

RECLAIMING YOUR LIFE IN AN OVERWORKED,
OVERSPENT, AND OVERCONNECTED WORLD



JEFFERSON BETHKE

NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
JESUS > RELIGION

*TO HELL WITH
THE HUSTLE*



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OVERSPENT, AND OVERCONNECTED WORLD*

JEFFERSON BETHKE



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To Lucy, Kannon, and Kinsley

*I pray the way of Jesus continues to become your highest
pursuit and ultimate treasure as you grow day by day.*

Love, Dad

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A TIME TO RESIST

We were both on the couch. She was crying. Then I heard, “You should’ve married someone else!”

I stood and started pacing. “Are you *serious* right now?!” It’s a question that has never helped a single marital situation since the dawn of humanity.

It’s a tough thing to hear your wife say she wishes you had married someone else. It’s even tougher when, for a second, you think she might be right.

We wouldn’t be in this situation if I had.

But I didn’t *want* to marry anyone else. I believe Alyssa is God’s gift and a physical representation of grace to me. In that moment, though, it sure felt like life would have been easier if I had married someone a little bit more like me. Why did she have to be so different? Nonetheless, here we were, married for four years, with a two-year-old and an infant sleeping in the other room, feeling like our lives were burdening us and weighing us down.

Over and over again, we'd been facing the same issue. When it came to making decisions about work and future commitments, we'd clash. This was exacerbated by both of us being depleted and overwhelmed most of the time. Parenting toddlers, being self-employed, and still needing to feed ourselves three times a day were more than enough to keep track of without a deep, recurring marital conflict thrown into the mix. Here was the crux of it: when I'm overwhelmed, burned out, and tired, my default position is "let's go," while Alyssa's is "let's stop." At those times, I don't tend to give anything thoughtful consideration because I'm running on empty. I'm too exhausted for decision-making so I just say yes. Alyssa is the opposite. When she is burning out she gets anxious, and to avoid feeling crushed or overwhelmed she automatically says no to any new demands. So for the first few years of our marriage, I felt like she was holding me back, and she felt like I was bulldozing her with all my ideas and dreams and my fast pace. I felt confused because I thought we were doing everything we were supposed to be doing. We got married, had kids, got jobs, and worked hard—all the seemingly appropriate cultural milestones done at the culturally appropriate times (married at twenty-three, had kids at twenty-five, had jobs that were meaningful and enjoyable by twenty-two, and were homeowners by twenty-five). We went to church every week. We read our Bibles and prayed. We were doing all the right things, but we sure didn't *feel* like we were. Instead

of experiencing fulfillment and happiness, we were tired, wired, anxious, and on edge.

Why did it feel like what we thought we were supposed to be doing was the very thing causing this disillusionment?

It was as if we were trying to build a life on the moon. If you've seen that famous video of Neil Armstrong landing on the moon, you know that when you are on the moon, you're ungrounded. There's no gravity holding you down. You kind of just float around—and the danger is, if you aren't tethered to anything, you'll float off into space indefinitely.

We as humans aren't meant to float in space. We are meant to live with our feet on the ground, so to speak. To be attached and connected to something that can anchor us in the dirt.

But because of unrealistic expectations, most of us are building our lives and families on the moon, and we're floating off into space without realizing it.

After only a decade or two of living up to these cultural expectations, many of us turn around and realize we can't find the meaning we thought we were striving for. We've been hustling, but hustling toward an empty grave. Lifeless. Less human. Because we're busier. More frantic. More disconnected. Lonelier.

But what if hustle is actually what got us to this point?¹ What if it's not the solution, but the problem? What if hustle is a contagion that seems to be flowing through our veins in

subtle, under-the-surface ways? Sooner or later, we will see symptoms.

In fact, I think we are starting to.

But let's back up.

Within the last hundred or so years, we have made incredible strides in production and labor-saving devices; and at first, the breakthroughs were so enormous that people couldn't envision what we would do with all the "free time" we would be creating for ourselves. Economist John Keynes said in 1915, "For the first time since his creation man will be faced with his real, his permanent problem," and that is "how to occupy the leisure."²

Am I the only one who will say that my main problem in life is *not* "how to occupy the leisure"? In fact, I say, *What leisure?*

Keynes was vastly wrong. That's not what happened. As Derek Thompson notes, in an article highlighting these developments, one large change no one saw coming: how work itself and our view of it evolved. Work jumped from being a means of "material production" to being much more about "identity production."³ In other words, work used to be about making things. Then all of a sudden, work was about making *us*.

We began to view our work as our reason for living, our purpose. A recent Gallup poll concluded that very thing: "Like all employees, millennials care about their

income. But for this generation, a job is about more than a paycheck—it’s about a purpose.”⁴

When our work becomes who we are and we derive our ultimate value and meaning from it, it runs the risk of becoming our god. The thing we worship. Bow down to. Become slaves of.

And that’s what they didn’t foresee a hundred years ago. That we would actually find our very center and being in *the hustle itself*.

We’d find it while we’re busy finding “our passion.”

While we’re trying to lifehack our way through life.

While leaving or bucking off anything that is uncomfortable, unpalatable, or unenjoyable, because the hustle and our passion should never feel that way, right?

When something is our god, we will give our all for it. We will sacrifice everything.

It’s no coincidence that Americans “work longer hours, have shorter vacations, get less in unemployment, disability, and retirement benefits, and retire later, than people in comparably rich societies,” as Samuel P. Huntington wrote.⁵

And a recent Pew Research report on the epidemic of youth anxiety noted that 95 percent (yes you read that right, virtually every single person who participated) said that “having a job or career they enjoy would be ‘extremely or very important’ to them as an adult.”⁶ It is *the* very thing we are all running toward to give us meaning. To give us life. To tell us *we matter*.

Not to mention this is even more pronounced by the impossibly high standards we set for our dreams and goals and work. Every person in my generation (millennials) is expected to not only have a job but also have one that is cool, fulfilling, and reflects well on us. As Anne Petersen noted in her brilliant, recent piece titled “How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation,” we think we “need to find employment that reflects well on our parents . . . that’s also impressive to our peers,” and that fulfills us.⁷ But, Petersen continues, the problem with thinking “*Your dream job is out there, so never stop hustling*—is that it’s a blueprint for spiritual and physical exhaustion.”⁸

It seems others are seeing the same thing. Hustle is being put on notice. As it should be.

The research is clear:

- 7 in 10 millennials would say they are currently experiencing some level of burnout.⁹
- 54 percent of us (millennials) would say we are chronically lonely and say that we “always or sometimes feel that no one knows [us] well.”¹⁰
- 30 percent of millennials and Gen Z currently say they experience disruptive anxiety or depression.¹¹

The pressure is too much. It’s unrealistic. And it’s hurting us. We are paralyzed while trying to keep up. To hell with being anxious, lonely, and burned out. This isn’t God’s

design. We are meant to flourish by the Spirit of God under the reign and rule of our King Jesus. Does this mean we won't be anxious ever? That we'll never be lonely? Never be tired? Of course not. But we are children of the King and more than conquerors¹² and we have every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.¹³ Do we believe—at least a little—that our lives would change if we fully embraced those truths and let them have actual weight in our lives? I think so.

And this isn't just our personal anxieties; it's our culture and our generation at large.

It's as if millions of us are on a treadmill, believing we're going somewhere when we're actually going nowhere. All that work, energy, and effort—yet we're running for nothing. Even worse, it feels like someone is pushing the up arrow on the treadmill constantly so we have to run faster and faster just to stay on.

Yet, I think it's a treadmill none of us want to be on.

Something about our culture has hypnotized us. It's *alluring*, and it sucks us into the vortex with its immense influence.

It's not unlike the story of the frog and the water. If you put a frog in water that is already boiling, it will jump right out from the sheer pain and collision of senses. But if you put a frog in water at room temperature, then steadily raise the heat one degree at a time until it is boiling, the frog will slowly but eventually die.

Our culture—us—we're that frog right now, thinking,

This is nice and cozy, but the heat has been climbing. This book is me saying, *Wait a minute. It's starting to get a little warm in here.* The values and pace of our culture, the speed at which it is moving, the demands and pressure we all collectively feel, the ethos of hustle injected into us all at birth—it's all boiling us alive. But we don't notice it because it has happened steadily over the last century or so.

It's time to stop and consider the cost of all of this hustle. All this speed. All this disillusionment. And just like most antidotes, I think a better way forward comes in administering the very opposite of the disease. We are slowly crushing our souls with noise, fame, work, and tribalism; we're living in our own private hells that are dragging us down spiritually, emotionally, and physically. So I say to hell with the hustle. And I mean that in *two ways*. To hell with it, meaning I'm done. Full stop. We can defiantly say no to where this is all headed. And two, I also truly mean *to hell with it*. Jesus was never in a hurry. Jesus was the fully human one. The prototype of all humanity. And I think we can pretty easily see that he was someone actively resisting cultural pressures, on many levels. Hustle isn't him. And if hustle isn't him, there's only one other place it could come from. Hell. The curse. The source of death.

I am realizing that only those who are anchored in a richer and deeper and more meaningful experience than the one our culture is currently offering won't get sucked away.

So what is this book about? It's about the disease, but

mainly about the cure. It's about silence, obscurity, rest, and empathy—the things that make us deeply and profoundly human. And we'd do well to hold on to them during a time when no one else is.

Because, in truth, *I'm over it.*

I'm over us being statistically the most anxious and depressed generation in history.

I'm over friends by the dozens struggling to find any sense of purpose or meaning.

I'm over people destroying their lives, relationships, and marriages on the altar of working themselves to death.

And I'm over simply living in a society where franticness and a tornado of the soul are the norms.

What you're reading right now is me putting my fist in the air and saying no. I'm done. I will not take one step further down this path. I refuse to glorify and elevate the grind, the hashtag #nosleepmovement, the noise, and commodification of our personhood through these little rectangular glass devices in our pockets.

Who's with me?



WE'RE BEING FORMED, WHETHER WE LIKE IT OR NOT

If a whiteboard were a love language, it would be mine. Who cares about “quality time” or acts of service?¹ I just want to brainstorm and scribble about ideas.

While I love to use the whiteboard for just about anything, it also shows up in a few predictable and big ways for our family at the end of every year during our Bethke Family Summit. This is a fun practice we started a few years ago where we carve out a few days at the end of every

December and we reflect on the past year, cast vision for the coming year, and check in on how we are doing in areas like growing together, parenting the kids, and more. On the first year of our summit, Alyssa and I had a nice dinner away from the kids, and with a blank journal nearby, we started asking and answering questions. It has evolved and grown into a multi-day super fun and celebratory reflection camp that includes our toddler-aged kids. It's like a corporate team-building event plus a vision-casting retreat, yet just for our little family team, and when they're older, we'll incorporate our kids' input too.

But here's one thing that might surprise you. One of our rules for the summit is *no talking about goals*. We aren't allowed to talk about or even use the language of "goals." We spend a few days reflecting and dreaming and connecting about the past year and the one coming up, and we don't even set one goal.

Why?

There's a principle in financial investing called a *stop-loss order*. It's essentially a benchmark set to automatically get rid of a stock if it drops below a certain value. If you buy a stock for fifty dollars, then you could set a stop-loss order for thirty dollars. So if the stock dips to thirty dollars, it'd automatically be sold in the system without you actively doing it.

A few years ago, Alyssa and I looked at each other and knew that we had reached our stop-loss order for goals. The

results we were getting from the goals we were setting had dipped far below what we wanted to get back from them. So we sold it back into the system. Moved on. We haven't set goals since. And here's why: for our family, goals haven't really helped us become who we want to be.

So we swapped them with one word: *formations*, which is the "process of forming."

What's the difference? Keep in mind the definition of a *goal*: "the object of a person's ambition or effort; an aim or desired result." You can already see a stark difference between a goal and formation just in their definitions.

One is about the end. The other about the present.

One is about doing. The other is about being.

One is about results. The other is about process.

To me they are similar, but the word *formations* seems to capture a bigger, truer idea. Goals are about *what practices I'm doing*. Formations are too, but because they *add* a few extra words in the beginning, they take on a deeper layer: formations are *who am I becoming through the practices I'm doing*. While this has been a tiny and perhaps a semantic change, it has yielded a massive difference in our lives. It has shifted our north star so we see ourselves through not what we achieve but who we are becoming, and we are putting tiny, micro, and repeatable practices in our path that will take us there.

In short, how we live forms us into a particular human. And we have to ask, is that the same human Jesus envisioned for our flourishing and our lives?

I think if we were honest, most of us would answer no.

I'll even say it a little more plainly for those in the back: we as humans are the summation of our repeated practices and rituals. Humans aren't made. We are *formed*.

So Alyssa and I over the last few years have leaned into this forming idea, asking ourselves, Who are we becoming through the practices we are doing? And, Can we create or point ourselves toward certain practices that make us the fuller, richer, more anchored humans we are meant to be? And this matters. For a few reasons. One, it feels more human. We are designed and primarily wired for becoming, not achieving. And two, I think in Christian circles we tend to focus far too much on assessing every decision we make through a lens of morality—is it right or is it wrong? There is merit to this, but I think it's too simple. It's elementary. And it doesn't take us where we need to go ultimately. It's why a Christian may not be doing anything morally "wrong," yet is addicted to being busy, feeling frantic, and overall staying anxious in their work and relationships, which clearly doesn't line up with the way of Jesus. To follow Jesus we need to not just follow His teaching but follow His way. His process. His cadence. His demeanor. His spirit. His very essence.

Who am I becoming through the practices I'm doing?

That's the better and truer question.

A couple of the small changes Alyssa and I have pursued are honoring a family Sabbath, never allowing phones in the bedrooms, and turning off our phones once a week for a twenty-four-hour period. They have yielded massive results. And guess what? There's no finish line on them. They aren't goals. We aren't trying to do them for a month or a year or only do them one hundred times and then take them off the list. We are committed to consistently and constantly coming back to these repeatable behaviors over decades, knowing they are forming and making us into people we want to become. Becoming like Jesus is the one and only "goal" we have. (I also am fully aware that sounds a little cliché and corny, but it has shifted and changed our behavior by pointing all of our formation toward the true north of intimacy with Jesus). We're not just doing a bunch of things. We're leaning on our very practices to take us there. To *form* us.

But first let's chat about where our cultural practices are currently taking us before we chat about where they *should* be taking us.

Information Is Killing Us

We have access to an unprecedented amount of information. We can essentially read, watch, look up, and listen to just about *anything at any time*.

We also care more about and do more with that information than ever before. I don't think we can even envision a farmer in 1803 spending copious amounts of time counting his calories or doing some new coconut oil lifehack for the longevity of his skin.

We are focused on trying to be better than ever. We have more goal-setting tools and more tips and tricks to help us become faster, better, stronger. But at what point do we pause and ask the obvious question: With all this authority and knowledge and enhancement to our personal lives, why aren't we immensely better for it? Why are we maybe even worse because of it? Essentially, Why aren't we superhuman yet?

Maybe it's because we aren't supposed to be.

To the many lifehackers out there who are trying to optimize their bodies and health and minds, thinking that somehow they will unlock the key to life by doing so, I ask: Have you ever taken an honest look at the human body to see how ridiculously inefficient and gross it actually is? It doesn't matter what new biohacking diet we are on; we still expel waste out of our bodies *every single day*. We are *literally waste-creating devices*. And if we don't shower or put on some type of deodorant we begin to smell. Quickly. We aren't shiny machines trying to get newer and better software updates. We are earthen vessels of dust with the very Spirit of God in us.

While we're busy trying out the latest productivity

system, at the end of the day we still need to sleep eight hours a day. Imagine if Apple tried to sell you a computer and they advertised it by saying, "This computer is inoperable for eight hours a day."

Have you ever reconciled the fact that if you live to ninety years old, you will have slept continuously for thirty full years of your life? An entire thirty years with your eyes closed, not engaged in the world, not even awake and certainly not doing anything the world deems productive.

Maybe it would do us good to actually ponder the age-old wisdom, "All come from dust, and to dust all return" (Eccl. 3:20). Our bodies are filthy, gross, smelly, and decaying. But before we get too down on ourselves, let's remember that when God wanted to enter our story, how did he do it? By wrapping himself in one of those very same bodies. Forever holy. Forever glorified.

So how many bulletproof coffees do we have to drink before we actually start becoming the person we want to become? How many bullet journals do we have crack open, podcasts do we have to listen to, Whole30 initiatives do we have to start, before we can be finished?

The truth is, we are informationally obese. Gorging ourselves on information until we are sick and unhealthy. Just one more podcast, one more YouTube video, one more hack to achieve a more optimized life.

But we keep wondering, *Why isn't anything changing?*

Why do we achieve a goal or a dream yet still feel as unfilled and anxious as ever?

Was a tentmaker in the first century or a farmer in the seventeenth century really worse off because they didn't know how to go from *Good to Great* or they weren't sure of the *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*? (Both are good books, by the way.) Or maybe they knew something we didn't. Maybe they *didn't* know everything we know and that was actually the blessing. On average, people 200 years ago were lucky to read fifty books in their entire lifetime. Today, people spend more time watching episodes or movies, and they watch more than fifty,² sometimes just in a week or two. The information onslaught is an intense issue that we haven't dealt with before.

Not all information is bad, of course. Helpful tips about ways to live better have blessed many, myself included. I too have found little tips online that have helped my focus and energy. What if we are attempting to exchange wisdom for shortcuts? One requires years of life experiences while the other just requires a Google search. Today, we face a huge gap between who we are and who we want to be simply because we can actually see that gap better than ever before. By just opening Instagram or reading Facebook posts, we see a different, perhaps ideal, self we wish we were.

Call it gorging on information. Call it getting drunk on information. Call it information abuse or addiction. Whatever you call it, it's killing us, and it's doing it silently.

And I say give or take about eighty years before there will be a strong cultural consensus saying, *Yeah, this isn't what we thought it was.*

Let's not forget that cocaine was considered a wonder drug a hundred years ago and companies put it in butter and wine and soda. It was even marketed as helpful for curing stomach aches and depression.

In the 1930s and 1940s, even after tobacco companies started to realize their product was harmful and causing people to die, they didn't shut down or change. No, they paid millions of dollars to hire PR firms to convince doctors to smoke cigarettes, believing that if they could show the world that doctors were okay with smoking, then regular people would be too.

I have to wonder, are social media and Google the tobacco companies of the twenty-first century? Are smartphones the cocaine of today? After all, our society has long had a pattern of considering something new as invigorating and exciting, adopting it at full scale and with full embrace without questioning the consequences. Then, thirty or fifty years later, the negative impact begins to show and regulations start to pop up.

Sadly, innovation always outpaces regulation. The cycle is the same. It usually goes a little something like this:

1. This is cool and exciting.

2. This is actually the best thing ever created. How did people even live without it before?
3. This is still the best thing ever and I can't imagine my life without it, but it seems to be hurting me also.
4. Ah yes, it's definitely hurting me, and I probably need to live without it in some way. Let's make a few rules to help us out.

As a society, I'd say we are currently in number two, with a few people starting to recognize and live into number three, which means we still have a long way to go until there are appropriate boundaries and maybe even government intervention—in 2050.

Here are a few insane flyovers to describe just *how much information* we are talking about:

- Five quintillion bytes of data is created every day.³
- Only 0.5 percent of all data is ever analyzed or used.⁴
- Every two days we develop as much information as we did between the dawn of civilization and 2003.⁵
- By 2020, 1.7 megabytes of new information will be created every second, for every human being on the earth.⁶

To think that in just forty-eight hours, the amount of information and data produced in the world will have been

equal to all the information from the beginning of time until the turn of the century is unbelievable. That means the actual amount data we consume in a day would have been one person's entire lifetime's worth in 1574.

We are fat and drunk on information. Stumbling through our lives. Except this abuse is the most culturally accepted in the history of mankind. In fact, we don't even recognize there is a problem yet. We are all "data junkies living in a data junkyard,"⁷ as one author put it. The more we consume information and the more we keep our faces in front of the water hose of the Internet, the more we lose the very skills needed to say no to it in the first place—we lose a long, steady focus and a deep flow for work. This is probably why ten years ago you'd read for three hours at a time but now you can only go for only ten minutes before checking text messages.

With all this data and information, we are more obsessed with metrics and goals than ever, but our *telos* (which is Greek for "ultimate end or aim")—our vision of the good life—doesn't seem to be becoming a reality.

But let's pause there for a second. The word *telos* is really important to this discussion. We don't have a modern English equivalent of the word, but our *telos* is that picture we all hold in our minds of *where I want to go, that's who I want to be, and that's how I want it to look when I get there.*

And whether we realize it or not, our *telos* is our most primal defining feature. We will bend and break an entire life around what we believe our *telos* to be.

And this is why it's specifically important to enter the conversation around information and data. We lean into information because we believe it's going to give us a certain future (our telos). But how's that going for us? When are we going to realize it's not taking us where we want to go?

The bottom line is, we can't research or *think* ourselves to a better version of ourselves. And this has to be reckoned with. We are not computers just waiting for a data offload or software update. In fact, we are more creaturely than we think. More primal. More animalistic. And while those drives and desires in us can be bent toward things that are evil or unhealthy, we have to remember that we were creatures before the curse as well. In other words, our impulses and desires and drives are part of what it means to be human (and pointing those desires or drives or impulses in the wrong direction is what it means to not be human).

We do not become just what we think. We become what we *desire*.

We are not shaped by facts. We are shaped by what we love.

Goals Are Finite and Final

The term *goals* was virtually nonexistent before 1920. On a graph, looking at any mention of the word in all of literature across the board, it's pretty much a flat line—until 1920

when it started to uptick and has continued to shoot up and to the right for the past ninety to one hundred years.⁸

Yet generations before us built countries without goal-setting. Electricity and the lightbulb were invented without bullet journals. New modes of transportation like the locomotive train, and the cross-country tracks that allowed unheard-of travel across the new frontier, were created without New Year's resolutions. It makes me feel bad for Alexander Hamilton or Mozart—if only they would've known about goal-setting.

Here's the bitter truth: a lot of people have the same goals, but not a lot of people reach them. If you asked an NBA player what his goal was, he would probably say, to win a championship. The winners and losers always have the same goals. But they don't always have the same *systems*.

When I look back at my old journals, I laugh at how ridiculous and naive and uninformed I used to be. But right after I stop laughing, I'm struck with fear, wondering if I will look back at myself in five years and think the same thing.

Probably.

That's how growth as humans works.

A few years ago, my goals included:

- Eat better.
- Write a book.
- Read my Bible every day.
- Get an A in my philosophy class.

I'd then set actionable steps to try to achieve each one, usually with a benchmark of my ideal reality. I wanted to eat better so I could have six-pack abs. I wanted to write a book so I could say I was a published author. I wanted to read my Bible every day so I could become a better Christian.

But then I started running into walls.

Most of my goals—especially the big, yearly ones I'd start on New Year's Day—would last until February, and then I'd completely abandon or forget them. Because the hard truth is, finish lines and end-result motivators do not change us. They usually feel too daunting or too disconnected from our current, everyday lives. And most people don't thrive under the pressure that we heap on ourselves to hit an exact bull's-eye, not to mention that we feel ashamed if we miss it.

We need to stop thinking, *I'm not that awesome or good enough right now, but if I can just do this one thing, then maybe I'll feel better about myself.* The idea that somehow the achievement of a goal will make us a certain type of person and that it will immediately rid us of our current unhappiness and discontentment just isn't true.

I've begun to understand that we are created for formation, not goal-setting. In general, goals are usually about a finish line. Something you can reach for and then be done once you accomplish it. It's about doing something. Formations, on the other hand, aren't about doing *something* but about being *someone*. One is usually about activity when

the other is about identity. Goals are linear and resemble a straight line. Formations look more like a circle, where you are constantly coming back to the same place to seek renewal and refreshment in a particular practice. One is about a result the other is about a process.

Some people, when they begin a new hobby, get a huge burst of ambition. Take running for example. They'll almost immediately tell themselves, *I want to run a 10K or half marathon by this time next year.* That's helpful and great. But I think a better approach is to focus on identity: *I want to be someone who runs as a normal part of my life.* Or *I will run at least five minutes five days a week.*

There's no finish line. Nothing to really accomplish. Make it more of a practice or way of life that will hopefully stay with you for the next sixty years. Because it's not about the marathon. It's about *I'm a runner.* And the latter to me seems to bring longer, deeper, richer benefits.

And why does this distinction matter so much? I think because Scripture doesn't talk much about goals. But it is deeply focused on our identity. On who we are becoming.

Are we becoming more like Jesus by the practices and formations we are doing?

Another important difference is the 80 percent rule. If you set goals and only do them 80 percent of the time (like working out, for example), you very quickly feel like a failure. You only think of the 20 percent of the time you didn't meet your own expectations. But with formations, if you

are doing it 80 percent of the time, you can still very much know that the rhythm is changing your quality of life and who you fundamentally are. Why? Because formations are about the process itself. The process is what makes you who you are. If I'm watering our plants five days of the week instead of seven, those are still going to be awesome healthy plants. Or if Alyssa and I try to have a rhythm of a weekly date night but only seem to do three a month for a season, we know it's helping and connecting us in ways that are very much necessary.

Here's a quick way to think about it. Traditional goals are like an arrow aiming for a bullseye. Formations though are less like a bull's-eye and more like an arrow bent in a circle.

One is linear and final. One is circular and forever.

One doesn't really change you. One can transform your life.

It's a subtle difference, but what's beautiful about formations is you get both—the process of becoming and probably the achievement or “finish line” too.

Goals tend to have a six-month lifespan, while formations you decide on usually weekly or daily for a long, possibly indefinite amount of time. That's because formations are about becoming someone and not doing something. It's about becoming someone through the daily rhythms and practices of your life.

Who Are You Today?

Think of yourself at your current stage in life. Your job, your romantic interests, your self-development. Now think back two years. Would the you of two years ago be happy or excited with how the last two years panned out in relation to your goals and plans and dreams? When I encourage people to ask themselves that question, the answer is sometimes no. They've ended up in a little different place than they were planning.

That's usually because they wanted their *beliefs* (which includes hopes and dreams about themselves) to get them where they wanted to go. But I don't know one person who could simply think themselves into transformation or a life change. Do you?

So then, what gets us to where we want to go?

You probably think I'll say being disciplined. Or trying harder. Or having a little more will power. And while all that's partially true, I think it's misleading. (Actually that's the thing that most bothers me about all the self-help and business leadership books currently—just hustle and work harder and *then* you can reach your dreams and have the life you want. *Cringe.*)

Here's the peculiar truth—what forms our identities are the million, tiny, micro-sized actions we all do every day without realizing it or thinking twice about it.

We are the sum of our habits.

It's really that simple.

Now if you ask yourself the question above, I bet you can backtrack your last few years and say, *Yeah, my daily ritualistic behaviors are usually second nature, and they have taken me in a particular direction.*

Here's the thing about habits: they are less about *doing* something and more about *loving* something. We sleep with our phones right by our bed, sometimes even under our pillows, not just because we actively make a choice every morning to look at the news in the world or what our friends are doing. We do it because we *love* what the phone gives us. There is an ancient call in us that taps the spigot of our desires until the ritual becomes worshipful and mundane.

Now let me pause for a second just to clarify a few of these words since we will be using them throughout the book. There is some overlap and similarity between the words *habit*, *ritual*, and *routine*. They all are repeated behaviors. But a *routine* is mundane (tying your shoe). A *habit* is something that goes a lot deeper into our desires and drives and loves—a repeated action that is difficult to give up or alter (for good or bad). And ritual to me is a habit of *meaning*. A repeatable action that draws us into a sacred moment. Throughout this book we will mostly be talking about the last two (habits and rituals) as they are ways of becoming like Jesus that many of us have forgotten about.

Now let's talk about habits a little longer. We are a

collection of our habits. And the reason habits are stickier and harder to shift or change is that they usually drive deep down into our *loves*. Our *telos* (our vision of the good life) is revealed through our habits. And our habits are simply the things we love deeply without ever realizing it. What we love has the power to control us and give our lives meaning and depth and richness (or it promises to, and severely underdelivers).

I am in a marriage, thankfully, where both of us understand God's design for the world, particularly the need for a cup of coffee every day, first thing in the morning. Unfortunately, I also have a spouse who thinks that even though we both enjoy coffee freshly made at 6:00 a.m., she should rarely if ever be the one to make it. If I went to bed before her, I used to assume she would prepare it before coming to bed and set the coffee timer for the morning, but then I'd wake up to find that the coffee was not made, bringing me close to passing out as I made it half-awake. (I'm only joking; if it's not made, I only tend to twitch a little in my right eye before I'm able to brew it.)

Now, coffee is not just about a cup of caffeine but is more about the dance of the morning ritual. The smell conjures up deep and fond memories of quiet, tranquil morning time, with journals and books and thinking. Drinking our morning coffee has become loaded with meaning, with immense attachment and imagery for our daily lives.

Because of the meaning of our repeated pattern, I have

become the chief designated coffee maker in our family. And guess what? Alyssa genuinely thanks me for it. She's mentioned multiple times that this little act of service and blessing every single night has shown immense thoughtfulness and love to her.

I'll admit, though, that when I first began to take over the coffee preparation, I felt very gentlemanly and chivalrous and sacrificial (in the tiniest way, obviously, because marriage is ultimately made up of one thousand microscopic opportunities to sacrifice for each other rather than one big sacrifice, right?). Now I essentially do it out of ritual, with a little mix of duty. But it's still an act of love. And me continually doing it, even once it got mundane, is maybe even more an act of love.

I think following Jesus with rhythm is the same. Even when it becomes dry for a season, it's not necessarily legalistic, but Jesus folks often expect following Jesus to always be free and fun and spontaneous and never ritualistic or liturgical. And if it is, we cry legalism.

But what if it's right in the middle?

Take the coffee again. I set myself up for failure if I expect to serve my wife only when I feel like it, or to make the coffee only on the mornings when my love for her is really pumping in my veins that day. A lot of us do that with Jesus. I call this "following the camp high, not Jesus."

But it would also be equally bad if I made the coffee

every morning purely out of duty and harbored bitterness while thinking, *Why doesn't she ever make the coffee for me?*

Making the coffee every day, even when I don't feel like it, is a way to show my love for her in faithful and non-spectacular ordinariness. I don't call that legalism. I call that holiness. Love isn't just a verb or noun. Love is a habit.

Governments have figured out this truth (the Pledge of Allegiance, anyone?), while many churchgoers in the Protestant traditions are still calling anything repetitive "legalism." For too long we've confused legalism with something that takes effort or discipline. Just because we do something over and over doesn't mean it's legalistic.

If we cry legalism whenever we do something with repetition or effort or discipline or when something has the potential to become dry and rote, then by that definition Jesus was one of the most legalistic people we know, praying the Shema prayer at least three times a day as any faithful Jew of the first century would have been expected to do.

Legalism isn't defined by behavior. You can't look at a certain behavior and know immediately that it's legalism, because the same behavior can be done in both holy and unholy ways. While the Pharisees are typically thought of as the enemies of Jesus and are the ones we most often picture in our minds when we hear the word *legalism*, many biblical scholars believe Jesus was a Pharisee too—or at least his beliefs and expansion of Torah more closely aligned with the

Pharisees than with any other group in the New Testament, including the Sadducees, the scribes, and the zealots.

But the idea isn't to do things that take repetition. It's to make sure your heart is right if you do.

I once heard a someone say that rules before love equals legalism, and love before rules equals gospel formation.⁹ How much power, vitality, depth, and richness have we evangelicals left on the table of church history or tradition simply because we thought it looked and smelled too "legalistic"? We can all be ritualistic whether we like to admit it or not.

We read the New Testament and think, *I can't believe people had to dress a certain way back then because of certain customs and codes*. Yet today, we might think a church is out of touch or not relevant if the worship pastor isn't wearing skinny jeans, and the pastor isn't preaching from an iPad.

Philosopher James K. A. Smith makes the beautiful observation that the first and last words Jesus speaks in the gospel of John are often overlooked, even though they're very much at the heart of how we change. Jesus asks, "Do you love me?"

We are not who we are because we thought our way there. We are who we are because we loved something and chased it, often unwittingly, and we continued to do it, over and over like a liturgy. Or as Smith puts it, "Love-shaping practices."

All our liturgies are pointing us somewhere. The

practices we do to shape and cultivate our loves are shaping us. And if that's true, liturgy isn't something you do. It's better defined as something being done to you.

We are a culture that leans heavily toward the intellectual, so we are determined to point out harmful ideas, or at least ones we disagree with. But because we don't understand that most ideas don't enter our lives through thinking them but rather practicing them unwittingly, then those ideas are able to sneak into our culture in a Navy Seal Team Six sort of way, changing us and shaping us and forming us before we even realize they're there.

And frankly the people who seem to best understand that we are creatures of love and desire, not thoughts, are the current giant tech companies of the world. Think about how Apple exists with a temple-like space (tell me their retail stores don't feel so "set apart" from the ordinary retail design that it doesn't immediately conjure up sacred feelings) where you go to sacrifice (enormously large portions of your money) to obtain that which you are looking for—connection, meaning, and depth. People stand in line all night, some even camping out on the sidewalk, for the latest device that offers those implicitly understood benefits. This phone can, and will be, more than a phone.

I think it's even fair to say that Apple is a religion with Steve Jobs as a priest (who has become a venerated secular saint after his death), mediating between man and God to

give us what we want. Connection. Power. God-like knowledge of good and evil.

And we take the phone, and we crouch and bend over.
Usually with heads bowed.

Laser focused on something. Blocking out all around us.
We are silent and solemn. Tending not to speak.

And then we perform a certain behavior over and over
and over again. Sound familiar?

Swipe.

Swipe.

Swipe.

Pull down.

Swipe.

Swipe.

Swipe.

Flick.

Flick.

Pull down.

You go to the Middle East and it's not uncommon to hear a bell ring throughout the day, which means it's time to pray and worship. In the West, we aren't much different. We hear that *ping* and most of us implicitly believe, *It's time to pray and worship*.

People hear the bell and get out their mats.

We hear the bell and we pull out our phones.

It seems we aren't just doing something. Screens and phones are doing something to us.

And Apple even operates on its own liturgical calendar with specific and rhythmic dates (what religion tends to call “high holy days,” where we get our word *holiday* from) for new releases and launches. Steve Jobs captured the allure of the product launch. Most people wouldn’t show up if you tell them you’re unveiling a new car or even your new model of Android phones. Yet Jobs, and now Tim Cook, have managed to fill theaters year after year with a religious fervor and excitement about what Apple products will be unveiled for that year. Jobs turned the fervor of “what new iPhone is coming out this year” into not just a consumer event but a religious event.

No one knew better than Steve Jobs that we are story creatures, not information creatures. We don’t want facts; we want a way of life. We don’t want the answers; we want a vision of what is good.

And it’s no coincidence Apple became the first company in history to hit the one-trillion-dollar market cap. The greatest storytellers always win, and Apple sure has.

Even in its commercials, Apple tells stories. In one ninety-second spot, a family is at grandma and grandpa’s house for the Christmas festivities. The whole family is laughing and enjoying one another, yet all throughout the video one of the young teenage boys is on his phone. The commercial is setup with beautiful, emotional music to give you all the feels about how awesome Christmas is and how beautiful and amazing and family-centric it is. Yet they are

purposely invoking a slight tension as you watch and wonder, *Hmmm . . . who is this boy? And why is he on his phone the whole time? He's missing all the important moments.*

And that's when the last scene cuts to the living room, with the whole extended family packed on the floor and couches, with their Christmas PJs and socks on, sipping hot cocoa facing the TV. The young teenage boy gets their attention and then turns the TV on and begins to play a little video. And the video is basically a little highlight video he put together of his family the last few days while they were together. That's why he'd had his phone out. He was making a family movie.

Everyone begins to tear up and cry and hug and thank him for the special gift to the family, then it cuts to "Happy Holidays," and the Apple logo.

The end.

There were absolutely no details or information about what the phone could do. Not how fast it is or how many megapixels it has.

Because Apple knows that's not what they're selling. They aren't trying to sell you on what the phone does. They're trying to paint a vision of the beautiful life their phone can give you.

I'll admit, the first time I watched that commercial, I thought it was touching and beautiful. But then I wondered, what is the commercial really saying? That the things I so desperately want in life—connection, meaning, deep sense

of family—this phone can give me? That's a big promise. And I'm not sure anyone has checked back in to see if they've really delivered.

Once we realize that our daily habits are forming us on a fundamental level (and even more once they become micro rituals, which are the things we do every day without really realizing them), then we will start paying attention. We begin to ask, are these doing something to me I don't particularly like or want but don't realize?

With all the information we have access to, we want to optimize everything. Our cars have chips. Our phones have chips. Our Fitbits have chips. All to track and give us data we didn't even know we needed so we can make adjustments.

We audit our finances. Our diet. Everything.

What would it look like if we looked at the books of our micro liturgies?

Because here's the thing: You are becoming someone and something. You are being formed. You are an image that is *reflecting*.

But we need to resist reflecting and participating in the hustle that turns us into something we aren't.

Why?

Because I want to be more than an efficient, driven, ambitious, goal-oriented, achievement-based human. When I envision that person in the future, I don't see a loving human presence. I see a machine. That's what most of us are pointing our *telos* toward without realizing it.

Yet there's a bigger and better and more truthful *telos* that our hearts long for deep down. The *telos* of flourishing as the image of God found in Jesus. True humanness. That is the goal and the objective. And that is what we lost the minute that fateful curse in the garden shattered it all. But we can find our way back. How? Through *the truly human one—Jesus*.

I want to be formed and shaped and molded into *his image*. *To be more like him*. *To look like him*. To walk at his pace. To respond to the world with his gentleness and grace. To reign and rule, build, create, and cultivate under his loving and sacrificial authority. But to do that, I have to look in his face. Meet with him. Stay at his feet. Spend time with him. To live in repeatable practices and formations that consistently put myself before him. I have to shape my space and my habits away from my false self and push myself into becoming a true full image bearer of him.