

Living the God Life

John Botha, Willows Methodist Church, 2026-08-30

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Introduction

I want to start by playing you excerpts of two songs. The first was released in 1999 and the second about 11 months later in 2000. Take a listen and feel how evocative the music is — it really is *dance* music!

[Play LLVL-1]

Anyone recognise it? If not, here is the first bit of the chorus:

[Play LLVL-2]

That's just ... happy music! It was an enormous hit, and is still heard on the dance floor today. In fact, the original artist performed it last year at the 2025 Video Music Awards.

Here's a second song that just gets your feet itching.

[Play S(PY)-1]

Just like the first song, it has incredible energy, and just begs you to get up and dance. In fact, the words we just heard say that, being “Take the shackles off my feet so I can dance” ... but the song continues. Let's listen to it again, but this time the whole musical phrase, and those words should now stand out.

[Play S(PY)-2]

I just need to make a house-keeping point here: if you are listening to a recording of this sermon, the music is not in it, but you can easily find it yourself, because the extracts came from the artists' official YouTube channels, and the references are in the PDF.

Now, can anyone tell me the title of the first song? It was “Livin' La Vida Loca” by Ricky Martin, and the second was “Shackles (Praise You)” by Mary Mary.

The music of each song... and notice I am not talking about the lyrics now, just the music... the music is uplifting, even happy. It lifts your spirit, and that's great.

You may be wondering why I am doing this. Listen to Luke 7:31–35

Jesus went on to say, “To what, then, can I compare the people of this generation? What are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling out to each other:

‘We played the pipe for you,
and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge,
and you did not cry.’

For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’

But wisdom is proved right by all her children.”
— Luke 7:31–35 (ESV)

One of the books that really impacted me and helped to shape my views on life was written by John Fischer and is called “Real Christians ~~Don’t~~ Dance!: Sorting the Truth from the Trappings in a Born-Again Culture” — but that’s not really the title. To understand, you need to look at the cover:

[Book cover]

Notice how the word “Don’t” is crossed out in red and the same red adds an exclamation mark at the end, so the title becomes “Real Christians Dance!”

Jay Kesler writes in the Preface:

John Fischer is not a “flash in the pan” or a “Johnny come lately” to the gospel ministry. I admired his commitment to Jesus Christ in the sixties as he tried to guide the anti-establishment rage of “hippie” youth toward the constructive radicalism of our Lord. I now applaud his efforts to challenge the conservative, “yuppie”, me-first age with the core of Christ's message.

This book is not about dancing—it is about living robust, vital, involved Christian lives.

In the Foreword Tony Campolo writes

Jesus taught that the constraints of religiously legitimated cultural legalism had to be challenged. In this book, Fischer tries to follow in the footsteps of his Master and strike out against those same kinds of biblically ungrounded ideas which smother the joyful freedom that can be had in Jesus. When you finish this book, you probably will get a better feel for that freedom and it may be that the next time someone asks you, “Can Christians dance?” you will answer, “Some can ... and some can’t.”

Today’s sermon is titled:

Living the Good Life

Sermon body

To change Kesler's quote slightly: Today's sermon is not about dancing — it is about living robust, vital, involved Christian lives, and I want to start with the end in mind: our goal, which I believe is beautifully encapsulated in Ephesians 4:15–16

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him Who is the head, into Christ, from Whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

— Ephesians 4:15–16 (ESV)

This is one of the places in the New Testament where we are likened to a body and shows how we are meant to live together as Christians. There are a few parts that I want to highlight:

- Speaking the truth in love
- We are to grow up into Christ, the head
- We are joined to each other by each other
- When we work properly, the body grows
- When we work properly, the body builds itself up in love

The core of this is community — we are designed to work together, and that last part is key: when we work properly, the body builds itself up in love, which means one part supplying what another requires. Note, also, that growing up means increasing in maturity.

Let's take a look at how we can achieve this goal, and here the key word for me is "exhortation". This might not be a well-known word for some, so here is a quick definition, taken from the Bible Hub site:

Exhortation refers to the act of encouraging, urging, or admonishing someone toward a particular course of action or toward greater devotion to truth. In Scripture, the term often translates the Greek word "paraklēsis" (παράκλησις), which conveys ideas of comfort, encouragement, counsel, and earnest urging. This ties closely to "parakaleō" (παρακαλέω), meaning "to call alongside," reflecting the idea of coming alongside another person to offer loving encouragement or serious admonition.

...

Through urging one another toward greater devotion, truthfulness, and perseverance, exhortation sustains the believer on the path of discipleship.

Wouldn't you love to be sustained on the path of discipleship? I know that I would! The thing is, that requires other people by definition. So again, it is the community at work that makes exhortation possible, and the key is that first point: speaking the truth in love. That prevents exhortation from being "telling people what they ought to do." Its ultimate concern is becoming like Christ and the health of the body.

With the text of Ephesians 4:15–16 as goal, I want to look at Galatians 6:1–5 as a model to help attain to this goal.

Brothers and sisters, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.

But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbour. For each will have to bear his own load.

— Galatians 6:1–6 (ESV)

Let's look at the main points.

Brothers and sisters, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.

After seeing that the goal is restoration, our first point of focus are the words “caught in”. We are not here speaking of a slip-up, of an accident. No, this is an on-going *problem*. It is something that is going to take *work* to *correct*. Most likely the person knows there is something wrong and might even have a really good idea what to do about it, but there is another possibility to consider: they might not realise how serious it actually is. Jesus's saying about taking the log out of your own eye before trying to deal with the speck in someone else's eye comes to mind.

Next, notice that needing to restore means that something has broken — this problem has led to consequences, to separation. Restoration should re-establish fellowship: both with God and with other people.

So who are those “who are spiritual”? Thayer's Greek Lexicon says that it is someone who “is filled with and governed by the Spirit of God”. Furthermore, this restoration should be done “in a spirit of gentleness” so that there is true exhortation. Importantly, you should go in with your eyes wide open, or you, too, could end up in a similar situation. This would be of particular concern when you first need to gain the other person's trust in order to help them.

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.

We have now moved on from the person caught up in a transgression and are looking at someone who is burdened. The Greek word used here mean a load which pushes one down, and here it is clearly something the other person cannot cope with alone. Also, the verb (bear) is in the present tense, so it is something that has to be done *right now*.

What is “the law of Christ”? Well, in John 13:34 Jesus said “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.” In the context of a burden the other person can't bear alone, this is clearly something with which they need help. It might be for the long haul, so be prepared to go alongside them.

Lastly, humility is part and parcel of this exercise; you simply cannot come across as superior or judgemental. Remember that this is exhortation, and not a reprimand.

But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbour.

This is such an important point. Yes, you need to be growing, and yes, you need to improve. Your reference for that growth, however, is how *you* are doing, not how someone else is doing. Test *your* work against God's standard. There is no point in comparing yourself to another.

For each will have to bear his own load.

This seems to contradict "Bear one another's burdens". Once we understand the different Greek words used, the apparent contradiction disappears. The word for "load" means something else entirely. As used here, it refers to a future event that each of us has to do.

The word for "load" has a few meanings. It can refer to the load of a ship, or to the invoice of something which was ordered, or to a task which has been assigned or a service which has to be rendered. Except for the load of a ship (which I don't think is in view here), this refers to the result of a decision or decisions that you made and in a sense the chickens have now come home to roost. In other words, you need to bring your part.

So we can see that while someone might be in a bad situation, in this instance it is one of their own making, and should not be someone else's *burden*. Yes, of course you can help, but watch out so that it doesn't become something that just keeps on repeating.

In this section I have spoken of helping in a spirit of gentleness someone who is caught up in a transgression, all the while making sure that you don't fall into a trap of your own. We fulfil the law of Christ when we bear one another's burdens, but in that and the previous case we need to remain humble. All the while we should be controlled by The Holy Spirit.

It helps us to remain humble to test our own work and not that of anyone else, because we have to bear the results of our own decisions.

Conclusion

These have been generic points and I now want to return to the two musical examples from the beginning of the sermon. The reason I used these two songs is not to speak about music as such, but to provide a practical example of where and how this general approach can be applied, because people can be *very* judgemental about music that they don't like... sadly, often in a religious context. I pointed out that musical style is really neither here nor there. Sure, we might not *like* some styles, but that's our own dislike. Styles of music are just that — styles — and yet many of us have experienced being on either the receiving or the giving end of criticising musical style in the context of it being “Christian” or not.

This maxim is very helpful:

In necessary things: unity
In uncertain things: liberty
In all things: charity

The reason I mention this is that when you start speaking into the lives of others you need to be very sure whether what you perceive as a problem is a necessary thing or an uncertain thing. Even so, you should be full of grace and love.

When I made the point that the *music* of each song was uplifting (which is pretty obvious when you listen to it!) I purposely pointed out that I was not talking about the lyrics.

The thing with *songs* is that generally the words convey the *meaning* of the song — what the song is *about* — and for some songs there is a massive disconnect. Here are some of the lyrics of the “Shackles” song by Mary Mary:

Take the shackles off my feet so I can dance
I just wanna praise You
I just wanna praise You
You broke the chains now I can lift my hands
And I'm gonna praise You
I'm gonna praise You

Yes, it's a Christian group, and they are singing about dancing and praising God.

In considerable contrast, here are some of the lyrics of the Ricky Martin song (it's title, by the way, means “Living the Crazy Life”):

She's into superstitions
black cats and voodoo dolls
I feel a premonition
that girl's gonna make me fall
...
She'll make you live her crazy life
but she'll take away your pain
Like a bullet to your brain
Come on!

This is one of those areas where wisdom (read: maturity) is required. It should be obvious that the Mary Mary song is no problem, but the Ricky Martin one is a very different

kettle of fish. In my personal view the *music* is fine, but it's clear that the lyrics definitely are not — how can you sing that? What is it are saying? The rest of the lyric makes it clear that it is not a warning against the crazy life, but rather an invitation to live the crazy life.

But: Real Christians Dance! There is nothing wrong with dancing: the Bible is full of believers dancing before The Lord. There is nothing wrong with enjoying music, enjoying art, enjoying sport, enjoying games, enjoying time spent with friends, enjoying food, ... enjoying *life*! Sadly many Christians seem to have a knack of looking at what Satan has defiled and then condemning and prohibiting the original as well as Satan's tainted copy. Here dancing is the prime example, but there are many others.

When a youth group wants to hold a party, rejoice! They want to have fun — part of the good life, not the crazy one. And there is more than enough great Christian music available to which they can dance to their heart's content. They might need the gentle guidance of someone spiritual who is knowledgeable about music, but maybe not much.

I know that most of us in this room have probably never listened to anything like this, or even know that these are musical styles, but there is a lot of Christian music in these styles: Trance, Dubstep, EDM, Afro House, Deep House, Techno, to name but a few. Then there are the better-known styles such as Rock, Jazz, Blues, Folk, Country, ... the list goes on, but my point is simply this: we should rejoice when Christians get involved in artistic expression. The Word is clear: *every* good and perfect gift is from above — whether or not you like the style is immaterial. Of course, there are styles where depicting blood and gore is part of the style, so use your discernment, your maturity.

All of this to say that when we speak into another's life we should be very sure not only to be emphatic about the essentials, but not to shy away from doing so, either. Wisdom, however, will be required to help them in areas of weakness, and here a close reading of Romans chapter 14 is a very good idea. That is Romans, chapter 14. While you may be strong in a particular area, they may be weak, and the exercise of your freedom should not cause them to stumble. On the other hand, they should grow, and here you might be able to help.

This has been a lot to digest, so again, if you want to go back to some of this, the PDF is already up on our web site, willows.org.za.

As we pray, will the worship team come up, please?

Thank You, God, for the blueprints You give us in You Word. Lord, You have laid in our hearts both the desire and the need to express ourselves not just in words, but in movement, in song, and in other art forms. Help us to recognise Your gifting in all of this, O Lord. Guide us, God into how to use these gifts for Your glory, and to express beauty and harmony as opposed to ugliness and dissension.

In our dealings with each other, guide us to help others carry their burdens while we do not offload our loads onto others. When we do help other, help us, too, Lord not to fall into temptation ourselves, but to keep a level head at all times, leaning on You to guide us to deal with others in a spirit of gentleness and not to compare ourselves against anyone other than ourselves and Your standard, O Lord.

At all times may our gentleness be evident to all as we speak the truth in love.

References and Sources Consulted

- Encouragement: Definition from Bible Hub: Accessed 2026-08-29 at https://biblehub.com/q/what_is_the_meaning_of_exhortation.htm.
- Livin' La Vida Loca (Pablo Flores English Radio Edit). Released: 23 March, 1999. Music excerpted from https://youtu.be/CN5hQOI_10 at Ricky Martin's official YouTube Channel, at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCGkkG-VYVXenlhVlqjH-9oA>. Performer: Ricky Martin. Copyright: (c) 1999 Sony Music Entertainment (Holland) B.V.
- “Real Christians ~~Don't~~ Dance!: Sorting the Truth from the Trappings in a Born-Again Culture”: <https://archive.org/details/realchristiansdo0000fisc/mode/2up>
- Shackles (Praise You). Released: 29 February, 2000. Music excerpted from <https://youtu.be/Jr8TC-qfCmo> at their official YouTube Channel, Mary Mary TV, at https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCk_OKWTCyen7Yr4gideyfkW. Performers: Mary Mary. Copyright: © 2000 Columbia Records, a division of Sony Music Entertainment.

Recommended Books

- “True Believers ~~Don't~~ Ask Why: Confronting the Questions We Pretend Aren't There”. See <https://archive.org/details/truebelieversdon00fisc/mode/2up>.

General Bible Resources

[Most of the original language information (including Strong's concordance) is via the Bible Hub site.]

This list is alive in that I update it as I go along — I just don't update all the instances of it, so see my latest devotion has the then-current one. At some point I'll probably put it on the web somewhere and update that, but for now this is it. Also note that I don't check each link for its continued existence...

There are some points in these resources where you (and I) may think differently. Just don't throw the baby out with the bath water — consider what is said, read widely in The Word, and pray to God that He would keep you from heresy as you continue in your study of His Word. Though I find the following resources useful in many ways, *each* has its points where at the very least I go, ‘Mmm. Not so sure about that. I need to look into that more deeply.’

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+1%3A1&version=ESVUK> is a brilliant collection of Bible translations. I tend to use the ESV-UK version: a solid translation in English.

<https://biblehub.com> is an enormous collection of resources. They have commentaries, concordances, Bible dictionaries, and more. Unless otherwise specified, this is where I get the information on the original languages. They have of late been encouraging people not to use ad blockers.

<https://www.blueletterbible.org/> packages of the same resources as biblehub.com, but has a completely different approach. They are also (currently) free.

<https://www.stepbible.org/> is an incredible resource if you want to look at the original language. When you use it on a PC and you hover over certain links you get more information without having to click.

<https://www.thebibleunpacked.net> is a rather unusual set of resources. At its core is a free book exploring core concepts of Christianity, but the book is available in seven editions. The smallest is just four 'pages' (each the size of a credit card) while the largest is 2,424 pages of A4 material. The two main areas are 'What to Know' and 'What to Do', which is an excellent balance. You can get an overview of the structure and topics at <https://www.thebibleunpacked.net/whats-inside>.

<https://www.preceptaustin.org/> is an enormous resource of commentaries by Dr. Bruce Hurt, a medical doctor. His work includes copious references, easing further study.

<https://soniclight.com/constable/> is the official site of the Bible commentary of theologian Dr. Thomas Constable, where that material is freely available.

<https://www.gotquestions.org> intends to provide answers to common questions about The Bible. While there is a core doctrinal point (predestination) on which I differ, there are many insightful answers.

These should be sufficient to get you going, but a word of warning: many 'fringe' sites (and some sects) go to great lengths to make their public / introductory material seem completely main-stream, so you really need to be on your guard.