TAKE STEPS TO A DEEPER FOLLOWING OF JESUS

Every culture and field of human endeavor has its ways of honoring those who attain greatness. We award the Nobel Prize to recognize academic, cultural, or scientific achievements. There are Oscars and Tonys for outstanding performance in film and on stage. We award medals to Olympic athletes, and trophies to Soccer and Rugby World Cups. We erect monuments, create days of remembrance, and even consecrate those who do great things for humanity.

WORLD'S DISCIPLESHIP VERSUS JESUS'S DISCIPLESHIP

1. Be popular versus reject popularity.

2. Be great versus reject striving for greatness.

3. Be successful versus rejecting pursuit of success above all else

4. Avoid suffering and failure versus embrace suffering and failure.

You may be wondering at this point, "You want me to reject popularity, striving for greatness, and success at all costs, and embrace suffering and failure? It might sound like a good message Andrew, but you have got to be kidding! How is it possible to live that free?"

To live this way is not only possible, but also what you were made for! And there are three essential and biblical practices you can use to begin your journey: RELAX IN JESUS, DETACH FOR JESUS, and LISTEN TO JESUS.

RELAX IN JESUS

The day after Jesus feeds the five thousand and then mysteriously disappears, the crowds come looking for him. When they find him, there is this fascinating exchange:

They asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?"

Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." **(John 6:28–29)**

When the people ask about the "works" God requires, they have in mind things such as prayer, acts of mercy, giving, or Bible study. Surprisingly, Jesus says there is only *one* work—"To believe in the one [God] has sent." This phrase *believe in* [*him*] means to *trust in him*—and not just once but continually—in an ongoing, moment-by-moment, and day-by-day kind of way.

Jesus gives this invitation to trust in him ninety-eight times in the Gospel of John. In fact, John states that the purpose of his entire gospel is "that you may believe [*be trusting, moment by moment*] that Jesus is the Messiah" (John 20:31).

Theologian Frederick Dale Bruner captures the richness of this kind of trust when he writes, '*Relaxing in' is a good modern translation of 'trusting in' or 'believing in.*' We relax by allowing ourselves to be held by him, regardless of the storms and circumstances in which we find ourselves.

This is easier to talk about than to live, especially when we are surrounded by anxiety or our lives seem to be going backward rather than forward. And yet, it is precisely what Jesus modeled for us in his own ministry.

We sometimes forget that Jesus experienced a mass defection in which he lost thousands of disciples. After feeding the five thousand, large crowds began to follow Jesus. However, when he started to teach hard truths about the need for people to eat his flesh and drink his blood, the crowds were offended and quit following him (John 6:66). Thousands abandoned him. Only the Twelve remained, and one of them was Judas!

In responding to the disbelief of the crowds, and then later, the disciples, Jesus makes three statements, each of which offer insights into how he was able to relax in God:

1. "All those the Father gives me will come to me" (John 6:37).
2. "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them" (John 6:44).

3. “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them” (John 6:65).

Even as thousands turn back, Jesus relaxes, grounded in a deep sense of the Father’s sovereignty and plan. He understands that, ultimately, it is the Father who draws disciples, and the Father who keeps them there. Regardless of the outcome, Jesus trusts that the Father is responsible for his mission and will send the right people to him. He models a steady contentment in doing God’s will, in God’s way, according to God’s timetable.

HOW RELAXED WOULD YOU BE IN SIMILAR CIRCUMSTANCES?

Chances are, most of us would probably respond along the lines of what Jesus’s brothers did, which was to panic. They tell him to get to Jerusalem as soon as possible to get his numbers back up. But Jesus didn’t always work in what we might consider a strategic way. He lived by the Father’s strategy, not by what anyone else considered best practices. Jesus simply told his brothers, “The right time for me has not yet come; for you any time is right” (John 7:6).

Jesus rejected popularity, striving for success, and greatness! He embraced suffering and failure—at least in the world’s eyes. He knew the disciples who stayed with him were given to him by the Father. The Father was in charge of the

mission. Everything was fine—even if things looked like they were falling apart. He relaxed.

So, what does it look like to "relax" within the context of life?

Here are a few of the markers to look for.

I Know I Am Relaxing in Jesus When I Am . . .

- Enjoying communion with Jesus even in the midst of disappointments and storms.
- Experiencing a lack of anxiety in my body.
- Not doing for others what they can and should do for themselves.
- Maintaining my rhythms of *being with* Jesus in seasons of great pressure.
- Less and less triggered by things going badly.

I Know I Am Relaxing in Jesus When I Am . . .

- Present to the beauty and wonder of those around me.
- Enjoying a deep sense of knowing I have nothing to gain and nothing to lose—I want only God's will.
- Experiencing deep contentment in caring for the people God has entrusted to me, family and friends.
- Receiving God's gift of limits rather than fighting, ignoring, or denying them.

- Discerning and embracing the season in which God has placed me.

1 – We relax in Jesus.

2: DETACH FOR JESUS

The goal of the Christian life is loving union with God, to allow God and his will to have full access to every area of our lives. This loving union with God is a oneness that is best understood by the analogy of a marriage, in which two people become one flesh and yet also remain separate from one another. This is the answer to Jesus's prayer, "Father, just as you are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us" (John 17:21).

The key to sharing this rich life of oneness with God is found in a practice called *detachment.* Unlike the cold detachment that we might expect from a judge or an accountant calculating our taxes, our motive for this kind of detachment is being with Jesus.

Jesus speaks of detachment as losing our lives that we might find them (see Mark 8:35–36). Paul describes it as not clinging or holding to anything, whether it be marriage, sorrow, joy, or anything we possess for the sake of Christ.

He writes:

From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy

something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away." **(1 Corinthians 7:29–31)**

In other words, we relinquish all possessiveness and self-will.

What does this mean practically? Many things. But here are a few to start:

- We are open to the unfolding of events and circumstances in our life, accepting everything, not attaching to any earthly experience or goal, but trusting God is orchestrating all things for our good, his glory, and the good of the world.
- We set goals and direction for our lives, yet release attachment to any particular outcome. We engage in active service to Jesus with a passionate, yet detached activism, recognizing we cannot manipulate or predict what he wants to do.
- We are prayerful, not to get what we want, but to surrender our will to God's will, recognizing that unhealthy attachments are a reflection of our core spiritual problem: self-will.

Here is how relaxing played out in one of the most difficult decisions I ever had to make in ministry.

I had been the lead pastor at Willow Hill Vineyard for twenty-two years when it became clear that I needed to initiate a succession process… It wasn't easy. In fact, it required daily, repeated surrender. I am profoundly aware that God's orchestration of a positive transition to the new Senior Pastor was a grace and gift, enabling Willow Hill to blossom in ways that might not have happened had we not done the hard work of positioning ourselves to let go and relax—regardless of the outcome.

1 – We relax in Jesus. 2: We detach for Jesus

3: LISTEN TO JESUS

Even the best of Jesus's leadership team—Peter, James, and John—were not good listeners. We see this clearly when Jesus invites them to a high mountain where he is transfigured and they see the heavenly glory of Jesus, along with Moses and Elijah (Matthew 17:2).

We might have expected Peter to fall on his face before such a jaw-dropping, overpowering, and dazzling sight. Or at least wait and listen. Instead, Peter does what we so often do. He sees a door of opportunity and interrupts with a plan of his own. He suggests they put up three shelters as a witness to what God is doing!

But he doesn't get very far with his plan. God himself interrupts Peter, saying, "Listen to him [Jesus]!" (Matthew 17:5). Jesus had been talking with Peter about his crucifixion and its implications for discipleship, but he wasn't listening.

Why? Because the direction Jesus is going appears counterproductive and doesn't make sense to Peter.

I relate to this particular incident more than I care to admit. I spent many years leading for Jesus but *not* listening to him. Peter didn't think he was doing anything other than following his best thoughts. So did I. The problem was that his best thoughts were leading him and others astray. The same thing happens when we follow our best ideas without listening first—we hurt ourselves and those around us.

GOD'S WORD TO PETER IS GOD'S WORD TO US: *LISTEN TO JESUS*.

Let's face it. We all want a spiritual life, but we prefer to be in charge of it and have it unfold according to our schedule and in our way. But following Jesus is not first doing things for him; it is first listening to him speak and then doing what he says. That is why listening to Jesus is more important than listening to any other person, project, program, or cause in the world.

This kind of listening, however, is not a quick and occasional check-in with God. It is a deep listening that allows God's direction to do its full work in us so

that it explodes with power inside us, even if what he asks us to do is as countercultural as rejecting popularity, greatness-ism, success-ism, and embracing failure and suffering.

We practice discretion. Discretion is the practice of waiting with prayerful expectation to see what unfolds. It has the humility and patience to discern when to leave things alone, knowing when our interference will only complicate things. Flowing from a space of silence and stillness, discretion gives us, as the apostle Paul wrote, the keen ability to distinguish between good and evil spirits (1 Corinthians 12:10). Moreover, it enables us to exercise self-control, and to wait.

One of the most striking aspects of the classic teaching on discretion is the emphasis to humbly *submit our best discernment to wise elders in the faith*. Why? So we can "discern what is correct, and in particular, avoid excess of any kind—even of an apparent good."

That is why, both in our decision making in general and when we are considering new exciting opportunities, a commitment to grow in listening and discretion may be one of the most important things we can do.

Mandy and I had to practice discretion recently when we faced the crucial turning point in the ministry when I was called to lead here at CVCF.

For well over a year, I wrestled with this. The need was banging at the door. We could do it. I knew our greatest contribution was in developing vision, mission, mentoring, and training to implement here at CVCF and in the broader Vineyard and church.

After a year of deep listening and communal discretion, we decided to do the best we could with our limited resources and to trust God with the rest.

1 – We relax in Jesus. 2: We detach for Jesus. 3: We listen to Jesus

This seems hard but:

TAKE COMFORT, YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Taking your next steps to relax in Jesus, to detach for Jesus, and to listen to Jesus is countercultural and prophetic, especially since it's unlikely you are living in a monastry. You can expect starts and stops, successes and failures, as you figure out what works best for you in light of your unique calling, responsibilities, limits, and temperament.

What is most important is that you take the long view of the call of God on your life—and on the lives of those you influence—to follow the crucified, not the consumer, success culture, Jesus.

Relax, allowing Jesus to hold you.

Detach, surrendering your self-will and plans to him.

And *listen*. You can bank on the reality that Jesus's commitment and ability to speak to you is far greater than your commitment and ability to listen to him.