

TEN ESSENTIALS FOR NEW CHRISTIANS

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and
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Part One

Realize the Limitless Love God Has for You



Chapter 1

God Made You for Something Special

As you begin your journey with Jesus, we're going to start with you, not because you are the most important person in God's story (that would be Jesus, in case you're wondering), but because God loves you so much that he sent his only Son to die for you so you could (1) have eternal life, and (2) do something special for him.

If that thought causes you to stop and wonder why God would think so highly of you, don't worry. You're not alone. The great poet King David pondered the questions of "Why me?" and "Why us?" in this famous psalm:

When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers—
the moon and the stars you set in place—
what are mere mortals that you should think about them,
human beings that you should care for them?
Yet you made them only a little lower than God
and crowned them with glory and honor.
(Psalm 8:3-5)

The reason for God's extraordinary love comes from his nature. God is defined by love (1 John 4:16). He can't help but love you, and

there's nothing that can separate you from his love (Romans 8:38-39). But God also loves you because he made you for something special. You aren't on this earth by accident or random chance. You were created by God in his very image. Here's how the Bible describes this incredible creative act. Notice the word *us* in this verse. It means all three Persons of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—were involved in the creation of humankind:

Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us" (Genesis 1:26).

Made in God's Image

Think about that for a minute. You and every other person born on this earth bear the image, or imprint, of God. You don't *look* like God because God is a spirit. But you have some of the same character qualities God has:

- You have a heart with the emotions of love, care, and compassion.
- You have a mind that can think and plan and dream.
- You have a will that allows you to choose and make decisions.

And there's something else you have because you are made in God's image. You are immortal. That doesn't mean you have always existed. Only God is eternal. Your immortality means you are made in God's image and will live forever. This awesome reality inspired C.S. Lewis to write this about us and others we encounter in life:

There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.¹

When We Ruined Everything

Imagine yourself in the Garden of Eden, that perfect place God created for his image bearers to live. You're immortal, you walk and talk with God, and you have an adoring spouse—not to mention you know all the animals by name. But for some reason, that's not enough.

You have the run of the Garden except for “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” God is very clear that you should not eat the fruit from this tree, for if you do, “you are sure to die” (Genesis 2:17). But that's exactly what you do. Oh, you try to place the blame on the other person (if you're Adam) or on the serpent (if you're Eve), but the deed is done. You have willfully disobeyed the one warning God gave you. And the penalty, as God promised, is death.

“But wait a minute,” you may protest, “that wasn't me in the Garden.” You're right; it was Adam and Eve. But as the representatives of the human race God made, their sin infected everyone born after them like a virus passed on by human contact. The only difference is that sin is a virus passed on by human nature.

But God's Love Is So Great

We're going to talk about God's solution for our sin problem in the next chapter. In this chapter we want to focus on a single idea: God

made you for something special. Despite the sin nature that every person born since Adam and Eve has inherited, God's love is so great that he saved you while you were still lost in your sin:

God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8).

Never forget this incredible reality: God made you, saved you, and has plans for you, both now and in the future.

You Are God's Masterpiece

We live in a time of great anxiety. Because of circumstances pretty much outside our control, the world presents us with challenges that can make even the most confident person question their worth. Perhaps you feel that way. You may wonder if you're good enough, smart enough, or privileged enough to be a success—at least by the standards of the world.

Stop thinking that way. We're here to tell you that you are already a success in God's eyes. You were made in his image, you have been redeemed by his Son, you are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and you have been designed by God to do something special. The reason we know this to be true is that the Bible tells us:

God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Notice the word *masterpiece*. When an artist creates a masterpiece, whether a painting or a piece of music or a book, it refers to his or her crowning achievement. That's what you are to God. Of all the beautiful things he created, including the universe itself, you are his crowning achievement. But it doesn't stop there. God didn't create you to sit on the sidelines. He created you and gave you new life in Jesus *so that you could do the good things he planned for you long ago*.

How to Get Good at Doing Good Things

We're going to give it to you straight. As a Christian beginning your life with Jesus, you don't have a choice. You can't sit passively on the sidelines, reluctant to get involved in worthwhile activities. It's your responsibility and your privilege as a new Christian to get good at doing good things. It's not easy, but it's pretty simple.

The first thing you can do is to discover the spiritual gifts God has given you through the Holy Spirit. In addition, there are some excellent assessment tools to help you identify your natural character traits and abilities. The more you know what you are good at, the more effective you will be in your service to God and others.

Once you have a realistic understanding of your spiritual as well as your natural gifts, there are three strategies that will maximize your gifts and abilities so you can give God your best as you do the good things he has planned for you to do.

Put in the Time

The most common way to get good at something is to spend the time needed to become good. World-class athletes don't rely on natural abilities alone. They "put in the time" to achieve a high level of skill and effectiveness. Same goes for artists, teachers, pastors, nonprofit leaders,

and business professionals. And here's a little secret: Just because you are passionate about something doesn't mean you are good at it.

Mark Cuban, billionaire owner of the Dallas Mavericks and *Shark Tank* star, had several passions growing up, but he didn't follow any of them because he wasn't any good at any of the things he was passionate about. Instead, Cuban pursued what he was good at, and he worked hard to get better. "If you put in enough time, and you get really good," says Cuban, "I will give you a little secret: Nobody quits anything they are good at because it's fun to be good. It's fun to be one of the best."

Bestselling author Mark Batterson put in the time and effort to gain the skill he needed to write. Before he even attempted to write his first book, Batterson spent two years reading hundreds of books. Through his reading, practice, and study, Batterson developed the skill to be a good writer and, consequently, a bestselling author. And now he is passionate about writing and the power of books to change lives.

Find a Mentor

Mentorship is a powerful and effective way to acquire skill in service to God. A mentor is simply a wise and trusted counselor or teacher. Both of us have been proactive about seeking and learning from mentors who have taught us by their words and demonstrated through their lives how to be effective in work and ministry. There are many examples of mentorship in the Bible.

- Jethro mentored his son-in-law Moses (Exodus 18:13-27).
- Elijah mentored Elisha (1 Kings 19:15-21).

- Paul mentored Timothy (1 Corinthians 4:17).
- And most famously, Jesus mentored his disciples (Mark 3:13-19).

Seek Wisdom

There's one more way to get good at something, and this may be the most powerful pathway of them all. It's a way suggested by the Bible in the book of Exodus. There you will find the fascinating story of Bezalel, a Jewish craftsman who was assigned by God to design and make beautiful artifacts for the tabernacle. Here's how Moses, who wrote the book of Exodus, describes the process God used to give skill to Bezalel:

Then the LORD said to Moses, "See, I have chosen Bezalel, son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills—to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of crafts" (Exodus 31:1-5 NIV).

The key word in this passage is *wisdom*, which is equivalent to the word *skill*. In fact, to live with wisdom means you are living with skill. Proverbs 4:7 (NIV) says: "The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom." And how do you get wisdom? The answer is found in James 1:5 (NIV): "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you."

Just Do It

As God's masterpiece, created anew in Christ Jesus so you can do those things he planned for you long ago, you have a responsibility and a privilege to just do it, whatever it is God is calling you to do. Once you find what you were made to do, you will know it's right because you will accomplish things you never knew you were capable of doing. You just need to put in the time, find someone to mentor you, and seek wisdom. Just do it and you will be amazed at the results.



AN ESSENTIAL FOR NEW CHRISTIANS

Realize that God loves you just the way you are, but also that God loves you too much to let you stay the way you are. You see, God has a goal for you, and it's not for you to be the best version of yourself. He wants you to be like Jesus (Romans 8:29). In return, you will show God that you love him by doing those things Jesus commands you to do (John 14:15). Make a commitment to diligently explore the depths of God's love for you. It will change your image of God and your image of yourself.

Q&A**HOW CAN I KNOW GOD'S WILL FOR MY LIFE?**

Anyone who is following Jesus should want to do his will. Living the Christian life is a journey, and the specific paths that journey is going to take aren't clearly marked. You know your final destination, but you don't always know what lies around the next bend. Here are four things you can do to better discern God's will, whether it's for a short assignment or a career change. But ultimately you need to trust God by faith to lead you where he wants you to go.

- *Pray about it.* Ask God to lead you along the right path and to give you his peace that you're doing the right thing.
- *Stay focused on God's Word.* You probably won't find specific verses that will tell you what to do, but allow the Holy Spirit to speak to you and give you wisdom.
- *Seek the wise counsel of mature believers* who know you well. You can trust the perception and advice of others who love you and care about you. It's ultimately your decision, but "there is safety in having many advisers" (Proverbs 11:14).
- *Do your homework.* God gave you intelligence. Use it. Whatever it is you are considering, take advantage of the resources to help you make a wise decision.

Here's something else we've learned about God's will over the years: God's will is a circle rather than a dot. What we mean is that there may

not be one specific thing God wants you to do; rather, you may be presented with more than one path that pleases him. If you follow the steps outlined above, it may end up that you have multiple options, all of which could have positive results. Trust God to guide you and then use your own judgment to make decisions—as long as your judgment is based on your growing relationship with God.