

Apprenticing to Jesus | Become Like Jesus

A number of years back, my husband Steve read a book that was captivating for him. The book was entitled, **A man called Ove by Fredrik Backman**. Now Steve, who is not typically a reader was so impacted by this book, he would talk about it with anyone who would listen. It's an incredible book and more recently has been adapted into a movie (it's now on Netflix if you want to check it out) called *A Man Called Otto*, starring Tom Hanks.

The story follows the life of 63-year-old Otto Anderson, a widower who lives alone in a condo cul-de-sac. And sadly, due to the pains and losses in Otto's life – most significantly through the death of his beloved wife, Sonya – in every interaction, Otto's attitude and spirit had become hardened and bitter, essentially making him the classic “grumpy old man” constantly irritated with his neighbours and religiously policing every minor Home Owner's Association violation of the people around him. Otto had become so nitpicky, that he even cut his best friend out of his life because of how he was so fed up with his friend's unconscionable preference for Ford over Chevy!

And while Otto lived a life that was utterly grumpy and irritable on the outside, even more sadly, he had come to a point of losing any remaining purpose for life on the inside. Until, as the spoiler-alert of the story, Otto finds his hard heart slowly but surely re-softened by the unexpected – and, at first, irritating – unrelenting acts of love from a young immigrant family that moved in across the street from Otto. Eventually breaking through his hard heart and almost miraculously helping Otto recover a sense of purpose, contentment, and even a love for others, in his final days.

And as I reflected on *A Man Called Otto*, I couldn't help but think of our current conversations about *Apprenticing to Jesus*. Because the truth is we're all on a journey of becoming a certain kind of person. As we look to certain role models. Value certain character traits. And prioritize certain ways of doing things. All of which eventually add up to making us the kind of person we become. And like John Mark Comer points out in his book, *Practicing the Way*, often sending us in one of two common trajectories in the later stages of life: of either becoming one of the most gracious, happy, grateful, and relaxed people you know. Or, like *A Man Called Otto*, letting life make us bitter, cynical, grumpy, manipulative, and purposeless.

And so, the question before us today is: **What kind of person are you becoming?** And if we aspire to be a follower or apprentice of Jesus, how can we actually go on the journey of fulfilling the second goal of apprenticeship to Jesus of *becoming like him*?

In **Luke 6:40**, Jesus once said to his earliest apprentices:

Students are not greater than their teacher. But the student who is fully trained will become like the teacher.

That as part of Jesus' program with his disciples, Jesus' belief and intention was that those who followed him and aligned their life with his could actually become the kind of persons that remind people of Jesus. With similar mannerisms. Shared values. Even reacting or responding to the challenges of life in the same way Jesus did.

Now, I don't how often you think about what kind of person you're *becoming*. We may, from time to time, think about the kind of person we are today. But in the midst of

the busy pace of our lives, rarely do we pause to think: *What kind of person will I be more or less like 10 years from now? Or 20 years from now? Or 50 years from now?!*

Philosopher and spiritual writer Dallas Willard once said:

The main thing God gets out of your life is not the achievements you accomplish. It's the person you become.

That who we become is what we're ultimately remembered for and take into eternity with God. And this is true with our closest friends and family as well. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks describes this as the difference between ***"résumé virtues"*** and ***"eulogy virtues"***. Résumé virtues being what we talk about at parties: where we work, what we've accomplished, what we're hoping to do next. And eulogy virtues being what our closest loved ones remember and talk about at our funeral.

So what are the virtues of someone who becomes like Jesus? The Apostle Paul writes about this in **Colossians 3:12-15**:

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord (Jesus) forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Paul says that as people who have been adopted into God's family because of Jesus – or, said another way, have become apprentices of Jesus – we are called to clothe ourselves with the virtues of Jesus: *compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and love*. So, one way for any of us to assess whether we're becoming more or less like Jesus, based on this list, is to ask ourselves: Am I becoming *more or less compassionate*? Am I becoming *more or less kind*? Am I becoming *more*

*or less humble? More or less gentle? More or less patient? More or less forgiving?
More or less loving?* And based on my current assessment, how's my trajectory shaping up for 10, 20, or 30 years from now?

Now, this isn't intended to be discouraging, because the reality is, most of us would probably love to be *more* of all those things, and, all of us probably feel like it's easier said than done. Because when it comes to the second goal of apprenticeship to Jesus and becoming like him, it's not just about the *what* but also about the *how*. So that like Jesus said, we could intentionally participate in the process of being "**fully trained**" (Luke 6:40) by him in order to become like him.

And to appreciate the *how*, we first need to recognize that we're *already* being trained and formed into the kind of person we currently are and the kind of person we're currently on the trajectory of becoming by at least three significant forces in our lives:

- 1) The stories we believe.**
- 2) The habits we adopt.**
- 3) The people we surround ourselves with.**

First, that we all have stories that help us make sense of the world, that drive the ultimate meaning of our lives. These include stories that we've been taught from our family of origin, to stories that we've caught from the culture around us. Stories like: *Money makes the world go round*. Or: *Family comes first*. Or: *Work harder than anyone else*. Stories about "the good life" and how we think we can find it.

Second are the habits we adopt. Appreciating that, as John Mark Comer says, "the things we do, do something to us." That over time, the things we do over and over and over again wire our thought patterns and program our desires, shaping who we are

and who we're becoming. That, what we do, we *become*. Author Annie Dillard said it well when she said, ***how we spend out days is, of course, how we spend our lives.***

And third, which I'm sure comes as no surprise, is how the people we spend the most time with end up looking like us as we end up looking like them.

That our closest friendships have a profound impact in forming and transforming the way we think, talk, believe, and behave – and sometimes, even dress. I had a funny realization of this a few weeks ago. I slept over at my sister's house and when I came to breakfast in the morning, we both arrived wearing the same outfit....right down to our white Birkenstocks. What on earth? Then there was the time in 2023 that we were in Pittsburg at the Eras concert and as we were waiting for the doors to open it began to rain and we both proceeded to pull pink raincoats out of our bags and literally looked like **twins**. The people closest to us rub off on us and we rub off on them.

So, because we're already being formed by these and other forces in our lives, that's why the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome, saying **(Romans 12:2):**

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed.

That we're either in a process of *conforming* to the stories, habits, and people of our culture. Or we're intentionally seeking to be *transformed* into the likeness of Jesus. Either conforming to the forces and patterns all around us – whether we're aware of them or not. Or intentionally being transformed into a new kind of person that thinks, feels, and acts a lot like Jesus.

So then the question is: How do we overcome these forces of conformity to instead be intentionally transformed into the likeness of Jesus? And to help us consider

this, I want to share a brief summary of a theory and process for intentional spiritual formation and transformation that comes from the Practicing the Way Course.

As you can see here, the core of this process is also defined by three main elements in our lives: **teaching, practices, and community**. Three elements that we can intentionally choose and integrate into our lives to help us not just *conform* to any old stories, habits, or relational influences. But instead, can help us participate in the process of being formed into people of love in the way of Jesus, becoming more like him through the journey of apprenticeship.

First, to help us live more fully into the story and way of seeing the world that defined Jesus' life, is the invitation to orient our lives around the **teaching** of Jesus and exchange our "stories" for his. Through environments like these, reading the Bible, having conversations with other apprentices, listening to podcasts, reading books, and so on, that we would immerse our lives in listening to, learning from, understanding, and ultimately trusting the stories that Jesus believed as well as those he taught and modeled – all in a way that reframes how we understand the good life and pursue it together.

For instance, when it comes to our money, if we've believed the "more is better" story, we've probably lived much of our lives trying to earn the next buck, get the next promotion, and keep up with the Jones's (couldn't resist!). But all in a way that tends to over-busy our lives, making us anxious and never really satisfied. However, if we begin to trust Jesus' story that says **"you're far happier giving than getting" (Acts 20:35)**, that has the power to completely transform our perspective on money, work, and achievement.

Then second are the **practices** of Jesus. That if we want to transform the less than healthy habits of our lives – and especially the habits that make us less attentive, less kind, less compassionate, humble, or patient – that we’d seek to experiment with and integrate the practices of Jesus into our rhythms and routines. That rather than starting our day by immediately looking at our phones and being overwhelmed and activated by the glow of headlines, emails, and algorithms, we’d start with slowness, with quiet prayer, to fix our minds and attention on the loving presence of God who is with us and for us and holding us.

Or rather than constantly consuming – whether content, online shopping, food, drink, etc. – we’d practice saying “no” once in a while, in order to grow in contentment and self-control.

Or rather than perpetually allowing ourselves to be “too busy” for relationship, the first thing in our calendar would be intentional blocks to connect with others. With none of these practices being an end to themselves but as a means to participating in the training program of the lifestyle of Jesus that helps us love God and others.

And this last practice leads to the third element of intentional transformation: **community**. Not through ignoring or abandoning existing friendships, but by intentionally engaging in *spiritual friendships*. Friendships and community where the conversation, encouragements, confessions, and celebrations centre around apprenticing to Jesus and living as his hands and feet together. And most significantly, is about not letting our lives drift into “go it alone” isolation or loneliness. Recognizing that apprenticing to Jesus isn’t a solo sport, both in how we need the support of others and how the end goal is to *love others*, which is impossible all alone.

Now a couple more notes on this process of transformation, **as you can see along the bottom**, all of this takes place **over time** and will inevitably involve challenges, pain, and **suffering** along the way. First, that becoming like Jesus doesn't happen by flicking a light switch or receiving a zap from heaven. That in the same way that becoming the kind of person who can run a marathon doesn't just mean buying a pair of Nike shoes, watching an inspiring YouTube video, and asking a friend to run 26.2 miles with you this afternoon. But if you commit to a training program, adopt the rhythms and practices of preparation, and have a friend or two to go on the journey with, **over time**, it's possible to become the kind of person who can run a marathon.

And like I assume anyone who's trained for a race will tell you, as time goes on there will undoubtedly be challenges, obstacles, and even **suffering** on the way.

That life is hard. And due to the pains, losses, brokenness, and sin in our world, apprenticing to Jesus and becoming like him is not a ticket to a pain-free life. But instead includes an invitation to meet Jesus in our pain and suffering, and to consider how even our suffering can shape us to become more like him. Not by ignoring or numbing our pain. And not by denying or bypassing our grief. But by setting it all before Jesus to experience his love in the midst of it and allow him, over time, to work through our suffering in a way that softens our hearts to the suffering of others.

Friends, as per the second goal of apprenticing to Jesus, we actually have the invitation, opportunity, and Jesus-centred "training program" that has the power to transform us to become like Jesus. To, over time, become people who are *more* (rather than *less*) compassionate, kind, humble, patient, and loving. What, by the grace of God, *A Man Called Otto*, was fortunate to re-discover in his final days.

But just in case any of today's conversation has felt a bit more like a Jesus-y "self-help" session than the "good news" of a sermon, let's not miss the ultimate good news at the centre of it all. That while Jesus absolutely invites us to intentionally, and even practically, go on this journey and participate in his training program of "working out our salvation" with him, the beautiful reality is, we are not in control of this process and we don't have to pretend to be.

Because **at the centre of the process** is God's presence and power. His loving presence and ultimate power to do in us what none of us can do for ourselves by the grace, love, and power of his **Holy Spirit**. As the ultimate source of how anyone can, over time, truly become a person of love like Jesus.

As it says in **Galatians 5:22-23**:

But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

That this conversation isn't about *trying*, although it is about training. Not about *striving*, but about intentionally setting our lives in the presence of God's Spirit to allow him to change us from the inside out to become the kind of people who are known for love, joy, and peace by the people and world around them. And that that is the goal of apprenticeship to Jesus and the good news of who we can become today!

I want to close with a simple spiritual exercise. As you're comfortable and interested, I want to invite you to close your eyes for a moment. And as you do, I want to invite you to imagine your life at 70... (And for some in our community, we don't need to imagine!). And now I want us to consider, what do I want to be like at 70? What do I want to look like, sound like, and feel like to those around me? To my neighbours? To

my friends? To my siblings? To my kids or grandkids if I happen to have them? In the church community? In the places I volunteer? In how I interact online?

And as I approach the later stages of life, as I think about eulogy virtues, I'm asking myself – what kind of virtues do I want others to most see in me or remember about me? And will people tend to see or say, though they're not perfect, they remind me of Jesus? Because that's what's possible...

And for today, is there one story, practice, or person you want to more intentionally make a part of your life to more fully participate in Jesus' training program, where his Holy Spirit transforms us into people of love, just like him?

Let's pray together...Jesus, we know that following you is not about ideas or concepts – it's about being enchanted with you, apprenticing to you, beautifully becoming more and more like you each day as we embody your love to the world. And this is our prayer. May it be so. Amen.