

# Apprentice

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## to the

# May

What does it mean to take Jesus' call to discipleship seriously? If you've ever pondered this question, you may have found and treasured the writing of Dallas Willard, a minister and philosophy professor at the University of Southern California.

Willard has written a trilogy of books on "the spiritual life of those who have become convinced that Jesus is the one." The first book, *In Search of Guidance*, presents life as a conversational relationship with God. The second, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, explains how disciples can interact with God in such a way that their character is changed. His most recent book, *The Divine Conspiracy*, focuses on discipleship.

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by Jan Johnson



Dallas Willard talks about what it means  
to live as Jesus' disciple every day.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG SCHNEIDER



**DJ:** In *The Divine Conspiracy*, you say that many in the church have misunderstood what it means to be Christ's disciple. What's wrong with the prevailing understanding of the Christian life?

**Willard:** Churches today are full of people who haven't been invited to become disciples. Being a Christian has come to mean going to church and being saved when you die. The ministry of the church is given over to "making the final cut" and solving problems (marital problems, witnessing problems, apologetics, pain and suffering), not to discipleship.

In the New Testament, discipleship means being an apprentice of Jesus in our daily existence. A disciple is simply someone who has decided to be with another person, under appropriate conditions, in order to learn to do what that person does, or to become what that person is.

What does Jesus do that I can be discipled to do? 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.

**DJ:** What does this kind of discipleship look like in everyday life?

**Willard:** You stay attentive to what you're doing at the moment. Let's say I'm a plumber and I'm going to clean out someone's sewer. *How will I do this as Jesus would do this?* If you encounter difficulties with the people you're serving or with the pipe or the machinery, you never fight that battle alone. You

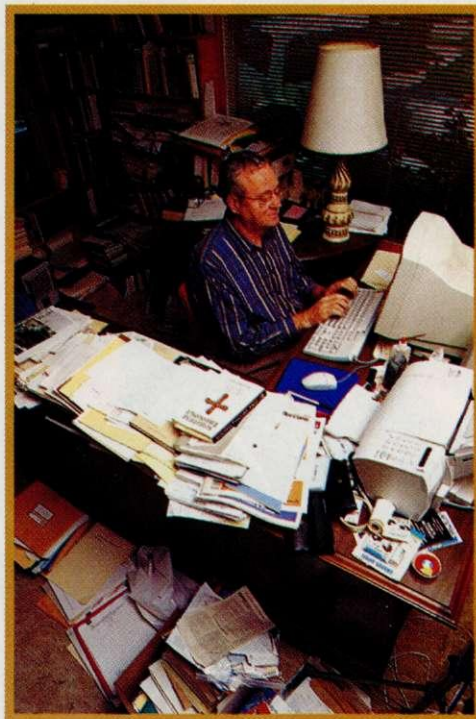
invoke the presence of God. You expect to see something happen that is not the result of you. If you train yourself to thank God when those "coincidences" happen, you'll see them as patterns in your life. The crucial thing is to be attentive to God's hand, not to get locked into one-on-one thinking: *It's me and this pipe!* Never do that.

But it takes training not to do that. A person has to be trained to think, *Now is the time to praise God for the solution that just came to me.* That training brings you to the point where you don't have to slap yourself up the side of the head and say, "I have to pay attention!" You routinely think, *This is an occasion when God is present. This is a time to pray, to praise.*

My main role in life, for example, is teaching in a university. As Jesus' apprentice, I constantly ask myself how He would deal with students and colleagues. 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?

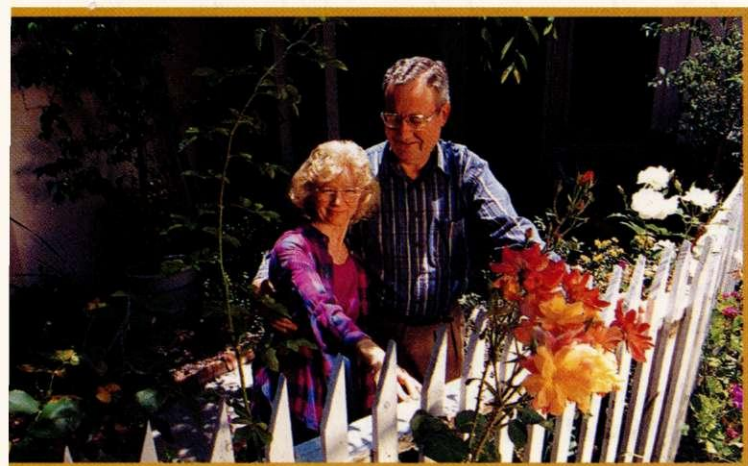
That was the teaching of the New Testament: "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Col. 3:17). Discipleship involves doing everything as if Jesus were doing it. As disciples, we say, "Yes, I will learn to do all the things that Jesus said to do." That's when we become His students. Through this process we learn things we never thought about. Our sense of the scope of the commitment grows. We build lives that are not just ours, but God's as well.

From apparent disorder  
come books, sermons,  
and lesson plans.



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or to become what that person is.**





Dallas and his wife, Jane, enjoy their California garden.

**DJ:** How does this training process affect our inner lives?

**Willard:** Discipleship focuses on the inner self, which consists of our ideas, beliefs, and emotions. Character grows out of our inner lives, and it governs what we think and feel. As our character is transformed, our behavior is transformed as well. Our character, for example, may not be to love our enemies. But the character of God is to love them. As our thoughts and feelings are conformed to Christ's, the loving of enemies takes care of itself. The person "who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice" (Mt. 7:24) has first been changed inwardly in his thinking and feeling. That's why Jesus said the good tree cannot bring forth bad fruit (see Mt. 7:17-20, 12:33-35). The point of training yourself by practicing certain habits is to renew the inner person and to make the tree inwardly good.

**DJ:** How can discipleship help those of us who are always in a hurry?

**Willard:** We can learn how to act quickly without hurrying. Quickness is an attribute of action. Hurry is an attribute of the spirit. First, we need to recognize when we're being drawn into hurry. At that point, we stop and take time out. Then we go over how God is with us and remind ourselves that we're acting with Him at our side. When we step back in, we expect God to do something to help. If I'm late for a meeting, I don't have to drive 85 m.p.h. Instead, I drive 65 m.p.h. and say, "Lord, I'm looking to see what You're going to do about my situation."

I had this happen recently. Just as I was ready to board a plane to Boston, the airline decided to change planes. I grew concerned because I was on my way to a speaking engagement and had little time to spare. I felt the Lord say to me, "It's going to be OK." After an hour had passed, I began to say, "Really?" Once again, God said, "It's OK." I rested in that. It was fine. I got there, changed clothes, and

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walked into the banquet room after they'd said the blessing. I ate and spoke, and everything was fine. That should be the ordinary course of life.

Hurry involves the idea that something is out of control and we must take control. I will drive 85 m.p.h. and I will get there! Hurry is an act of unfaith. We must learn to move beyond the immediate, unthinking responses that govern most people's lives. In Peter's denials of Christ, he allowed immediate responses to govern him. Peter should have wept bitterly when Jesus told him that he was going to deny Him. But he didn't. Instead he said, "No way." After the denials, Peter did weep bitterly. Silence, solitude, fasting, and Scripture memorization train us to respond differently to the events that demand an immediate response.

**DJ:** Why are solitude and silence so basic for discipleship?

**Willard:** The mind and feelings are transformed through a process of training—which is where the spiritual disciplines come in. They teach us an inner posture of not having to have our way, which relieves us of one of our greatest burdens. Solitude, for example, is a wrenching experience for most people. Solitude is difficult because it exposes the illusion of our self-importance. It can be terribly threatening to be silent, or to not have the last word in a conversation. Or take fasting. While fasting, I'm able to think, *I'm hungry, but I don't have to eat.* These disciplines train our body and personality to be able to want something and not get it.

Solitude and silence are means of being with God. They form a context for listening and speaking to Him. God will not compete for our attention. God waits us out. He has certain purposes that He's going to accomplish. How do we fit in? What choices will we make about our lives? The tempting choice is to work, work, work, talk, talk, talk. That's not the New Testament picture. In Acts 6, the apostles gave themselves to the ministry of the Word and prayer



instead of doing everything that presented itself. They got others involved. We should always be looking to see how others could do what we're doing, and teaching that we are not indispensable.

Solitude and silence train us to let go of thinking we have so much we "have to do"—that's a dangerous phrase. There's very little that I have to do, and those things generally apply to my personal relationships. I realize this by going into solitude and silence. These disciplines put me in a context where God can speak to me and I can listen. As a pastor or teacher, the great danger is that I could get up and rattle on for years. More than anything else, I need to hear from God about what I am to say and to whom I am to speak.

**DJ:** What do we focus on during these solitary times?

**Willard:** If we want to be disciples, we should ask Jesus to reveal Himself to us. We need to read the Scriptures and ask, "Lord, reveal Yourself to me in such a way

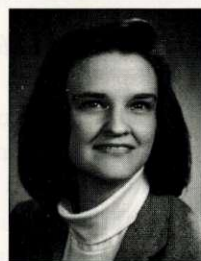
that I will see Your beauty." To see Jesus clearly, we need to fill our souls with the written gospel. A. B. Simpson read the four gospels through several times a week, and his life was turned around. If you intensively focus on things, they become part of your soul substance, which is why spiritual disciplines make a world of difference. When you read the gospels over and over, they frame your world and make it obvious how you are to act.

Without the help of the written gospel, our minds are filled with junk and framed by commercials and news stories. Our character and actions are confused, befuddled, and dissipated. That's where most people live. They drag into church confused and scattered, hoping to have a rousing service to pump them up and get them through the next week. Then they'll need another charge. The way to redeem this cycle is to give the mind an intensive bath in the Word of God.

Through the written gospel, Jesus reveals Himself. As we deal with people, we can imitate what we've read and pon-

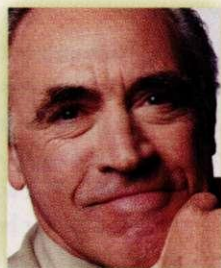
dered—for example, the striking quality of Jesus' generosity. He gave time and attention to people, whether they were lepers, Roman centurions, or rich Jewish kids who knew everything. He was absolutely generous that way. He didn't have to touch lepers to heal them, but He did. Reflect on scenes like these from the gospels through journaling, meditation, or talking with a spiritual friend. Put into practice what God gives you in these times. This is how we experience the reality of the kingdom. ♦

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



JAN JOHNSON is the author of *Enjoying the Presence of God* and *Listening to God* (both NavPress). She has also written more than 700 Bible studies. Jan spends most of her time speaking at retreats and writing. Her experience with burnout led her to find ways to connect with God every day in more meaningful ways. A trained spiritual director, Jan desires to help believers immerse themselves in God.

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