

Clutter-
F R E E
Christianity

What God *Really*
Desires for You

Robert Jeffress

author of *Outrageous Truth*

The background of the book cover features a sunburst pattern of thin lines radiating from a central point. Scattered throughout this pattern are various items representing clutter: paper clips, crumpled paper, a spiral notebook, and a piece of paper with the words "lack of organization" written on it.

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Italics in Scripture quotations indicate the author's added emphasis.

Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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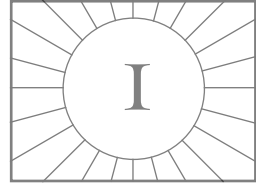
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The Heart of the Matter

Keeping Your Faith Clutter-Free

Imagine your employer announces that in two weeks you'll be moving to Vienna, Austria...forever. How would you react? Although you've seen pictures of this beautiful city, you know very little about it. Because of your limited knowledge, you'd probably try to find out everything you can about Vienna before you left. What language is spoken? What's the temperature like? What clothes are most appropriate?

You'd want to obtain or update your passport, secure any other necessary travel documents, and purchase your airline tickets. You'd have to decide what items you want to move with you and which ones to leave behind. You'd arrange to sell your house here and purchase a new one over there. You'd want to exchange your dollars for the proper currency.

But it would be unimaginable to do nothing and simply adopt the "I'll go with the flow" philosophy. Sure, you might be able to rationalize your lack of preparation with thoughts such as:

- “Maybe at the last moment, circumstances will change and I won’t have to go.”
- “I’ll wait until I get there to see what it’s really like.”
- “I doubt Vienna is any different from where I live now.”

Failing to prepare for your journey would be unwise and could result in some disastrous consequences. If you know you’re going to make a long trip, you certainly want to be ready for it.

Whether you realize it or not, you will one day take the journey of a lifetime to a foreign land you’ve never seen. Although your departure time is unknown to you, the hour is already fixed on God’s calendar. At a moment known only to Him, you’ll leave everything you own and everyone you know, and you’ll stand alone before God. He will decide your eternal destiny: heaven or hell. If you wait until that moment to prepare for the journey, you’ll have waited too long. The preparations you make in this life will determine how you spend the next one.

Admittedly, this is a sobering thought for anyone, but especially when we’re reminded of our mortality. Last year I turned fifty. This milestone event in my life wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be. It was worse! Don’t misunderstand. I enjoyed all the attention from family, friends, and church members. My congregation held a huge birthday party for me, complete with skits about their aging pastor. Diapers and Metamucil were among the most frequent gifts. It was all great fun.

But after the celebration ended and the humorous cards had been read and discarded, I was left with this stark realization: Without any doubt, I have more years behind me than in front of me. Sometime in the next twenty to thirty years, I’ll meet the invisible God about whom I’ve taught and with whom I’ve sporadically communicated.

And when that moment arrives, all of my theological speculations will

be meaningless. I'll see God as He really is. The only thing that will matter is whether or not my preparation for eternity has been adequate.

Realizing how little time I have left before my inevitable departure has led me to ask myself the simple question, *What does God really want from me?* In my mind, that question has moved from being theoretical to critical. The stakes are too high for me to get it wrong. It's really the only question that matters. In my twenties and thirties, I thought about this question occasionally, but now I awaken in the middle of the night wondering, *What must I do to please God?*

I can already hear some of you shouting back the stock answer: "Robert, you of all people should know that there is nothing you can do to please God. Just trust in Christ as your Savior, and everything will be okay." I've preached that message for years, and I still believe it—to an extent. But let's be honest. When you look at the whole of Scripture, can you honestly say that the only thing God wants from us is a willingness to accept our free ticket to heaven? Again, the stakes are too high for us to be wrong.

At the outset, let me affirm that I definitely believe that salvation from God's eternal judgment comes through faith alone in Jesus Christ. We can do nothing to merit God's forgiveness. "For by grace you have been saved through faith...not as a result of works, that no one should boast" (Ephesians 2:8–9). Those words are more than just an evangelical mantra; they are the bedrock of the Christian faith.

However, an honest search of Scripture reveals that God is interested in more than our justification—our right standing before Him, secured by Christ's death and guaranteeing our entrance into heaven. How do I know that? Consider Jesus's exchange with an attorney who might have been experiencing his own midlife crisis. Perhaps on the morning after his fiftieth birthday, he saw a crowd standing around Jesus and decided to take

advantage of the opportunity to speak with the rabbi who was gaining renown throughout Israel.

“Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25).

Whenever I’ve taught on this particular passage, I’ve always claimed that this was an insincere question from someone trying to trap Jesus into contradicting the teaching of the Pharisees. After all, Luke emphasized that the question was meant to “put Him to the test” (verse 25). Maybe the lawyer was fulfilling his assignment from the Pharisees to trick the Lord and destroy His credibility.

Or maybe this lawyer—feeling the signs of his own mortality—thought he might do his assigned job and, at the same time, seek the answer to a question that kept him awake at nights. Regardless of the lawyer’s motivation, notice Jesus’s answer. He affirms what the lawyer already knows to be true. Interested in eternal life? Then:

You shall love the LORD your GOD with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and will all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself. (verse 27)

What’s the essence of a right relationship with God? What does our Creator desire from us more than anything else? A heart fully devoted to Him and a heart that loves other people as much as we love ourselves. Simple. Not easy, but simple.

We’ve all heard our share of fallen-preacher stories, but one that came across my desk recently takes the cake. A prominent church in our denomination had been searching for a pastor for three years. After an exhaustive hunt, the pulpit committee proudly presented the candidate to the church. The first few weeks, the new pastor wowed the congregation with his flamboyant oratorical skills. The crowds began to build almost instantly.

However, a month after arriving at his church, the new pastor submitted a one-paragraph resignation. The reason? A local newspaper had uncovered the truth about this man. His résumé was filled with bogus degrees. Not only that, he'd reportedly embezzled nearly \$200,000 from a previous church. And the IRS had been after him as well. When confronted about the negligence in the pulpit committee's research, one member responded, "We were swayed by his unusual ability to communicate the gospel."

Communicate the gospel? What gospel? The gospel that says you can receive your "get out of hell free" card and then live however you choose? The gospel that teaches you can be *forgiven* by Jesus without ever *following* Jesus?

The stunned members of this church were probably left asking, "How could such a thing happen?"

Perhaps Dallas Willard has the answer:

A carefully cultivated heart will, assisted by the grace of God, foresee, forestall, or transform most of the painful situations before which others stand like helpless children saying "Why?"...

Accordingly, the greatest need you and I have—the greatest need of collective humanity—is *renovation of our heart*. That spiritual place within from which outlook, choices, and actions come has been formed by a world away from God. Now it must be transformed.¹

The essence of the gospel is a changed life that comes from a transformed heart. The apostle Paul wrote, "Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Unfortunately, too many of us come to the cross of Jesus Christ "just as I am," we receive our pardon from hell, and

we leave just as we were. Although the statement has become almost trite, it's still true that no measurable differences exist between the lifestyles of believers and unbelievers. We commit adultery and get divorced at the same rate non-Christians do. We inflate our résumés. We become slaves to various addictions such as prescription drugs and pornography.

I recently received an urgent call from a member of our congregation. His addiction to alcohol and pornography had led to the breakup of his marriage a few hours earlier, and now he was driving himself to a rehabilitation center in another city. He was calling not only to ask for my prayers but to apologize for having to leave his place of service in our church.

“Pastor, it was so exciting to be part of a ministry with a worldwide impact, but my heart was dying on the inside.” He went on to compliment the “wonderful teaching” that he said he had heard each week, but frankly his words seemed a little hollow to me.

No matter how orthodox my messages were, they apparently hadn't penetrated his heart. I thought about the plaque one pastor placed on the inside of his pulpit. Every time he stood to preach, he read, “What in the world are you doing to these people?”

I'm asking myself that question a lot these days. What message am I communicating to the people under my spiritual care about their eternal destinies? Is some flaw in my teaching responsible for the lack of measurable change in the lives of my congregants? Is it possible that I've gotten it wrong all these years and have completely missed what God really requires of me? Am I going to be surprised when I stand before God one day and hear His evaluation of my life?

I assume you were attracted to this book because you sincerely want to “get it right” when it comes to your relationship with God. You may or may not have yet crossed the midlife milestone, but something inside you yearns to cut through the clutter of Christianity and discover what God

really wants *from* you and *for* you. Face it. Christianity has become unbelievably complicated by secondary issues.

One of my recently acquired addictions is reading Christian blogs. A newspaper interviewer asked me recently if I blogged, and I sanctimoniously responded, “No, I’m too busy trying to share God’s Word rather than my musings about life.” But my schedule doesn’t keep me from *reading* the musings of others. Right now some of these blogs are filled with wranglings over theological issues.

Reading these back-and-forth exchanges, you’d think that the ability to precisely parse the correct answers to these issues is what the Christian faith is all about. I like what one person wrote after someone suggested a laborious rewording of a particular statement of doctrine: “It seems to me that our personal relationship with Christ should be more enjoyable than doing our taxes.”

Again, don’t misunderstand. I appreciate the importance of correct theology. But do we really think when we get to heaven, God will judge us according to our ability to properly articulate the relationship between His sovereignty and our responsibility? At the judgment seat of Christ, will the Lord distribute blue books to each of us and ask us to diagram the end times?

For the less theologically inclined, the essence of Christianity may be embracing the right cultural causes. After all, they remind us, “Faith without works is dead” (James 2:26). Some popular causes we’re encouraged to champion include the elimination of poverty in third-world countries; the fight against same-sex marriages; and opposition to abortion, stem-cell research, and human cloning. Again, all worthy causes, to be sure. But as you read the New Testament—written during one of the most morally decadent periods in human history—can you honestly surmise that what God wants most from us is to become cultural warriors?

Are these theological points and cultural matters really the issues about which God is most concerned? Is He waiting breathlessly in heaven and hoping against hope that we're able to formulate a doctrinal statement that explains Him in human terms or to eradicate every social evil on the planet?

The contemporary landscape of Christianity today reminds me of Jesus's admonition to Martha in Luke 10:

Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only a few things are necessary, really only one.
(verses 41–42)

The problem with focusing on secondary concerns is that it causes us to miss what God really desires from us. It's time to cut through the clutter and discover what the Christian faith is really all about.

Clutter-Free Christianity

Hans Hofmann wrote, "The ability to simplify means to eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary may speak."²

The business world increasingly understands the importance of simplicity. Last year both my teenage daughters wanted the same item for Christmas: Apple iPods. After taking out a second mortgage on our home, I was able to purchase these portable musical devices that have sold millions of units. While iPods are expensive, they're also incredibly simple to operate—just one large button in the center with four touch points controls the entire device. Apple successfully reduced complex technology into a simple operating system that anyone can use.

So what can Christians learn from the corporate world? For starters,

perhaps the reason our faith seems to make so little difference in our lives is that we've clouded Christianity with secondary concerns and missed the core issue. And maybe we've become so distracted by so many things that we miss the one thing God is most interested in.

The Pharisees had the unusual gift of complicating the simple. They formulated 613 regulations for living. But, as we saw earlier, Jesus reduced these hundreds of laws into two simple principles: love God with all your heart and love others as yourself.

“Wait a minute, Lord! Aren't You forgetting a few things? What about abstaining from immorality, setting aside anger, forgiving those who wrong us, being a good steward of the earth's resources, and the myriad other commands in Scripture? Are You saying You don't care about any of this?”

Of course not. God is concerned about those areas of our lives, and many more. Yet God understands that the basic issue in life is the condition of our heart. Unless our heart is right, nothing else can be right. The writer of Proverbs advised:

Watch over your heart with all diligence,
For from it flow the springs of life. (4:23)

Think about it. Every issue you confront is related to the condition of your heart:

- Whether you continue to be paralyzed by fear over that potential disaster looming on the horizon depends on whether you have a fearful heart or a trusting heart.
- Whether you allow anger to govern your life is determined by whether you have developed a bitter heart or a forgiving heart.
- Whether you allow money to consume your thoughts depends on whether you have a greedy heart or a content heart.

- Whether you ultimately fall into the trap of immorality is determined by whether you have an adulterous heart or a pure heart.

Christians tend to get it backward when it comes to our relationship with God. We try to modify our behavior without ever doing anything to transform our hearts, where our behavior originates. We join accountability groups to break our addictions. We cut up our charge cards in an attempt to control our spending. And we medicate ourselves to relieve our anxiety. But we still find it impossible to experience victory over pornography, greed, or fear. Why? Because we haven't dealt with the heart of the issue—our heart.

On a Christmas Eve afternoon a few years ago, I was showering, getting ready for our church's annual candlelight service. While I was standing in the stall, a very offensive smell began to suffocate me. Although I'd waited until the afternoon to shower, I quickly realized that I couldn't smell that bad! I looked down and saw the source of the problem. I won't go into the gross details, but all kinds of unspeakable things started gurgling up from the shower drain, over the edge of the shower, and onto the bathroom tile. Merry Christmas!

I quickly leaped out of the shower and yelled for my wife, and we began a serious mop-up operation. Once the floor was clean, I used my vast knowledge of plumbing to fix the problem. Reaching under the bathroom sink, I retrieved a bottle of Drano, poured it down the shower drain, and then turned on the water as the directions dictated. And up—and out—it all came again.

Fortunately, we found a plumber willing to pay a visit on Christmas Eve. He quickly surmised that the problem was not in the drain, but instead could be traced to the sewage line. Some aggressive underground

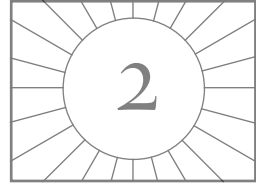
tree roots had clogged the lines and caused the backup of refuse. Only by dealing with the root problem could we be free of the resulting mess.

Every day you and I have offensive thoughts, attitudes, and actions that flow from our hearts. When even *we* are offended by the resulting stench, how must God react?

What can we do about the refuse in our lives? We can spend our time in futile mop-up operations, or we can get to the root of all of our problems: our heart. “Watch over your heart with all diligence.” Greed, anger, adultery, addiction, and a thousand other vices aren’t our real problem. They’re just symptoms of the real problem: a heart that hasn’t been properly guarded and cultivated so that it can love God and others fully.

What can we do about the condition of our hearts? More than you might think. Together, we’ll discover how we can cooperate with God to transform our hearts—and, as a result, our entire lives.

That’s what God really wants from you—and *for* you.



Simply Supernatural

Connecting Your Heart to God's Power

Talk about spiritual transformation and you may get glazed looks. We shouldn't be surprised. Phrases like "conformed to the image of Christ," "obeying Christ in every area of life," or "Christ in you the hope of glory" do little to excite the average Christian. We've heard it all before and have become numb to it.

Yet, in contexts outside of the Bible, the possibility of supernatural transformation seizes our imagination and lies at the heart of our favorite stories.

When I was a child, I dressed up in blue tights and a red cape and sat glued to our black-and-white television set watching *Adventures of Superman*. Millions of children just like me were enthralled by the transformation of mild-mannered reporter Clark Kent into the Man of Steel.

Some fifty years later, the special effects have improved, but the intriguing plot—an ordinary person discovering he has supernatural powers—remains one of our favorite fantasies. Currently, one of the top-rated

television programs is about “ordinary people discovering extraordinary abilities.” The story involves a genetics professor in India who uncovers the truth that seemingly normal people among us possess supernatural powers. A high school cheerleader learns that she’s indestructible, a young dreamer discovers that he can fly, and a down-on-his-luck police officer has the ability to hear what others are thinking.

Why do millions of viewers tune in to this program every week?

Because we’re naturally enthralled by the possibility of living a supernatural life.

A True Supernatural Transformation

Being able to reach inside ourselves and access a power that will lift us above our humdrum, everyday existence isn’t only intriguing...it really is possible. As a Christian, you’ve been genetically engineered to transform into someone more super than Superman and more incredible than the Incredible Hulk. You have the extraordinary ability to be transformed into the person of Jesus Christ. Think about that! Within you lies the potential to

- think the thoughts that Jesus thought
- possess the inner peace that Jesus possessed
- enjoy the freedom from material concerns that Jesus enjoyed
- experience the connection to God’s power that Jesus experienced
- respond to mistreatment as Jesus responded
- receive the praise from God that Jesus continues to receive

Spiritual transformation is about an ordinary person like you discovering that you indeed have extraordinary abilities...and living accordingly. This is more than the storyline for a television series. It’s a reality for everyone who has trusted in Christ as Savior. The apostle Paul described the

Christians in Galatia as “my children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is *formed* in you” (Galatians 4:19).

This verse is pregnant (pardon the pun) with symbolism. The word *formed* is a translation of the Greek word *morphō*, which describes the growth of an embryo in the mother’s womb. Think of the supernatural phenomenon of a tiny fertilized egg morphing into a full-sized and fully functioning human being. That minuscule egg, invisible to the naked eye, possesses all of the energy necessary for transforming itself into a being millions of times larger in size, developing a brain capable of creating a nuclear weapon to destroy the planet where it lives, and interacting in meaningful relationships with other human beings and with its Creator.

Similarly, when you become a Christian, you’re impregnated with a “seed...imperishable” (1 Peter 1:23) that contains all of the spiritual energy necessary to morph you into the image of Jesus Christ. In a bit, we’ll discuss the way this transformation occurs. But it’s that possibility I want you to consider right now.

What God wants *from* you and *for* you—above all else—is for you to resemble Jesus Christ in your attitudes, actions, and affections. In fact, those areas provide a good way to define *spiritual transformation* as meaning “thinking as Jesus thought, doing what Jesus did, and loving what Jesus loved.” Consider just some of the many passages in the Bible that describe God’s desire for our complete transformation:

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become *conformed* to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren. (Romans 8:29)

And do not be conformed to this world, but be *transformed* by the renewing of your mind. (Romans 12:2)

But we all...are being *transformed* into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

Christ in you, the hope of glory. (Colossians 1:27)

I'll confess to you that the above words didn't excite me that much—not initially. I've read these verses and heard so many sermons using the phrase “conformed to the image of Christ” that I almost put myself to sleep when I preach the same message to my congregation or write this message to you. Why is that?

Familiarity breeds contempt...and boredom. Anything you hear repeatedly—especially if it involves the same words—can anesthetize your response. But I believe the primary cause of the apathetic feeling most of us have about spiritual transformation (go ahead, you can admit it) is our failure to grasp the benefits of such a life. We'll discuss this more in the next section, but you'll never be excited about something—much less pursue something—until you believe it will benefit you.

Consider for a moment some benefits that you'd enjoy if you could miraculously morph into Jesus Christ. Imagine a life where:

- You were completely free from worry about *anything*.
- You felt content about your financial situation.
- You had no ill feelings toward anyone.
- You weren't enslaved to any destructive habits.
- Your outward circumstances had no effect on your inward happiness.
- You had the assurance that God was pleased with your life.

This kind of life isn't a pipe dream. It's a possibility. How do I know? Because this is exactly the kind of life that Jesus lived, and the embryo of His life has been implanted in each of us who knows Him. What we must

do to ensure the growth of that embryo into the full-grown person of Christ in us is the subject matter of this book.

However, to clearly understand what spiritual transformation is, we need to clarify what it isn't. I grew up in a family that didn't have much money but loved ice cream. Sometimes when we found ourselves running out of money before we ran out of month, my parents would purchase a substitute ice cream called mellorine for forty-nine cents a gallon. Only aging Baby Boomers might remember the name—or the awful taste—of this poor man's ice cream. But trust me, a few servings of mellorine could quench your desire for any kind of frozen dessert, including ice cream.

Author John Ortberg identifies two cheap substitutes for spiritual transformation that, like mellorine, squelch our desire for the real thing; in place of being transformed, some Christians settle for being informed or conformed. I define these cheap substitutes as follows:

Informed

It's far too easy to equate spiritual information with spiritual transformation. For some believers, the goal of the Christian life involves learning as much about the Bible and theology as possible. They think this knowledge will somehow magically and automatically transform them into the kind of people they should be. If that's true, why are knowledgeable Christians some of the meanest people on earth? Why do gifted teachers of the Word regularly fall into sexual immorality and addictions? Why do we hear so many stories of well-taught believers completely abandoning their beliefs?

Conformed

For other Christians, conforming to some man-made system of beliefs and behavior is equated with spiritual transformation. According to Ortberg, many religious groups establish "boundary markers"—highly visible and

usually superficial standards of dress, behavior, or beliefs that help the group distinguish who is in the club and who is outside the club. Unfortunately, many Christians in these subsets (commonly known as denominations) confuse conformation to these artificial standards with spiritual transformation.

For the purpose of full disclosure, I'm part of a religious denomination known for such artificial boundaries. If asked to define a Southern Baptist, the average person off the street would probably say, "Someone who doesn't drink, dance, or have any fun." Some of my Baptist brethren are probably insulted by that caricature, protesting that no such standard is embraced today. Maybe that's true, but we Baptists are constantly tempted to adopt some new artificial standards to help us maintain our identity. Last year a leader in our denomination said that we needed to take a stand against contemporary praise music. When asked why, he responded, "How else can we distinguish ourselves as Baptists?" Although he was resoundingly criticized by fellow leaders, his attitude reflects that of many Christians who have confused conformation to a man-made standard with spiritual transformation.

In Jesus's day, the Pharisees adopted conformation as their preferred substitute for spiritual transformation. They established a superficial standard of conduct, prided themselves for adherence to it, and criticized anyone who didn't conform. Jesus, in turn, criticized *them* for missing the whole point:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. (Matthew 23:25–26)

What God really desires from you isn't a head filled with information, and God also isn't interested in your conformation to some superficial standard of behavior. What God wants for you is a complete transformation of your entire life.

If He has already planted the possibility for such a change within you, what hinders that transformation in your life? I believe Christians fail to experience spiritual transformation for the following misguided reasons.

It's Not Necessary

Perhaps the most pervasive reason Christians fail to become the kind of people God wants them to be is the mistaken idea that spiritual transformation is nice, but not necessary. Receiving my free ticket to heaven is what really matters; anything beyond that is optional. Allowing God to reign over my thoughts, actions, and attitudes is like an upgrade from coach to first-class—a luxury reserved only for those who care to pay the extra price.

But is that really the message of the New Testament? Did Jesus make allowance for belief without obedience? Read what Scripture says about Jesus and then decide for yourself:

He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him. (John 3:36)

If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me. (John 12:26)

He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me; and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and will disclose Myself to him. (John 14:21)

He who does not love Me does not keep My words. (John 14:24)

I like the old joke about a man who died after living a godless, immoral life. To his surprise, however, he found himself in a world of bright sunlight, soft music, and people all dressed in white.

I sure never expected to wind up here, he thought to himself. *I suppose God must have a soft spot in His heart for people like me.* He turned to one of the figures dressed in white and said, “Can I buy you a drink? I’ve got something to celebrate.”

“If you are referring to an alcoholic beverage, we don’t serve those here,” the angel responded.

“No booze, huh? Well, how about a game of poker?”

“Sir, we don’t gamble here, either,” the angelic figure replied.

The man was perplexed. “Then what do you do around here all day?”

“Well, we sing a lot of hymns. There is a Bible study every morning and a prayer meeting every afternoon.”

“Hymns, prayer meetings, Bible studies? Boy, heaven is not what it’s cracked up to be.”

The figure in white smiled. “You don’t understand. We’re in heaven; you’re in hell.”

Behind this cute story is the profound truth that heaven is reserved for those who love praising God, talking to God, and obeying God. It’s illogical to think that we could spend our entire lives rebelling against God’s rule over our life on earth and then want to spend eternity submitting to His authority in heaven. Dallas Willard wrote:

One should seriously inquire if to live in a world permeated with God and the knowledge of God is something they themselves truly desire. If not, they can be assured that God will excuse them from his presence. They will find their place in the “outer darkness” of which Jesus spoke. But the fundamental fact about them will not be that they are there, but that they have become people so locked into their own self-worship and denial of God that *they cannot want God*.¹

It's Not Desirable

Have you noticed that we often consider the unpleasant things of life as being optional? Exercise, diets, and controlling our spending aren't practiced behaviors because they aren't desired behaviors. For the most part, we end up doing the things that we really want to do. Taking a vacation with my family each summer, watching the next episode of *24* each week, and eating a bowl of Häagen Dazs vanilla ice cream each night might not always be possible, yet I'll try to find a way to do these things simply because I want to do them.

The same principle is at work in our relationship with God. I appreciate the honesty of this simple prayer: “Lord, I don't love You. I don't even want to love You. But I want to want to love You.” Perhaps you've felt the same way about the subject of spiritual transformation: “Lord, I'm not like Jesus. I don't even want to be like Jesus. But I want to want to be like Jesus.” We must want to want to be like Jesus before we'll ever become like Jesus. And that means being convinced that spiritual transformation is really something desirable.

To be like Jesus means to live like Jesus, and that means allowing God to have the final say in every part of life. The essence of spiritual transformation—the essence of living in the kingdom of God—is submitting to God's rule in all aspects of our lives. The central message of Jesus Christ concerned the kingdom of God:

Jesus was going about in all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues,
and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom. (Matthew 4:23)

As you go, preach, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.”
(Matthew 10:7)

He said to them, “I must preach the kingdom of God to the
other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose.” (Luke 4:43)

What is the “kingdom of God” or the “kingdom of heaven” that Jesus
announced and invites us to participate in? It’s actually quite simple. A
monarch’s kingdom consists of the territory he rules. Within that piece of
real estate, whatever the king wants done, the king gets done.

While it’s true that God is sovereign (a word simply meaning “in
charge”) over all creation, He has chosen to allow a rebellion against His
will in one small portion of the universe. That territory is the human heart.
But the condition is only temporary.

One day God’s authority will be recognized and obeyed by everyone
on the planet. Some refer to that period of time as “the Millennium” (the
thousand-year rule of Christ on the earth) while others call it the “new
heaven and the new earth” described in Revelation 21. Regardless of what
you name it, Old Testament prophets like Isaiah eagerly anticipated this
time when all the earth would submit to God’s rule:

But with righteousness He will judge the poor,
And decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth....
And the wolf will dwell with the lamb,
And the leopard will lie down with the kid....

They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain,
For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
As the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11:4, 6, 9)

Can you imagine how magnificent it will be to live in a world where whatever God wants done, gets done? The poor are no longer taken advantage of. The afflicted are relieved of their problems. No one mistreats another person. Everyone submits to God's will.

Relegating this kingdom of God exclusively to some future period in history, however, unnecessarily postpones the benefits of living under God's perfect and protective reign. In a sense, we can experience the kingdom of God right now. How?

Jesus told a series of stories in Matthew 13 to illustrate how God's kingdom secretly operates in the hearts of individuals who submit themselves to His authority. While God's rule over the entire earth has been postponed until Christ's return to earth, we can still experience the benefits of God's rule in our personal lives. And those benefits have incomparable value, as Jesus illustrated in this brief parable:

The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has, and buys that field. (verse 44)

Some years ago our family owned some farmland that we sold for what we thought was a fair price. Little did we know that underneath that land was one of the largest reserves of natural gas in this part of the country. Had we retained the mineral rights, I'd probably be enjoying life on a tropical island somewhere.

Interestingly, last week an attorney called me and said he believed there was a chance that we'd retained a minuscule claim on the rights to that land. Since that time, I've had visions of Jed Clampett dancing in my head! We're willing to go to extensive trouble and expense to prove our small interest in that property because of its great value.

The man in Jesus's parable had a similar experience. The treasure he discovered in a field he didn't own was so valuable that he was willing to pay any price to obtain title to that land.

Jesus was teaching that if we really understand the value of the kingdom of God, we'll be willing to pay any price and expend every effort necessary to obtain it.

Instead of limiting the kingdom of God to heaven or to some future period in time, we need to understand that the kingdom of God is any-place where God's will is being obeyed. Isn't that what Jesus taught in the model prayer?

Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven. (Matthew 6:10)

Right now God's will is being accomplished in heaven. We should pray for the time when God's will shall be done on earth. And in the meantime we can experience the incomparable benefits of God's will being accomplished in our own lives.

First, however, we must be persuaded that submission to God's will is really desirable...and we aren't fully convinced of that, are we? In fact, we believe the opposite. We've allowed the Enemy to deceive us into believing that God's rule over our:

- sexual lives will result in frustration
- vocations will result in our living in a hut in Africa
- dreams will result in disappointment
- desire for significance will result in obscurity
- finances will result in poverty
- relationships will result in loneliness

Don't believe any of that for a moment. Satan is "a liar and the father of lies," Jesus said (John 8:44, NIV). The truth is that submitting to God's authority in our lives results in:

- freedom from worry
- contentment with our finances
- harmony in our relationships
- power over destructive addictions
- inner peace in spite of outward circumstances

Jesus experienced all of this and more because He placed every part of His life under God's rule. His experience can be your experience if you're willing to make the effort to allow Christ's life to be formed in you.

It's Not Possible

Another misconception that keeps us from experiencing spiritual transformation is that we don't think it can happen. I might, for example, wish I were six feet tall. I wish I'd win the lottery. I'd like to speak several languages fluently. I'd like to win the Pulitzer Prize. All of those objectives are desirable, but they're either not possible or not probable. So why try?

After reading about the invaluable benefits of living under God's complete rule of your life, you might have sensed your spirit starting to soar a little as you began to imagine what such an existence would be like. Then

reality set in as you realized that every resolution you've ever made to change has resulted in disappointment:

- You've never had any power over your appetites.
- Worrying seems to be your favorite pastime.
- You find it impossible to forgive those who have hurt you deeply.
- You feel that you're slipping further and further away from God.

So why attempt to do something you know is impossible? Why add to your list of broken resolutions? Living like Jesus Christ may be desirable, but we've convinced ourselves that it's beyond our reach.

Recently I saw a cartoon on the editorial page of a national newspaper. The first frame pictured a television reporter announcing, "The government is now targeting single adults with its abstinence-only program." In the second frame the reporter continued, "Future programs will try to keep birds from flying and fish from swimming."

Such cynicism about our ability to overcome our natural impulses has crept into the Christian world as well. Say no to sex outside of marriage? Resist the impulse to hurt those who hurt us? Separate our inward peace from our outward circumstances? Refuse to worry about the future? Experience contentment regardless of our income? As the *Seinfeld* character Kramer would say, "That's kooky talk!" It's just not natural.

That's right. It's *supernatural*, meaning it's above the natural. But supernatural living is possible because of the supernatural power every Christian possesses. Paul explained:

For the power of the life-giving Spirit—and this power is mine through Christ Jesus—has freed me from the vicious circle of sin and death.... So now we can obey God's laws if we follow after

the Holy Spirit and no longer obey the old evil nature within us.

(Romans 8:2, 4, TLB)

It's Not Planned For

Finally, we don't experience spiritual transformation because we don't plan for it. Imagine that, after fifteen years of living in your present home, you decide to make a change. The demands of a growing family coupled with the natural deterioration of your current residence require you to do something. However, the memories you've built in your current home and your enjoyment of the neighborhood cause you to rule out both moving to another house and completely leveling the one you occupy. What you really want isn't a completely new home, but a renovated home.

You can envision the benefits of expanded living areas, fresh paint, and updated appliances. Yes, an extensive renovation will be costly and messy, but the finished product will be well worth the effort. Maybe an unexpected inheritance from a dear old aunt means you can afford the project.

However, determining that the renovation is necessary, desirable, and possible isn't enough. You need to create a plan to execute and complete the project. You need to take such steps as selecting an architect to design the plans for the renovation, establishing a budget, setting a schedule, and hiring a contractor. And, of course, laborers must actually do the work. Renovations don't happen automatically.

Could it be that one reason you and I aren't experiencing the kind of spiritual transformation I've described so far is that we don't have a plan for the renovation of our attitudes, actions, and affections? Think about it. What plan do you have for any of the following?

- freeing yourself from concerns about money
- conquering those addictions that are destroying your life

- refusing to allow resentment to be your response to mistreatment
- making obedience to God's commands your normal response

This kind of spiritual transformation doesn't just happen. Again, believing that such transformation is essential, desirable, and possible isn't enough. We must develop a plan—and execute it.

Costly? You better believe it.

Difficult? Without a doubt.

But the finished product is well worth the effort.