

Session 5 Transcript

What does Christian Life Look Like in Practice?

Discipleship Story

Jan and Keith wouldn't claim to be anything special. They've lived in the same part of the city all their lives, in a very ordinary terrace on a very ordinary street. They're down-to-earth people who speak as they find. They like camping, fishing, baking, armchair sport, tending the allotment, nights out with friends. Apart from the occasional holiday snap, you'll never see them on social media. They've never studied theology, never led a church. Brought up to go to church, as young adults, their Christian commitment was a bit up and down... that is, until a period of real spiritual rediscovery in their early 50s.

Jan and Keith won't make a big show of their spiritual lives, but when you talk to them in private, you realise how much of their lives are undergirded by God. Often they'll share a story of noticing God at work. It might be a small thing – maybe a feeling they should ring someone to check on them. Or it might be a big thing, like that time they and their friends prayed for a washing machine for a family in need, and four brand new machines turned up the next day. On Wednesday nights for many years, Jan and Keith's house was the gathering place for the small group. The kitchen was alive with conversation, laughter and encouragement as group members caught up with the week's goings-on over a bowl of Jan's home-made soup, and usually plenty of cake. Then it was on to Bible study, prayer, more cake, and more laughter.

The group was a great source of friendship and fellowship, but also the engine-room for the local community project run by Keith and Jan. Prayers for re-housed families mingled with discussions about Jesus and justice, practical planning for the next furniture delivery, and the church's next outreach event. Helping others simply felt like a natural consequence of knowing and receiving God's love. In time, members came and went, and the group came to a natural end. But Jan and Keith's commitment to their community continued in other ways, rooted in their sense of God's Spirit at work, drawing others into the sharing the work too.

Jan and Keith aren't perfect: they have their ups and downs with family and health, snap at each other when they're tired, experience everyday frustrations with their church. If you told them they were saints, Jan would laugh and tell you not to talk daft; Keith would say something mildly rude. But over the years, they've lived quiet but remarkable lives; some of the best living examples I know of loving God, loving their church family, loving their neighbours.

Main Session Content

What does a fruitful Christian life look like? Perhaps you, or someone you know, has come to faith and at some point said: 'So, I'm a Christian. What happens now?' Sometimes, we answer that question by talking about things like being part of a church, developing a habit of prayer, etc. All of those things are good and we'll explore them further in a future session. But in this session I want to go back a step and ask: What is the kind of life into which God is calling us? What are the touchstones of Jesus' life and teaching which give us a framework and direction for our Christian living - and keep our 'enabling' of others on track? How do we cast a vision for discipleship which is clear enough to be memorable and livable, but also broad and rich enough to be applicable to all our unique selves and life circumstances? Here I want to suggest three starting points which I have found hugely helpful to keep coming back to, each of which builds on the previous one.

The Two Greatest Commandments

An obvious place to start is with the two commandments which Jesus calls the greatest:

²⁸ One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

²⁹ "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'³¹ The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." (Mark 12.28-34)

Our most important job in this life is to love - not just/primarily as a thought or feeling, but as a practical life commitment. Our most important job as discipleship enablers is to learn how to help people love God and their neighbour. A few years ago at Saltley Trust we did a survey of churches to ask what helps people grow as Christians. The project lead Simon Foster, and I, spent hours trying to work out what sorts of things could be taken as evidence that someone was growing in discipleship. At one point, we seriously considered writing what would probably be the shortest questionnaire ever, with just two simple questions: 1) What has helped you come to love God?; 2) What helps you love your neighbour as yourself. Everything seemed to boil down to these two things (didn't Jesus say something similar?!). In the end we wrote a much longer survey, but I've never forgotten that discussion. Sometimes it's so easy to over-complicate the Christian life, that it's crucial we keep sight of these two central commitments. So a question to keep in mind when walking alongside others is: what will really help them love God and neighbour?

Love in Three Dimensions - Up, In, Out

Love of God and neighbour is central, but how can we build out from this a little? One simple idea which many Christians have found helpful over the years is to think of Christian discipleship in three dimensions: upwards, inwards, and outwards. This is the main tool or practice for this

session. Although you won't find 'up, in, out' in the New Testament in so many words, it's very clear that Jesus lived out this pattern in his own life. Luke 16 offers a good example:

¹² One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. ¹³ When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles...¹⁷ He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, ¹⁸ who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, ¹⁹ and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.(Luke 6: 12-13, 17-19)

Notice here how Jesus' loving has three dimensions:

- Love for God (he goes up the mountain to pray - v. 12)
- Love for one another (he gathers his disciples and forms them into a community - v. 13)
- Love for the world (he teaches, cures and heals - vv.18-19).

Inspired by this and other passages, many Christian writers have seen the holy life as having three dimensions:

- UP (to God)
- IN (to community); and
- OUT (to be a blessing to others)¹

Some have seen parallels between these passages and the famous description of holy living in Micah 6.8: 'And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God'. 'Acting justly' is about how we transform the world (OUT); loving mercy is about how we relate to one another (IN), and walking humbly with God is about the vertical dimension of our living (UP).

Being firmly rooted in a relationship with God is the bedrock for our love for one another and the world. It's notable that in Luke 6, Jesus spends time in prayer with the Father before choosing his apostles and continuing his ministry. A similar pattern is found in John 15:

- Jesus tells his disciples to remain in Him; apart from God we can do nothing (v. 4) (UP);
- As a result of Jesus' love for us, we love one another (v. 12) (IN);
- As we remain in Jesus's love, we are able to live the fruitful lives he commands. As we love one another, others will also come to know that we are his disciples (v.8) (OUT).

¹ The 'up-in-out' framework has become widely used, but one of its more influential early articulations is found in: Mike Breen and Walt Kallestad, *A Passionate Life* (Kingsway, 2005), 85-102, which also draws upon Micah 6:8 and John 15.

A Balanced Life

Many have found this 'up, in, out' framework a helpful tool in bringing a Christ-centred shape and balance to their Christian lives - both our individual lives and our shared life as a church or group. It can also offer a helpful framework to reflect on the shape of our personal discipleship and our life as a church. It's offered as this session's **tool/practice** (see below), along with some questions for discussion and reflection.

A spiritually balanced life is healthy and fruitful. By contrast, lack of balance may lead to burnout, isolation, or lack of fruitfulness in the work God has given us to do. For example, what might be the difficulties we face if we only pay attention to our relationship with God and church community, but never look outwards? Or if we dedicate our lives to serving others, but don't root ourselves in a relationship with God? Or if we spend time with God, try to live missionally, but don't connect with a close community?

Beyond Up, In and Out: Streams of Living Water

Once the 'up, in, out' makes sense to you and your group, how can we go a bit deeper? Whilst loving God, loving each other and loving the world is central, but also quite broad. Sometimes it can be helpful to put some more flesh on the bones in order to help people know what that looks like in practice. There are many different ways of describing the Christian life in more detail - often these look slightly different depending on your theology or church tradition. I've listed some of them in the resources section.

One idea many have found helpful is Richard Foster's six 'Streams of Living Water'. Foster is an evangelical Quaker (yes, they do exist!) who has read, taught and lived deeply into many of the Christian church's great traditions of spirituality.

Looking across 2000 years of Christian teaching and experience (what he calls 'the great conversation about the growth of the soul') Richard Foster identifies six broad strands of Christian discipleship, found in the life of Jesus, the Bible and Christian tradition. These are not primarily a list of six 'things Christians should do' (although all of them do invite a practical commitment of time, energy and attention). Foster calls them 'streams of devotion' and 'streams of living water' because they are channels for God's grace to flow into us, and channels for God's love to overflow from us to love and transform the world. Seeing Christian discipleship in terms of these six 'life streams' fits well with the 'up, in and out' dimensions of Christian living.

The six 'streams of living water' which Richard Foster describes are as follows:

- **The Prayer-Filled Life (or the 'contemplative' tradition):** This is about cultivating a life of 'loving attention to God', for example, through prayer, silence and contemplation. As Christians we are not to hold God at arm's length, or treat faith as merely an intellectual

activity. The prayer-filled life is about fanning the flames of our relationship with God. In the process, our enlarged souls are made ready for God's work in the world.²

- **The Virtuous Life (or the 'holiness' tradition):** This is about 'the inward re-formation of the heart' and the development of "holy habits" which shape our character and enable us to live functioning and fruitful lives. It's about taking Jesus' call to discipleship seriously, training for growth in Christlikeness. It's also about seeking to root out sin and vice in our lives, so that in all situations, we can '[do] *what* needs to be done *when* it needs to be done'.³
- **The Spirit-Empowered Life (or the 'charismatic' tradition):** the word 'charismatic' can be prompt a love/hate response for many. But at root, the Spirit-Empowered life is about discovering and using the gifts of the Holy Spirit and growing the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, humility and self-control. It's about recognising that we don't 'live lives under our own steam' but always in co-operation with the Holy Spirit.⁴ This is for all of us, not just people who call themselves Charismatics or Pentecostals.
- **The Compassionate Life (or the 'social justice' tradition):** Jesus said one of the two greatest commandments is to love your neighbour as you love yourself. The prophet Amos has strong words for those who claim to worship God whilst neglecting their needy neighbour and oppressing the poor. The Social Justice tradition is about living a life of justice, compassion and peace. It's about loving others and loving God's creation in all of our big and small decisions.⁵ This is not just for 'liberals', but for all Christians.
- **The Word-Centred Life (or the 'evangelical' tradition):** this is about proclaiming and living the message of the Gospel. The Word-centred life is rooted in a deep engagement with Scripture. We choose to let the words of the Bible transform us. We commit to sharing the Good News with others. It's about taking seriously Jesus' call to repent, to turn around towards God, to believe Jesus's message, and to take part in Jesus's calling to make disciples of all nations.⁶ This is not just for 'evangelicals' - but for all of us.
- **The Sacramental Life (or the 'incarnational' tradition):** Although this can sound a bit obscure, the incarnational tradition is about seeing God at work in the world, using material things to express spiritual realities (e.g., how we use art, music, colour and symbol in worship, or how we become aware of God's handiwork in creation). It's about

² Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (Hodder and Stoughton, 2017 edn), 58, 49-52, 46.

³ Foster, *Streams of Living Water*, 61, 82.

⁴ Foster, *Streams of Living Water*, 99, 125.

⁵ Foster, *Streams of Living Water*, 166-67.

⁶ Foster, *Streams of Living Water*, 187, 227.

bringing faith and daily life together, not putting our religious lives in separate box. It's about treating our bodies as a temple of the Holy Spirit; valuing every moment as 'holy ground'; meeting God through the rites and sacraments of the church.⁷ This is not just for Catholics and lovers of sacramental worship - it's for all Christians.

If we seek to cultivate all six of these 'streams' in our lives, our Christian discipleship will be rich but also balanced, drawing from all the great traditions of the faith, in ways that remain solidly biblical and theologically grounded. To go beyond 'up, in, out', this is a great place to start.

How far are these six 'life streams' present in your own life? How far are they present in the life of your group or church? If you would like to explore this further, you can use find some helpful material in the **Resources** section.

Balanced... but not Burdensome

Whether you're reflecting on the Up/In/Out Triangle or the Life Streams, the aim is **not** to strive to spend equal time on each one at all times. There will be seasons where we need to pay special attention to our walk with God, or our close community relationships, or our reaching out to others. But if one or more areas are absent from your life, or your church's life, for a long period, there's probably something to address there. But as always, this is in a spirit of invitation, of making ourselves open to God's leading - rather than as a burden or a rule.

⁷ Foster, *Streams of Living Water*, 238, 260, 266, 272.