

10 Steps to Finding Your Life Partner

This year, five young friends of mine are getting married: Anibál met his future wife at his church in California, Vitaliy met his fiancée at Christ for the Nations Institute, KC found David on the mission field, Ben met Tiffany while studying at Regent University, and Doug—who has been waiting the longest for his bride—got engaged to Danya last week on his 32nd birthday.

But I have many other friends, some young and some not so young, who are still waiting for the big introduction. For whatever reason, marriage hasn't happened for them. Single Christians are often told that all they must do is "wait on God" for a mate. But I believe that phrase is both overused and abused. In many cases, a single person doesn't need to wait on God; the Lord may actually be waiting on you to take some action.

If you want to be married, here are some simple steps that might help move you farther along in the process:

1. Make sure Jesus is on the throne of your life. You can never go wrong when you put God first. Matthew 6:33 says: "Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." Marriage is a need, and God is very eager to meet it. And since it is probably the biggest decision you will ever make, why trust your own instincts to choose the right person? God is the best matchmaker. Ask Him to guide you.

2. Make spiritual growth your priority. A marriage is strong when both the husband and the wife are strong Christians. If either is immature spiritually, problems will multiply. That's why you should spend your single years becoming a mature

disciple. Paul told the Corinthians that single believers should pursue “undistracted devotion to the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:35). Get involved in a church, study God’s Word and become a passionate worshipper.

3. Make a list of your relationship preferences. It’s OK to desire certain qualities in a spouse. Maybe you prefer a girl who is short, a guy who is older than you or someone who has a certain educational background. Psalm 37:4 says: “Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart.” Just check your motives and make sure your desires are not selfish or unrealistic.

4. Get rid of your false expectations and fantasies. Many singles have totally unrealistic ideas about what marriage and romance are all about. Some girls have been conditioned by Disney cartoons to expect a guy to sweep them off their feet and take them to his fairy tale castle. That’s not going to happen. Neither will you ever feel the level of heartthrob described in romance novels. Pornography has also ruined romance for people; some guys who are addicted to porn can’t even experience normal arousal without it. Come down to earth and get real. Marriage will never resemble your perfect dream world.

5. Set your moral standards high and never sell out. Every unmarried Christian needs a list of non-negotiables. Never compromise your sexual purity. If a sweet-talking guy from your church’s worship team tries to lure you into a one-night stand, refuse his charm. If you feel attracted to a girl and then realize she flirts with every guy and doesn’t share your values, back off. And never, ever date a nonbeliever with the intention of converting them. “Missionary dating” rarely has a good outcome.

6. Get busy with your life and career. The worst thing any single can do is sit around waiting for a mate. Moping is not attractive—it’s pitiful. Don’t be desperate. God loves you

just the way you are, and you don't need a husband or wife to make you valuable. Live your life. Finish your education, achieve your professional goals and get involved in ministry. It's more likely you will find your mate while pursuing your dreams than while sitting in a corner mourning your singleness. (And remember: Love does not pay the bills. You need a job to be married!)

7. Seek emotional healing. I know singles who jump from one dysfunctional dating relationship to the next and never realize they have serious issues to address. Don't wait until you are married to realize you have addictions, bitterness or unresolved pain. If you don't get rid of your drama now, your marriage will be filled with drama. Seek prayer ministry at your church or find a counselor.

8. Take care of yourself physically. You don't have to be a cover girl or a GQ stud to find a mate. We come in all shapes and sizes, and your spouse is going to love you *and* all your imperfections. But making yourself more attractive doesn't hurt! If you always look like you just got out of bed, ask some honest friends to give you a makeover. If you need to lose weight, stop making excuses and start a sensible food plan and exercise routine.

9. Develop an active social life. Some Christian guys I know are afraid to ask a girl out for coffee, yet they play video games all day while complaining about loneliness. Hello? You will never find a mate in a vacuum. You have to break out of your shell and make yourself available. You don't have to pair up when you gather with a group of singles for fellowship. Many dating relationships start as innocent friendships—and then a romantic spark turns into a flame.

10. Find a married mentor to help you prepare. You don't have to navigate the journey from dating to marriage all by yourself. Seek out a trusted older friend to help you. Ask questions. Share your fears. Marriage is a huge decision, but

a mentor can give you the courage to embrace your future. And they will be cheering the loudest at your wedding because they've played a small part in God's miracle. {eo}

Don't Close Your Heart to Refugees

My friend Matt Hyde lives in Boise, Idaho, a city that is 89 percent white. After he became the pastor of Discovery Church in 2013, he learned that refugees from many countries were living in Boise. They are from Bosnia, Serbia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Nepal, Bhutan, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Congo, Togo and Sudan.

Most of them had fled political oppression or civil war. Many spent time in crude refugee camps before they were granted permission to move to the United States. Almost all of them endured unbelievable trauma.

These refugees have changed Hyde's life—and his entire congregation. Today some of these foreigners are members of Discovery Church. A group of believers from Bhutan and Nepal use the church's facility for their own congregation. A Congolese church and an Ethiopian/Eritrean church also use the building. And members of Hyde's church now go to the airport regularly to welcome refugees when they arrive in town.

"These people have endured things I cannot imagine," says Hyde, who is 38. "Yet they have so much love for Christ. That has been so humbling. As I have become friends with them, it has reawakened my heart to the call to reach the nations."

When God showed Hyde that Discovery Church should minister to

Boise's refugee population, he realized this would be a stretch for some of his members. But compassion compelled him. He even got on his knees during last year's Easter service and washed the feet of the leaders of a Nepali and Congolese congregation.

"People were just weeping as they watched us serve them," Hyde says.

For Hyde—and many other charismatic and evangelical Christians—loving refugees is a biblical mandate, not a political position. He and his team point to Scriptures such as Leviticus 19:34 ("The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born") and Zechariah 7:10 ("Do not oppress ... the foreigner or the poor"), which make it obvious that caring for immigrants and refugees is a core mandate for God's people.

But how do we fulfill this mandate in an era of global terrorism? Many countries are closing their doors to refugees because Islamic militants are sneaking across borders with bombs. In some cases, nationalism and xenophobia have turned hearts cold toward foreigners who need shelter and food.

Then last week, President Trump triggered a firestorm when he signed an executive order suspending all refugee admission for 120 days. The order also restricts immigration from seven predominantly Muslim countries and bans all Syrian refugees indefinitely.

The people who elected Trump cheered his decision—because they believe our lax immigration laws help terrorists. Those who didn't vote for Trump view the executive order as a mean-spirited betrayal of American compassion.

I know it's complicated. But I believe the kingdom of God often is in conflict with both liberal and conservative sides of the political spectrum. God's love should be extended to the oppressed whether you are a pro-Trump Republican, an anti-

Trump Democrat or anything in between.

I know we need to police our borders. I know we don't want a repeat of 9/11—when foreigners who were legally allowed in this country killed 2,996 people. I know we need to screen people before they enter the country.

But I am grieved that Trump's order has slammed the door in the faces of thousands of people who are fleeing the kind of tyranny my ancestors faced when they sailed to these shores in the 1700s. I don't want to imagine what will happen to today's refugees during the next 120 days while they wait for a green light that may never come.

Mr. Trump's aides have assured us that his orders were given to improve the vetting process (which is already extremely tedious). They have also made it clear that this law is only temporary.

But I can't help but wonder how many lives will be lost during the 120 days.

Proverbs 24:11 commands us: "Deliver those who are being taken away to death, and those who are staggering to slaughter, oh hold them back." How tragic that many Christians who pride themselves on being "pro-life" in reference to the abortion issue are happy to keep innocent refugees out of the country in the name of "security."

I believe American churches must develop an action plan that includes the following:

- Write your elected officials and ask that President Trump's ban on refugees be lifted as soon as possible, and that Syrians (a refugee group that includes more than 2.5 million children) be allowed to find a safe haven in the United States.
- Get to know the refugee population in your own city, build relationships and find out how you can serve them.

- Contribute to Christian organizations (such as World Relief) that are helping refugees on the front lines.
- Mobilize your church to provide welcome baskets, meals, job training or English classes for refugees in your area.
- Provide counseling and prayer ministry for refugees who have suffered trauma.

We must speak out on behalf of the oppressed—and we must do it with a sense of urgency. Some refugees don't have three months to languish in their squalid camps. Moral courage, not fear of terrorism, should guide our policies. We must not let our love grow cold. If we truly want to "Make America Great Again," we can't turn a deaf ear to people who need our aid. {eoa}

For more information about Discovery Church and their work with refugees go to .

Why We Need a Totally New Women's Movement

Last Saturday, one day after President Trump's inauguration, a huge group of women in pink hats made history when they took to the nation's streets to demand gender equality. Almost 500,000 women (and a few men) marched in Washington, and more than 600 smaller marches were staged in cities all over the world. There was no violence—which means, to their credit, these women behaved themselves as they took advantage of their right to free speech.

But I couldn't help but be disappointed as I watched coverage of the march and listened to speeches by the celebrities who addressed the crowd. The worst moment occurred when Madonna

(who has done more to sexualize and objectify women with her music than most male pop stars) dropped multiple F-bombs on the crowd and talked of wanting to “blow up the White House.”

“Yes I am outraged,” said Madonna, referring to her disgust over Hillary Clinton’s election loss. Then she used the F-word twice to tell Trump voters what she thought of them. CNN and MSNBC had to apologize for broadcasting the singer’s profanity.

Other speakers were not as vulgar or childish as Madonna, but most of them—feminist Gloria Steinem, actresses Scarlett Johansson, Ashley Judd and America Ferrera, and liberal filmmaker Michael Moore—basically channeled fury over Trump’s election and demanded that the right to abortion be protected.

Missing from the platform were any women who believe in protecting unborn babies. (Pro-life women’s groups were told they were not welcome at the march.) Also missing on the stage were Christian women who think there might be a wiser way to confront Donald Trump’s insensitivity than to stick a middle finger in his face.

I understand why American women are concerned. Our new president does not have a good track record when it comes to his comments about women and their bodies. His lewd locker room talk, forever documented on YouTube, makes women feel both frightened and disgusted.

I also understand that women voters in this country care about justice. They fear that Trump could turn back the clock on rights for minorities and immigrants. And many Christian women (and Christian men like me) care deeply about those issues.

But the organizers of this women’s march made a big mistake when they decided to make the whole event about abortion rights and anti-Trump slogans. They could have made room for the 53 percent of white women who voted for Trump—because those women also care about women’s equality. At times it

seemed that the march was less about serious political discussion and more about providing therapy for people who are depressed over Hillary Clinton's defeat.

What a missed opportunity.

The truth is we need a vibrant women's movement today more than ever. Women—and brave men who believe in gender equality—must speak out like never before against a legion of evils that are aimed at women around the world: Domestic violence, femicide, sex trafficking, female genital mutilation in Africa, forced child marriage, honor killings in the Middle East, lack of education for girls in developing nations and yes, sex-selective abortion of girls.

These horrific atrocities won't end until women cry out for justice.

The problem is the modern feminist movement is backslidden. It began as a Christian movement, but it was hijacked by people who want to make their entire cause about reproductive rights. Organizers of last week's march even aligned their event with Planned Parenthood, an organization whose racist founder admitted that abortion could be used to weed out the black race.

It is time for a new women's movement that is more in line with the Christian feminists of the late 1800s who started the suffrage movement. Brave women such as Harriet Tubman, Lucretia Mott, Addie Waites Hunton and Sojourner Truth stood on street corners and in pulpits to mobilize peaceful resistance to the oppression of both women and African-Americans.

Those early heroes didn't have Madonna's millions; they sacrificed everything to win the right to vote for women. They did not lower their dignity when confronting the system that oppressed them. Their sermons were filled with holy fire, not expletives. They called our culture to embrace morality, not

licentiousness. They protected life rather than devaluing it.

It was Christian suffragette leader Lucretia Mott (1793-1880) who said: "The world has never yet seen a truly great and virtuous nation because in the degradation of woman the very fountains of life are poisoned at their source." Mott did not live to see American women win the vote in 1920, but she laid the foundation for that victory.

If we truly want to stop the poison of injustice and elevate the dignity of women in the Trump era, we will need more than sassy outrage from Hollywood stars. We need a gutsy, courageous, grassroots Christian women's movement that is not afraid to stand for both gender equality and sexual purity; we need compassion for pregnant women as well as a mother's heart to protect unborn and unwanted children.

Such a movement won't come from Hollywood. It will be birthed out of the hearts of Christian women who carry the heart of Jesus for the oppressed, the victimized and the abused. {eoa}

Why You Must Pray for Donald Trump

When President-elect Donald Trump is sworn in this Friday as our nation's 45th president, he will stand in front of the U.S. Capitol and place his hand on two Bibles: One that was used for Abraham Lincoln's inauguration in 1861, the other a gift from Trump's mother when he graduated at age 9 from Sunday school at the First Presbyterian Church in Jamaica, New York.

Trump won't be hiding his affiliations with evangelical

Christians at the ceremony. He will be surrounded by religious leaders, some who supported his campaign and others who criticized his rhetoric. They include Paula White, a Pentecostal pastor from Florida who is sometimes credited with bringing Trump to faith; evangelist Franklin Graham; Hispanic minister Sammy Rodriguez (who denounced Trump's anti-immigrant comments) and African-American preacher Wayne T. Jackson of Detroit. A rabbi and a Catholic cardinal will also join Trump on the stage.

Yet in spite of the two Bibles and the six ministers on the platform, many Christians aren't fully supportive of our next president. Most African-American and Hispanic Christians did not vote for Trump, younger Christian voters were skeptical of his campaign, and other believers opposed him because his views on women and immigrants seemed incompatible with Christianity.

So when Trump lays his hand on those Bibles and pledges to "preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States," he will lead a divided nation. But if you are a Christian, you have an obligation to pray for your president no matter how you voted in November. 1 Timothy 2:1-2 commands us to pray "for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceful life in all godliness and honesty."

Praying for our leaders is not optional. It does not depend on your mood or your opinions. Here are eight ways I plan to intercede for President Trump regularly:

1. Pray for his protection. There will be more than 28,000 security officials at the inauguration on Friday, and Trump's decision to spend some of his time at his home in New York City will increase the security threat during his time in office. Pray that he and his family will be protected from assassins' bullets and terror attacks. May civility triumph over violence.

2. Pray that Trump will govern with God's wisdom. God rewarded Solomon because he asked for wisdom instead of wealth, long life or vengeance on his enemies (see 1 Kings 3:11-12). Pray that Trump will order his priorities like that. Despite Solomon's tragic character flaws, his legacy was wisdom. We can ask God to give our president the same grace.

3. Pray that God will set a guard over Trump's mouth. It is no secret that Trump often speaks (or tweets) before he thinks. He can be impulsive and short-tempered. Yet a man in his position must use discretion, or else his impetuous words can close doors and ruin diplomacy. The psalmist prayed: "Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips" (Ps. 141:3). Pray this on behalf of our president.

4. Pray for wise and righteous advisers to surround him. Godly leaders cannot do their jobs alone. Even the best leaders have failed because they trusted the wrong people. Pray that Trump will not select his counselors based on party, race, pedigree or political cronyism but on godly character and proven wisdom. Pray especially that Vice President Mike Pence, who is an evangelical Christian, will rely on the Holy Spirit to advise the president.

5. Ask for the spirit of reconciliation. Some segments of our divided society want nothing to do with Trump now that he has won the presidency. Some media outlets have become downright hostile, breaking all rules of journalistic objectivity. Even some Christians will be tempted to harbor resentment and nurse political grudges throughout his term in office. Pray that God will grant forgiveness and healing so that leaders on all political levels can have constructive dialogue. And pray that Trump will reach out with kindness to Democrats, the media, minorities, immigrants, foreign leaders and Republicans who opposed him.

6. Bind all evil forces assigned to manipulate our president. The specter of Islamic terrorism looms over the United States,

and dark forces have already infiltrated. On the other side, it is obvious that Russia desires to manipulate our nation. Our only hope lies in prayer to the God who is able to expose and outwit the schemes of the wicked. This is truly a time for spiritual warfare, and intercessors must not come off the wall in this hour. Pray that no foreign government, terrorist organization, multinational corporation or demonic principality will use Trump as a tool. We must stand strong against the spirit of anti-Christ that promotes dictatorship, persecution of Christians and hostility toward Israel.

7. Pray that Trump's door will always be open to the church.

The loudest voices of secular culture—from Bill Maher in Hollywood to atheists in academia—would be happy if religion were removed from public life. Pray that Trump, who claims to have a personal faith in Jesus Christ, will unapologetically welcome Christian leaders into his company and seek their counsel.

8. Pray that our nation will enjoy God's peace and blessing during the Trump administration.

God's will is for America to experience peace and prosperity so we can continue to export the gospel to the nations. This must happen whether a Democrat or a Republican is in the White House. As we cry out for God's mercy on our nation, pray that He will allow us to be a light to the world as we finance global missions, feed and heal the world's poor and share Christ's love at home and abroad. {eoa}

6 Roadblocks That Will Stop Your Spiritual Growth

A few days ago, I was driving from my home in Georgia to a

church in Alabama to preach for five days. I didn't think the predicted "snowpocalypse" would hinder my trip until I arrived in the town of Anniston—where state troopers had blocked the main road due to ice on bridges.

The road was closed, and I couldn't get to Birmingham on Highway 431. When I tried a different route, I ran into more ice and more roadblocks. This had never happened to me in Florida—we don't have ice on roads. So I was stuck. I had to turn around and go home.

Thankfully, my host rescheduled our meetings, and I arrived at his church two days later, after all the feared ice had melted. But the whole experience reminded me that there are times when we can't get where we need to go because our roads are blocked.

As Christians, we are called to move forward in our faith. The apostle Paul set the example for us when he said: "I press toward the goal to the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14). You are not supposed to stay in the same place spiritually year after year. God wants you to grow. But often we get stuck, usually because of one of these six roadblocks:

1. Lack of spiritual hunger. Let's face it: The main reason many Christians get stuck in a rut is they are happy to be there. But God is looking for people who refuse to be content with where they were last year. He is calling you higher. You must ask the Holy Spirit to set your heart ablaze with a desire for more of His presence and power.

David is our example of spiritual hunger. He wrote: "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants after You, O God" (Ps. 42:1). He actually felt lousy when he wrote those words, so we can't use our discouragement as an excuse. David fanned the flames of spiritual fervor even when he felt like quitting.

2. Plain old laziness. Many of us become motivated at the beginning of the year to pray, study the Bible, go back to school or lose weight. But nobody wins a race by sprinting the first 50 feet and then sitting down. Winners must stay in the game. You must be determined to finish what you start instead of leaving a trail of aborted attempts.

Paul exhorted the Romans to be “fervent in spirit,” but first he warned them not to be “lazy” (see Romans 12:11-12). The Greek word used here, “okneros,” is the same word Jesus used in the parable of the “lazy servant” who didn’t invest the money he was given by his master. If you are sitting on your dreams or procrastinating when you should be growing your faith, the “lazy” label applies. Don’t just start and then give up. Be consistent and keep going.

3. Unpacked baggage. The Israelites who left Egypt could have marched into the Promised Land in a matter of weeks, but they ended up in a holding pattern for 40 years. Why? They were dragging their sin with them. The more weight you drag behind you, the less likely it is that you will reach your destination.

I knew a Christian guy who had a thriving ministry to college students. But because he refused to get help for his pornography habit, his addiction prevented him from functioning normally. It finally weighed him down so much that it destroyed both his marriage and ministry. You may think you can “manage” your sin, but it is more powerful than you are. You can’t move forward while carrying a load of shame and addictions. Repent, confess your weakness to someone else and get free.

4. Fear of change. Many people feel a tug in their hearts that says: *Start that Bible study. Go on that mission trip. Write that book. Launch that business.* But they never get past step one because they feel frozen in their tracks. Nothing will keep you in spiritual limbo like fear. It paralyzes.

Some people keep their dreams inside them for decades—and then they take them to the grave. If you want to grow, you must take risks. Don't let your fear of public speaking, airplanes, crowds, strangers or people's criticism stop you from trusting in the God who is bigger than all those things.

5. Shallow relationships. Who are you hanging around with? Abraham had to part ways with Lot because they had very different goals. Lot had a selfish motive, and Abraham was fully surrendered to God's plan. If you spend all your time with selfish people who are content to live spiritually fruitless lives, you will end up just like them.

If you want to move forward spiritually in 2017, don't expect the crowd to go with you. Some people don't want God's presence. Don't let them drag you down. Be willing to find new friends who will support your spiritual commitment.

6. A religious spirit. Religious people build memorials to honor what God did in 1967, sing songs from that era and write books about "the way we've always done it." Yet when the Holy Spirit calls them to "sing ... a new song" (Psalm 96:1), or if He starts doing "a new thing" (Isaiah 43:19a), they get offended. They insist God must move the exact same way He did 50 years ago.

But God does not stay in the same place or do things the same way. His character is unchangeable, but He always has a fresh word and a new anointing to pour on His people. He loves to surprise and overwhelm us. Don't let religious inflexibility keep you from experiencing the adventure of following His Spirit. {eoa}

5 Ways You Can Grow Spiritually This Year

The last words the apostle Peter wrote in the Bible are priceless. He said: “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory, both now and forever. Amen” (2 Pet. 3:18). Peter’s plea to the first disciples still screams out to us today: “Grow!”

Remember, a disciple who was up and down in his faith, wrote this exhortation. In his early years, Peter bravely confessed that Jesus was the messiah one minute and then denied Him the next. But in the end, this impetuous, fearful, insecure Peter became one of the strongest leaders of the early church.

That’s because he grew in his faith.

The Greek word for “grow,” “auxano,” means “to increase, to become more fruitful or to become greater.” This is God’s will for every Christian. God does not want us to remain in the same condition year after year. He desires that we be changed from one stage of glory to the next until we are transformed into the image of Christ.

But how does that happen? How do we grow spiritually? Is there anything you can do to encourage that growth as you step into this new year? I believe you must do the following:

1. Rediscover the Bible. You need the Bible like you need food, but many Christians go for weeks or months without reading God’s Word. No wonder their spiritual growth is stunted. You will never grow spiritually without soaking your mind in the inspired words of Scripture.

When Jesus told the devil, “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4), He was quoting a verse from Deuteronomy that He

had memorized. If Jesus found life in Scripture, so should you.

It's not complicated. Pick a book of the Bible and begin reading one or two chapters a day. Don't just casually read it on your phone. Invest in a study Bible and pour over the words carefully as you underline key phrases. And before you read, ask the Holy Spirit to illumine the verses you need to hear. He will speak to you.

2. Restart your prayer life. British preacher Charles Spurgeon told his congregation: "As well could you expect a plant to grow without air and water as to expect your heart to grow without prayer and faith." A Christian who does not pray is weak, immature and defeated. But when you venture into the realm of the impossible and start asking God to move supernaturally in your family, your personal challenges, your workplace, your church and your nation, you will soon see His miracles.

This year, I was inspired by the movie *War Room* to make an actual prayer closet in my house. I got an old chair and a bulletin board and created my own private spiritual retreat. As you begin 2017, do something radical to make prayer a lifestyle.

3. Reconnect with God's people. I often meet Christians who tell me they've given up on church. Usually it's because they were hurt at a previous church or got bored with the way things were done. But no matter how many legitimate reasons you have for boycotting church, the truth is that God calls us to find our place in His house. You will never grow if you disconnect yourself from His corporate dwelling place.

4. Resist your sinful habits. Like the children of Israel in the wilderness, some Christians wander around in circles their entire lives and never get anywhere. That's because they never break free from habit patterns that prevent them from growing.

It's like taking the same class over and over and always failing.

Have you been stuck in a spiritual rut because of an addiction to pornography, an obsessive fear or an un-yielded attitude that ruins your relationships? It's time to break free. God has already promised "a way to escape" from any temptation that drags you down (see 1 Cor. 10:13). You will need to humble yourself and confess your sin to a mature believer, but after that, you can find deliverance from any stronghold of sin.

5. Recommit yourself to investing in others. Jesus told His disciples He wanted them to reproduce His life in other disciples. He said: "You did not chose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain" (John 15:16a-b). That means we can't truly grow into mature disciples unless we lead others to Christ and help those younger believers mature.

Many Christians today are satisfied to take, take, take while they become spiritually obese. They receive but never give. They view church as a spiritual buffet line where they can gorge on messages from popular preachers and compare the personal benefits of their flavor-of-the-month teachings. But Christianity is not about bringing on spiritual truth for our own benefit. If your faith is focused on you, you will never grow.

In 2017, I challenge you to step out of your comfort zone and find your outlet. God has a place for you to serve. Make a quality decision that you are not going to just sit in a church chair and soak in one more sermon; no, it is time to act on what you have learned. Get up and share your faith. That is the secret of spiritual growth. {eoa}

Embrace This Friend Who Sticks Closer Than a Brother

One recent morning as I was walking to my car in my driveway, I sensed that familiar voice speaking to me—the voice of the Holy Spirit. The words triggered a big smile on my face. He said to me, “Lee, I get a big kick out of you!” For the next 10 minutes in my car, I praised Him for showing me, yet again, His overwhelming love.

I can already hear some people gnashing their religious teeth over this comment and saying, “You just made that up!” But I know my Father’s love, and His acceptance has transformed me. I’m eager to grow more intimate with Him, and it is the Holy Spirit’s presence that helps me know Him better.

Many Christians struggle to know God as an affectionate, approachable and even playful Daddy. They read the Bible, listen to sermons and attend church, and they can quote Scriptures about God’s love. But for them, God’s love is a cold, clinical doctrine, not a warm experience. If you want to go deeper in intimacy with your Father, consider taking these steps:

First, you must discover your identity as a child of God. I’ve met a few people who don’t know who their father is. But I meet Christians all the time who doubt God loves them as a Father.

The Bible tells us that when we are born again, the Holy Spirit enters our hearts to solve our own paternity mystery. Romans 8:15 says, “You have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’” The Holy Spirit helps us understand whom we belong to. And His name is

Abba—the Hebrew word for “Daddy” or “Papa.”

Second, you must throw out all old religious mindsets. Are you uncomfortable calling God your “Daddy”? If you are, then you don’t really believe Romans 8:15. He is *Abba*! The problem is that many Christians have been conditioned by harsh sermons, rote prayers and somber organ music to believe God is (1) very distant, (2) always angry and (3) too busy managing heaven to take notice of us. That’s how the legalistic Pharisees viewed God, but Jesus challenged their warped ideas.

Throughout His life here, Jesus showed us that God is approachable, accepting of all people, friendly toward sinners, forgiving, protective and affectionate. He even let the disciple John lay his head on His chest (John 13:23), something a proper Pharisee would never do! Yet Jesus isn’t the slightest bit religious.

If you let Him, He will pull you close to His chest and let you hear the beating of His heart. He really wants you to be close!

Third, you must accept the forgiveness you’ve already been given. Some Christians can quote every Bible verse about God’s forgiveness, yet what they believe in their heads has never shifted to their hearts. Deep down they think God simply tolerates them. They know the blood of Jesus paid for their sins, but this seems more like a legal transaction ratified by a benevolent judge. They still believe God is silently mad at them, even though He canceled their guilty sentence. That is not the gospel!

God did not halfheartedly or reluctantly forgive you. He forgave you from His gushing heart of love.

Fourth, you must bring your hidden shame out of the closet. You can receive Christ’s forgiveness the moment you confess your sins (1 John 1:9). But James 5:16 says you can go further: you can also confess your secret sins to another

person “so that you may be healed.” Many Christians have never taken this bold step because it’s too embarrassing. But the more transparent you are with others, the freer you will be from your past.

If the devil is constantly reminding you of your past sins, grab another Christian and pray together about these accusations. I guarantee your accuser will flee.

Finally, you must be healed from your own issues with your parents. When some people hear the word *father*, it conjures up painful memories of domestic abuse, abandonment, alcoholism, or frightening punishments. Others associate *father* with a numb detachment because they never connected emotionally with their dads. These are called “father wounds”—and there is a maternal version too. Don’t let the mistakes of your imperfect parents keep you from enjoying God’s perfect love.

Talk to a pastor, mentor or counselor about your pain. Then let the Holy Spirit show you that your heavenly Daddy is strong, compassionate, accepting, gentle, kind, and faithful.

*The preceding is an excerpt from **J. Lee Grady’s** book, Set My Heart on Fire (Charisma House, 2016). Copyright © 2016 by J. Lee Grady. All rights reserved.*

J. Lee Grady was editor of Charisma for 11 years before he launched into full-time ministry in 2010. Today he directs The Mordecai Project, a Christian charitable organization that is taking the healing of Jesus to women and girls who suffer abuse and cultural oppression. Author of several books including 10 Lies the Church Tells Women, he has just released his newest book, Set My Heart on Fire, from Charisma House. You can follow him on Twitter at @leegrady or go to his website, .

Why Physical Fitness Should Be a Spiritual Priority

One year ago I faced a sad reality in the mirror: I was getting fat. I was beginning to resemble the fat preachers I had seen going back for third helpings at the Sunday afternoon all-you-can-eat buffet line.

At first I tried to ignore my weight gain by cropping photos and adjusting my belt. But the numbers on the scale weren't lying. I told myself I didn't have time to exercise or eat right because my ministry kept me too busy. I had more "spiritual" things to do than exercise.

But finally I made a powerful decision to reclaim my life. I got ruthless, sort of like when Jesus went into the temple with His whip. I slashed all white bread, sugar, junk food and sodas from my diet. I joined a gym. And I started an exercise routine that I can do anywhere, even in a hotel room.

After one year, I've lost weight and gained muscle—and I feel better than I have in years, even though I've faced enormous stress this year. My progress has motivated me to get even more fit in 2017. And it has helped me realize that physical fitness is not something optional.

I won't win a popularity contest for saying this, but it's true: The American church is fat—and ministers are sometimes the biggest sinners when it comes to overeating. This may be one key reason we don't address bad eating habits from the pulpit. If a preacher is hiding his huge stomach with his Sunday jacket, he's certainly not going to deliver a sermon about gluttony.

So here's my attempt to confront the issue. Here are three reasons why physical fitness needs to move up your priority list in this New Year:

1. Because you should glorify God with your body. I know Christians who would love to go on a mission trip, participate in a three-day fast or lead a weekly discipleship group for teenagers. But they never do these things because they are limited by their physical abilities. Some of us are simply too overweight, too tired or too out of shape to engage in any type of rigorous ministry.

Yet the New Testament teaches that our spirituality can't be separated from the physical. The apostle Paul wrote: "What? Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God, and that you are not your own?" (1 Cor. 6:19).

Paul's powerful words, in their context, refer to the importance of sexual purity. Sexual sin is wrong because we should never do with our bodies what would offend the indwelling Holy Spirit. So if this is true for immoral types of sex, is it not also true when we fill our bodies with drugs, alcohol or unhealthy food?

In New Testament times, Gnostic heretics taught that a Christian can love God and yet engage in any kind of immoral sin because it is physical, not spiritual. Yet Paul denounced this by saying: "Therefore glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:20b). Today we still preach against sexual sin, yet gluttony is no longer considered a sin in most churches. Instead, we laugh about it while we pass the cheesecake and the onion rings.

2. Because how you control your appetite affects every other area of your life. Part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit is self-control (see Gal. 5:23). Yet in the church today, we have created a culture of overeating—and then we wonder why some

Christians fall into porn addiction, adultery or gambling. The truth is that we have sanctioned food addiction as “acceptable flesh”—and we are reaping the consequences.

Jacob’s brother, Esau, sold his birthright for a bowl of stew because his appetite controlled his judgment. Many Christians have done the same. We forfeit certain spiritual blessings simply because we can’t say no to food.

3. Because you want to live a long and fruitful life. I decided to get serious about fitness last year because I’m getting older, and I want to make the biggest possible mark on my generation before I die. It’s a lie that you can’t be fit in your 50s or 60s. I want to be like the biblical Caleb, who testified that he was as strong at age 85 as he was at age 40.

God has promised the righteous a long life, but that isn’t an automatic guarantee. Long life requires wisdom, which includes healthy eating, regular exercise, proper rest and stress management. When we binge regularly on pizzas, sodas and glazed donuts and fill our bodies with processed foods full of chemicals, we shouldn’t be surprised when we end up with diabetes, heart ailments, high blood pressure and an early funeral. Don’t eat for the moment. Always keep tomorrow in mind when you are looking at the menu.

Jesus called His followers disciples, a term that means “disciplined ones.” Yet how many of us would honestly say we are disciplined in the area of food and fitness? I challenge you to make this your goal in the coming year. Be a disciple. The decision you make today to get healthy will reap countless benefits—not only for you, but also for those you love. {eoa}

Discernment—the Most Neglected of All Spiritual Gifts

Those who walk in the fullness of the Holy Spirit have access to the nine “power gifts” mentioned in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. These gifts include prophecy, speaking in tongues, miracles and healing—and many Christians are eager to receive these supernatural manifestations of God’s power.

While we know God can perform such wonders today, we also know Satan can counterfeit them. Jesus Himself warned that false prophets and false teachers would gain followers because of their supernatural powers. Jesus said: “For false christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect” (Matt. 24:24).

So how do we know the difference between a true Christian who operates in the power to heal or perform miracles and an imposter who relies on trickery, manipulation, sensationalism or sorcery to deceive crowds?

We desperately need to know the difference today, because an increasing number of “Christian” charlatans are emerging—especially in the developing world where churches lack biblical discipleship. Here are just a few examples:

- In November, millions of people were shocked after seeing videos of Lethebo Robalago, a pseudo-Pentecostal pastor from South Africa who claims he can heal people by spraying insect repellent in their faces. The videos posted online showed congregants allowing Robalago, of the Mount Zion General Assembly church, to spray Doom Super Multi Insect Killer into their eyes and nostrils to cure them of various diseases.
- Similar claims were made recently by Paul Sanyangore, a

self-proclaimed prophet from Zimbabwe, who recently urged his followers to drink water polluted with raw sewage in order to heal them. Not to be outdone, a South African pastor named Rufus Phala made local headlines when he convinced some of his followers to come to his church altar and drink Dittol, a highly toxic antiseptic.

- Another wildly popular evangelist in South Africa, Shepherd Bushiri of the Enlightened Christian Gathering church, released a video claiming he is so anointed by God that he can walk on air. But the film clip is not convincing. It shows Bushiri walking down the staircase in his mansion, and then the camera zooms in on his feet while someone lifts his body above the carpet so he appears to float. (You can see the video [here](#).) Bushiri is reportedly worth about \$150 million because so many Africans support his work.
- Last year, viewers around the world watched in horror as a pastor from Ghana asked a pregnant woman to sit in a chair while he placed his foot on her stomach and kicked her—presumably to heal her. Worshipers in the audience can be seen applauding this man, Daniel Obinem, for his flagrant act of abuse.

I'm not surprised that a greedy charlatan would kick a woman or pretend to float on air. But I am baffled that crowds are gullible enough to drink the antiseptic and follow these phonies. Why are so many people so foolish?

The answer is actually found in the list of spiritual gifts Paul described in 1 Cor. 12:8-10. One of the nine gifts of the Holy Spirit is "the discerning of spirits" (v. 10)—and it is a gift we desperately need in this season. The Greek word for "discerning" is *diakrisis*, which means to distinguish or judge something to see if it is evil or from God.

When God blessed us with the powerful gifts of the Holy Spirit, He also gave us a gift that can warn us of a

counterfeit. The gift of discernment is like a spiritual security system; when the church begins to drift into deception or when someone with impure motives or corrupt character invades the pulpit, a person with the gift of discernment can sense their internal alarm bell ringing.

A mature Christian who has overcome sinful habits and developed godly character will naturally discern whether a prophet or teacher is from God or not. If we sense pride, perversion, occultism or any other form of evil, our spirits will grow uncomfortable. We may not know exactly what is wrong with the person or his message, but we will sense danger and warn others to stay away from it. This “knowing” can feel similar to a gut instinct—but it does not originate with us; it is a warning from God.

On the flip side, a person who is not yielded to the Holy Spirit and not familiar with Scripture will be clueless when an imposter shows up. The undiscerning Christian will blindly follow a false prophet until they both fall in a ditch. And while God certainly promises to judge those who willingly deceive, those who follow charlatans also suffer consequences. Those who follow greedy prophets usually have greed in their own hearts.

Please don't be gullible. Ask God to fill you with heavenly discernment. Study the Bible daily and soak in its truth so you will immediately recognize false teaching when you hear it. Ask for the gift of discernment so a spiritual fake will never defraud you. {eoa}

The Explosive Blessings of a Personal Prayer Language

I teach at a ministry school in Pennsylvania twice a year. Recently, after one of my classes, a 22-year-old guy from Maryland asked if I would pray with him. He had heard me share about being baptized in the Holy Spirit at age 18, and he wanted the same experience. He was especially intrigued by the idea of speaking in tongues—something He had never done even though he was comfortable around other classmates who had this spiritual gift.

This young man, Eric, understood that he already had the Holy Spirit. But he knew that Jesus offers us more—that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is a second experience in which the fullness of God’s divine power saturates us and anoints us for supernatural ministry.

I explained to Eric that when I had prayed for this blessing many years before, God did not force anything on me. We don’t *have* to speak in tongues, and God certainly doesn’t make us move our mouths against our will. We open our mouths, but it is the Spirit who gives us this unusual heavenly language.

Glossolalia (the Greek word for spiritual tongues) makes no sense to our natural minds—it actually sounds like gibberish—but the Bible says praying in the Spirit strengthens us profoundly (vv. 2, 4).

I laid hands on Eric in the back of the auditorium. I asked Jesus to fill him with divine power and release the Holy Spirit’s language as a manifestation of the overflow. Nothing happened at that moment, but I told Eric to remain expectant. I’ve learned that oftentimes the release of the Spirit comes easier when people are not distracted by crowds. Some people are just self-conscious.

I encouraged my new friend to go home and pray some more. A couple days later I received an email from this brother letting me know that a small miracle had occurred in his life. He wrote:

Thank you for praying for me to speak in tongues. That night was interesting because phrases started to pop into my head. I was determined. I began speaking the phrases, and by the next night I was speaking in tongues as I was falling asleep. Now, every moment that I am not worshipping, praying, eating, or speaking to someone, I am practicing this gift. Praise God!

Many of us fall into the trap of downplaying the phenomenon of speaking in tongues, even after we have received the gift ourselves. We may consider it divisive (and it certainly can be when it is abused), or we're embarrassed because it seems weird or fanatical to our unbelieving friends or family members.

Yet when I read the apostle Paul's comments about tongues, I realize *glossolalia* was a key component of the New Testament church. No one can deny that. This strange gift not only played a fundamental role on the Day of Pentecost when the church was born, but it also fueled Paul's personal zeal. He wasn't bragging when he wrote: "I thank my God that I speak in tongues more than you all" (1 Cor. 14:18). He most likely prayed in tongues for hours at a time. He knew he couldn't carry out his extraordinary ministry without a private devotional life that was soaked in supernatural prayer.

That's also why he wrote: "Do not forbid speaking in tongues" (v. 39). He knew even though some people may be tempted to misuse this gift (and that is usually why people restrict it), we must never shut it down.

Eliminating the gift of tongues can have a direct impact on the miraculous flow of the Spirit's anointing in the

church—you might as well flip a circuit breaker and turn off all the lights. The gift of tongues does not make us holier than anyone else. In fact, if we don't exhibit love and Christian character along with it, it becomes a useless gift comparable to a noisy gong (1 Cor. 13:1). But when stewarded properly and tempered with humility, this seemingly insignificant grace of the Holy Spirit becomes an invisible atomic weapon.

I am not saying we should showcase tongues in church gatherings, scream at people in tongues or make people feel like misfits if they haven't experienced the gift. When the Corinthians put tongues on the platform and turned their meetings into chaotic circus sideshows, Paul rebuked them sternly. But the same apostle who warned his followers not to flaunt tongues in public also spent countless hours praying in tongues privately.

He did so because it is a vital source of spiritual power that we must not neglect. {eoa}

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