



Following Jesus

Part 6 – Is Seeing Through Lenses of Love

Joe White

Following Jesus Is Seeing Through Lenses of Love. Doesn't that sound great. Following Jesus is seeing the world and people in the world through lenses of love. I can't take credit for the great idea. I actually plagiarized my son Brady on this one. In fact, I plagiarize my son often. There is no one I would rather plagiarize than my son Brady. He has a little church down in Disney, in Orlando. He looks out at the audience every day and he sees Captain Hook, Peter Pan, Mickey and Minnie. They're not dressed like that on Sunday evening, but he gets to preach to the princesses and the princes.

My oldest son, Brady, has a whole lot of his mom in him. He is a great teacher. I love to listen to his sermons on podcast. The problem with Brady is he is married to five wives. Now he's only had one wedding, but he has five wives. Some mornings, he wakes up and she looks a lot like Aurora. True story. How would you like to be married to her? And some mornings he wakes up and the same wife looks a lot like Belle. Some mornings Brady wakes up and she looks a lot like Cinderella. What a wig will do. Some mornings more recently, he wakes up and she looks a lot like Mary Poppins, along with her newly fabricated British accent. Some mornings, he wakes up and he has a silver slipper and she looks a lot like Jennifer.

I asked him one time, "Brady, what's it like to be married to all those different princesses?"

He said, "Dad, it's really weird."

One Sunday, Brady was talking about lenses of love and I thought *My oh my, what a great thought that it is seeing the world through lenses of love.* How many of you y'all are Oakley people? How many of y'all are Ray-Ban people? How many of y'all are Maui Jim? How many of y'all are the Casey's \$9.99?

Seeing the world through lenses of love because we all see the world through our own set of glasses. There is the lens of pride and then there is the lens of love. Probably all of us have seen through one lens or the other at some time in our life. Maybe both on different days.

With the lenses of pride, you see a person as someone to take advantage of. Through lenses of pride, you see someone to elevate your position. You see someone to control. But through lenses of love, you see someone who is infinitely valuable no matter who they are. You see a brother or sister in Christ or a future brother or sister in Christ.

In marriage, through lenses of pride, you see your spouse as someone to change, someone to fix, someone to mold in your image, someone to bring you pleasure, someone to fill your senses - as John Denver would say - or someone to make you happy. But, through the lenses of love, you see your spouse as someone to serve and someone to bless.

Through lenses of pride, you see kids as someone to endure. Through lenses of love, you see someone to enjoy. Through lenses of pride, you see conflict as an opportunity for revenge, as an opportunity to increase your bitterness quotient. Through lenses of love, you see conflict as a chance to forgive and a chance for God to make you more like Jesus. Through the lenses of pride, you see the lost – those that live in darkness who don't know Christ – as someone to ignore, someone to avoid, someone to judge because they don't live like you think they ought to be living.

Let me remind you what it's like to be lost. Maybe we have forgotten. To be lost is to be dark, to live in darkness. (lights off) Can you remember how dark it was before 2 Corinthians 4: 6 came alive in your life. Paul says it so well. ***For the one who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.*** To know Christ is to plug into the greatest light source ever imagined. To know the light is just sometimes too amazing to think that you can call God your Father, isn't it? That you could look forward to improvement even through the horrible hands that someday this life deals. And at the last closure of your eyes, that you would wake up and see Jesus. But, do you know what, men and women? That is not where it ends. That's just the beginning. To know Christ is to put on lenses of love and it looks a whole lot more like this, doesn't it? (lights on) Yes, to see him, yes, to see the God of heaven, but the greatest part of the adventure is to take others to see the same light of heaven that by the grace of God, he has allowed you to see.

Of all the events that I've ever been blessed to be a part of... I've probably been a part of 1,000 events over the years, but my favorite was not at an arena or a stadium or to a crowd at a college campus. My favorite was in a prison. It was a few years ago, back in the Promise Keepers days. On Friday nights, I would go out and meet with men in NBA arenas and stadiums and we had some great years together in the Promise Keepers days. But back stage at one event, I heard about a prison that had been praying for three years that we would come do Promise Keepers in a prison. I couldn't wait. My gift is mercy. I just could not wait to be with those men. It was a high security prison in Marion, Ohio. There was rioting and unrest, but I heard some changes were being made. I couldn't wait to go in. I took my ax, sledge hammer, 12 inch spikes that I build the cross with, and walked through security in a breeze. I thought there would be an issue with that ax. They said, "Oh, Mr. White, no problem; come on in."

The yard was manicured. It looked like Pebble Beach. The men were so excited. Fourteen hundred seats were in perfect rows out there in the prison yard; every seat full with an expecting heart. The warden stood up and the men gave her a standing ovation. Irish Johnny stood up to speak. He was the leader of the Aryan Society, the biggest black hate group in the prison. The African American brothers gave him a standing ovation. There was no unrest. There was no racial tension. I could tell this place was a family of Christ. Willie stood up, this dear, precious African American brother, who led his brothers with love. The white guys stood up and gave Willie a standing ovation. He had been paroled two days earlier, but he refused the parole because he'd been praying for three years for this day.

I built the cross and gave a little invitation. Twelve hundred to fourteen hundred men stood up and pledged their love for Christ. The silent choir stood to sing, eighty murders predominately. Their faces shined like angles. I was weeping as they did Christian songs, the warden leading the choir. I was out hugging guys. Boy, was I out hugging guys afterwards. I would hug deeply, holding men, tears and tears in each other's arms. I would always tell the men, "You know what? I'm not your pop, but if I was, I would be so proud to have a son like you the way you're growing in Christ today." Most of the men had never been hugged before by a guy.

I asked what happened in this prison yard. When it was time to go back to the cells, the guards and prisoners walked as one. There was no tension. The guards stood outside the cells and the inmates were inside the cell; it was a formality. No guns necessary.

Six years before, six guys out of church... Men, there were only six guys. They were just regular ole deer-hunting guys like me and you, just regular ole guys, guys that love to cook out on the grill on the back porch, just fellas. This could have been us. Each went into the prison and they took one guy and they loved him to Jesus until he was ready to love another man to Jesus. That was their mantra. After a time, they had six believers, but they so thoroughly and biblically disciplined these men that they changed cells, with the warden's blessing. Then, after a few weeks, they had twelve. Each of these twelve would love a man to Jesus until he was ready to love another man to Jesus and they had twenty-four. I saw it with my eyes. In six years, the prison was not just believers; they were disciples, they were walking with Christ well actually.

The next fall, I went back for chapels to be with the men that I had grown to love. I said, "Willie, are you upset they messed up your papers, your parole and you're here for three more years?"

He said, "Aw, Brother Joe, I'm not upset. I'd be preaching Jesus outside the walls or I'll be preaching Jesus inside the walls. We're freer in here than most men out there."

Discipleship. What an idea. Let me tell you the backstory of Jennifer, talking about discipleship and the joy of seeing a culture change through loving people to Jesus until they are ready to love somebody else to Jesus. Jennifer wanted to work at Disney. Brady said, "Let's go to L.A. I'll never live in Orlando. Because I'm doing music, L.A. would be a great place to work." For six weeks, she tried to get a job with Disneyland, but they were in a hiring freeze. Twice a week, she would go to the interview and twice a week, they would send her home in tears. There wasn't a job in Disneyland.

Finally, at the end of six weeks, I think they got tired of seeing the little girl's blue eyes. They said, "Why don't you come sell corn dogs?"

She said, "I would be delighted. I'll do anything you want me to do in this park."

She was so charming selling corn dogs; you'd think you were getting them from Mickey Mouse himself. The Chief Talent Director came by and he gave Jennifer a card. He said, "Why don't you give me a call. You obviously have not been discovered yet." She gave him a call and they gave her an interview and they told her it was the best interview they ever had.

They said, "We need you to go to Orlando to be Aurora." She said, "My husband said he would never go to that place," but after he blessed her with that, they went to Orlando.

After she had been loving on these little girls for a few weeks, I asked her one time, "Jennifer, how do you make every little girl feel so special?" She said, "Because they are." So they made her captain and Cinderella and all the other things. Then they made her a trainer so she could train all the princesses and all the employees. Then she started writing curriculum for them.

The best part that no one sees with the gown and the wig and the make-up is that behind the scenes, after the shows, she's in the castle, in Kanakuk Crazy Creek chairs, wearing Kanakuk tee shirts, (she's our billboard model) with the Peter Pans and the Captain Hooks and the Mickey Mouses and Minnie Mouses, doing discipleship. She takes them through a Bible study plan we call LifeLine 9 Eleven. The culture... For all of y'all that get to participate in roles at our theaters in this town and for those of y'all who are in the market place and the workplace in the Tri Lakes area and for those of us who are in families, it's a discipleship plan. She does it week by week, sitting in Crazy Creek chairs there in Walt Disney's Palace, between shows. The culture, men and women, has literally changed. There are 60,000 employees at Walt Disney World. The culture was jaded and they were jealous; there was back biting behind the scenes, arguing and fussing. Today, there is a spirit of love in that place. She's changed the culture through loving folks to Jesus until they are ready to love somebody else to Jesus.

My favorite moment in this church... And I've had so many favorite moments watching our precious pastor and all of his crew and this fantastic band minister to folks, but my favorite moment was walking into church back there in the corridor and I saw a gentleman with a little three-year-old girl and his wife, proudly walking in as a family man. I will never forget it. Six years before, he was on a water tower with a bottle of whiskey, ready to jump. In fact, he tried to get up the courage to jump off three times. Fortunately, he never jumped. There, sitting on the bumper of my car, one of the boys in the church had a chance to lead him to Christ by the grace of God. Then I started meeting with him and going through the LifeLine 9 Eleven discipleship studies.

I'm an average dad. I've got a marvelous wife. I don't know what I did right. I did a lot of things wrong I'm sure, but I got to disciple my children. There is a difference between raising your kids and discipling your kids. I learned a lot of it from Ted and Gary Smalley. But getting to tuck those kids in bed at night, starting at age three and still tucking them in bed when they were 18... We'd lie there, shoulder to shoulder and we'd talk about the day. Sometimes we were in tears together with the difficulties of life. And then we would do our little Bible study together and memorize a little Bible verse. Then, before they would go to school, if I wasn't traveling, I'd get a chance at breakfast to go through a little Bible study in Proverbs. Just a short moment before they went to school.

I'll tell you the fun thing, parents, about discipling your kids. When they go out on a date when they're 16, or they are at a party when they are a teenager, you can't go. But the word of God never leaves their heart. Jesus is on every single date when you disciple your kids. When they go off to college and you say good-bye for a while, it's a horrible day for some of us who are babies, like me, but you know they are going to be okay because the word of God, day by day, has been painted on their hearts.

We call it LifeLine 9 Eleven. It's an iPhone app, completely free; I'm not selling anything, trust me. It's what Ted and Gary Smalley and Chuck Swindoll, with help from Lecrae and Timmy Tebow and Kay Arthur and others, put together. It's this very simple "add water and stir" iPhone app. It's for parents to disciple children at all ages. It's for women to disciple women. Kay Arthur kicks that off for us. It's for men discipling men. Church Swindoll and Max Lucado and Tony Evans kick that one off. It's for students discipling students. Lecrae and Timmy Tebow kick that one off. It has videos and very simple studies. If you wonder why we call it LifeLine 9 Eleven, let me show you this video of the hero of our discipleship program.

[Video Plays]

My name is Thomas Bowen. I volunteered as a firefighter on the search and recovery teams at the World Trade Center following the September 11th terrorist attacks on our country. Our nation will never forget that devastating day when four airliners were hijacked and used as weapons against our country, against people like you and me.

I arrived at ground zero several days following the attack and joined hundreds of other men and women in searching for those who were lost that day. During those long months, we worked anywhere from 12 to 18 hour long days, hoping to bring peace to the families who lost a loved one. We searched day and night through a seven story debris field of twisted metal, concrete, and crushed material. Fires raged deep below our feet and the threat of shifting or collapsing debris were constant reminders of the immanent risk of injury or death.

On one of my shifts, I fell over 20 feet into a collapsed stair well onto a large steel beam. My wrists were crushed and my back was badly injured. Because of the contaminants in the air, my lungs sustained permanent damage. As a result, I've had multiple surgeries and most recently, a portion of my right lung had to be removed. I returned home a different man. I disconnected from the people I knew and loved. Gradually, sleepless nights and graphic dreams led to frustrating days hypervigilant and anxious. My wife loved me faithfully through it all, but she lost the man she married. I withdrew from my church, friends, and family, from my wife and children.

About a year and a half later, I found myself facing a new ground zero closer to home. One morning, my 16-month old son Ben fell asleep on my lap as we reclined on my Lazy Boy chair to watch a Disney movie. A few minutes later, I sensed something was really wrong. His body went limp and he was unresponsive. We rushed him to a local hospital and after an MRI, they identified a tumor in the center of his brain. They Life Flighted Ben to Cincinnati Children's Hospital where surgeons met him to perform a life or death surgery.

After two more grueling brain surgeries and dozens of painful procedures, we went to St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital to begin treatment for his cancer. Guys, my wife and I were devastated. It had been a bumpy couple of years, to say the least, and now our son was dying. My mind raced with regret. Did I cause this? Was this related to 9/11 exposure? I had been so mentally checked out since 9/11 that I felt I had missed out on Ben's life.

Ultimately, the treatment plan failed. The last couple of months of Ben's life were very difficult. His pain was impossible to manage and we felt helpless. This was my son. I would give anything to make it all better, but I couldn't. I remember curling up next to him and saying, "Ben, if you see Jesus, you run to him. It's okay." A few hours later, our little boy died in our arms.

To you, this is a firehose. It's just a way to put water on fire. To firefighters, it's a life line, one of the tools of the trade. We are trained to remain anchored to it at all times while fighting fire. We know that when a building is crumbling and debris is everywhere, we can follow the life line back to safety. To do this, we have to remain connected to it at all times. We fight and rescue with one hand and keep the other hand on the life line or on the arm of someone who is connected to the life line. If you lose contact with this tool, you could lose your life.

People ask me how I keep fighting through the pain of Ben's death and the 9/11 wounds that continue to impact my body. I answer with one word: Jesus. Jesus is my life line. He guides me out of the fire and destruction and rescues me to safety. He helps me navigate impossible nights, lingering regrets, and the feeling of great loss.

I came here to ask you, "Are you connected to the life line?" Jesus' last command to all believers was to go make disciples. Think about the people in your life, your ground zero, your family, a friend at work, a neighbor, a classmate. Are you sure their hand is on the life line? A fireman's tools are always by their side. The tools of the trade are never out of reach. There is a lot of hurt and need in this world; it's all around us. You know someone who needs rescued and you have the tools needed to help them. I can't guarantee that life will go as planned, but I know that God provides a tool for us and those we love so that we can be truly rescued.

[Video ends]

So, how many of y'all have a person in your life you can think of who needs to walk with Jesus better? Thanks to the work of Gary Smalley and Ted, part of the app is couples to couples. Part of the app is men with guys. Part of the app is women with women. Part of it's for families with children. Part of it's for students. Part of it's for pastors to equip their church. There are no strings attached. You can download it immediately and I hope you do. As Nadia comes up here to close, I would just say that with all the experiences, Ted and I went out and trained 61,000 men over a five or six-year period of time and we have thousands of stories of folks who left the little events we did to go and disciple people and love them to Jesus until they were ready to love somebody to Jesus.

There was a guy in Pennsylvania that certainly we'll never forget who left the conference and said, "I'm going to do that." He had never done that before and probably most of us haven't. He said, "God, who do you want me to take the tool and disciple?" God said, "Your dad." His dad was 83 years old. He was a mortar man in World War II. Most of his buddies had gotten blown to shreds in those difficult days.

The son went up to his dad and said, "Dad, I would love to have some conversations with you about Jesus." He said his daddy started crying and said, "Son, no one has ever asked me that before."

The first lesson was about grace. That's a great place to start, isn't it? His daddy trusted Christ in the first lesson. They continued to meet and they went through the LifeLine 9 Eleven program together. His daddy died three years later and his son said, "As I laid by his side as he was on his way out and on his way into heaven, at the last breath of life, he opened his eyes and he said, 'It is written.'" His son has no idea what he saw written, but I have a feeling that he saw his name written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

Your adventure is about to begin folks. I'll tell you it's the greatest adventure you'll ever go on in your life.