

Conversion: A Continual Relationship, Not Just Another Spiritual Experience

Lesson 13

GROW DISCIPLESHIP CURRICULUM

Engaging the Learner

Kris Kristofferson, musician, solo artist, film star, and Rhodes scholar, relates the following experience he had in a Nashville church in the mid-seventies:

The congregation knelt and Preacher Snow asked anyone who was lost to raise their hand. "My head was saying, 'That'll be the day that I raise my hand in front of a bunch of strangers,' but my hand went up anyhow." Kris explains. "I couldn't see if anyone else's did cuz we all had our heads bowed, but then Jimmy asked people who'd raised their hands to walk up to the front of the church. I said there was no way in hell I was gonna do that, but I found myself doing it. He asked if I was ready to accept Jesus Christ, and I said, 'I don't know.' I didn't know what I was doing there. He said something about forgiveness and I completely fell apart, was crying uncontrollably, but it felt like this whole darkness was lifted off my shoulders. I don't know how long I was there, but I remember standing outside afterward and it was like coming down from an acid trip... I still get kinda embarrassed talking about it."

Kristofferson called this event "the only real mystical religious experience I'd ever had in my life," and lists it as a major incident for him in a time of spiritual searching and emptiness. What stands out about this account, however, is the fact that Kris never returned to church or further explored Christianity.

A surprising number of spiritual searchers relay similar patterns following significant experiences of God. This trend towards collecting religious experiences like souvenirs without any true conversion or decision to make God a regular part of life is increasingly common in our spiritually starving world. People are drawn to occasional experiences of "the other," but show no interest in a spiritual commitment or re-orientation of their life or morals.

Exploring the Lesson

The tension between searching for a religious experience and deciding to follow God is not new. A similar issue is addressed in the Old Testament book of Micah. Chapter 6, verses 6-8 are constructed as a dialogue between a spiritual searcher and a spiritual wise man, addressing the question of what ritual or experience God requires of His people. The answer remains instructive for us today. Take a moment to read Micah 6:6-8 at this time.

How Should I Come Before God?

In Micah 6:6, the spiritual searcher begins with the question, "With what should I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?" The question the searcher poses seems straightforward enough: What sort of things must I do to demonstrate my desire to know God? The Jewish people of Micah's day heavily utilized sacrifices in their worship and encounters with God. If we were to re-word this question to reflect current religious practices, we might ask, "What should I do to experience God? Do I need to light incense or candles? Should I bow my head and hold up my hands when I pray? Do I need to cross my legs or use prayer beads? Should I go to a temple or church to find the Lord?" No matter how we might approach it, the idea is the same: Are there certain ritualistic acts that guarantee I will experience God?

What Pleases the LORD?

The second question the searcher in this passage asks is similar to the first, but there is now a hint of sarcasm. "Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" Again, we notice the impact of the sacrificial system on this dialogue. However, the question has shifted a little. Now the issue is forgiveness of sin and pleasing God. What amount of sacrifices will placate God? The speaker begins by mentioning high numbers of rams and large amounts of oil to be used in sacrifices. Will the volume of sacrifices allow forgiveness? Next, the speaker sarcastically suggests perhaps he should sacrifice his own child to make restitution for sins.

If we were to re-word this question today, we might ask, "What will I have to give up before God will forgive my sins? What if I give away all my money and possessions? Would it be enough for me to be a missionary in Africa? Must I force my children to work and give away their money as well?" The spiritual seeker in this verse accurately realizes that there is ultimately nothing he can do to place himself on the same level with God and make-up for all the wrongs he's committed. In frustration, he employs sarcasm to drive the point home. No matter the approach, the point is the same: Are there things I can do to be entitled to an experience of God?

Wrong Questions

The answer to both questions can be found in the teaching of the spiritual wise man in Micah 6:8. "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with you God." What are the requirements of God? Interestingly, they do not even address the questions this spiritual seeker is asking. He asks how he can come before God or what will please God. The speaker is searching for rituals that will afford him a religious experience or sacrifices which will make up for past sins. But the words of 6:8 belie the fact that God is not interested in rituals allowing people to occasionally come into His presence, He wants us to live in His presence. God does not want sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins; he wants us to quit sinning. While the first speaker in this text is searching for spiritual experiences alone, God desires spiritual conversions that realign us with Him and with other people. The Lord is more interested in how we live our everyday lives than in particular ceremonies.

Do Justice

The requirements listed by God appear deceptively simple. The first is to "do justice." Justice is a major theme in the Old Testament, especially among the prophets. As the verb "do" hints, the Biblical concept of justice is not a vague ethical ideal to be considered. "Do" demands action on the part of the hearer. To "do justice" is to act on behalf of fairness and equality for all. God calls us to social and ethical action. Among the prophetic writings, the most common groups denied justice are widows, orphans, and strangers in the land. These groups were not attached to the male-dominated extended families by which Israelite society provided protection, land, food, and access to the temple.

In our contemporary setting, there are still groups denied protection, basic needs, and religious inclusion. These include single-parent families (especially among minorities), citizens of so-called "third world" nations, the mentally and physically handicapped, and citizens of certain religion-dominated nations. In many ways, these issues seem too complex for one person to make a significant impact in; nevertheless, this is the first requirement mentioned in Micah 6.

Love Kindness

The second commandment required by God is to "love kindness." This seems almost too easy to consider. Who, after all, doesn't love kindness? Rarely do we find ourselves broken-down on the side of the road or short a few dollars for dinner and wishing people were a little less kind. Indeed, we all love kindness when it is offered to us. However, this requirement is to love to do acts of kindness. To put it another way, God asks that we love being kind. This is difficult for us in the United States, not because we don't want to be kind, but because kindness takes time, and time is one thing we don't think we have enough of to share.

Like justice, this word kindness also has a long history in the Old Testament. Although kindness is translated a number of ways in different verses (including righteousness, loving-kindness, mercy, and covenant-faithfulness), the overarching idea is the same. Kindness is the summation of the Old Testament commandments and laws for treating other people. Kindness is based in how God treats us. We are called to care for other people as God has cared for us. It is a step beyond the Golden Rule of doing unto others as you'd have done unto you. God requires us to show forgiveness, grace, and unconditional love to all people in our lives.

Walk Humbly with Your God

The final requirement is to “walk humbly” with God. This last command utterly destroys the pre-suppositions of the enquirer seeking the proper ritual for a spiritual experience. Here, “walk” means to travel through life with God. The concept is to keep God in every aspect of life, not relegating Him to an occasional religious experience. “Humbly” further suggests that humans must understand their place in relationship to God. To walk humbly is to know there is nothing a person can do earn or secure a place next to God. God grants us a relationship with Him by His grace and love for us. He requires that we do justice and love mercy as reflections of how He has treated us. However, if this earned us a place beside God, we would not have to be humble in our walking. We might, justifiably, be somewhat proud of our achievement. But we can't earn this relationship. God grants us a love relationship. God only requires that we remember He is the source of the relationship, not anything we've done.

Enhancing Our Lives

Are you guilty of concentrating too heavily the pursuit of religious experiences to the neglect of a daily relationship with God? The following exercises and questions are designed to allow you to examine the implications of this lesson on your life.

Religious Experiences

1. List significant religious experiences you've had.
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2. Determine: Did this experience produce significant change in my behavior? Did this experience mark the beginning of my relationship with God? A change in my understanding of God?

Rituals/Ceremonies

1. Ask yourself: Are there rituals or ceremonies that I engage in because I believe they allow me to come before God? Because I believe they will allow God to forgive me of my sins?
2. Have you noticed these rituals have become so important to you that you don't believe God is available without them?
3. Do you judge people who do not expect or practice the same rituals which you engage in?
4. Ask yourself: Am I proud of the rituals or practices I engage in? Are they the reasons my sins are forgiven? Do they keep me from walking humbly with God?
5. There is certainly nothing wrong with religious rituals. In fact, they can be very healthy and helpful. Nevertheless, determine to cease practicing rituals which you have grown to rely on as necessary to come before God (at least for a certain period of time).

How can I begin doing justice?

1. List social injustices or oppressed groups you recognize in our society.
 - A.

- B.
- C.
- D.
- E.
- F.

2. What practices can you engage in to do justice for these groups? Options might include volunteering with certain organizations, making donations to certain organizations, etc.).
3. Pick one group to become involved with and determine to “do justice” on their behalf.
4. Ask yourself, “Do I or does my business treat anyone unjustly?”
5. If you do, determine to cease business habits that are not just.

How to love kindness

1. In what ways has God shown His love and grace to you?
2. Make a list of six of your closest family members and friends.

A.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
B.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
C.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
D.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
E.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
F.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
3. Rank each person on a kindness scale of 1 to 10, with 10 meaning you show great kindness to them, and 1 indicating you show no kindness to them.
4. How good are you at showing kindness to your loved ones? If you do not rank yourself very high, how can you improve?
5. How do you treat solicitors? Fast food employees? Members of the service community (waiters, secretaries, etc.). Your actions are indicative of your level on kindness.

How to walk humbly with God

1. Ask yourself: Are there times during the day when I don't want God with me? When?

2. If you don't want God's presence because the practice is immoral, ask God to help you cut this activity out of your life. This will probably be difficult, but God will help you with the area.
3. There are other places where you may not want God with you that are harder to cut out of your life, such as at work or while you are playing sports. What actions do you need to change at those places that will allow you to walk with God in those arenas of your life?

4. Spend some time every morning inviting God to go with you in all that you do that day. This can be as little as five or ten minutes. You may want to put a note on your rearview mirror to remind you to dedicate that day to God.
5. Set aside some time every evening to ask God, “Were you comfortable going with me throughout the day today?” Allow God to draw you mind over your days activities, highlighting areas you may need improvement.
6. Pray right now, asking God to become a part of your life everyday.

Outline for Small Group Discussion or Personal Reflection

All questions and exercises are useful for either personal or small group reflection. While exercises marked with an asterisk (*) are written specifically for a small group leader, individual learners can easily modify the exercise for their personal study.

Engaging the Learner

Are you surprised that someone might have a significant religious experience like the one Kris Kristofferson describes and not continue in that religion? Why or why not?

*Ask class members whether or not spiritual experiences play a major part in their spiritual lives.

Exploring the Lesson/Enhancing Your Life

*Ask someone to read Micah 6:6-8 to the class.

How should I come before God?

*List Christian rituals or ceremonies that class members consider important or necessary on blackboard. Ask, "Do you think these rituals allow you to come into God's presence more easily? Are they necessary for God to accept you into his presence?"

Can we do anything on our own to secure forgiveness from sins?

Do you try to do anything to secure forgiveness from sins?

Do justice

*List groups of people that are denied justice in our society. As a class, choose one group and determine to "do justice" to them in the upcoming weeks. Set a date and place a class member in charge of doing this.

Do you currently take part in any activities that could be labeled, "Doing Justice"?

Love kindness

What things has God done for you in your life?

Do you allow God's treatment of you to determine how you will treat others?

Walk humbly with God

*Ask. "As a church or class, how can we move from being 'spiritual experience to spiritual experience' minded to walking continually in God's presence? Are there things that the local church can do to facilitate this? Individuals?"

Do you find yourself assuming that you are in a relationship with God because of the religious things you do?

Are there places in your life that you are uncomfortable taking God? If so, what are you going to do about that?

*End the class in prayer,