

# BodyLife Articles

## How Do I... ?

By Wayne Jacobsen

BodyLife • March 2010

How do I...?" Probably 80% of the questions I get begin with those three little words. I shudder now when I hear them, though I don't always show it. Believe me, I understand well enough. It used to be three of my favorite words, too.

- How do I get the relationship with Jesus I want?
- How do I find other like-hearted believers near me?
- How do I get my spouse to see what I want him or her to see?
- How do I get my book published, find an agent, or launch a bestseller?
- How do I find my ministry?
- How do I start a house church?
- How do I find an audience for the things I want to share?

The list goes on and on. But I must warn you at the outset that similar questions asked of Jesus didn't get the answer most were looking for. This article probably won't either because the question itself begins with the wrong focus. It already buys into the lie that if we don't have something we want, there must be something we can do to get it.

We've been pressed by four thousand years of religious indoctrination into that conclusion. The life you want is a few good decisions and a lot of hard work away. Fifty years of self-help books have underlined that same self-deifying approach. Give me three steps, five rules or eight keys and I can do it. Except we can't, and when our efforts fail we only have ourselves to blame with some form of, "I didn't do enough, I didn't do it right, or I didn't have the right steps." Thus we are left to either find better answers or work even harder.

Now I'm not saying hard work won't be rewarded in this temporal world. It will--much more than lying on a couch hoping to win the lottery. But in the kingdom of God human effort and our confidence in it are two of the greatest obstacles to living in his joy.

Religious lie #212 is, "If we won't, he can't," and it underlies so many of the ways we motivate people and make them feel responsible. While that may lead people to work hard to do something great for God it only leads to the disillusioned hopes of self-effort, especially when we think ourselves successful.

Jesus described a very different Father, one who was working every day in the world inviting us to come alongside him. That's how Jesus lived. He watched what his Father was doing and joined him there. Paul

admonished us to do the same. "Watch what God does, and then you do it." (Ephesians 5:1, *The Message*)

One of the signs of his working in us to take us beyond the good intentions and failed hopes of religion is that we are no longer concerned with doing things for God, and instead learn to do things with him. And that begins with the simplest of opportunities.

## **Hounded by Luke 14**

I've slaved under the lie of self-effort and the frustration it engenders for most of my spiritual life and when you combine that with spiritual passion, the results are disastrous. It wasn't that God didn't try to warn me, but that his nudges were not nearly as compelling as the internal drive to climb the ladders that would make me feel more significant and important than others around me. There was so much God wanted me to do for him, or so I had convinced myself. Looking back, it's hard to imagine that I didn't even notice that the things I thought God wanted of me and the things that would make me successful and important were synonymous. That should have been my first clue.

God wanted me to write and teach, and I needed an ever-expanding audience to validate that calling and the truth of what I was sharing. I was so driven to find myself an audience worthy of my imagined calling and spent endless nights in frustration and anger that God wouldn't bless my efforts the way I thought he should or that others wouldn't help me the way I thought I needed. Oh, how naive I was.

During this season of my life I had a number of people approach me saying they had a Scripture on their heart for me. After three or four times over a period of five years, I would just look at them and say, "Luke 14." Their eyes would get wide and I knew I was right. "The story about the banquet," I'd add and they would nod with a bewildering look on their face. "You're not the first," I'd reassure them.

The story is found in Luke 14:7-11. Jesus attends a Sabbath feast and notices how everyone comes into the room jockeying for the most honored seats. He warns them not to. Better to take the last place and be invited up, rather than presume the honored one and have to be moved down. He finishes with one of his favorite lines, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Over a twenty-year period in my life I had different people bring up this story at least a dozen times. Each time grew more frustrating, as I wondered why I hadn't yet learned whatever lesson he wanted me to know. Just how humble do you have to be to merit a wide-ranging ministry?

But that really wasn't the point of the parable or what God wanted me to know. Whenever we set ourselves to be honored above others, or promote our own influence, people only become a tool to our own ends and real life and real love cease. Why did God bring this story to be so many times? I find that he confirms in extraordinary ways the lessons we have the hardest time learning, and this one answers

the how-do-I question better than any other I know.

## **The Fight For the Top**

They came into the party with their eyes glued on the head-table. Who wouldn't? Banquets are designed to draw attention to the front of the room and celebrate the most-honored guests. And few people walk in without wishing they could have that place of honor so that others would know how important they are.

If you're talented enough, or have the right contacts, you can claw your way to the top at someone else's expense, but Jesus warned us here that the wake-up call from our contrived posturing will be painful indeed for those who think of themselves more highly than they ought to think.

Celebrity is one of the sickest realities of the human family--we stratify ourselves in terms of perceived relative value usually based on someone's talent, looks, or success, and then believe the lie. Those who sit at the head of the table bask in the perception of their own self-importance, and those who don't wish they were. Jesus let his disciples know that his kingdom works very differently. He was confronting fallen humanity's need to find our significance in comparison to others. It is a trap, and all the better if you get there and still believe the lie.

And yet, there is a dysfunctional drive in broken humanity, especially those with creative gifts, to be the next celebrity. You see it at *American Idol* auditions and hear it in the voices of would-be artists and authors. They think all their dreams will be fulfilled if someone will just "discover them" and offer them the platform they haven't found for themselves.

But it is often true that those who make such big jumps often get twisted by them, and end up crushing others when their influence exceeds their personal character. Perhaps that's what Paul meant when he warned us not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think, whether we aspire to a place of influence or already have it and think it gives us a place above others. Do you know how many people approach me, certain that my work with *The Shack* proves I have the key or the audience to promote their project into the stratosphere? What happened there was the result of three men God brought together along with a lifetime of experiences, pain, work, and relationships to do something that was beyond each of us.

We didn't have a formula to work then and we don't now. We learned that God opens doors as he desires. To be honest, that whole project was far more fun and far more impacting when we'd only sold a few thousand and people felt like they had stumbled upon a hidden treasure. The bigger it got the less it seemed to impact the people reading it. The book became the star instead of the God we wanted people to engage through the book.

## **Head Table Wannabes**

They are not hard to recognize. They always draw attention to themselves, and scheme for favors to advance their ministry. Most of the ones I meet really think this is what God wants for them. I did too. But that still makes you a user. Their friendships last only as long as the benefit they derive and they easily discard people when their benefit is used up. Those who make it into the limelight become quite different people, enamored with themselves and their famous friends. They treat common people as if they are beneath them and if anyone challenges them, they counter with whispered accusations, or cutting off the relationship altogether.

Interestingly enough, the men and women I know in the world who most live loved by Father and demonstrate that love to others around them, are not household names nor are they people who seek the stage. Most have not written books, nor are they frustrated with the sphere of their sphere of influence God has given them. But they have more impact on the world around them than those with more recognizable names and larger platforms.

I wonder if that is why Jesus never wrote his own book, or started an organization? He knew the limitations of both and that they would distract from his real mission of shaping lives to live loved by the Father. He would rather have left the world with a hundred and twenty men and women on the road to living loved than anything else he could think of.

But what I don't wonder about any more is what table I'd prefer to sit at. I've sat at head tables. They are false space indeed. There's not much real conversation there, since people are facing away from each other in more ways than one. Those people are caught up in appearances and posturing and making the next connection to advance their own agendas.

That's why I don't think Jesus' point was to take the last place as a way to get to what you think is first place. Maybe his point was that the last place in a room is really the best place to enjoy him and love others in a way that is meaningful and transforming. Maybe that is why he washed the disciples feet as the greatest demonstration of his affection for them, and encouraged them to do the same.

## **The Organic Growth of Service**

I don't know of a story that better answers all of our how-to questions. How do I find relationship, fellowship, or an outlet for my creative expression? Instead of looking for what we don't have, Luke 14 invites us into the space of responding to God's working right where we are. Rather than having to make something happen by our own wisdom or ingenuity, the path to God's life comes by loving the people he has already put before us, applying our gifts to their needs. I'm convinced that will create opportunity enough for whatever God wants to give us and what he desires us to share with us.

Most of our how-to questions focus on our abilities, wisdom, or connections and trying to find what we

don't have, rather than allowing us to live freely in what God has already given. It's easy to miss his gentle nudges when we're more focused on our desires or ministry. He knows how to draw us into relationship with him and, it's not by following someone else's steps.

And He knows how to connect us with others near where we live. Most think they have to find an existing group of like-minded people. While that is a wonderful gift if you come across one, it doesn't often happen. What if you just began to love the people that God has already put around your life--neighbors, co-workers, other parents at your children's activities, and even strangers who might cross our paths on a given day? Caring about them would lead to conversations and conversations to relationships and you would soon find yourself a caring part of people's lives instead of attending a group.

As for ministry, trust that the slow reality of organic growth has far more value in this kingdom than flash-in-the-pan promotion the world exalts. As you simply do what God puts before you and let him be concerned with how far it travels and whom it touches. If your life is encouraging others on this journey, opportunities will come to share that with others. But keep your eyes focused where it counts the most, not on high-visibility opportunities, but occasions to help others. Serving them, rather than getting others to serve you, will open more real doors than the false promises of hype and promotion. It probably won't be as fast as you want, but it will be real and your focus will be more on the people you're touching than the "ministry" you want to grow.

In the Scriptures we read about a God that transforms over time--of a seed growing into a plant, of Abraham wrestling with the promise of a son for 25 years before Sarah got pregnant, of Jesus spending 30 years as a carpenter before he ever performed a miracle, or Paul, the former Pharisee, sorting out who God was over 17 years in a wilderness before he ever taught anyone else. Why, then, do we keep looking to build a name for ourselves or create a following others will notice?

God is less interested in helping you reach a place of honor, as he is teaching us how to honor the people he has already placed around you.

## **Live, Love and Listen**

I often meet people who want to live the way I do, writing and traveling to encourage others on this journey. I get that. I love living where God has placed me, but most have a distorted view of what that is. They don't see the cost and pain that underlies a lot of my journey, or the constant barrage of those who want to use me for their own purposes. And most have no idea that what I live now I did not find by my own scheming, but unfolded organically over years of simply following the gentle nudges on my heart where the consequences were unseen and the impact seemingly insignificant.

In the end, we are only asked to follow him, not to build an audience or to produce our own

transformation. I wrote my first book, *The Naked Church*, back in 1987. That book was not successful by any publishing standards, and I was incredibly frustrated at the time that that book didn't have the sales arc of a bestseller. I wrote it to change the course of Christianity in the west and it failed that hope. In spite of my distorted agenda, however, God knew how to take it to all the places he wanted to take it. I still get email from people who were deeply touched by that book way back then, some of them in very remote corners of the planet.

I look back now grateful for what God did with that book, knowing that if it had fulfilled what I wanted at the time, I might well have been destroyed in the process. I now know what those emotions preyed on and if God had satisfied them then, I am fairly certain I would not be on the road I am today. And I wouldn't trade this road for any other. And so much of what I'm a part of today spilled out of that little book and the unintended consequences of it.

Whenever you are frustrated at God for not opening better doors for you, that might be a sign that you're focused at the wrong doors. I have come to trust the organic growth of simple relationships over the substitutes of self-promotion, manipulation and begging favors from others.

So how do you find ministry, find fellowship or live transformed? Simply accept the invitation to live deeply in him, love those around you the way you are coming to understand how he loves you, and then simply listen when he nudges your heart. If you live in that space you will find his power transforming you, his Spirit connecting you to others and everything he wants to do in you will be fulfilled by him.

That's what Jesus wanted his disciples to know. If they had set out to change the world, they would have failed miserably, lost in their own ingenuity and wisdom to accomplish so large a task.

*This is a large work I've called you into, but don't be overwhelmed by it. It's best to start small. Give a cool cup of water to someone who is thirsty, for instance. The smallest acts of giving or receiving make you a true apprentice. You won't lose out on a thing." (Matthew 10:41-42, The Message)*

Jesus knew the most amazing things could begin with a cup of cold water.

---

© Copyright 2010 Lifestream Ministries

*Permission is hereby granted to anyone wishing to make copies for free distribution.*