

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

The Allure of Gentleness

Apologetics in the Manner of Jesus

by
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INTRODUCTION

1. When you hear the word *apologetics*, what comes to mind? Now think in the same way about *gentleness*. Dallas Willard writes that apologetics is a helping ministry to be done in gentleness (p. 2). How does this compare with your thoughts about these two words?
2. “Being mistaken about life, the things of God, and the human soul is a deadly serious matter” (p. 3). These strong words show how important it is for everyone to

find real truth. How do gentleness and guidance from the Holy Spirit aid in our helping others in an atmosphere of mutual inquiry and generous love?

3. Willard notes, “When we do the work of apologetics, we do it as disciples of Jesus—and therefore we are to do it in the manner in which he would do it” (p. 2). If Christians were to take this claim seriously, what aspects of contemporary apologetics would need to change? What could stay the same?

CHAPTER 1: BEGINNING TO THINK FOR CHRIST

1. Apologetics is a ministry that uses “thinking and reasoning in reliance on the Holy Spirit” (p. 9) to help people deal with disbelief in and mistrust of God. Our faith in God is where we start, but then we move on to knowledge and continue to grow in grace and in knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:5; 3:18). How do you grow in grace? In knowledge? How does your faith help you move into greater knowledge of Jesus Christ?
2. “The intellect is good,” Willard writes. “Our natural abilities of perception are good, and they are not opposed to faith. Please hear me: our natural abilities are not opposed to faith” (p. 10). Is this how you were taught to understand the relationship between knowledge and faith? How do you understand this relationship today?

3. “One of the greatest issues facing the church is whether we have *knowledge* or just *belief*” (p. 13). When you think about Christian beliefs, do you think about them having the same validity and relevance as math or the sciences? How do Christian beliefs compare with what you learned in your math and science classes?
4. Willard writes, “Everything that really matters in guiding life falls outside of science. Can any of the sciences or the scientific method tell you how to become a truly good person? . . . Science turns out to be only a portion of the much broader field of knowledge” (p. 15). What subjects and activities do you think are part of this “broader field of knowledge”? Can you “know” God, goodness, or love?
5. According to Willard, “People who are walking the path of Christ should be the best *reasoners* on the face of the earth” (p. 17). Why is this so? Is this how you would describe the Christians you know? Is this how you would describe yourself?
6. Willard presents the idea that truth is precious to human life in all of its dimensions, because truth alone allows us to come to terms with reality. He then identifies Jesus as being “the only solid foundation for our ideas” (p. 19) and discipleship to Jesus as being the key to reshaping our ideas (p. 22). With this combination, then, “we’re ready to think about the New Testament ministry of apologetics” (p. 22). Why should these be prerequisites to apologetics? Have you ever thought of

the connections between ideas and discipleship on one hand and apologetics on the other?

CHAPTER 2: THE NEW TESTAMENT CHARTER ON APOLOGETICS

1. Willard opens this chapter with a reflection on how to deal lovingly with doubt. Have you ever experienced doubt in your journey with God? How did you feel about it? Have you ever considered what Willard calls “the great value in doubt”—that it can “stimulate you to keep thinking and asking questions” (p. 27)?
2. According to 1 Peter 3:15–16, the true context for apologetics is our lives. When we live like we are “tied into the kingdom of the heavens, there is going to be something so obviously different about you that people are going to think, ‘What have you done? What have you got? What makes you so different?’ And *that* is the context for apologetics” (p. 32). Have you ever encountered Christians who live as if they are “tied into the kingdom of the heavens”? How would you describe them?
3. For Willard, 1 Peter 3:15–16 reveals that apologetics is for everyone because apologetics “simply calls upon a very natural ability that we each have—reason” (p. 33). How well do you love God with your mind? What steps could you take to grow in that love?
4. “Do you ever listen to the way people groan and carry on about life?” Willard asks. “There’s not much happiness in the world, is there? If you are truly happy, you’re

going to stand out like a sore thumb” (p. 35). Are you “truly happy”? If not, what might be standing in your way? How might your personal happiness complement or detract from what you tell others about your life with Christ?

CHAPTER 3: BIBLICAL APOLOGETICS

1. According to Willard, philosophy is “an attempt to figure out the best way to live, what the best ways *to be* and *to do* are” (p. 41). Is this how you understand philosophy? How might philosophy—understood in this way—be of service in the Christian life?
2. “Trust God *and* use your head. That’s the general advice that we have for all of our faculties: we are to trust God, worship him only, serve him only, *and* use everything we’ve got—our legs, our brains, everything—present it all to God as a living sacrifice and ask him to inhabit it and use it” (p. 42). Here, Willard presents a holistic approach to the Christian life. What are your thoughts about this? Would you describe your own approach this way? Why or why not?
3. “Christian apologetics is not an attempt to prove we’re right” (p. 46). Instead, Willard suggests that the goal of apologetics “is to answer existential questions and quandaries that hurting people face” (p. 51). Do these different approaches to apologetics produce different

results? If so, how would you characterize that difference?

4. For Willard, when doing apologetics, “we surrender our powers of reason to the Holy Spirit. We expect God to enhance those powers and use our words, under the teaching of the Holy Spirit, to relieve the burden of doubt from a troubled heart” (p. 50). What would it look like to more intentionally partner with the Holy Spirit in your approach to apologetics? What about your approach would need to change? What could stay the same?

CHAPTER 4: FAITH AND REASON

1. Willard notes, “There’s a vague sense of guilt [in recent American religious history] about thinking too much. There’s a sense of uneasiness about reason, as if it were somehow opposed to God” (pp. 59–60). Have you ever felt these things? Who or what made you feel that way? Why?
2. According to Willard, we face “a great temptation to believe that the natural, physical world is all that exists” (p. 64). Why do you think this belief—also called *secular humanism*—is so pervasive? What is at stake in seeing the world and our lives through the lens of secular humanism?
3. Review pages 67 to 70, where Willard addresses common misconceptions about both heaven and hell. What

was helpful to you in this section? Does your own understanding of heaven and hell align with Willard's? If not, where does it differ?

4. For Willard, the Bible “always presents real faith as something that is based on knowledge as well as something that goes beyond anything you could know, and involves a commitment to God and his kingdom” (p. 81). What roles do knowledge and commitment play in your own journey with God? Do you give them equal weight, or do you emphasize one over the other?

CHAPTER 5: COMMUNICATION BETWEEN GOD AND HUMANITY

1. Willard suggests that we know the Holy Spirit is present in our work when the results far outweigh the effort. How might this view of the role of the Holy Spirit inform how we do apologetics? How might this view also produce humility in us?
2. According to Willard, “What God is going to bring out of human history in his people is going to be the greatest reflection of God's own glory, wisdom, and love. That is what human history is about. It is to make a society of the redeemed that will be the crown jewel of creation” (pp. 95–96). How do you understand human history, as well as God's purposes for it? Have you ever thought of yourself part of “a society of the redeemed”? Why or why not?

3. Addressing the ritual of animal sacrifice in ancient Israel, Willard writes, “This is a reflection of the way God meets people where they are. He is willing to make concessions to the people he is trying to communicate with, and he will redeem them through the reality of their circumstances” (p. 100). What “concessions” might God be making today to meet people where they are?
4. “*To be a biblical Christian* is not to have high views about the Bible. *It is to seek and know and live the life that is depicted in the Bible*” (p. 106). How does this approach to the Bible strike you? Have you ever considered such an approach in your own thinking about the nature of Scripture? How does this reframe the word *biblical* for you?

CHAPTER 6: THE PROBLEM OF PAIN AND EVIL

1. “Some people regard the presence of pain in the world,” Willard notes, “as a peculiarly deadly blow to the Christian faith” (p. 113). Do you know anyone who thinks this way? Have you thought that way?
2. Willard writes, “It is only in the heat of pain and suffering, both mental and physical, that real human character is forged” (p. 118). Have you ever connected the pain in your life to the formation of your character? How might seeing your own pain in this way lead you to handle differently the difficult circumstances you face?

3. Willard notes that “the presence of moral evil in the world does not mean that God is lacking in goodness or power” (p. 128). He is able to handle this classic dilemma by placing existing evil within the context of the good that God can achieve by allowing moral evil. What do you make of Willard’s approach here? How might you use this approach in conversations with others about this common issue?
4. “The claim of Christ on the lives of men and women,” Willard claims, “consists simply in this: that he is what they ought to be. He is the unique embodiment of all those traits of character that we call virtues” (p. 137). Have you ever viewed Christ in this way? What virtues do you see in the life of Christ? Which of those virtues do you see in your own life?

CHAPTER 7: LIVING AND ACTING WITH GOD

1. “Sharing the good news is often about sharing the personal good news of your life in Christ and not the abstract and generalized good news. [People] want to hear about your personal relationship to this personal God, who is the foundation of all reality” (p. 145). Reflect for a moment on your own relationship with God. What about that relationship is worth sharing with others? What about that relationship is “good news”?
2. “I believe,” Willard writes, “the single most important thing I have to do is to encourage people to believe that

God *will* speak to them and that they can come to understand and recognize his voice” (p. 147). What is your experience with hearing God speak? What have you learned about understanding and recognizing God’s voice that you can share with others?

3. “You can get pretty good at recognizing whether a thought has come to you from God. For one thing, God will never nag or whine at you. By contrast, I have found that there is always a quality of nervousness, of tinniness, about one’s own thoughts” (p. 150). How do you determine whether a thought has come to you from God? What criteria do you use?
4. Commenting on prayer, Willard writes, “In our conversations of prayerful love with God, we must move beyond giving God a list of wants, needs, and desires and move into deeper conversations with God about what we are doing together in his world” (p. 156). If you were to adopt this approach to prayer, what about your prayer life would have to change? What could stay the same?
5. In the preface, Rebecca Willard Heatley mentions that Dallas Willard, her father, hoped this book “would help return the field of apologetics to its wise and gentle roots” (p. xii). On those grounds, would you say that this book succeeded? What have you learned from reading it? Has working through the concepts found in this book changed your approach to apologetics? How so?