim. 4:12). The writer of the letter to the Hebrews counsels his readers not to be sluggish, "but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (6:12). They should "remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith" (13:7). As it was for "your leaders," the writer assures them, it will also be for you, and that is because "Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday and today and forever" (vv. 8–9). The point of this much misapplied verse is, as the context makes clear, that the nature of discipleship to Jesus and its outcomes does not change.

## TRANSFORMATION THROUGH THIS KIND OF DISCIPLESHIP

Now, this practice of discipleship in the communities of Christ followers—being with Christ, learning to be like him, in part by being with those who are further along on that same path—is what lends realism and hope to the glowing pictures of his people that stand out from the pages of the New Testament. Such passages as Matthew 5–7, John 14–17, Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 13, Ephesians 4–5, and Colossians 3 readily come to mind. These are not just passages stating required behaviors, as laws might do—“Turn the other cheek” and so forth—not a new and sterner legalism. Rather, as expressing what lies “beyond the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees” (Matt. 5:20), they are indications of what life becomes for those who are devoted disciples of Jesus Christ within the fellowship of disciples and under the administration of the word and of the Holy Spirit. A life of this quality is the “output” of disciples of Jesus who make disciples wherever they go, gather them in Trinitarian reality, and teach them in such a way that they come to do all that Jesus told us to do out of transformed personalities. What is now generally regarded as “normal Christianity” drops away with the “cleaning of the inside of the cup” (Matt. 23:25–26). Discipleship is the status or position within which spiritual (trans)formation occurs.

As we have noted, post-WWII Evangelicalism does not naturally conduct its converts and adherents into a life of discipleship, nor into pervasive Christlikeness of character—with the routine, easy obedience that it entails. What this most recent version of Evangelicalism lacks is a theology of discipleship. Specifically, it lacks a clear teaching on how what happens at conversion continues on without break into an ever fuller life in the kingdom of God. How, to cite Paul’s language, does “the grace of God that brings salvation” discipline us, train us, in such a way that we turn from “ungodliness and worldly lust” to live lives that are “sensible, righteous, and godly in the present world” (Titus 2:11–14; cf. Phil. 2:12–15)? How is it, exactly,

that he who gave himself for us also “redeems us from all iniquity and purifies for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds” (v. 14; cf. Eph. 2:10)? To such questions contemporary Evangelicalism has no answer. Its doctrine of grace and salvation prevents it from developing an understanding of discipleship that makes discipleship (“being with Jesus, learning to be like him”) a natural part of salvation. The basic genius of Evangelicalism as such, however, is never content to leave the matter there.

# Discipleship How-To

The following piece identifies what Dallas believed were the essential qualities of a disciple of Jesus. He argues that intentional discipleship is a necessary predicate to living a Christlike life in our workplace, and here he uses the New Testament Gospels as a foundation for learning this practice.

Adapted excerpt first published in 1998 as "How to Be a Disciple" in *The Christian Century* from chapter eight of *The Divine Conspiracy*

BEING A DISCIPLE OR APPRENTICE OF JESUS IS A DEFINITE AND OBVIOUS kind of thing. To make a mystery of it is to misunderstand it. There is no good reason why people should ever be in doubt as to whether they themselves are his students or not. And the evidence will always be quite clear as to whether any other individual is his student, though we may be in no position to collect that evidence and rarely would have any legitimate occasion to gather or use it.

Now, this may seem very startling, even shocking, to many in our religious culture, where there is a long tradition of doubting, or possibly even of being unable to tell, whether or not one is a Christian. The underlying issue in some traditions has been whether or not one was going to "make the final cut." And that has, in turn, often been thought a matter of whether God has "chosen you" and you are therefore "among the elect." Or else it is a matter of whether or not you have sinned too much, or are good enough. Needless to say,

those would be difficult questions to answer with much assurance—perhaps impossible to answer at all, because we are in no position to inspect the accounting books of heaven.

It would take us far out of our path to enter into those hoary controversies. But fortunately there is no need. It is almost universally conceded today that you can be a Christian without being a disciple. Further, we can be assured that anyone who actually is an apprentice and co-laborer with Jesus in his or her daily existence is sure to be a “Christian” in every sense of the word that matters. The very term *Christian* was explicitly introduced in the New Testament where, by the way, it is used only three times to apply to disciples when they could no longer be called Jews, because many kinds of Gentiles were now part of them.

Now, people who are asked whether they are apprentices of a leading politician, musician, lawyer, or screenwriter would not need to think a second to respond, as would also be the case for those who are studying Spanish or a trade such as bricklaying. Formal apprenticeships are hardly something that would escape attention. The same is all the more true if asked about discipleship to Jesus.

But if we were to inquire as to whether one is a *good* apprentice of whatever person or line of work is concerned, they very well might hesitate. They also might say no. Or, yes with the qualification that they could be a better student. And all of this falls squarely within the category of being a disciple or apprentice. For to be a disciple in any area or relationship is not at all insinuating that one is perfect. One can be a very raw and incompetent beginner and still be a disciple or apprentice.

It is a part of the refreshing realism of the Gospels that we often find Jesus doing nothing less than sternly correcting his disciples. That, however, is very far from rejecting them. It is, in fact, a way of being faithful to them, just as chastisement is God’s way of showing that someone is his child (Heb. 12:7–10). A good “master” takes his apprentices seriously and therefore takes them to task as needed. Therefore, a good working definition of a disciple or apprentice is

simply someone who has decided to be with another person, under appropriate conditions, in order to become capable of doing what that person does or to become what that person is.

How does this apply to discipleship to Jesus? What is it, exactly, that he, the incarnate Lord, does? What, if you wish, is he “good at”? The answer is found in the Gospels: he lives in the kingdom of God, and he applies that kingdom for the good of others and even makes it possible for them to enter it themselves. The deeper theological truths about his person and his work do not detract from this simple point. Discipleship is what he calls us into by saying, “Follow me.”

The description Peter gives in the first “official” presentation of the gospel to the Gentiles provides a sharp picture of the master under whom we serve as apprentices. “You know,” he says to Cornelius, “of Jesus, the one from Nazareth. And you know how God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and power. He went about doing good and curing all those under oppression by the devil, because God was with him” (Acts 10:38).

Likewise, as a disciple of Jesus I am with him, by choice and by grace, learning from him how to live in the kingdom of God. This is the crucial idea. That means I am learning how to live within the range of God’s effective will, with his life flowing through mine. Another important way of putting this is to say that I am learning from Jesus to live my life as he would live my life if he were I. I am not necessarily learning to do everything he did, but I am learning how to do everything I do in like manner to that in which he did all that he did.

My main role in life, for example, is that of a professor in what is called a “research” university. As Jesus’s apprentice, then, I constantly have before me the question of how he would deal with students and colleagues in the specific connections involved in such a role. How would he design a course, and why? How would he compose a test, administer it, and grade it? What would his research projects be, and why? How would he teach this course or that? That my actual life is the focus of my apprenticeship to Jesus is crucial. Knowing

this can help deliver us from the genuine craziness that the current distinction between “full-time Christian service” and “part-time Christian service” imposes on us. For a disciple of Jesus is not necessarily one devoted to doing specifically religious things as that is usually understood.

To repeat, I am learning from Jesus how to lead my life, my whole life, my real life. Please note, I am not learning from him how to lead his life. His life on earth was a transcendently wonderful one. But it has now been led. Neither I nor anyone else, even himself, will ever lead it in that particular manner again. And he is, in any case, interested in my life, that very existence that is me. There lies my need. I need to be able to lead my life as he would lead it if he were I.

So as his disciple I am not necessarily learning how to do special religious things, either as a part of “full-time service” or as a part of “part-time service.” My discipleship to Jesus is, within clearly definable limits, not only a matter of what I do, but of how, why, and from what resources I do it. And this necessarily would cover everything, “religious” or not.

Brother Lawrence, who was a kitchen worker and cook, remarks,

Our sanctification does not depend upon changing our works, but in doing that for God's sake which we commonly do for our own. . . . It is a great delusion to think that the times of prayer ought to differ from other times. We are as strictly obliged to adhere to God by action in the time of action as by prayer in the season of prayer.<sup>1</sup>

It is crucial for our walk in the kingdom to understand that the teachings of Jesus do not by themselves make a life. They were never intended to. Rather, they presuppose a life. But that causes no problem, for of course each one of us is provided a life automatically. We know that our life consists exactly of who we are and what we do. It is precisely this life that God wants us to give to him. We must only be careful to understand its true dignity. To every person we can say

with confidence, “You, in the midst of your actual life right here and now, are exactly the person God wanted.”

The teachings of Jesus in the Gospels show us how to live the life we have been given through the time, place, family, neighbors, talents, and opportunities that are ours. His words left to us in the scripture provide all we need in the way of general teachings about how to conduct our particular affairs. If we only put them into practice, along the lines previously discussed, most of the problems that trouble human life would be eliminated. That is why Jesus directs his teaching in Matthew 5–7 toward things like murder and anger, contempt and lust, family rejection, verbal bullying. This is real life. Though his teachings do not make a life, they intersect at every point with every life.

So, life in the kingdom of God is not just a matter of not doing what is wrong. The apprentices of Jesus are primarily occupied with the positive good that can be done during their days “under the sun” and the positive strengths and virtues that they develop in themselves as they grow toward “the kingdom prepared for them from the foundations of the world” (Matt. 25:34). What they, and God, get out of their lifetime is chiefly the person they become. And that is why their real life is so important.

The cultivation of oneself, one’s family, one’s workplace and community—especially the community of believers—thus becomes the center of focus for the apprentice’s joint life with his or her teacher. It is with this entire context in view that we most richly and accurately speak of “learning from him how to lead my life as he would lead my life if he were I.”

Let us become as specific as possible. Consider just your job, the work you do to make a living. This is one of the clearest ways possible of focusing upon apprenticeship to Jesus. To be a disciple of Jesus is, crucially, to be learning from Jesus how to do your job as Jesus himself would do it. New Testament language for this is to do it “in the name of Jesus.” Once we stop to think about it, we can easily see that not to find our job to be a primary place of discipleship is to

automatically exclude a major part, if not most, of our waking hours from life with him. It is to assume to run one of the largest areas of our interest and concern on our own or under the direction and instruction of people other than Jesus. But this is right where most professing Christians are left today: with the prevailing view that discipleship is a special calling having to do chiefly with religious activities and "full-time Christian service."

Therefore, we must pursue how, exactly, one is to make one's job a primary place of apprenticeship to Jesus. This is not accomplished by becoming the Christian "nag-in-residence," or the rigorous upholder of all propriety, and the deadeye critic of everyone else's behavior. This is abundantly clear from a study of Jesus and of his teachings in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere.

A gentle but firm noncooperation with things that everyone knows to be wrong, together with a sensitive, nonofficial, nonintrusive, nonobsequious service to others, should be our usual overt manner. This should be combined with inward attitudes of constant prayer for whatever kind of activity our workplace requires and genuine love for everyone involved. As circumstances call for them, special points in Jesus's teachings and example, such as nonretaliation, refusal to press for financial advantage, consciousness of and appropriate assistance to those under special hindrances or struggles, and so on would come into play. And we should be watchful and prepared to meet any obvious spiritual need or interest in understanding Jesus with words that are truly loving, thoughtful, and helpful.

I do not believe it is true that we fulfill our obligations to those around us by only living the gospel. There are many ways of speaking inappropriately, of course even harmfully—but it is always true that words fitly spoken are things of beauty and power that bring life and joy. And you cannot assume that people understand what is going on when you only live in their midst as Jesus's person. They may just regard you as one more version of human oddity.