**Cutting to The Heart of the Matter**

A leader told us the story of “Lou,” a man he met in a small group shortly after joining their church. Lou and his wife had been in the church for more than fifteen years. He had been a deacon for a time. He had a wonderful wife; his kids were active in the church. On the outside, everything looked great. A few months of sitting in the small group did nothing to change anyone’s opinion either. Lou didn’t speak out a lot, but when he did, it was worth listening to.

One day, this man got a call from Lou’s small group leader. Lou had left his wife and kids. He had been having an affair for several months, and was taking some time to “figure out what he wanted to do.” He never came back.

How can this happen? How can a man sit in a small group, serve as a deacon in his church, seem like the great father in a great family, and then one day just chuck it all away?

**The Struggle of Self-Reliance**

In Habakkuk ([Habakkuk 1:7-11](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Habakkuk+1%3A7-11&version=NIV)), God describes the Babylonians as “a law unto themselves” (they do whatever they want), they “promote their own honor” (they look out for themselves), and their “own strength is their God” (they rely on themselves). **Sounds like many men to this day.**

This is the fundamental struggle of man, going back to Adam and Eve. Every moment of every day we choose either to live our of our own strength and be independent from God, or to depend on God alone and walk by faith. When we try to be independent, we sin. When we walk by faith, Christ’s righteousness is lived out in obedience.

The system of this world is almost perfectly designed to encourage men to rely on their own strength. It is easy for our projects and pressures to become more real to us than Jesus. **Instead of walking by faith, we let our strength become our god.** Then we become controlling, angry, panicked, bitter, defensive, proud, and withdrawn.

**Performance vs. Faith**

How are men successful in the world? We quickly figure out that we have to dress a certain way, have a certain job, make a certain amount of money, live in the right house, or have a good family. The focus is on external things that we can do or see.

So we take a man like that and plop him down in church. How can he be a successful Christian? He looks around and decides he needs to dress a certain way, use certain phrases, attend church a certain number of times, give money, serve on committees, and join a men’s class. Often we take a man from one performance-oriented culture (the world) and move him right into another (the church).

The problem is that in both of these cases a man is basically relying on his own strength to be his god. We end up with men who are focused on whether their external behavior matches some ideal, but who are totally disconnected from a heart of faith.

Men know how to play the game, and, if you let them, they will follow your rules to perfection. The only problem is that in ten or twenty years, like Lou, they will realize their hearts are dead. (See also: [*No Man Fails on Purpose*](https://maninthemirror.org/2019/01/14/no-man-fails-on-purpose-2/).)

**Why Is This So Important?**

True or false: “Every man does exactly what he wants to do”?

It’s actually a bit of a trick question, since it depends on how you define the word *want.*

In what sense is the statement false? Every man has good intentions on which he doesn’t follow through—that’s why the price of health club membership rises in January and goes on sale in March. And men often conform to others’ expectations rather than behaving how they might otherwise. Paul himself said, “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do” ([Romans 7:15](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+7%3A15&version=NIV)).

Yet there is also a profound sense in which this statement is true. At the moment of decision, a man chooses to do one thing over another. Even when facing outside pressure or temptation, he evaluates the pros and cons and chooses what he believes will bring the greatest happiness. Whether a man gives in to lust and looks at pornography on the internet or *finally* hangs the curtains for his wife, he makes choices based on his worldview and beliefs. **Actions are the last step in a process that starts with our attitudes, faith, and desires.**

Pascal said it this way: “Happiness is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves.” Jonathan Edwards said, “The will is the mind choosing.”

Jesus also makes it clear that what we do comes from our hearts. He says that “out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks” ([Matthew 12:34](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+12%3A34&version=NIV)) and indicates a good tree brings forth good fruit, but a bad tree brings forth bad fruit ([v. 35](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+12%3A35&version=NIV)).

He makes this even more explicit in [Matthew 15:18-20](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+15%3A18-20&version=NIV). Jesus says, “The things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man ‘unclean.’ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man ‘unclean.'” The external actions of a man are motivated by his worldview and beliefs.

We must get beyond performance orientation. **A man’s actions will eventually reflect what is happening in his heart.** Just like you can’t treat cancer by putting a bandage on a man’s skin, you can’t help a man become a disciple by fixing his behavior and allowing him to ignore his heart.

**BIG IDEA:** Discipleship is not about behavior modification; it’s about heart transformation.

We already know that no man fails on purpose, and you have no doubt known men like Lou. They learn to look like a man who is walking with Christ, but their hearts are not being transformed from the inside out. After years of conforming to other people’s expectations, a temptation or crisis comes along and they decide to do what they really want to do.

**True Obedience Flows From a Heart of Faith**

So how do we motivate a man to do the things God wants him to do? Not just by telling him to do them, but rather by helping him to *want* to do what God wants him to do.

As we’ve said, in our experience working with churches, the most meaningful change takes place in the context of relationships. Most of what it means to be a disciple is caught, not taught. Men’s hearts change as they “do life” together with other men. Many men have no real friends. Yet all men need someone who truly wants the best for them. This is why we say that discipleship looks like [intentional spiritual friendship](https://maninthemirror.org/2019/01/28/how-to-make-disciples-who-love-jesus/).

When you work with a man, consider these questions: “How can I help his faith in God to grow?” “How can I help him understand even more fully that his hope is only in God?” “How can I help him develop a deeper love for Jesus Christ?” A heart filled with faith, hope, and love leads to a righteous, obedient love.

**Christ offers men the ability, by His Spirit, to change from the inside out.** He calls us to stop making our strength our god, and start walking with Him by faith. Consider Jeremiah’s words:

*Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the Lord. He will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes, He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a sand land where no one lives. But blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.* ([Jeremiah 17:5-8](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Jeremiah+17%3A5-8&version=NIV))

As leaders, when we create a culture in our churches where God can transform men’s hearts, we’ll find more and more men moving beyond being involved in our ministry for what they can *get*. We’ll have men who desire to help other men experience what God has done for them.

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