

Week 2: The Choice

Pastor John Ortberg, who wrote *God Is Closer Than You Think*, tells of a relative of his—a young woman and her husband—who bought an older home a few years ago and were fixing it up.

The husband was going through the attic during one of those fix-up days and found an old paper bag. Knowing it wasn't something they had put there—and out of curiosity—he decided to look inside. There was money in the bag. In fact, it turned out to be thousands and thousands of dollars!

They looked at the dates on the bills and they were all from many decades ago—that bag had been up there for ages. There was no way to track who put it there first—if it was a miser's savings or left over from some bank heist.

The husband said, “What are ethics of this—what do we do with it?”

John's relative replied, “Maybe we should call John.”

The husband paused for a moment and said, “No—he's a pastor. He'll tell us we have to give it back.”

Instead, they decided to call a lawyer so they wouldn't get any ethical advice at all! He said they could keep it.

They did end up calling John anyway. He also said that they could keep it ... as long as they tithed ... to a pastor that they were related to.

[PAUSE]

Here's the strange thing ... somebody put a treasure in the attic and then forgot it was there.

Just think about all the other owners between then and now, living in that house for years. Imagine the flood of financial obligations and crises that existed during that time: bills, mortgage payments, taxes, debt. There were, no doubt, some sleepless nights and anxious moments in that house about financial concerns.

And the whole time there was a treasure in the house.

Here's the point:

There was a huge gap between the riches available to those people ... and the reality in which they lived. They never made the effort to go to the attic. They never saw the treasure.

The reality for many people today is that there is a gap between what they are experiencing in their relationship with God and what they know they could be experiencing.

It is as though they are living and walking around in the house knowing that there is treasure in the attic—but it is a treasure that they have rarely, if ever, experienced. They know that there's something more, but haven't been willing to visit the attic.

The choice is theirs, but they haven't *made* the choice to be with God.

Last week we talked about God's desire from the beginning of creation to be *with* us—and all the different ways he has expressed that. But even with all his desire and effort, he still leaves it up to you and me to make the choice to be with him.

And remember, God *is* closer than you think.

Today we're going to talk about *our* choice ... to go to the attic ... to move toward God. And we're going to consider what it means to pursue a relationship with him.

Jesus said anyone who makes his way into the kingdom of God is like a man who finds treasure buried in a field; in his joy he sells everything he owns because this is the one thing he needs.

This guy didn't go out treasure seeking. He wasn't some Indiana Jones or on a hunt for "national treasure" ... it was discovered through the natural course of doing life—of working the fields. And when he invested in the field he got a lot more in return than just a plot of land.

You see, when we make the choice to be *with* God, it doesn't mean that we have to go and sit on a mountain and learn how to chant; or eat one meal a week; or read our Bibles and pray twenty-three hours a day ... we can learn to be with Jesus through every part of every day.

As Christ-followers, as disciples, there's a treasure to be found by being with Jesus and it is worth everything we can invest to spend every day with him. A disciple is someone who seeks concretely to make each day a chance to be with Jesus, to learn from Jesus ...

To become like Jesus.

As we consider what it means to make the choice to be *with* Jesus every day, I'm going to cover four aspects of life which illustrate how interwoven this concept can be in the fabric of our days.

Let's start with ***work***. How do you *work* with Jesus?

Did you know that the single largest block of waking time in most of our lives is spent working? How we work—and the way we approach our work—can actually be a life-or-death decision for us.

This is very significant. There was a survey done which discovered that outside of genetics, the single most important predictor of longevity of life was *work satisfaction*!

[PAUSE]

Now that you know that, are some of you wondering if you're going to die at any moment?!

Since work is such an important part of our lives, I think it's important that we say a bit about what work is from a biblical perspective.

Over the last few centuries, arising from the Industrial Revolution, we've come to equate *work* with having a *job* which in turn yields our *paycheck*.

The result has been that we have sort of distinguished between those who "work" and those who "do not work." In fact, many people—those who are retired, or stay-at-home parents, or the unemployed—are thought of as not working.

Do you remember in school when you were told, "There's no such thing as a stupid question?" Oh yes there is ...

Go ask a mom of young children: "Do you work?" *THAT'S* a stupid question!

We have to reclaim the biblical definition of work because it encompasses far more than our culture has defined. The biblical perspective is that work is the creation of value as I serve God, as I care for his creation, and as I seek to benefit the lives of other people.

Work includes our paid employment. And work also includes doing household chores. It includes study and schoolwork. It includes our volunteer service at church or in the community.

Here's a simple test you can take right now to evaluate whether or not you are functioning with a biblical perspective of work. Ask yourself this question:

"If tomorrow, Jesus were to show up while I'm working, looking just like me, would things go any differently?"

Every day, no matter what work you are doing, equals an opportunity to learn from Jesus how to do your job as he would. Every day we should be working a little bit better than the day before. Some days it's no more than an incremental improvement in our attitude. Other days, it's not robbing our employers of the energy, or focus, or time for which they are paying us.

There's a fundamental statement about work in the Bible which serves as kind of a recalibrating directive that I try to remember in all that I do. Here it is:

"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men. ... It is the Lord Christ you are serving." (Colossians 3:23–24)

Rate yourself on a scale of 1–10, with 1 representing "Whatever I do I do as little as possible when I do it" and 10 representing "I have 'HWJW' on a bracelet, on my screensaver, and on posters around my office and home that remind me: "How Would Jesus Work?" Where are you on the scale?

Here's a true story—I'm not making this up:

A husband was at home on the couch reading the newspaper. His wife, who was eight months pregnant, was in the kitchen—on her hands and knees—waxing the kitchen floor.

His mother-in-law walks in and exclaims: "How can you let my daughter do this?"

He peers over his newspaper and replies, "I tried to help. I told her if she'd tie a rag around her middle, she'd get done twice as fast."

[PAUSE]

No one ever saw him again!

Dallas Willard writes this about work: We "routinely sacrifice our comfort and pleasure for the quality of our work, whether it be ax handles, tacos, or the development of a student we're teaching ... We do the job well because that is what Jesus would like, and we admire and love him. It is what he would do."

Here's a few more questions to ask yourself:

Am I making an idol of my work?

Do I sacrifice time and energy that ought to go to my family, or friendships, or rest, or to prayer?

How do I treat my coworkers?

If I'm in a position of authority, do I treat those who report to me as Jesus would? Am I truthful and fair? Do I work for their growth and development?

Do I regularly ask God for help, wisdom, and guidance in my work?

Am I scrupulously honest in my work? Am I careful with expense reports? Do I reimburse the company for personal use of phone or equipment?

Is my work in line with my sense of how God has gifted and called me? If not, what steps can I take to move in the right direction? How can I continue to serve with diligence in the meantime?

Whatever activity may constitute work, how we choose to do it reflects our choice to be *with* God or to *move away* from God.

It's important to remember that work is one of best learning opportunities most of us have to discover truth about ourselves. It is an intensive environment which God uses to test and shape us to become more like Jesus.

When we receive feedback, or performance reviews, and when there's an honest assessment of our attitudes and habits it can be very significant—*if we're truly open*.

Attitude is huge.

Concerning attitude, *how many of you are defensive?*

Perhaps you are sitting next to someone who is so defensive they won't admit it ... so why don't you just raise *your* hand for them in a spirit of community?!

Teachability in the workplace is a key attitude which honors Christ. Asking for and learning from honest feedback in your work is one of the greatest growth opportunities you'll ever have.

So tomorrow when you go to your work, take a moment before you start and say:

"Here's my chance to learn from Jesus how to live in his kingdom."

Now let's turn the corner and talk about the opposite of work. Another area where we can make the choice to be with Jesus is in our ...

Recreational activities and leisure time

God did not make you to work all the time.

This may come as a shock to some of the "type A's" here, but part of God's will for you is to rest, relax, create, play, and be renewed.

Each moment of free time that you have equals a chance to be with him.

But we need to be intentional, because the default mode with our time often goes toward what one sociologist calls an eight-hundred-pound gorilla of leisure: the television. Time researchers John Robinson and Geoffrey Godbey found that television took almost 40 percent of American's free time in 1995—and that was an increase of a third from thirty years earlier!

Robert Putnam, in his book *Bowling Alone*, writes, "Dependence on television for entertainment is not merely a significant predictor of loss of community; it is the *single most consistent* predictor I have discovered."

Nothing—not low education, not full-time work, not long commutes, not poverty or financial distress—is more broadly connected with loss of community and relational disconnection than is dependence on TV for entertainment.

People who rely on TV for entertainment are least likely to volunteer, least likely to stay in touch with friends, least likely to attend church—and most likely to give another driver the finger.

Television is surely habit forming and may be mildly addictive. In 1977, the *Detroit Free Press* was able to find only five out of one-hundred and twenty families willing to give up TV for a month in return for five-hundred dollars.

People who do give up TV report experiencing boredom, anxiety, irritation, and depression. One woman observed: “It was terrible. We did nothing—my husband and I talked.”

So why are we so hooked on it? Does it produce high levels of joy, growth, and meaning? No.

In fact, in one study, researchers had subjects carry beepers, and when the beeper went off they’d write what they were doing, and how they felt. Here’s what they discovered: TV watching was associated with feelings of passivity and lowered alertness. It was rated below every other leisure activity—even below work!

So why are we devoted to it? In Putnam’s book he quotes British researchers Sue Bowden and Avner Offer who say that: “Television is the cheapest and least demanding way to avert boredom.... TV’s dominance in our lives reflects not its sublime pleasures but its minimal costs.”

So how can you reclaim your recreational and leisure time—and choose to be with Jesus instead of Hollywood?

Limit how much you watch. We have rule in our house about how much the TV can be on—*decide on a limit*.

Limit the number of TVs in your house.

Here's a shocking factoid: In 1970—6 percent of all sixth graders had TVs in their bedrooms. But by 1999—77 percent of sixth graders had their own bedroom TV!

Perhaps you would choose to go for a day/weekend/week of no TV. Take it even further and go on a “media fast.”

As you are reclaiming the time lost to TV, ask yourself: “What are some of the activities that God uses to breathe life into me? What do I engage in that produces gratitude, joy, and renewal?”

Some people love to get out into nature—either riding a motorcycle, hiking, or biking.

Others enjoy cooking—so for them reading cookbooks and creating new dishes is their way of feeling refreshed and renewed.

Maybe your deal is eating—you need to find someone whose deal is cooking and strike up a spiritual friendship!

Tomorrow you'll probably have some free time. Before you pick up the remote control, stop ... and say, “Here's my chance—to be with Jesus, learn how to become like him.”

A third area where we can make the choice to be with Jesus is through our ...

Lifestyle choices

We all make choices about the way we'll spend our time. The way we spend our money. What our pace of life will be. How much debt we'll live in. How many commitments we'll make. How much pressure we'll be under—

These have an enormous impact on whether we're able to get closer to God, or if we are moving farther away.

The apostle Paul basically said: “Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold.” (Romans 12:2)

But what happens is that the world says: “Move faster!”—and so we do!

But when we move faster it cuts us off from prayer. We become more anxious and increasingly angry ... and eventually unable to love.

Media tycoon Robert Maxwell was being picked up at the airport by an employee. But the employee was late picking him up, so Maxwell fired him. The employee was Maxwell’s own son.

It’s not just media tycoons who wrestle with this. If Satan can’t make you defy God outright, he’ll settle for just making you real busy.

John Ortberg tells about a time when he was in Germany for a weekend ministry assignment. It was a full weekend—he flew out from Chicago on a Friday night and arrived Saturday afternoon. Here’s how he describes the weekend:

“I arrived Saturday afternoon and did four talks, a question-and-answer session, a couple of magazine interviews, and a radio broadcast in forty-eight hours. There was still one interview left to go, so we decided to do that in the car on the way to the airport.

“On the autobahn—where there is no speed limit—we didn’t have much time to catch the plane. I looked up—and we were driving 230 kilometers—something *over 140 miles per* hour—and I’m saying into the tape recorder—

“hurry is the great enemy of spiritual life in our day ...

“you must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life ...

“Next to me the German countryside is an absolute blur out the window. The guy from Willow with me was in the front seat and he sat there thinking: *This is how I’m going to die; traveling at the speed of sound in Germany, listening to someone drone on in the backseat about eliminating hurry from my life.*”

So what's the pace of life at which you can live and still be intimately connected to God?
What's the pace of life at which you will be able to effectively love people and live with joy?

Another lifestyle choice has to do with our stuff. Our world says: "Accumulate more."

We live in a consumer culture:

—Holidays, which once existed for rest and worship, are now primarily excuses to shop and consume.

—Malls have replaced churches and town squares as gathering places.

And the rise in consumerism has led to an increase in clutter in our lives. One of the ways that we can choose to be with God is to clear out the clutter so that we are freer to focus on him. Go on a forty-day de-clutter campaign in your home. Clean out your closets and donate excess stuff to charity.

Dr. Paul Pearsall writes, "You may need help with this assignment, because many of my patients cannot seem to bring themselves to get rid of their stuff. You may require a closet exorcist experienced in dealing with the demons of closet clutter. A trusted friend can also prevent the 'restuffing phenomenon.' Restuffing happens when in the process of cleaning out closets and drawers, we somehow are stimulated to acquire more stuff.

"One of my patients said: 'Until I tried to get rid of all my junk I didn't need or use, I didn't realize how much I didn't have. I really had to go out shopping.' This 'stuff logic' can sometimes be blocked by a friend who is better disciplined in simplification.

"Beware of the stuff co-addicts who may see a closet cleaning as a chance to acquire stuff for themselves from your stuff supply. Such friends are likely to go with you on a restuffing expedition or even to trade stuff with you."

Obviously that doesn't mean it's wrong to shop. It's fine to love beauty and enjoy excellence and fine design—those are good things.

The point is, we each need to come to the place where we can say: “I will need God's help to make purchasing decisions wisely.”

Carry that wisdom principle into other areas of life. A job change. Relocation. A new relationship. Any time you make a major life decision, you need to ask the question: “How will this impact my ability to follow Christ—as a worker, dad, friend, husband, and so on.

If you are going to make the choice to be with Jesus through your lifestyle choices, saying yes to Jesus means you are going to have to say no to some other things.

What do you need to say no to?

—Maybe you say no to debt. Perhaps you'll want to take a financial management course at your church. Start to make the move from financial pressure to generosity.

—Maybe you say no to certain time commitments. There could be an activity you or the kids are involved in—and it's not a bad thing in itself, but it's contributing to an overall pace of life for you or your family that is not healthy.

—Maybe it's a major purchase that could put you under financial pressure that would not be healthy.

—Maybe it's a need to honor the Sabbath.

Be sure to have times of rest or vacation with people you love that will be renewing to you and remind you of God's goodness. Bring a healthy rhythm to your life's pace and balance with your stuff. Make the choice to be with Jesus in your lifestyle choices.

The fourth area where we can make the choice to be with Jesus is in our ...

Relationships

Have you ever considered that when you are with other people, you are making the choice to either be with Jesus in those relationships or to exclude him?

Every day you are interacting with people. Every interaction is a chance to learn from Jesus how to form a loving heart.

For instance: The moment of greeting is a very important moment. Every culture has certain expressions or rituals or questions used in greeting that say:

“You are significant. You matter to me.”

The Bible says a lot about greetings. There was a standard greeting in the Old Testament which was simply “peace.” The Hebrew word is *shalom*, which means, “I hope you flourish in God’s good order.”

Now apparently, some people got overly zealous with their greeting and it was anything but “peace.” In the book of Proverbs there’s a warning not to get super-spiritual in your greeting. It says, “If a man loudly blesses his neighbor in the morning, it will be taken as a curse.”

Jesus warns of the religious leaders, saying, “They ... love to be greeted in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets.” In other words, the act of greeting for these pious folks was all about being sure their sense of status and importance was propped up. *Am I being greeted by the “right people” in the “right way”? Do important people remember my name? Do they say nice things to me?*

Four times when Paul wrote to the churches he instructed them to “greet one another with a holy kiss.” It was part of their culture.

It sounds kind of weird to me. Though I’m not sure we have a lot to brag about. In our culture, we’ve become the first in history where the standard greeting is: “*Whasssup?*”

Here are some ways to make the choice to be with Jesus when you greet someone:

—As you greet them, say a silent prayer asking God to bless them (I would recommend that you not drop to your knees, clasp your hands, and close your eyes—doing this may actually keep them from ever choosing to meet you!).

—Consider the gift of a touch. Some people never get touched. A handshake or a hand on a shoulder can make a huge difference in a person’s life.

Go through the New Testament and see how often Jesus touches people. He especially touches people who didn’t normally get touched—sinners, lepers, children—and they expressed authentic joy as a result!

Another facet of choosing to be with Jesus in our relationships is through our friendships.

On March 3, 2000, the *Wall Street Journal* printed an article called, “Whatever Happened to Friendship?” In it, Nancy Ann Jeffrey states that we’re living in the midst of what could be called “the marginalization of friendship.”

“People are saying—‘It’s the one thing I can give up,’ says sociologist Jan Yager. “They’re diminishing the value of friendship.”

Even though the TV comedy *Friends* was a hit, the reality is that friendships are becoming less common. When friendships are formed, they are more short-lived and more superficial.

A friendless life is not God’s plan for human life. When we make a choice to live with marginalized friendships—or no friendships—we are choosing to be less “with” Jesus—because he reveals himself to us through the community of friendship. The Bible says, “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.”

Friendship is necessary for spiritual growth. In the book of Proverbs it says: “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.”

Are you devoting enough time, attention, and energy to cultivating deep spiritual friendships?

Another kind of relationship where we not only make the choice to be with Jesus, but cling to him is when we have to deal with difficult people.

You may not believe this, but you need difficult people in your life.

Jesus was very emphatic about this. He said (and I paraphrase), “Love your enemies—those who are difficult for you to like. If you love only those who love you back—where’s the goodness in that? Even the mafia does that much. And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Drug dealers do the same thing.”

The ability to love difficult people is like a litmus test of spiritual growth.

This means—you need difficult people in your life. It is absolutely necessary for your development. Through those relationships you are drawn more closely to Christ because your new intention is to treat these people the way Jesus would, and you can’t do that apart from him.

If you’ve got some difficult people in your life—be glad.

If you don’t—we have a list here at the church. We can assign you some.

I want you to think of someone who is difficult for you to love:

Maybe someone at work.

Maybe someone in your family.

Maybe an ex-spouse.

Maybe it varies—a relationship that sometimes goes smoothly, sometimes doesn’t.

Every time you have an encounter with someone who’s difficult for you to love, remember:

Here's my chance to learn from Jesus how to live in his kingdom. Here's my chance to be with Jesus in the stuff of everyday life.

Every day, woven into the fabric of our activities and relationships, are choices to be with Jesus or to attempt life on our own.

Every day we face choices to go into the attic where the treasure is, or to go through that day missing the richness of life found in the choice to be with Jesus.

Moses once prayed, "Teach us to number our days aright, so that we may gain a heart of wisdom." (Psalm 90:12)

I pray that God would help us to wake up every morning and say, "Here's my opportunity..."

To be with Jesus,

To learn from Jesus,

How to become like Jesus.

And treasure this day."