

Finding Purpose and Contentment through Deep Connection with Jesus

KYLE IDLEMAN
AUTHOR OF THE BESTSELLING NOT A FAN

PRAISE FOR WHEN YOUR WAY ISN'T WORKING

Kyle Idleman, one of my favorite authors, did it again! Are you feeling discouraged or exhausted and don't know why? In *When Your Way Isn't Working*, Kyle offers questions that help his readers understand what is off and the *only* way that works. Kyle reminds us that Jesus is who we need most and helps us find a deeper connection with him.

Jonathan Pokluda, lead pastor of Harris Creek Baptist Church, bestselling author, and host of the *Becoming Something* podcast

In a season of restless discouragement and persistent anxiety, what we desperately need is not a new strategy for greater productivity; it's an invitation to deeper intimacy with the Almighty. Thank you, Kyle, for this beautiful blend of grace and truth!

Ben Stuart, pastor, Passion City Church, Washington, DC, and author of Single, Dating, Engaged, Married and Rest & War

We go to great lengths to manage our lives and control our emotions. But our coping mechanisms only take us so far. When the stresses of life press in, our well-constructed ideas start to crumble. We react instead of respond; we feel annoyed instead of compassionate; we tend to isolate ourselves instead of engaging with our community. What's the answer? Deepening our connection with Jesus. Kyle Idleman has written a brilliant, honest book about life, Jesus, and how to abide more deeply in him. Jesus is the answer to every question and the solution to every problem. The words on these pages are funny, accessible, and wonderfully insightful. You'll love this book.

Susie Larson, bestselling author, national speaker, and talk radio host

When Your Way Isn't Working is a clarion call to cling to the Vine. Let's be honest, we all need that. It's not necessarily that Kyle Idleman's exegesis is revolutionary; it's that his own transparency is convicting. He's not a megachurch pastor who pontificates but a beleaguered pilgrim who is vexed by his own longing to reconnect with Jesus. I'm in, Kyle.*

*Kyle's footnotes are worth the price of admission. Skipping them is like missing the water cooler gossip at the office Christmas party.

Mark E. Moore, PhD, teaching pastor at Christ's Church of the Valley, Phoenix, Arizona

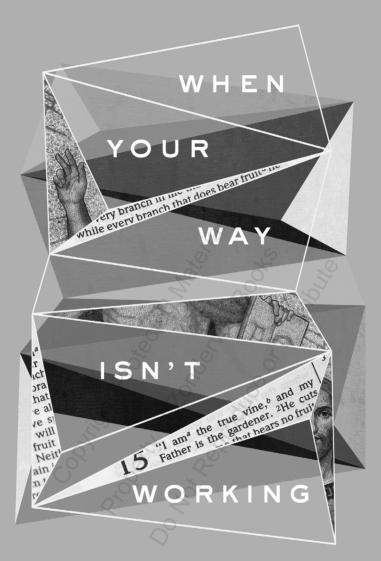
Kyle Idleman nailed it. This book is going to be foundational for people. This *is* the way to contentment.

Brant Hansen, radio host, author of *Unoffendable* and *The Men We Need*, and advocate for CURE International Children's Hospitals

In John 15, Jesus uses the imagery of a vine and branches to illustrate our need to be intimately connected to Him. In *When Your Way Isn't Working*, my friend Kyle Idleman unpacks this rich section of Scripture and explains how being connected to Jesus gives us purpose, perspective, and freedom.

Jim Daly, president, Focus on the Family

WHEN YOUR WORKING



Finding Purpose and Contentment through Deep Connection with Jesus

KYLE IDLEMAN



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To my Southeast staff family—
every day I am so thankful
to call each of you partners in the gospel
and that together we get to be Jesus' branches.

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SECTION 1: DIAGNOSING DISCONNECTION

SECTION 1

DIAGNOSING DISCONNECTION

Apart from me you can't do anything.

-JESUS





DIAGNOSING

have a friend who is an executive coach. I think you should give him a call."

That suggestion was made to me by a buddy who recognized that my way wasn't working. He worded it more graciously than that. He said something to me like, "You just haven't been yourself lately." My initial response was a combination of being dismissive and defensive, but deep down I knew he was right.

I have never been someone who is easily discouraged. I have rarely felt overly stressed or anxious. I have always been driven and energetic. For most of my life it hasn't been hard to see the potential good and keep

a positive perspective. But the last few months had been especially challenging and the people around me could see I was struggling. Meanwhile, I was struggling with the fact that I was struggling, which made my struggling more of a struggle.

The people around me had to *see* it because they weren't hearing about it from me. Not to brag, but I'm really good at not asking people for help. Like super good at it. I'm not saying I can go longer without asking for help than you can, but the fact that you are willingly reading this book is at least an indication that I'm better at not asking for help than you are. I decided a long time ago that I wanted to be a helper, not someone who needed help. It's much more appealing to be a rescuer than the person getting rescued. No one watches *Spider-Man* and fantasizes about being the person hanging helplessly from the balcony hoping to be saved.

I think it's hard for me to ask for help because I don't like to be perceived as weak and I worry that asking for help comes off as whiny. If there is one thing I have a hard time with, it's grown adults, especially men, who whine. I even have a Bible verse for that—Philippians 2:14: "Do everything without grumbling or arguing." I used to keep that verse posted on a wall in both my house and at my office, not so much as a reminder to me but as a warning to everyone else. If you're feeling frustrated, tired, overwhelmed, stressed-out, anxious, discouraged, or depressed, my counsel would have been fairly straightforward: stop feeling that way and do something about it.

That approach worked really well for me—until it didn't. "Don't whine; deal with it" was my way of dealing with discouragement and disappointment, but it was becoming increasingly clear to the people around me that my way wasn't working.

The suggestion of an "executive coach" came at a time when I knew I needed help, even if I wasn't willing to say it out loud. Ironically, I'd later discover I was surrounded by people who loved me and wouldn't charge me money for the help. But it felt safer to pay a stranger, so I set up an appointment. A few minutes into our first Zoom meeting, I was struck by a realization about my "executive coach." I was onto him and blew his cover like it was the end of a Scooby-Doo cartoon. "Wait a second! You're a therapist! You just call yourself an 'executive coach' so people like me will talk to you."

I talked to him about my feelings, the best I knew how. Without meaning to, I was suddenly spewing a bunch of frustrations. I told him I was frustrated with the things happening around me that were out of my control. I confessed to him that while I didn't feel burned-out, I sure felt worn-out. I admitted to him that I felt like all I did was disappoint people. Before I knew what was happening, I started to unload:

Everyone has an opinion about what I should be doing differently or how I could do it better.

I can't post anything on social media without somebody taking it personally and getting offended.

- My list of things that need to get done feels like a weight that's too heavy, but more plates get added to the bar every day.
- The people I care about the most are always getting my leftover energy and time.
- I'm in over my head. I don't know what I'm doing, and I think everyone around me is starting to figure that out.
- I feel like everyone needs something from me and all I do is let them down.
- For the first time in my life, I don't feel very motived or driven. I come home from work and just want to lie on the couch and stare at my phone.
- Even though I know God's grace, I feel like I'm letting him down. I don't know why he doesn't pull me out of the game and put someone else in.
- I feel discouraged, and I'm discouraged about feeling discouraged because I'm supposed to be the one who encourages people who are discouraged.

When I was finished, I was immediately ashamed. My wife would have been proud of me for being vulnerable, but I was sure I sounded weak and pathetic, probably whiny—although at some point, I definitely started to sound more annoyed. I have this thing I do where instead of vulnerably admitting that things are hard and I need help, I act annoyed. I say annoyed, but some people might say angry, but even angry seems better than whiny. It feels more powerful and less helpless.

My executive coach therapist went on to ask me a series of questions. (It reminded me of going to my primary physician, who would run through a list of questions to determine if I'm healthy.) He asked me about my schedule: "How are you sleeping? Are you keeping a consistent routine?" He asked about my relationships: "What kind of time are you spending with your wife? How connected are you with your kids?" He asked about my friendships: "Do you have authentic friendships? Or do you just have buddies and coworkers?" He asked about who I'm honest with: "When was the last time you asked someone to help you or pray for you?"

I was starting to get defensive. "Umm . . . I'm doing it right now, bro."

And then he asked me about my relationship with Jesus: "How connected do you feel to him and how much time do you spend praying and reading Scripture. Are you talking to Jesus about the things you just unloaded on me?"

I wanted to give honest answers to all these questions. I wanted to tell him my life felt out of control, like I was always under water, straining to break through the surface and get a lungful of air. I wanted to tell him I wasn't sleeping well at night because I couldn't turn off the scrolling list of things in my head that I hadn't gotten done that day. I wanted to tell him I felt lonely and that I hadn't been making time for the people closest to me. I wanted to tell him I hadn't been walking as closely with Jesus as I'd like to and how much I missed Jesus.

I wanted to admit that the way I was living wasn't working,

but I didn't say any of those things. Instead, I began to blame people and circumstances over which I had no control.

After my executive coach therapist had completed his questions and I had listed my answers, he asked me a simple question: "How would you say that's working for you?"

I couldn't believe he dropped the "how's that working for ya?" question on me. That's the question I ask other people. I don't do much pastoral counseling, but when I do, I almost always ask, "How's that working for ya?"

A wife tries to tell her husband what he needs to do
differently . . . How's that working for ya?

A father has been putting in sixty-hour workweeks and his
teenage son is spiraling . . . How's that working for ya?

A young woman is always on social media and everyone
thinks her life is perfect, but she's struggling with
depression . . . How's that working for ya?

You keep cheering for the Detroit Lions . . . How's that
working for ya?

I've asked that question of the middle-aged man who has all the toys but still feels empty. I've asked it of the alcoholic who is trying to get over their divorce. I've asked it of the woman who is always put together on the outside but feels like her life is out of control. I've asked it of the pastor who feels like it's their job to make everybody happy. I've asked it of the CEO who is killing it at work but is only vaguely aware of what's happening in the lives of their children.

"How's that working for ya?" is the question I ask people who need to make a change. My executive coach therapist asked it more gently and little less passive-aggressively than I would have, but I've asked the question enough to know it's a rhetorical question. The answer was so obvious that it didn't need to be said out loud. We both knew my way wasn't working.

I will somewhat begrudgingly share more of my situation with you in the pages ahead. But as we set out on our journey together, would you start by asking yourself that same question: *How is your way working for you?*

That question may be too general, so let me get a bit more specific. Take a few minutes to think through your answers to these questions:

- Would the people you're closest to say that when they talk to you, you listen well?
- Is it difficult to fall asleep at night? Do you wake up feeling lethargic?
- How do you spend the first fifteen minutes of your morning?
- What's the last thing you do before going to bed at night?
- What's the last passage of Scripture you read and meditated on?
- On average, how much time do you spend a week doing some kind of hobby?
- Are you constantly dropping the ball on basic responsibilities like paying bills or replying to emails?

- Are you having a difficult time keeping commitments?
- How many unread or unanswered texts do you have right now?
- If you're a parent, can you tell me the names of your child's teachers?
- Have you been more irritable and easily annoyed with people?¹
- Do you spend more time on social media or more time in prayer?
- When was the last time you asked someone for help?
- Have you experienced some weight gain?
- How many times in the past seven days have you exercised?
- Have you experienced an increase in backaches, headaches, or digestive issues?
- How often do you say you're too busy when asked to do something you want to do?
- How often do you volunteer or find ways to serve every month?
- When was the last time you read a book?²
- Do you get irrationally upset when the drive-through line is taking too long?
- Have you become more apathetic to things you once cared deeply about?

^{1.} If you're not sure, ask your people. If you get annoyed because they take too long to respond or you don't like what they say, you have your answer.

^{2.} You just started this one, so it doesn't count. Good try though.

- Do you increasingly find yourself wanting to be left alone?
- Do you feel your contributions and efforts are often unnoticed or unappreciated?
- Where do you go or what do you do to escape the stress and pressure you feel?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, how defensive and annoyed have these questions made you?

After my first meeting with my executive coach therapist, I was getting ready to start a new sermon series that would expound on John 14–17. Recorded in these chapters of John are the final words of Jesus to his closest followers before his crucifixion. This passage of Scripture is often referred to as the "Farewell Discourse." Four different discourses of Jesus are identified in the Gospels, but this is the longest and certainly the most personal. Jesus knows he doesn't have much time left on earth—his time with the disciples is coming to an end—so he has some things he wants to make sure to say to them.

If you've ever spent time with someone in the final moments of their lives, you know that the conversations are especially personal and intentional. The disciples don't realize that this is the end of their time with Jesus, but he knows full well what is coming. He knows the uncertainty they will experience in the days ahead. He knows the challenges they'll face and the insecurity they'll feel. He knows how overwhelmed they will feel regarding the mission he will

give them. He knows how people will misunderstand them and falsely accuse them. He knows they will soon feel wornout and weak. And Jesus knows that if his disciples try to do things their way, it won't work.

Doing things their way will create division and cause them to turn on each other. Doing things their way will cause them to feel discouraged with the lack of progress. It will make them feel like quitting because of their own inadequacies. It will leave them feeling overwhelmed by everything that is out of their control. Doing things their way will leave them angry with God and with each other, but especially with themselves.

In the second half of this book, we'll be looking at a number of key verses in the Farewell Discourse. However, I want to highlight one verse—John 15:5—as we begin our journey of discovering what to do when your way isn't working. We will walk through the context of John 15:5 in later chapters, but for now we'll let it stand on its own:

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

The phrase *can do nothing* captures the exasperation of your way that isn't working. You feel like you've put in the work but you're not getting the results. Despite your good intentions and maybe even your disciplined routines, you're not seeing the gains. There are other ways to translate "can

do nothing." You might say, "Nothing seems to be working" or "I can't catch a break" or "The deck's stacked against me" or "What's the point?" or "I've tried everything."

When nothing you do is working, Jesus gives a metaphor to help you know what to focus on, and it all comes down to one word: *connection*. Jesus says he is the vine and we are the branches, and as long as we stay connected with him, we will bear much fruit, but apart from him nothing works the way it should.

The word that keeps showing up as Jesus unpacks this metaphor is *remain*. The English Standard Version translates the Greek word *meno* here as "abide." It shows up eleven times in John 15:1–15. In his final moments, Jesus tells his followers again and again to *stay connected with him*. No matter what happens in the future, no matter how discouraged you become, no matter how disappointed you are, no matter how frustrating the situation is, no matter how tired you feel, no matter what trouble you experience, here's the one thing you must never forget to do: *stay connected*.

When your way isn't working, check your connection with the Vine. You are the branch, and the branch's most important job is to stay connected with the Vine.

A Metaphor and a Mantra

Jesus loved to use metaphors and word pictures to help people get their arms around significant and foundational truths. We see all kinds of examples in Scripture. When

Jesus wants his followers to understand how to live in the world, he tells them to be "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world," like a "town built on a hill" that "cannot be hidden" (Matthew 5:13–14). Jesus reveals himself as the giver of "living water"—the one who is "the bread of life" and "the good shepherd" (John 4:10; 6:35; 10:14). To help us better understand the nature and function of the church, the Bible uses images such as Christ's bride (Ephesians 5:22–23; Revelation 19:7), "God's household" (1 Timothy 3:15), and the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:14; Ephesians 4:15–16).

Not only is a metaphor memorable; it can take a complex idea and connect it to a familiar picture so that the listener continues to discover and apply deeper meanings.

While Scripture contains dozens of metaphors, only a handful can be called "controlling metaphors"—which, in literature, are metaphors extended throughout the entire literary piece. Think of a controlling metaphor as the hub of a wheel, with all the spokes connected to that hub.³ The controlling metaphor anchors⁴ the concept and conversation.

I know you may be thinking, *Thanks for the recap of middle school English but let's move on.* But don't skip over this. There is incredible power in identifying a controlling metaphor for your life. These metaphors give us common language, clear direction, and a firm foundation.

Some friends of ours who have been married nearly

^{3.} Bonus points if you recognized that I used a metaphor as a way to explain a metaphor.

^{4.} Yep, that's another one.

twenty years were ready to call it quits. They went to a marriage counselor, who asked each of them separately for their side of the story and took careful notes and then brought them back together. At the end of the first session, the counselor said, "Before you go, I want to read several different words the two of you used to describe how you relate to each other." He proceeded to read a sampling of their quotes:

She is constantly attacking.

He is always defending himself.

I make one mistake, and she's ready to go to war.

We've tried a cease-fire but it never lasts.

I feel like she's always *locked and loaded* and waiting for me to mess up.

Yeah, I *attacked* first, but it was a *preemptive strike* because I knew what was coming.

And the counselor told our friends that according to his count, they had used the word *fight* or some variation of it twenty-seven times.

He explained to them that the controlling metaphor for their marriage at that point was a war. Without intending to, battle imagery was the word picture they used again and again to describe their marriage relationship. Attack. Conflict. Fight. Defend. Oppose. Struggle. This was the lens through which they viewed their marriage. If war were

to continue to be their controlling metaphor, they'd keep responding as enemy combatants.

The marriage counselor explained that our friends needed a new controlling metaphor for their marriage. As the counselor listened to their story, he had jotted in his notes that early in their marriage, they would often go dancing. In fact, they had even taken ballroom dancing lessons together.⁵ The marriage counselor suggested that they work at switching marriage metaphors. Instead of thinking of marriage as a *fight*, they needed to think of marriage as a *dance*.

When my buddy shared this solution with me, my first thought was, *That sounds nice, but I'm not sure the metaphor switch is gonna work*. He went on to explain that they were, in fact, learning to dance together. I asked him to unpack that statement a bit more. "Well, we realized pretty quickly," he said, "that our problem seemed to be focused on who should take the lead when it came to different decisions. We were both trying to take the lead all the time, and that wasn't working. So now when I start to feel defensive, I'll say to her, 'I thought I was taking the lead, but I feel like you're stepping on my toes.' And lately we've been talking about how we need to find a rhythm for our relationship that allows us to move together."

A controlling metaphor of *dance* instead of *war* gave them new language, brought some clarity and purpose to their marriage, and opened new pathways for evaluating their

^{5.} Something I didn't know about my friend at the time but would certainly make fun of him for.

roles and responsibilities. Sometime later I had a conversation with their counselor, who told me the book *Metaphors We Live By* had changed the way he carried out his therapy.⁶ He explained that by guiding people toward finding new controlling metaphors for their struggles, he is able to help them gain a new perspective.

Chances are, if you've heard about controlling metaphors, it was from a literature teacher who talked about the use of extended metaphors in poetry. An example can be found in Emily Dickinson's "Hope Is the Thing with Feathers." For people who are metaphor skeptics, she is gracious enough to give the metaphor away in the first line. Take a moment to read the opening stanza:

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words
And never stops at all.⁷

Did you just whip through that? Don't do that to Emily. You can do that to me, but she deserves better. Go back and read it again. Slowly.

The image of hope as feathers that never stop singing is a powerful image. I read of one man whose daughter had become gravely ill. His discouragement was giving way to

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Metaphors We Live By (1980; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

^{7.} Emily Dickinson, "Hope Is the Thing with Feathers." Public domain.

despair. Someone shared that poem with him and told him not to give up hope. One day while out walking, he saw some feathers in the grass. He picked them up and put them in his pocket as a reminder that hope will never stop singing. Having someone tell him, "Be hopeful," might have been helpful, but the metaphor gave him something to take with him on the hard journey ahead. It gave him a different lens, changing the way he saw his circumstances.

That's what Jesus did for his disciples in his conversation recorded in John 15. He wants to give them something to hold on to when life is hard and nothing seems to be working. So in the cool of the evening as they walked along the streets outside of Jerusalem, he pointed to the vines and branches along the side of the road and said, "I am the vine; you are the branches."

For many years, sitting on my desk in my office was a grapevine. The vine came up from a large vase filled with dirt, and the connected branches sprawled across my desk as a reminder that my primary job description—the singular best practice for me as a husband, father, friend, and pastor—is to be the branch. There are a number of things I can get wrong as long as I get that right. And it doesn't matter what else I get right if I end up getting that wrong.

Language like *remaining*, *abiding*, and *staying connected* doesn't seem overly helpful. My preference is to have a list of actions steps and boxes to check. When my way isn't working, I want a to-do list. I want to be able to take control. I want to be able to put in the work so I can fix what's broken.

DIAGNOSING DISCONNECTION

Staying connected seems too passive. However, I'm learning that the personal practices that lead to connection require intentionality and work. Connection doesn't just happen.

When your way isn't working and you're not sure what to do, be the branch. If you stay connected with Jesus, you'll bear much fruit, but apart from him you can't do anything.

