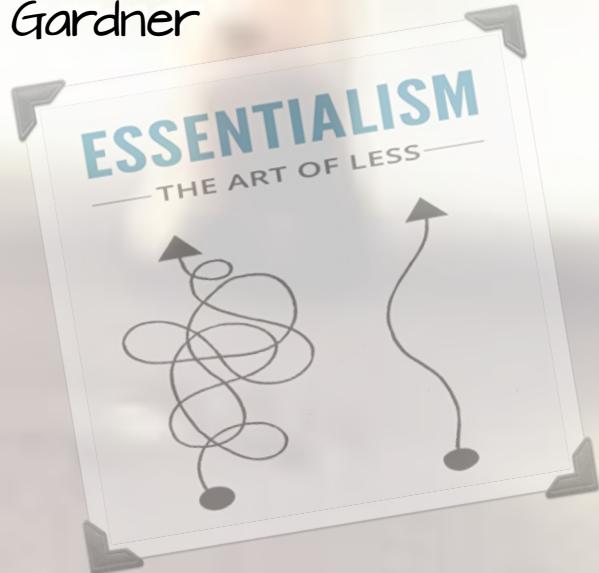


April 8-12, 2024 Edition

Following The Year^(s) Of[^] Jesus Part 119

Cultivating Essentialism

By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner



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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: This week we are going to be looking at what has become a pretty influential movement in our culture- essentialism. Essentialism is defined as "a belief that things have a set of characteristics which make them what they are, and that the task of human beings is their own discovery and expression; the belief that essence is prior to existence."

I like that- essence is prior to existence. I know it sounds new-age-y but not everything new-age-y is necessarily wrong or bad. In fact this definition is spot on (although I have no idea if essentialism is an important concept in the new age movement or not so don't quote me on that). Your essence- what makes you uniquely you- is prior to your existence. At least your existence on this earth. God created you for a purpose. That purpose is His gift to you. Finding and living out that purpose is your gift back to Him (and it's a gift for yourself too whether you realize it yet or not).

At its core essentialism is the decision to identify what I am here to do and then ruthlessly cut out anything that isn't "essential" so that I am living out what I was designed and created to do. It's the understanding that if I add too much detritus to my essentials then my life will be diffused to such a point that I will never live out the purpose God put me here to live out.

One day Jesus was teaching in Bethany at the home of Lazarus, Mary & Martha. They were very good friends of His and He spent a lot of time with them:

As Jesus and the disciples continued on their way to Jerusalem, they came to a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. Her sister, Mary, sat at the Lord's feet, listening to what he taught. But Martha was distracted by the big dinner she was preparing. She came to Jesus and said, "Lord, doesn't it seem unfair to you that my sister just sits here while I do all the work? Tell her to come and help me." Luke 10:38-40 (NLT)

It's like the opposite of the family feud in the Brady Bunch- but instead of Mary saying, "Martha, Martha Martha..." it's Martha saying, "Mary, Mary, Mary..." Not funny? Sorry, but my writing style is kind of free flowing and I never know where my thoughts will take me- today they took me to the Brady Bunch and Jan complaining, "Marsha, Marsha, Marsha..."

Anyways- in a similar fashion to Mr & Mrs Brady, Jesus tries to get Martha to take her focus off of Mary and onto something else:

The Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but one thing is essential. Mary has made the right choice, and it will not be taken away from her." Luke 10:42 (CSB)

At that point in time there was something more important than hospitality. It doesn't mean that hospitality isn't important. It is. In fact it's one of God's highest values that He wants us to adopt. But at that moment there was something FAR more essential going on in Martha's house than making sure everyone got fed. The Creator of the Universe was teaching about what it meant to be a human being. Mary was soaking it in. Martha would have loved to be soaking it in too but felt like she wasn't allowed. That's a big enough problem (one that all of us should probably be looking at in our own lives from time to time) but add to that envy or whatever emotion caused her to complain to Jesus and Martha is headed WAY off track.

Jesus gently but without apology corrects her hierarchy of importance. How would He maybe correct your hierarchy of important tasks today if He were here with you right now (which He is by the way)?

I hope you don't let this story make you think less of Martha. She was a remarkable woman that had a scholars mind. Just before Jesus resurrected her brother, Lazarus from the dead she would have a conversation with Jesus that is one of the most amazing conversations Jesus has with anyone in which Martha makes a claim that only one other person makes before Jesus' own resurrection:

Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask." Jesus told her, "Your brother will rise again." "Yes," Martha said, "he will rise when everyone else rises, at the last day." Jesus told her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die. Do you believe this, Martha?" "Yes, Lord," she told him. "I have always believed you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who has come into the world from God." John 11:21-27 (NLT)

Peter is the only other one to make that connection before His resurrection. Everybody's heard of Peter's confession- how many have heard of Mary's? I know I hadn't until I read it for myself the first time in my early 20s and I grew up going to church. Martha was amazing- you are too. But Martha had gotten her essentials out of whack- maybe you have too?

Tuesday Reflection: So if I was created to live a life of "essentialism" (discovering what's my most important purposes that God put me here to discover and live out in my life) then how do I go about doing that? How do I know what is most important? How do I know what is essential? A study was done where experts were asked how much time each day someone would need to spend to faithfully attend to different categories. Sleep, nutrition, cardiovascular health, work, family, recreation, etc. When all the categories that were believed to be "essential" were added up experts had told us that 36 hours a day were required to do everything well.

Guess what? You don't have 36 ours a day. None of us do. So how do we decide where to put our energy and time? Well, it all depends on how you think you got here. It really revolves around your view of God and what you think your purpose on this earth is. Since you're reading this reflection I'd wager you care what God says about what you're doing on this earth and what He wants from you. If that's the case then let's take a look at what Jesus said about this whole concept:

That is why I tell you not to worry about everyday life-whether you have enough food and drink, or enough clothes to wear. Isn't life more than food, and your body more than clothing? Look at the birds. They don't plant or harvest or store food in barns, for your heavenly Father feeds them. And aren't you far more valuable to him than they are? Can all your worries add a single moment to your life? "And why worry about your clothing? Look at the lilies of the field and how they grow. They don't work or make their clothing, yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are. And if God cares so wonderfully for wildflowers that are here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow, he will certainly care for you. Why do you have so little faith? "So don't

worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?' These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need. "So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today. Matthew 6:25-34 (NLT)

What does Jesus say about essentialism? He says there is one thing that is more important than anything else. Did you catch it? If not go back and re-read it. Go ahead. We'll wait. He talks about things that are pretty important first. Things like what we'll eat, what we'll wear and where we'll live. And then He talks about how those things (as important as they may be) are eclipsed by something else. The Kingdom Of God and living "righteously". But what does that mean?

Well, that's what we'll spend the rest of the week looking at. Specifically we'll look at 4 things that are absolute essentials when it comes to the Kingdom of God and living righteously. They aren't the only essentials but they're WAY up there. But before we get to those let's spend just a minute looking at these two things Jesus says we are to seek after above all else. First the Kingdom Of God. I always thought the Kingdom of God was something that existed in Heaven and one day would be established on this earth. Until then we were destined to dwell in the kingdom of wherever we found ourselves on this earth. But that's not exactly true. God's Kingdom exists wherever God is King. If I make God King over my life then wherever I am the Kingdom of God exists there. We will talk about what a life lived bringing that Kingdom down here to this earth looks like over the next few days but make no mistake about it- if you live a life of essentialism as defined by Jesus you will be engaged in bringing up there (Heaven) down here (earth)- that's what you were created for.

But there's something else Jesus mentions that we should seek first- living "righteously". What does that even mean? We don't use that word much in 21st century America. In fact it is most often used when talking about someone being self-righteous and not in a complementary way. But self-righteousness has nothing to do with living righteously. Living righteously means to live the way Jesus did. To bring the Kingdom of Heaven down here to this earth with my thoughts, my actions and my faith. Can you imagine a world where everyone was doing that? Me neither. But can you imagine how beautiful it might be?

Good- then let's start with ourselves today, shall we? Let's make a decision that as much as we can and as much as we know and as much as we have it within our power we will seek the Kingdom of God above all else and live righteously today. Then tomorrow we can make the same decision. And then the next day- well you get the picture. What will that look like? I'm glad you asked. That's exactly what we'll be talking about for the next 4 days.

Wednesday Reflection: Today we begin looking at four "essentials" as found in the Bible. If you're asking God, "what did you put me here to do" this is a pretty solid list to start out with and the first of the four that we'll look at today is transformation. You were put on this earth for transformation. In other words, you aren't yet what God has in mind for you to become. Neither am I. Neither is (insert anyone who isn't named Jesus here ;o)

But what is transformation and why is it important. Well, transformation is training and miraculous growth combined. It requires my part (practice, practice, practice) and it requires

God's part (growth). It is the only way to combat the psychological conditioning our culture exposes all of us to. Some of the things our culture invites us to are fine and some of them may even be good but an awful lot of it is toxic and destructive to us discovering and living out who God created us to be. And yet we salivate at the ring of our culture's bell just like Pavlov's famous puppy (or was it a cat? I get Pavlov and Shroedinger mixed up all the time).

Don't like feeling like you've been conditioned to do the things you do by our culture? Good. But you have. Unless you've engaged in transformation from another source. How does God's transforming program work? Simple:

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Romans 12:1 (MES)

We counteract our cultures conditioning on us by choosing a different way of looking at the world and our lives in it. And you can't just dip your toe in God's transformational waters. God's transformation is free but it'll cost you everything you've got. Does that seem like an oxymoron? I know it's strange but it checks out if you use the Bible as your guide. Transformation isn't like a pie where you have your life all separated out but you make sure one slice is for God. Transformation is more like the flavor that makes every slice of the pie different. If you're practicing essentialism then your family slice will be impacted by God's transformational power. Your work life will be impacted by God's transformational power. Your recreational life will be impacted by God's transformational power. Even your church life will be impacted by God's transformational power (gasp!!!!).

That's why Paul says to take YOUR EVERYDAY LIFE and place it before God as an offering. Try and make God a small piece of your life and transformation will always stay beyond your grasp. And that would be a tragedy. You may not know yet what it feels like to live the life you were created and designed to live out but once you do you'll recognize there's nothing else like it on this planet. The truth is this: God created you and put you here on this earth for a reason but you're not born fully formed or fully transformed. We've all got A LOT of growing up to do both physically and spiritually. The process may be mysterious and confusing and sometimes difficult and other times it may seem completely counterintuitive to us. But it always leads us deeper and more fully into who we were designed to become. We all need to face the fact that our Creator didn't just drop us into this world to find our own way- He has plans for us:

The Lord has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. Micah 6:8 (NLT)

And the more we find out what God put us here to do the more we discover our true selves and the more this life makes sense. But if we're not careful we'll never discover all of that because we diffused our lives with non-essentials to the point where all our power was lost. So how about it? Ready to cultivate a little transformation? Then practice today doing what is right, loving mercy and walking humbly with your God. Not just in one or two slices of your life but in the whole pie.

Thursday Reflection: Another "essential" that God has created you to focus your life around is love and love may not be ONLY about other people but that's a part of love that

many of us are failing at (if love for yourself or self care is more your problem then that's another lesson for another day because you can't love others to the detriment of your own health and sanity and expect to be any good at loving the people you're "sacrificing" everything to "love" so if that's your thing then get some help with that. Seriously- you need to take care of yourself first and figure out how to do that while still balancing love for others and love for God in there). Wow. That was one heckuvva run on sentence, wasn't it? Notice the very next sentence was only one word long? Yeah- averages baby!

Anyways, today we're focusing on love for others. You were not put here to soak in a spiritual sauna. At least not all the time. There may be times you need that for self care but often we never get around to the whole loving others things. But what does that look like? What does a life balanced with loving others and loving God while taking really good care of myself look like? Jesus. There's another one word sentence for you ;o)

Jesus is the model. He didn't just come to this earth to die for you. He came to live for you too and to show you what your life was designed to look like:

Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with him and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn't love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that. Ephesians 5:1-2 (MES)

Love like Jesus loved. Love God like Jesus loved God. Love others like Jesus loved others. Love yourself the way Jesus loved Himself. Those are the three legs of a life of love that if one is out of balance will throw the whole life into a place of wonkiness like a three legged table with one leg out of balance. Love your family. Love your co-workers (obviously in a different way than you love your family but still...). Love your neighbors. Love your enemies. I know, ouch. And while we're here let me just drop this little nugget I heard this week- when Jesus said for us to love our enemies why do we not think that should extend to the parts of ourselves that are our greatest internal enemies? Nobody grows in a climate of accusation and condemnation which is why Jesus never offered those things to those who were struggling in sin. He offered unconditional acceptance and it changed lives and changed the world. It still is. Maybe we should all take a minute and practice that kind of love with our greatest internal enemies and see what happens, hmmm?

Ok let's finish up with a study that was done on kids and parents. A study was done on what kids want from their parents. When the parents were asked what do you think your kids want most from you do you know what they said? Time. Do you know what the kids said? I wish when my parents were around they were in a better mood. Yeah- time is important. For some of us that's what we need to focus on- how to figure out a way to spend more time with those we love. But for some of us we need to figure out how to be a blessing to those we love not just by giving them more of our time but also by figuring out a way to show them love by being a blessing WHILE we are spending time with them.

This is Who God Is. God IS love. He wants us to grow to become more and more like Him. This is one of the essentials. Miss this and nothing else in your life will matter much. If you

want to practice essentialism as defined by your Creator Love HAS to be a huge part of where your energy is going.

Friday Reflection: I know I told you we were going to look at 4 “essentials” this week but I’ve run out of time and so we’re going to skip joy- which is a HUGE part of what you were put here to experience and to share with others. It makes like sweet and it is a source of strength but we’ll be talking a lot more about that as this year of cultivating progresses so we’ll finish this week’s look at essentialism by looking at our calling:

I urge you who have been chosen by God to live up to the life to which God called you.
Ephesians 4:1 (TLB)

You were put on this earth to do a job. All of us were. Somewhere along the way we’ve gotten it in our heads that the only Christians that have a “calling” are preachers or missionaries or some other kind of “professional” Christian. There’s a fancy Greek word that I use sometimes for misunderstandings this profound. Are you ready for it? Here it is: RASPBERRIES

That typed out word doesn’t really do justice to this fancy Greek word. Imagine the sound of somebody doing the raspberries spit and making it last a really, really, really, really long time. You were put on this earth and God has a calling for you. For some of us it will be to teach. For others to heal and to comfort the sick. For some it’s helping animals (ever hear of St. Francis?). For some it will be protecting the weak. For others it might be serving food or building beautiful and useful things. And for some it might be to preach God’s word on Sundays or carry God’s word to foreign places where they’ve never heard of Jesus. But we all have a calling.

Miss yours and you will miss a HUGE part of what it means to be you. Before I talk about my calling (and how I almost missed it) I want to talk to those of you who have young children right now. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve talked to a young mom or dad who feel horribly guilty because they’re not “serving” but they just don’t have time. I always want to scream BUT YOU ARE SERVING GOD!!!! YOU’RE SERVING GOD BY RAISING YOUR FAMILY AND THERE’S NOTHING MORE IMPORTANT IN YOUR LIFE THAN YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO YOUR FAMILY!!!! Too many caps? I wanted to make sure you didn’t miss it. Now one of your jobs as a parent is to teach your kids about the importance of serving God and living out their calling so doing some of that with your kids is really important but don’t feel like you’re not serving just because you aren’t serving in a traditional sense while you raise your family. Ok- getting off my soap box now.

I almost missed my calling. You know who made sure I didn’t? My wife, Judy. When I was about 33 years old I was drifting. I had gotten my religion degree because Jesus had saved my life and there was nothing else I was interested in studying. I wanted to know more about Him and the Bible and what that meant for my life. But by the time I was about 33 I had lost track of my calling. Judy and I had volunteered as youth ministers at a church in Anchorage for about a year but it ended badly with us being fired from our volunteer positions. It crushed us and the teens we worked with but I realize the adults were doing what they thought was best for everyone in asking us to step down. But it still hurt and made me decide maybe I wouldn’t be involved in ministry where people could hurt us again.

So there I was. A member of this church I now am a pastor at- but not a very good member. I came late to church on purpose so that I wouldn't be asked to say a prayer or help serve communion. I'd sit through church listening to my pastor preach but I had built up a protective shell around me that was tough to penetrate. So Judy started chipping.

For some reason I was sitting in the adult class one Sunday and made some offhand remark about whatever we were talking about and this lady at the church who was sitting right in front of me turned around and kind of looked at me for about 3 seconds which might not seem that long but when she's sitting right in front of you in Bible class it's weird and seems like an eternity. I wondered what I had said that bothered her. Turns out she wasn't bothered. She was impressed. She asked our pastor who I was and why I wasn't more involved. He directed her to Judy and the two of them started scheming against me.

Judy told me one day she was going to volunteer to teach the 4-6 graders at church. I told her I didn't want to teach the 4-6 graders. "That's not a problem- I'll do it. You don't need to help. You just take care of Jonathan while I teach." Well, if you know Judy well you might know she doesn't have a lot of extra energy to do things like that and I didn't want her to get stuck doing it alone so I told her I'd help her (but there may or may not have been a bit of whining to go along with my grudging decision to help her).

A couple of months later Judy told me she was going to start a teen night on Friday nights at our house. I told her I didn't want to get involved in teen ministry again. "That's not a problem- I'll do it. You don't need to help. You just take care of Jonathan while I do teen nights." You'd think I'd have seen her sinister scheming for what it was but I'm really not that smart (thank you for not shouting "AMEN" there- I appreciate those of you who restrained yourselves and for the rest of you... well, Jesus is always listening ;o)

So I started helping her with the teens ministry at this church. Before long Jesus had used Judy's gentle chipping away at the shell I had put up and I remembered what I had long believed to be my "calling". I felt the pull to full time ministry and because the church in Eagle River couldn't afford two full time ministers we moved to Southern California where I took a job at a church as the youth and families minister.

I will always be grateful to my wife for helping me to remember what's really important in this life. What's truly "essential". I hesitated to tell that story because it ends with me in full time ministry and so often we get the idea that only full time ministers have a "calling" from God. It's true that full time professional (or amateur or whatever I might call myself) ministers do have a calling but it's also true that so do you. It's just that not many of us answer that call. Which is why God is constantly on the lookout for anyone who will devote their lives the essentials He has called us to focus our lives around:

The eyes of the LORD search the whole earth in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him. 2 Chronicles 16:9 (NLT)

God is looking for you. If your heart is fully committed to Him then He will add His strength to your life and guide you into the calling, the love and the transformation that He created you to live out in the life He has given you.