

FOREWORD BY JOHN PIPER

*habits  
of grace*

david  
mathis

Enjoying Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines

“Simple. Practical. Helpful. In *Habits of Grace*, Mathis writes brilliantly about three core spiritual disciplines that will help us realign our lives and strengthen our faith. In a world where everything seems to be getting more complicated, this book will help us to downshift and refocus on the things that matter most.”

**Louie Giglio**, Pastor, Passion City Church, Atlanta; Founder,  
Passion Conferences

“Although this little book says what many others say about Bible reading, prayer, and Christian fellowship (with two or three others tacked on), its great strength and beauty is that it nurtures my resolve to read the Bible and it makes me hungry to pray. If the so-called ‘means of grace’ are laid out as nothing more than duties, the hinge of sanctification is obligation. But in this case, the means of grace are rightly perceived as gracious gifts and signs that God is at work in us, which increases our joy as we stand on the cusp of Christian freedom under the glories of King Jesus.”

**D. A. Carson**, Research Professor of New Testament,  
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School; cofounder, The Gospel Coalition

“Most people assume that disciplined training is necessary for attaining any skill—professional, academic, or athletic. But for some reason, Christians do not see this principle applying to their Christian lives. In his excellent book, *Habits of Grace*, David Mathis makes a compelling case for the importance of the spiritual disciplines, and he does so in such a winsome way that will motivate all of us to practice the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life. This book will be great both for new believers just starting on their journey and as a refresher course for those of us already along the way.”

**Jerry Bridges**, author, *The Pursuit of Holiness*

“David Mathis has more than accomplished his goal of writing an introduction to the spiritual disciplines. What I love most about the book is how Mathis presents the disciplines—or ‘means of grace’ as he prefers to describe them—as habits to be cultivated in order to enjoy Jesus. The biblical practices Mathis explains are not ends—that was the mistake of the Pharisees in Jesus’s day and of legalists in our time. Rather they are means by which we seek, savor, and enjoy Jesus Christ. May the Lord use this book to help you place yourself ‘in the way of allurements’ that results in an increase of your joy in Jesus.”

**Donald S. Whitney**, Associate Professor of Biblical Spirituality,  
Senior Associate Dean of the School of Theology, The Southern  
Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *Spiritual Disciplines for the  
Christian Life*

“So often as we consider the spiritual disciplines, we think of what we must do individually. Mathis takes a different approach that is both insightful and refreshing. Along with our personal time of prayer and reading, we are encouraged to seek advice from seasoned saints, have conversations about Bible study with others, and pray together. The Christian life, including the disciplines, isn’t meant to be done in isolation. Mathis’s depth of biblical knowledge along with his practical guidance and gracious delivery will leave you eager to pursue the disciplines, shored up by the grace of God.”

**Trillia Newbell**, author, *United: Captured by God’s Vision for Diversity and Fear and Faith*

“This is the kind of book I turn to periodically to help examine and recalibrate my heart, my priorities, and my walk with the Lord. David Mathis has given us a primer for experiencing and exuding ever-growing delight in Christ through grace-initiated intentional habits that facilitate the flow of yet fuller springs of grace into and through our lives.”

**Nancy Leigh DeMoss**, author; radio host, *Revive Our Hearts*

“There is not a Christian in the world who has mastered the spiritual disciplines. In fact, the more we grow in grace, the more we realize how little we know of hearing from God, speaking to God, and meditating on God. Our maturity reveals our inadequacy. *Habits of Grace* is a powerful guide to the spiritual disciplines. It offers basic instructions to new believers while bringing fresh encouragement to those who have walked with the Lord for many years. It is a joy to commend it to you.”

**Tim Challies**, author, *The Next Story*; blogger, *Challies.com*

“When I was growing up, spiritual disciplines were often surrounded by an air of legalism. But today the pendulum has swung in the other direction: it seems that family and private devotions have fallen off the radar. The very word *habits* can be a turnoff, especially in a culture of distraction and autonomy. Yet character is largely a bundle of habits. Christ promises to bless us through his means of grace: his Word preached and written, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper. Like a baby’s first cry, prayer is the beginning of that life of response to grace given, and we never grow out of it. Besides prayer, there are other habits that grace motivates and shapes. I’m grateful for *Habits of Grace* bringing the disciplines back into the conversation and, hopefully, back into our practice as well.”

**Michael Horton**, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California; author, *Calvin on the Christian Life*

“David Mathis has given us a book on the spiritual disciplines that is practical, actionable, and accessible. He speaks with a voice that neither scolds nor overwhelms, offering encouragement through suggestions and insights to help even the newest believer find a rhythm by which to employ these means of grace. A treatment of the topic that is wonderfully uncomplicated and thorough, *Habits of Grace* offers both a place to start for beginners and a path to grow for those seasoned in the faith.”

**Jen Wilkin**, author, *Women of the Word*; Bible study teacher

“I am drawn to books that I know are first lived out in the messiness of life before finding their way onto clean sheets of paper. This is one of those books! David has found a well-worn path to Jesus through the habits of grace he commends to us. I am extremely grateful for David’s commitment to take the timeless message in this book and communicate it in language that is winsome to the mind and warm to the heart. This book has the breadth of a literature review that reads like a devotional. I am eager to get it into the hands of our campus ministry staff and see it being read in dorm rooms and student centers across the country.”

**Matt Bradner**, Regional Director, Campus Outreach

“David Mathis has provided us with a gospel-driven, Word-centered, Christ-exalting vision of Christian spiritual practices. Furthermore, he understands that sanctification is a community project: the local church rightly looms large in *Habits of Grace*. This book is perfect for small group study, devotional reading, or for passing on to a friend who is thinking about this topic for the first time. I give it my highest recommendation.”

**Nathan A. Finn**, Dean, The School of Theology and Missions,  
Union University



# Habits of Grace

*Enjoying Jesus through the  
Spiritual Disciplines*

David Mathis

Foreword by John Piper

 **CROSSWAY**<sup>®</sup>  
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To Carson and Coleman  
May he give you a palate  
for the ancient recipes





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# Foreword

*by John Piper*



I don't even think David intended this, but his title and subtitle are a chiasm. And I like it so much, I'm going to build my foreword around it. A chiasm (taken from the Greek letter *chi*, which looks like an X) is a sequence of thoughts in which the first and last member correspond, and the second and second-to-last member correspond, and so on, with a hinge thought in the middle. So the title of the book looks like this in a chiasm:

*Habits*  
*of Grace:*  
*Enjoying Jesus*  
*through the Spiritual*  
*Disciplines*

*Habits* corresponds to *Disciplines*. *Grace* corresponds to *Spiritual*. And *Enjoying Jesus* is the hinge. This is loaded with implications for why David's book is worth reading.

The chiasm, and the book, and the theology behind it demand that *enjoying Jesus* be the hinge. But "hinge" only

signifies the swing position in the middle of the other thoughts. There is always more to it than that. In this case, the hinge is the goal of all the rest.

David is writing a book to help you enjoy Jesus. In doing that, he is not trying to be nice. He's trying to be nuclear. His way of thinking about enjoying Jesus is explosive. If you enjoy Jesus more than life (Matt. 10:38), you will live with a radical abandon for Jesus that will make the world wonder. Enjoyment of Jesus is not like icing on the cake; it's like powder in the shell.

Not only is enjoying Jesus explosively transforming in the way we live; it is also essential for making Jesus look great. And that is why we have the Holy Spirit. Jesus said the Spirit came to glorify him (John 16:14). The primary mission of the Spirit—and his people—is to show that Jesus is more glorious than anyone or anything else. It cannot be done by those who find this world more enjoyable than Jesus. They make the world look great. Therefore, the ultimate aim of the Christian life—and the universe—hangs on the people of God enjoying the Son of God.

But this is beyond us. Our hearts default to enjoying the world more than Jesus. This is why the hinge thought—enjoying Jesus—is bracketed on both sides by *grace* and *spiritual*.

*Grace*

*Enjoying Jesus*

*Spiritual*

*Grace* is the free and sovereign work of God to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, even though we don't deserve it. *Spiritual* is the biblical word to describe what has been brought about by the Holy Spirit. "Spiritual" does not mean religious, or mystical, or new-age-like. It means: caused and shaped by God's Spirit.

So the point is this: God almighty, by his grace and by his Spirit, does not leave us to ourselves when it comes to enjoying Jesus. He helps us. He does not say, “Delight yourself in the LORD” (Ps. 37:4), and then merely stand back and watch to see if we can. He makes a covenant with us and says, “I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes” (Ezek. 36:27). He causes what he commands. Enjoying Jesus is not optional. It is a duty. But it is also a gift—spiritual and gracious.

But the gift comes through means. This is why *Grace* is flanked by *Habits*, and *Spiritual* is flanked by *Disciplines*.

*Habits*  
*of Grace:*  
*Enjoying Jesus*  
*through the Spiritual*  
*Disciplines*

The Bible does not say, “God is at work in you to bring about his good purposes, *therefore* stay in bed.” It says, “Work out your salvation, *because* God is at work in you” (see Phil. 2:12–13). God’s work does not make our work unnecessary; it makes it possible. “I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me” (1 Cor. 15:10). Grace does not just pardon our failures; it empowers our successes—like successfully enjoying Jesus more than life.

This book is about grace-empowered *habits*, and Spirit-empowered *disciplines*. These are the means God has given for drinking at the fountain of life. They don’t earn the enjoyment. They receive it. They are not payments for pleasure; they are pipelines. The psalmist does not say, “You *sell* them drink,” but, “You *give* them drink from the river of your delights” (Ps. 36:8). But all of us leak. We all need inspiration and instruction for how to drink—again and again. Habitually.

If you have never read a book on “habits of grace” or “spiritual disciplines,” start with this one. If you are a veteran lover of the river of God, but, for some reason, have recently been wandering aimlessly in the desert, this book will be a good way back.

John Piper  
desiringGod.org  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

# Preface

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I make no pretense that this is the definitive book, or anything close to it, on the spiritual disciplines—better, “the means of grace.” In fact, I’ve been intentional to keep things relatively brief. Think of this as an introduction or orientation. Many important lessons are left to others to provide in more extended treatments.<sup>1</sup> In particular, I am eager to help Christians young and old simplify their approach to their various personal habits of grace, or spiritual disciplines, by highlighting the three key principles of ongoing grace: hearing God’s voice (his word), having his ear (prayer), and belonging to his body (fellowship).

This simplified approach, and many of the ideas developed in the pages ahead, were forged first in the classroom at Bethlehem College & Seminary, where I’ve taught “the disciplines” to the third-year collegiates. Next I made the effort to get the concepts the students seemed to find most helpful into article form at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org). The response was encouraging, and Crossway was kind enough to provide the opportunity to bring the thoughts together and extend them in this form.

This volume is intentionally half the size of most others on

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<sup>1</sup>In particular, as you’ll find throughout the book, I am indebted to three texts I highly recommend—two old friends and one new: Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014); John Piper, *When I Don’t Desire God: How to Fight for Joy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004); and Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York: Dutton, 2014).



the disciplines. I hope that some readers will go from here to the larger books. But I wanted to provide something shorter, yet still cover the major topics, in hopes of making a simplified approach to the means of grace accessible to others who wouldn't take up the bigger volumes.

However, the roots of this book go back long before teaching college and writing articles. Seeds were sown earlier than I can even remember by my parents and childhood church in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Every morning Pop was up early reading his Bible and praying before heading into the dental office, and Mom typically had her Bible open on the dining room table as she dipped into the Book during the day. I frequently heard refreshers on the basics in varying detail and depth in elementary, middle, and high school classes at church.

In college, through the ministry of Campus Outreach, I was disciplined during the semester and shaped by summer training projects. When I was a college junior, a discipler introduced me to Donald S. Whitney's *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. I began teaching "how to have a quiet time" to younger students in the context of life-on-life discipleship, and then continued doing so on staff with Campus Outreach in Minneapolis. These experiences eventually led to instructing college juniors at Bethlehem.

I must mention the incalculable influence of John Piper, with whom I have worked closely since 2006. For those who know his ministry of preaching and writing, John's fingerprints will be unmistakable in these pages, both in explicit quotations and in structures of thought and instincts I can't shake, and wouldn't want to. His 2004 book *When I Don't Desire God* is the place to find his most concentrated practical teaching on Bible intake and prayer, but gold nuggets on the means of grace, and his own habits, are scattered throughout his corpus, especially in his annual new-year sermons on Bible and prayer available

at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org), and his answers to the litany of practical questions that come through the *Ask Pastor John* daily podcast.

Just after receiving the invitation to publish this book, I read Timothy Keller's *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*. You will see in part 2, on prayer, that already I'm gleaning much from Keller's insights, and I greatly commend his book. My hope is that the little bit I have to say about prayer will point you in the right direction, and then sooner, rather than later, you will take it to the next level, and more, with Keller's remarkable guide.

### How This Book Is Different

I eagerly send you to the longer texts on the disciplines, but that doesn't mean I've written this book merely as a summary, with nothing distinct to contribute. Perhaps the key distinguishing feature of this book, in addition to its brevity, is the threefold organizational scheme we've already noted. Here we cast the disciplines not as ten or twelve (or more) distinct practices to work into your life, but as three key principles (God's voice, God's ear, and God's people), which then are fleshed out in countless creative and helpful habits in the varying lives of believers in their differing contexts.

In particular, this structure restores fellowship as a means of grace to its essential place in the Christian life. Piper's, Keller's, and Whitney's books focus on personal disciplines, and include no extended sections, much less a full chapter, on the role of fellowship.<sup>2</sup> In structuring this book in three parts, similar practices can be grouped and understood together, such that individual chapters are shorter and designed for reading in one sitting. My hope is that this will help you move toward application in your own practices by making clear that the point isn't

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<sup>2</sup>Whitney has made a good effort to compensate for it with *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church: Participating Fully in the Body of Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1996).

to practice at all times in one's Christian walk every single specific discipline addressed, but to understand the key pathways of ongoing grace and seek to create regular habits for these principles in life.

At Crossway's request, I've written a study guide to accompany this book for those who would like to deepen their reflections and applications. It is designed for both individual and group study, and is available in workbook format.

My prayer is that you will not come away exasperated that you simply don't have time to put into practice all that this book commends. Rather, in its very structure, the book aims to help you see how realistic and life-giving it can be to integrate God's means of grace into daily habits of life.

And alongside the emphasis on fellowship, this book also hopes to make the pursuit of joy more central, explicit, and pronounced than has typically been the case in many texts on the disciplines.

### **My Dream and Prayer for You**

My prayer for you as you read is that you would find the means of grace to be practical, realistic, and desirable in your pursuit of joy in Christ. I hope that there are many things here beneficial to a general Christian audience, but that there will be a special appeal to college students and young adults who are learning to fly for themselves for the first time in the various rhythms and practices of the Christian life.

My dream is that this book would serve you with simplicity, stability, confidence, power, and joy. *Simplicity* in that looking at the means of grace in three main channels will help you understand the matrix of grace for living the Christian life and create practical pathways (your own habits) that are realistic and life-giving in your unique season of life. *Stability* in that getting to know your own soul, and creating rhythms and practices,

will help you weather the ups and downs of life in this fallen world with the contentment that comes, in some measure, from knowing ourselves and learning ways in which we can help “lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet” (Heb. 12:12–13) and “keep yourselves in the love of God” (Jude 21). *Confidence* in that as you walk these paths, you’ll see how God is faithful to sustain us and give us “grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16). *Power* in that hearing his word, having his ear, and belonging to his body fill our souls with spiritual energy and strength for the pouring out of ourselves in ministry and mission. And *joy* to satisfy our deepest longings that will only be met in their fullness when we see the God-man face to face and live in perfect communion with him, and all our fellows in him, forever.

The note we will strike again and again, without any apology, is that the means of grace, fleshed out in our various habits of grace, are to be for us *means of joy* in God, and thus means of his glory. And so the simplicity, stability, confidence, power, and joy of God himself stand behind these means. These are the paths of his promise. He stands ready to pour out his wonderfully wild and lavish grace through these channels. Are you ready?



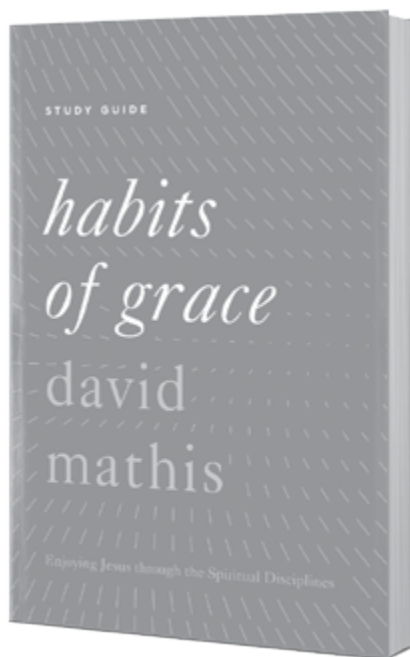
Everyone wants to be happy. Our website was born and built for happiness. We want people everywhere to understand and embrace the truth that *God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him*. We've collected more than thirty years of John Piper's speaking and writing, including translations into more than forty languages. We also provide a daily stream of new written, audio, and video resources to help you find truth, purpose, and satisfaction that never end. And it's all available free of charge, thanks to the generosity of people who've been blessed by the ministry.

If you want more resources for true happiness, or if you want to learn more about our work at Desiring God, we invite you to visit us at [www.desiringGod.org](http://www.desiringGod.org).

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**[www.desiringGod.org](http://www.desiringGod.org)**

# Deepen Your Understanding of *Habits of Grace* with the Study Guide



Developed for both individual and small group use, this companion to *Habits of Grace* features key Scripture readings, practical reflection questions, and prompts for prayer—equipping you to keep the gospel at the center as you develop habits that put you in the path of God’s grace.

Available Now

# *Hear his voice. Have his ear. Belong to his body.*

Three seemingly unremarkable principles shape and strengthen the Christian life: listening to God’s voice, speaking to him in prayer, and joining together with his people as the church. Though often viewed as normal and routine, the everyday “habits of grace” we cultivate give us access to these God-designed channels through which his love and power flow—including the greatest joy of all: knowing and enjoying Jesus.

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“Simple. Practical. Helpful. In a world where everything seems to be getting more complicated, this book will help us to downshift and refocus on the things that matter most.”

LOUIE GIGLIO, Pastor, Passion City Church, Atlanta; Founder, Passion Conferences

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TRILLIA NEWBELL, author, *United: Captured by God’s Vision for Diversity and Fear and Faith*

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DAVID MATHIS is executive editor at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org), adjunct professor with Bethlehem College & Seminary, and pastor for Cities Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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