THE WAY OF A DISCIPLE
WALKING WITH JESUS

DON COUSINS AND JUDSON POLING
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PREFACE

The Walking with God Series was developed as the core curriculum for small groups at Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois. The material here flows out of the vision and values of this dynamic and world-renowned ministry. In the early years of Willow Creek, small groups using these studies produced many of the leaders, both staff and volunteer, throughout the church.

Don Cousins, who at the time was associate pastor at Willow Creek, wrote the first draft of this material and used it with his own small group. After testing it there, he revised it and passed his notes to Judson Poling, who was the director of curriculum development. Judson edited and expanded the outlines, and then several pilot groups helped retool the material. After the pilot groups completed the studies, a team of leaders labored through a yearlong, line-by-line revision. The revisions became the original six-volume Walking with God Series. Since its first publication in 1992, the series has sold more than one million copies and has been translated into seven languages.

Thirty years later, the authors have reworked the six-book series and created this updated and condensed edition, now 42 sessions in two volumes (instead of 78 sessions in six books). However, while there are fewer sessions overall, the authors have made sure this adaptation is true to the original and retains the distinctives of that proven study. They believe this new version will reach a whole new generation of Christ-followers who seek to become mature disciples of Jesus. A small group that uses and completes The Way of a Disciple: Walking with Jesus and The Work of a Disciple: Living Like Jesus will lay a solid foundation for a lifelong walk with God.
At its core, Christianity is Christ. Christians embrace a Person, not merely a philosophy. It is not so much knowing about his teaching as it is about knowing him. The greatest misunderstanding about Christianity today, even in the church, is the perception that God’s bottom-line requirements are deeds to be done and beliefs to be believed. The Christ who spoke is bypassed for the things he spoke; the Guide is left behind for the guidance; the Commander is ignored for the carrying out of commands.

This series addresses the problem by encouraging Christians to develop a relationship with the living God. We believe that mature discipleship encompasses four foundational practices. A disciple of Jesus Christ is one who . . .

- Walks with God
- Lives the Word
- Contributes to the work of Christ
- Impacts the world

The two volumes in this series will encourage these four activities in the life of a believer. This volume, *The Way of a Disciple*, begins with a study of that essential relationship between you and God ("Developing Intimacy with God"). The next two parts examine the life of Jesus ("Getting to Know Jesus" and "Following Jesus"). The next volume, *The Work of a Disciple*, discusses your place in the gathering of
believers known as the church ("Life-Changing Community" and "Building Your Church"). The study concludes by discussing ways you can make your mark for God's kingdom ("Making a Difference in Your World").

We do not intend to bury people in mountains of theological information. Our interest is in transforming hearts. We would readily recommend two years of a small-group experience that truly caused people to know God over twenty years of "Christian education" that rendered them all but dead to the real world and the God who is willing to walk with them in it. Group discussions alone won't produce that change. Thus, we have designed the weekly assignments as a systematic way of getting people to begin their own times alone with God—a practice we believe (and objective data shows) leads to deep and lasting transformation.*

Here is probably the best way to measure success for all who use this series: * How consistently do you walk with God after the study is over? *

* See Greg Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, Move: What 1,000 Churches REVEAL about Spiritual Growth (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).
A FRIEND WORTH HAVING

PERSONAL STUDY: John 1–3; 1 John 1–2
SCRIPTURE MEMORY: Revelation 3:20; 1 John 5:13
ON YOUR OWN: What Is God Like?

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”
—A. W. Tozer

What Is Your View of God?

Suppose you have to choose between two people who want to go to dinner with you. The first person is very warm and takes a genuine interest in others. He listens attentively and is fun to be with. Those who develop a friendship with him want it to last a lifetime.

In contrast, the second person is aloof and demanding. He keeps most of his friends (if you could call them that) at a distance. The only time he calls you is when he wants something from you. He’s pretty unpredictable emotionally, and you never quite know where you stand with him. He wields considerable influence, but if it weren’t for his power, he probably wouldn’t have any friends at all.
The Way of a Disciple

You'd rather have dinner with the first person, right?

Now think about your image of God. Which is he more like—the first person or the second? Unfortunately, many people have a distorted view of God’s character. To them, he’s a divine version of the second person—distant and uncaring. Although he is powerful, they can’t count on him. The only real benefit in knowing him comes from occasional answers to prayer. No wonder people have a hard time relating to God! Who would want to cultivate a friendship like that?

If your view of God has been colored by mistaken assumptions and erroneous ideas, it can be startling to learn that God longs to establish a close, intimate friendship with you. This study will help you understand what it means to relate to God in a personal way and how you can be assured of your eternal destiny. Let this one truth sink in: God is a Friend worth having.

1. What are some necessary ingredients for building a relationship with another person?

2. How do these compare with what you think might be necessary ingredients for cultivating a relationship with God?

Why You Can Have a Personal Relationship with God

3. God has chosen you. Why is it significant that Jesus said, “I chose you” (John 15:16)?

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A Friend Worth Having

4. *God wants to spend time with you.* What does it mean when Jesus says that he wants to eat with you (see Revelation 3:20)?

5. *God will never leave you.* How do you respond to the promise that God will never leave you (see Hebrews 13:5)?

What God Has Given You to Establish This Relationship

6. *He gave you his Son.* What did God accomplish through giving his Son (see John 3:16)?

7. *He gave you a book.* Why is the Bible so important for your relationship with God (see Matthew 4:4)?

8. *He gave you his Spirit.* What does the Holy Spirit do for you (see John 16:13–14)?
How to Be Sure You’re a Christian

No couple can build a lasting marriage if one partner is unsure of the love of the other. What if a spouse isn’t even sure if the other person accepts him or her completely and doubts the other’s commitment for life? A marriage with that degree of uncertainty is unstable and unhealthy.

The same is true in our relationship with God. People who aren’t sure of their salvation can never fully experience the blessing of their union with Christ. On the other hand, there are people who assume they will go to heaven while failing to ask what might still stand in the way. These people may live with false hope and may possibly face eternal destruction.

When it comes to assurance of salvation, people fall into three categories: (1) those who live with confidence that they have salvation; (2) those who at times doubt their salvation; and (3) those who hope they are forgiven but lack assurance.

False Assurances of Salvation

Examine the following assumptions. I'm assured of salvation because . . .

- I believe there is a God.
- I'm basically a good person.
- I attend church and pray often.
- I was baptized or confirmed.
- I once prayed a prayer and asked God into my heart.

9. “I believe there is a God.” How can a person believe in God and yet not have salvation?
10. “I’m basically a good person.” Why is trusting one’s own goodness a false basis for being included in God’s kingdom?

11. “I attend church and pray often.” Why doesn’t being religious give enough assurance of salvation?

12. “I was baptized or confirmed.” Why could a person have been baptized yet not have assurance of salvation?

13. “I once prayed a prayer and asked God into my heart.” How could a person invite God into his or her heart and still not have a relationship with God?

Genuine Assurance of Salvation

14. *Read John 1:12.* According to this verse, what do we do?
15. According to this verse, what does God do?

16. *Read John 5:24.* According to this verse, what do we do?

17. According to this verse, what does God do?

Tests for Those Who Want to Be Sure

18. *The repentance test.* What does it mean for a person to repent (see Acts 3:19)?

19. *The presence test.* What does the Holy Spirit do for a believer (see Romans 8:15–16)?

20. *The evidence test.* What will be true of someone who has an authentic relationship with Christ (see 1 John 2:3–6)?
Apply It to Your Life

21. Read 1 John 5:11–13. The phrase “that you may know” implies a strong level of certainty. Why might God want you to be sure that you possess eternal life?

Your Walk with God

Central to the values behind this series is the belief that regular appointments with God will serve your spiritual life better in the long run than doing fill-in-the-blank “homework” related to the small-group study. Therefore, in this curriculum, your walk with God is the homework. Considering the pace of modern life, we thought it impractical for the average person to complete lengthy assignments to prepare for group meetings and have quiet times. For this reason, the material in this section was designed to help you establish simple foundational practices to enable you to maintain a vital connection with God.

Bible

Schedule three times this week to be alone with God. Pick the time during the day that works best for you. Each day, read the passage indicated below, write down one idea for application, and make a list of what you learn about Jesus from your study. Also, read over the article in the On Your Own section that follows.

Day One: John 1:1–2:12

Some of the things I observe in this passage:
THE WAY OF A DISCIPLE

One idea for how to apply this passage to my life:

**Day Two: John 2:14–3:36**

Some of the things I observe in this passage:

One idea for how to apply this passage to my life:

**Day Three: 1 John 1–2**

Some of the things I observe in this passage:

One idea for how to apply this passage to my life:
Prayer

Spend a few minutes praying about things that come to mind during your Bible reading. Also, identify something for which you can be thankful. At the end of the week, list two or three benefits you received from these appointments with God.

Scripture Memory

As part of the curriculum, we’ve included memory verses with each study. If you desire to make this discipline part of your discipleship experience, begin by memorizing these verses:

*Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me* (Revelation 3:20).

*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life* (1 John 5:13).

Next time, we will begin a lesson on the value of personal Bible study, the difference between reading the Bible and studying it, and the importance of memorizing Scripture. If you want to prepare for the study, think about different ways you can get the teachings of the Bible into your life. Then consider why the Bible is important and what it does for you.

On Your Own: What Is God Like?

Most people think they know the answer to that question. It wouldn't even occur to them that they might not have an accurate picture of God. “Everybody knows what God is like! He’s, uh . . . well, he’s . . .” What follows is a mishmash of ideas people have heard from parents and teachers over the years—ideas never critically examined but firmly believed. At an even deeper level, what people feel toward God flows out of their life experiences—and is equally subjective and untested.
My grandma talked about God, and she was very nice to me—I guess I see God like her.

I grew up in a very strict home with lots of rules—pretty much like God treats me now.

Most ministers say God loves me—I guess he's like that.

Most ministers say God is really mad at me—I guess he's like that.

Let's begin with this assumption: some of our perspectives about God are wrong. We've seen too much, been hurt too much, and been confused too much to assert we've got an accurate picture of God in every area. Somehow, we got some misinformation—every one of us. So we'll either have to take deliberate steps to reeducate ourselves about what he's like, or our view of him will continue to be out of focus . . . and will probably get worse with time.

Getting an Accurate Picture

Where do we begin to get an accurate picture? A good place to start is with what God has done. By seeing his acts, we can get a picture of the one responsible for them. Just as art tells us something about the artist, or a person's work tells us about his or her abilities and interests, what God has created tells us about what he, the Creator, is like.

As we look at creation—nature, the world, the stars and planets—one undeniable conclusion emerges: the one responsible for all this must be powerful beyond comparison. From the tiniest single-cell amoeba to entire distant galaxies racing away at unimaginable speeds, from an intricately complex snowflake to a sunset that sends amber blasts of color across the expansive sky, God's handiwork is so evident that we actively have to suppress what we see and feel in order to ignore him.

Yet the Bible tells us that is exactly what we do (see Romans 1:18–20). That inner sense of his majesty—clearly evident in the cosmos—is squelched. We hear the Voice . . . and ignore it. And so, while we all carry around some sense of his grandeur, we've modified our image of him until the gap between who we perceive
him to be and who he really is becomes uncrossable. Sin—our deliberate attempts to expel him from the throne of the universe and our passive indifference to his rule—not only messes up our lives but also our view of God.

But our condition is not hopeless. God doesn’t just do—he speaks. He talks to us. He sends messages. He tells us the truth through prophets and leaders. The Bible is the written record of his love. We learn things from this book that we couldn’t know otherwise.

What We Learn from the Bible

For one thing, we learn that we need to cultivate and expand the sense of awe we get from his creation. Every notion we have of his power is true—and then some. But we also learn that his power is restrained. He isn’t an angry father about to blow his cool. He’s a loving Father desiring to be close to us.

In the earliest parts of the Bible, we see God calling out a single man, Abraham, for a special purpose: to make a nation that would represent God to the world. That group of people was intended to be a tangible picture of his love, power, justice, and holiness. They’d be different from the rest of the world—because he is different. They’d be holy—because he is holy. They’d show compassion—because he is compassionate. They’d avoid sin—because he has no sin. They’d be blessed—because it is his nature to bless. Next to the picture of God painted in creation would be this picture painted through a unique group of people. He would talk to them and talk to the rest of the world through them.

But God didn’t just do and didn’t just speak. He became. His work ordered the nothingness and made it a world for all to see. His words came to the prophets and apostles and made a book for all to read. His Word came to dwell among us in Jesus for all to receive. We see his handiwork; we read his book; we meet his Son. Jesus is the ultimate picture of God—the work, words, and Word of God incarnate. What Jesus does, God does. What he loves, God loves. What he hates, God hates. What he says, God says. How he acts, God acts.

Look no further for clarification of what God is like: the only begotten Son has
fully explained him (see John 1:18). He showed God’s awesome power by stilling
the storm, healing the sick, and raising the dead—creation was subject to him.
He showed God’s desire to speak to us by unsurpassed teaching—truth was fully
represented by him. And he lived out God’s compassion without compromising his
righteousness—God’s nature was completely embodied in him. Nowhere was this
more forcefully demonstrated than through his death on our behalf. By hating sin,
God showed justice. By forgiving sin, he showed mercy. But by being the payment
for that sin himself, he showed matchless, marvelous, magnificent grace.

What God Is

This, then, is what God is like. Theologians have come up with words that sum-
marize these qualities, or “attributes,” as they’re known. Once we get past the
somewhat formal feel of these terms, they can be useful tools to encapsulate what
we know about God. Here’s a list of his main attributes.

WAYS WE CAN’T BE LIKE GOD:

- Omnipresent: God is always near; no place is farther from him than any other
  place; he is not limited to any spatial dimensions.
- Omnipotent: God can do anything that doesn’t violate his nature; he’s
  all-powerful; nothing is impossible for him; his power is unlimited and
  unrestricted except by his own choice.
- Omniscient: God knows everything; nothing is hidden; nothing goes
  unnoticed; no situation is beyond his ability to grasp; all mysteries are clear
  to him; no one can tell him something he doesn’t already know.
- Sovereign: God is the ultimate ruler of the universe; no one is greater in
  authority or power than he; no sin or disobedience can thwart the purposes
  he desires to bring to pass.
- Eternal: God has always been; he will always be; he had no beginning; he
  will have no end; he is the creator of time; he is not subject to time but rules
  over it.
A Friend Worth Having

- **Immutable:** God doesn’t change; he isn’t getting better; his beauty can’t be diminished; he doesn’t grow or increase; he’s perfect the way he is; we can rest assured he will continue that way.
- **Infinite:** God is unlimited; whatever he is, he is to an infinite degree; we can’t measure any part of him or his attributes; he is inexhaustible in every aspect of his being.

**Ways We Should Imitate God:**

- **Holy:** God is pure; he’s without fault; he can’t be compared to anyone or anything because he’s so different from all we’ve known or experienced.
- **Wise:** God uses his knowledge skillfully; he makes sense; he is no fool; his counsel can be trusted.
- **Good:** God has no evil and can do no evil; he works for the benefit of his creatures; he can be trusted with our well-being.
- **Just:** God is fair; he doesn’t tolerate unrighteousness; he will make sure every wrong will be made right; he is impartial.
- **Loving:** Sacrifice is in God’s very nature; he cares; he gives; he serves; he works to bring about what we need; he’s compassionate; he’s sensitive; he chooses to let us matter to him.

We can come up with many other words that describe God as well: among them merciful, kind, pure, righteous, patient, faithful, trustworthy, generous, awesome, and majestic. These qualities will all be, to some degree, aspects of the main attributes we’ve listed above.

The more you get to know the Bible, the more you will discover the manifold descriptions of his nature. Look for new ways of describing him. Worship him for the many and varied facets of his being. Learn who he really is so you can gradually replace the shadows in your mind with the substance of his true nature.

What is God like? Maybe this classic children’s song says it best: “Jesus loves me, this I know; for the Bible tells me so. . . .”