

 **nextstep**
VOLUME 2

**Discipleship is a series of
next steps.**

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Introduction

Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

—Hebrews 12:1-2, NIV

In Part 1, we talked about “deification”—the idea that we can all be made more into Christ and become more God-like through grace. Baptism and conversion set us free from sin, so we can live freely the life God has made for us. Our first yes is to trust the God of these precious promises.

In Part 2, we considered the explicit call to discipleship—the idea that we need to make following Jesus the defining yes of our lives. Come what may, we are followers of Jesus Christ and his way! We commit to daily practices for the

ongoing formation of our hearts and to develop the habits of discipleship.

In Part 3, we continue the journey of growing in discipleship, looking even more closely at the nature of freedom. Freedom is more than a one-time transaction by grace. Like any good parent, God wants us to grow in human and spiritual maturity as we acquire the tastes of God's kingdom: choosing for ourselves virtue over vice. This is the way of freedom. We do not merely sneak into God's kingdom by a grace-filled declaration that you and I are allowed entrance. We actually become fit for the kingdom itself, by living in it even now and acclimating to God's ways. Jesus came not only to forgive our sins but also to lead us into freedom and victory over "everything that hinders" (Hebrews 12:1, NIV).

In Part 4, we will begin to be equipped to help others take their next steps in following Jesus. As we grow to seek what Jesus seeks and love what Jesus loves, we will emanate more of Jesus' "flavor" into our world. Though there are many diverse ways to be the Lord's salt, light, and fragrance in the world, Part 4 focuses specifically on showing person-to-person love and care for the individuals the Lord has placed in our lives. We are each called to help a few others take their next steps on their way with Jesus.

Our journey of discipleship is never over. We can always grow closer to God. But the good news is that anyone on the road can help guide a fellow traveler.

An Acquired Taste

Andre

I love broccoli.

I really love brussels sprouts.

Don't get me wrong. I still love a good ole greasy McDonald's meal, but the enjoyment of French fries and broccoli are different experiences. A Micky D's binge can properly be described, for me, as a "guilty pleasure." Along with my temporary satiation comes that nagging awareness that I've just filled my body with a substance that only detracts from its health and longevity. If I manage to forget this fact, my body reminds me with rumblings and aches within the hour.

Not so with vegetables. While it may be (much) less exciting or addictive, the experience of enjoying healthy food is another level of "good"—one which most parents hope their children will experience for themselves. It's different from French fries and candy. There's no downside. It contributes to everything good for our brains and bodies. And to the one who has acquired the taste for vegetables, eating them is delightful.

Some things in God's kingdom—like justice, meekness, humility, generosity and self-control—can be acquired tastes. In our immaturity, even though we may be "saved by grace" and forgiven, we still prefer the "taste" of many vices over that of virtue. Our concupiscence remains. At times, we manage to fight back against our urges to sin, and at other times, we dive in with guilty pleasure and then run back to the Lord in

repentance. In his love and mercy, he never tires of lifting us up—thanks be to God! But let us never think that this situation describes the fullness of life and freedom in Christ! No! God gave us spiritual taste buds, so to speak, that can mature with repeated exposure to virtue and all that is good. We may have to choke down some vegetables we don't like much at first—things like faithfulness to prayer or giving money away or trying to bear wrongs patiently or sharing a faith story with someone else. But before we know it, we find ourselves enjoying the taste of these kingdom ways more and more. They're so deeply good for us—and for those around us!

By grace, with effort, and through many failures, we can actually get somewhere in victory over sin and vice! We can experience not merely a white-knuckled, last-minute victory of self-control over the pull of pornography or gluttony or ranting in anger, but *distaste* for these very things, such that leaving them behind becomes . . . dare we say . . . easy! This is true freedom: not merely to hold our noses and force down God's laws but to *relish their sweetness*.

Do not be discouraged if your taste buds are not yet fully attuned to all that is good, true, and beautiful. None of us are there yet. But this is the road of transformation upon which we all must travel as Jesus' followers. Jesus called it the narrow way (see Matthew 7:13-14), and it leads to "the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Romans 8:21, NABRE). Our ongoing transformation consists in acquiring God's own tastes. As we grow "in union with Jesus, we seek what he seeks and we love what he loves" (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 267).

Not only do we grow to acquire the tastes of Jesus and his kingdom, but in doing so, we also become “salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13) or what St. Paul called “the aroma of Christ” (2 Corinthians 2:15). With the help of our witness and actions, others too can better acquire the tastes of God’s kingdom.

This volume of *Nextstep* presents various reflections and practices to help us continue on the narrow path and further develop our tastes for God’s ways.

▣ PART 3 ▣

**HIT YOUR STRIDE:
MATURING AS A DISCIPLE**

1

Virtue and Vice

In roaring winds and crashing seas,
an anchor holds the vessel fast.
Hope anchors us.

Faithful in Small Matters: Human Virtues in Increments

Think about a goal you have struggled with, strived for, fought for, or sacrificed for. Perhaps you were the kid who ended up as an all-state athlete, or maybe you practiced daily to become first chair violinist in the orchestra. Perhaps you participated in an advanced training so you could lead coworkers on a project. Or maybe you know the blood, sweat, and tears involved in rearing a child with special needs or caring for a parent with dementia.

Regardless of the specific skill, your abilities in this area didn't appear overnight. They required both time and effort. You didn't become a master of addressing the challenges of

autism, swimming one hundred meters at top speed, or fixing diesel engines just by *wanting* the skills necessary. You fought for those skills, and that fight spanned years.

Beyond this prolonged effort, with skills growing slowly and in increments, we know that the abilities of an Olympic athlete and the skills of a welder or a nurse all represent value. While the Olympic athlete may appear on television and receive a medal, that athlete is certainly not more valuable to the world than the welder or the nurse. The world's division of skills into "small" or "large" does not reflect the worth of a skill. All skills involve sacrifice.

St. Francis de Sales spoke on these issues in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*. To serve God "as he wishes we must have great care to serve him well both in great, lofty matters and in small, unimportant things. With love we can capture his heart by the one just as well as by the other."¹

If God doesn't call us to make the "great sacrifices," de Sales explained, we can grow in virtue in the small things by bearing "patiently the slight injuries, the little inconveniences, the inconsequential losses" that come to us daily.²

As De Sales reminded us, "Great opportunities to serve God rarely present themselves but little ones are frequent."³ We should take advantage of every one of these little opportunities to grow and to please him.

Growing toward the Ultimate Goal

Obedience helps us move toward sanctification. This faithfulness in small matters trains our spiritual muscles, or we could

say that it develops our spiritual taste buds. This commitment to obedience to Christ transforms us. Merely refraining from sin does not lead us to grow into the fullness of our true nature. Remember the discussion of Mr. Nice Guy in Part 1? Mr. Nice Guy is not enough.

We need to *grow in virtue*. And we need to grow this way intentionally and with specificity.

From a psychological perspective, it makes sense. Elite athletes using sports psychology to reach excellence know that a positive statement carries far more efficacy than a negative one. Olympic coaches will tell you the power of positive “self-talk.”

Try this exercise:

“Don’t think about purple poodles.”

What did you think about?

Yep, you probably thought about those poodles. A better way to get someone to move away from purple poodles is to give them a positive alternative.

“Think about yellow elephants.”

You probably didn’t think about purple poodles!

In obedience and sanctification, we can focus on *virtues* to grow. With “our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith” (Hebrews 12:2, NABRE), no longer will we simply avoid sin. We can grow in holiness by cultivating virtue.

The three theological virtues are:

1. Faith
2. Hope
3. Charity

As with the seven deadly sins we discussed in Part 1, there are also three theological virtues and four cardinal virtues to make seven essential virtues to pursue. The four cardinal virtues are:

1. Prudence
2. Justice
3. Fortitude
4. Temperance

With our Baptism and these virtues, we become receptive to seven special gifts of the Holy Spirit, namely:

1. Understanding
2. Knowledge
3. Wisdom
4. Fear of the Lord
5. Counsel
6. Piety
7. Fortitude

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* urges us to remember that the human virtues have their roots “in the theological virtues, which adapt man’s faculties for participation in the divine nature” (1812).

Hope: Our Anchor

Clare

Having lived on two sailboats, I can tell you how marvelous an anchor is. Such a small tool to do such an enormous task! Anchors don't simply hold a boat in place. They secure a boat to keep her from foundering on rocks, on treacherous lee shores (downwind places), in roaring winds and in crashing seas. They hold the vessel fast.

Hope anchors us. In Christian tradition, an anchor symbolizes hope:

So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he interposed with an oath, so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God should prove false, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek. (Hebrews 6:17-20)

Hope is the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit. "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful." "The Holy Spirit . . . he poured out upon us richly

through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life.” (*Catechism*, 1817)

While bleak times can demoralize us, we must call on God to fill us with the hope that keeps us ever mindful of his grace and protection. This hope cultivates in us magnanimity (a confidence to do great things in God) and humility (a recognition that one’s gifts come from God). We sin against hope when we presume (take for granted God’s goodness or believe we can succeed without God) or despair (give up on God’s grace).

In All Things Hope

*Yes, I have spoken, I will accomplish it;
I have planned it, and I will do it.
Listen to me, you fainthearted,
far from the victory of justice:
I am bringing on that victory, it is not far off,
my salvation shall not tarry.*

—Isaiah 46:11-13, NABRE

Andrea

God’s time.
God’s promises.
God’s faithfulness.
God’s ability.

My doubt.

“Fainthearted.” The word describes me. My heart lacks the needed strength. My love lacks the needed courage. My heart faints, flounders. It surrenders to worries and anxieties instead of to the surpassing strength of God.

You who seem far off but are not. “It is not far off, my salvation shall not tarry” (Isaiah 46:13). So often I have experienced this: lack of hope, lack of faith that God will come through, that whatever seemingly unbearable situation I’m facing will end. Then suddenly, I meet *restoration*. Only in retrospect do I recognize that this relief hid just around the corner, that salvation was almost there.

During a struggle, I’ve sometimes tasted the grace of hope: *This will not last forever. The Lord has an end to this suffering in store. His salvation is near. God is able. He keeps his promises.*

Those days are gifts, and they keep me moving forward. On other days, I’ve heard instead the nagging voice of the deceiver: *God has abandoned you to this fate. There is no end. God might be able, but he’s not willing to save you. You’re never going to feel whole.*

Those thoughts don’t strengthen me. They give instead a *false* sense of strength; they give *calluses*. These calluses ready me for more days of disappointment, more seemingly fruitless novenas, more deep-down aching. They also close me off and construct walls between me and God.

Hope is so, so hard. It requires vulnerability. It doesn’t involve protective calluses. It requires us to *feel*. Feel the pain, feel the disappointment, feel the longing. Feeling means keeping our hearts

open to God. “*How long, LORD?*” (Psalm 13:2, NABRE). We make the ancient cry. Our hearts must *ache* instead of hardening.

Hope allows the pain; hope accepts the suffering. Hope cries out, submits itself to scourges, undergoes the beatings, and bears the shame. Hope keeps walking, stumbling forward.

You who seem “far from the victory of justice. . . . it is not far off, my salvation shall not tarry (Isaiah 46:12, 13).

Hope is the virtue of the cross, the grace of Calvary. Mary and John look at the cross; Jesus suffers the cross—*You who seem “far from the victory of justice”*—they hope the truth: God is able. God’s salvation will not tarry.

Hope waits through the night of Good Friday into the dawn of Easter. It persists through Holy Saturday, looking at death, at a tomb closed tight, still expecting the God of the impossible to bring forth life.

Hope remains faithful in all things.

What Would You Give for Your Life?

Jesus “came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). He goes on to say, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (10:11).

Our lives are precious to us, as they should be. We don’t like to think about their fragility and their briefness. But if there’s one thing we can all say for sure, it’s that someday we will die. But here’s the thing: that’s why Jesus is such *good* news! He offers to save us, if we’ll let him.

Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life?" (Matthew 16:24-26)

What is more important than your life? If you put things into proper perspective, probably only the most beloved relatives or causes seem worth dying for. And yet most of us hand over our lives to foods, money, status, habits, and even addictions that slowly kill us. Even worse, we allow sin to creep in and tear us apart from the inside out. Self-denial is hard, and carrying the cross is hard. Following Jesus isn't easy. But is it worth it? What use is it to have the whole world but not your life?

Jesus makes good on his word. He is willing, and in fact does lay down his life in order to save us from death. The question is: are you willing to lay down your own life in order to save it?

Fully Alive

Andrea

My husband tells me that when he hikes and reaches the pinnacle of a mountain, he feels *more alive*. I know what he means, and yet, I can't help but think, isn't life sort of a binary thing? Like either you're breathing or you're not? Yet I too can point to times in my life when I felt like the walking dead, still breathing in and out, but listless and without direction. Maybe it's not so straightforward.

We recently considered Jesus' promise that "whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25). Was Jesus asking people to literally sacrifice their lives for his sake? Many martyrs have done just that. But "losing your life" for Christ's sake has an additional definition. When St. Paul tells the Romans, "We were buried therefore with [Jesus] by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4), he's not only talking about the resurrection. The "death" to the old life and walking in a "newness of life" are not only for after you stop breathing. You can have this newness *now*.

We hope you've never been part of an argument in which one party used the strong words "You're dead to me!" The phrase suggests that, for the speaker, the hearer no longer exists, no longer matters, and is completely cut off. When we follow Jesus—when we agree to take up our crosses and follow him and when we say we're all in—we say to our selfishness and to our sin, "You're dead to me!"

The death [Jesus] died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:10-11)

When we're dead to sin, it no longer exists to us, it no longer has power over us, and we have completely cut ourselves off from it. Instead, everything we are and all that we have are oriented to God. We live only for God and for nothing else.

Action Step: The Particular Examination

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. (Hebrews 12:1-4)

Sin weighs us down; it entangles us. We can't run fast after Jesus when we're bound up by sin.

In past sections, we've discussed examining our consciences and our actions and preparing for Confession. Let's add to these practices the *particular examination*.

You may feel like you're always on the defensive when it comes to sin: trying to avoid it, warding it off, resisting temptation. A particular examination lets you take the offensive against a particular sin by preemptively asking for grace and for virtues that combat the sin you struggle with.

Choose one sin you want to avoid and/or a corresponding virtue to foster.

Every evening for two weeks or more, take one to two minutes to review your day:

- Did you avoid this sin/exercise this virtue?
- If you failed, ask for forgiveness. If you succeeded, give praise and gratitude.
- Pray for the grace to resist this sin/exercise this virtue tomorrow.