

HOW TO BE A MINDFUL CHRISTIAN

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How to Be a
MINDFUL
CHRISTIAN

40 Simple
Spiritual Practices



SALLY WELCH



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FOREWORD

We can't see light—we can only see by light. The only way that we can see into what makes up light is through a natural phenomenon like a rainbow or a prism that refracts light into its various colors to reveal the beauty hidden within light itself.

With this timely book on Christian mindfulness, Sally Welch has delightfully provided a prism through which reality can be viewed. How can one be mindful physically, mentally, emotionally, and in how one behaves? These are questions and challenges that arise quite naturally.

In writing this work, Welch remains faithful to her goal—to describe what mindfulness is and how faithful followers of Jesus can live it out in their lives. Along the way, she manages to make this work both a spiritual journey and a practical pilgrimage for the reader. With its blend of biblical passages and exercises on mindfulness, this book demands to be prayed through and personally experienced, more than simply read.

It is also a pilgrimage that one does not do alone; it is an invitation to journey with others. The exercises urge us to consider our relationship with God and with our self, but also with others—especially the difficult people in our lives—and invite us into a healing interaction with them.

Welch displays a very creative and unfailing ability to connect the gift of our five senses with appropriately chosen Scripture passages and then to draw life lessons for us out of those connections. Throughout, the constant invitation is for us to just be mindful of our senses, honor them, and deal with them gently through mindful exercises.

Significantly—especially for those of us in a world so prone to the temptations that Jesus refused: possessions, prestige, and power—she invites us to be childlike, noting that, for Jesus, “children were the bigger picture.” That reminder to try to practice the mindfulness of children joyfully caught up with adventure, exploration, imagination, play, and learning is balm too.

The simple structure of weaving together the five senses with Scripture and exercises, and ending with a mindful way to experience the pattern that Jesus offered us—his Passion, death, and resurrection within the context of Holy Week—is both effective and creative.

We are also taught that when we are mindful we are honoring those parts of ourselves that need attention. Indeed, that may be the most ignored and least lived of all the commandments Jesus gave us—to love ourselves—and in pointing this out, she does us a service.

Welch’s choice of Scripture passages, and her commentary on those passages, is enlightening. Her knowledge of biblical and Jewish culture and history also adds depth and breadth to the book.

On many levels, this is a unique book very much worth reading, praying with, contemplating, and experiencing—all in a very mindful way.

- **SYLVAIN LAVOIE, OMI,**
Archbishop Emeritus of Keewatin-Le Pas

INTRODUCTION

Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." And he laid his hands on them and went on his way. ■ MATTHEW 19:13-15

Jesus has been teaching in Galilee, telling huge crowds the good news of God's love for all people. He has just left the region and traveled to Judea, but the crowds followed him there, eager to listen to his stories about the kingdom of heaven, to spend time with this man who knew so much about God and whose gifts for healing were becoming so well known. The disciples were trying to marshal the crowd, preventing Jesus from

becoming swallowed up by the crush of people around him. They were probably trying to ensure that he met the right sort of people too: those with power and influence, those who could change the way things were run, the “big hitters” in the area of religion. They were well meaning, this group of followers, but did not always understand—to them, the group of children and parents who clustered around Jesus were simply a nuisance. The little ones were getting in the way, perhaps their chatter and noise were preventing serious conversation and concentration on the important things. So the disciples told them to go away. It would have been easy for Jesus not to have noticed these no doubt peremptory instructions to the supplicant parents; it would have been easy, if he had noticed them, for him to have ignored what was happening so that he might concentrate on the bigger picture. But for Jesus, these children *were* the bigger picture. He halted his discussion, his conversation, his interaction with the adults, the influencers, the decision makers, and he laid his hands upon the children; the young, the weak, the insignificant.

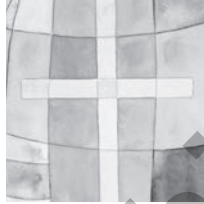
“It is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs,” he proclaimed, and then he simply went on his way, leaving the crowd puzzling over his words and actions.

Something of the very essence of Christian mindfulness is evident in these few short verses, brief in words, but highly significant in content. A compassionate Christ notices those people who appear on the edge of life, the weak and vulnerable. His heart is filled with care for them, and he shares with them the blessing of God, lifting them up as examples of those to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs, to the consternation and puzzlement of those who believe that the path to happiness lies in material goods, worldly success, and power and status in society. None of these things matters to children, who live each moment as it happens, rejoicing in the new discoveries made each moment—discoveries about their physical and mental abilities and about the world around them.

The exterior world is perceived as an enchanting and fascinating place, full of opportunities to explore and learn to one who can bring their powers of concentration to focus on the smallest of objects—an insect or a flower. The interior world opens up new areas of possibility and interaction to the one who judges people on their attitude and nature, their approach to others, and their care for themselves, rather than on the amount of wealth they possess or their position in society.

This book explores the nature of Christian mindfulness and offers an opportunity to reflect on various passages from the Bible that serve as springboards for prayer and contemplation. The reflections seek—through the media of the five senses, and an examination of the Passion—to approach Christian living in a holistic and mindful way. Simple exercises are given at the end of each section to help open the door to a deeper understanding of God and a more mindful way of faith. Reflections are included for each day of Holy Week, so *How to be a Mindful Christian* can also be used as a Lent study companion if desired.

The final section of the book—The Mindful Pilgrimage—offers thoughts and reflections on making a pilgrimage.



WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

Walking along any busy city street, it is difficult not to notice how many people look worried and anxious. So many of us live a frantic way of life that brings little satisfaction, perhaps driven by past memories or concerns about the future. The consumerist culture that promises fulfillment with the next purchase highlights the gap between the world that we strive toward and the world as we experience it. Driven by habit and automatic reactions practiced for years, yet never held up to objective scrutiny, our default thought patterns are in danger of controlling our approach to the events of our lives, leaving us tense in mind and body, unable to focus clearly on the world as it is, seeing instead a vision of what we fear it may become.

The practice of mindfulness invites us to see the world just as it is, without judgment. It invites us to view our thoughts simply as events that occur in the mind, not as reality itself. We may notice our thoughts and their nature, observing whether they are negative or positive without becoming engaged with them or caught up in them. Mindfulness enables us to step off the treadmill of the past and engage fully with the present. We learn not to anticipate events with anxiety or fear as we learn not to play out possible outcomes but wait instead for the reality to

unfold. We are encouraged to step outside the activity of our thoughts, to view them with compassion without engaging with them, noticing stress or unhappiness without feeling driven to act upon these emotions but simply observing them. When we can accept reality as it is, just at this moment, we will be able to approach it in a more balanced way, without argument, confusion, or impulsiveness but with awareness and clarity. This is wholly compatible with Christian faith, which encourages us to see ourselves as God sees us—with truthfulness, compassion, and love.

We are all aware of the close relationship between the mind and the body. When the mind is stressed or unhappy, this is reflected in the level of tension in the body, which may develop into actual ill health. An awareness of this link opens the way to an engagement with it; conscious relaxation of the muscles and sinews of the body can ease physical pain and mental pressure. This interested, detached approach, which is at the same time compassionate and yet freed from emotional associations, can be directed outward, toward the physical world that surrounds us. Mindfulness invites us to encounter the physical world apprehended by our senses with curiosity and excitement, noticing the environment that we inhabit, approaching it with interest, directing our focus toward the everyday activities of our lives in a way that enhances our awareness of our surroundings and provides a sense of perspective that gives proportion and balance to our experiences. With renewed confidence in our judgments of the world around us, we are able to remember the past and plan for the future without being trapped by either. Our experiences are precious and provide a resource of wisdom and expertise; our imaginations enable us to dream and be creative, but these are merely tools for engaging with reality rather than reality itself.

A mindful approach to life enables us to pause, to step outside our own heads, and to engage with the real outside world with all its fasci-

nating charm. We are invited to become more aware of ourselves and of others, to cherish our whole selves, and to appreciate the rich variety of our inner life—our sadnesses as well as our joys—appreciating and accepting our emotions with compassion and acknowledging them without becoming defined by them.

When we become practitioners of mindfulness, we adopt a holistic approach to life, which enables us to receive with gratitude the kaleidoscope of experience that is available to those who are open to the present moment. Mindful meditation opens up spaces in our lives and heads that offer the opportunity to think and feel differently and give us the freedom to choose the best way to solve problems. Pauses, breaths, and moments of stillness prevent us from becoming inseparable from our emotions, clearing our minds and enabling us to see reality. In this way we will in turn be able to offer compassion to others, patient with their faults just as we have learned to be patient with our own, accepting our flaws while refusing to be defined by them, and sharing this empathy with others.



CHRISTIAN MINDFULNESS

It is a warm afternoon in July. A group of people has gathered on a terrace outside a cathedral on a hill overlooking a large city. Below them the city is set out like a child's drawing, the straight streets filled with houses, tiny trees, and traffic moving in fits and starts as it pauses briefly at crossroads before joining the flow again. The noise of the city is faint from the viewpoint of the onlookers—among them is a silence that is full of expectation. On the terrace a complicated pattern is laid out in beautiful stone slabs; it twists and turns around a central rose, and if the eye follows closely the curves and bends of the pattern, it will be seen to consist of just one path, beginning at the outer edge of the pattern and opening out into the central petals.

One by one the people approach the entry of the path, pause, then begin slowly to walk, following the line of colored stones as they weave among each other. It is almost as if these people were dancing—a slow, graceful dance, full of thought and feeling. Some of the walkers pause when they arrive at the center, standing still or sitting or kneeling, facing toward the cathedral or looking out over the city. Others simply turn immediately and retrace their steps toward the outer edge of the pattern. As they walk, the people appear to become calmer; their steps slow,

their breathing deepens. Eyes carefully focused on the pathway ahead of them, some will pause to look up; others stop in their tracks, eyes fixed on the ground. Finally, each member of the group has walked the entire path from the outside to the central rose then back out again and has taken up a position around the outside of the pattern. When all are still once more, a prayer is said, and the group disperses.

They have just walked the labyrinth and, in the midst of a busy city, have encountered the stillness and calm that come from focusing simply on the moment. Letting go of memories of the past and anticipation of the future, they have concentrated simply on the physical and mental experiences of the moment itself, content to allow it to be what it is, without judging or criticizing. For a brief time, the walkers have ceased their mental commentary on the events that surround them and allowed themselves purely to exist, noticing internal and external feelings and sensations without giving them energy, being aware of their bodies as they move through the labyrinth, noticing how this movement feels and its effect on their emotions. Freed from the baggage of the past and a preoccupation with the future, the walkers have found the space they need for creativity and imagination, for interaction with the moment itself as it happens, in all its preciousness. In the moment of the now, God is to be found. God, who exists outside time, who is eternity itself, allows us to encounter eternity in the immediate.

Throughout the Bible, we are reminded of the fact that we will never encounter God if we are so preoccupied with ourselves that there is no room for anything else. We are taught to set aside our thoughts and feelings to make space for God, to allow the love of God for us to fill our hearts and minds so that we are no longer preoccupied with the past or afraid for the future, but simply content to dwell with God in his love through his grace. Jesus, in his struggle in the desert, does not argue with Satan but simply sets what he says aside. He does not allow his thoughts

and feelings to be kidnapped by a preoccupation with his reaction to the temptations of wealth and power; he acknowledges them, but treats them merely as the passing of an inconvenient weather system over the mountain of God's eternal and unmoving love. In Martha's resentful busyness, her need to be needed and appreciated, we see the perils of not being present to the moment, of allowing expectation and past experience to cloud the appreciation of the moments of companionship and the presence of Christ. In Mary's calm enjoyment we observe the joy of the "now," the relishing of precious moments, freed from clouds of obligation and past patterns into the open space of the new. When our attention is removed from the necessity of anticipating every event, of plundering the past to provide new sources of anxiety for the future, we will be able to see things for what they are, in the intensity of their beauty, in the perfection of their creation. Emotions will no longer enslave us, and in the freedom into which we have been released, we will encounter God. Once we have ceased to allow our thoughts to be shaped by patterns from the past, they can be transformed (Romans 12:2). Christian mindfulness enables us to move away from negative ways of thinking and adopt new habits of thought, ones that enable us to focus on the moment, to derive strength from the knowledge that, good or bad, the experiences of the now are the ones that shape us and reshape us, enabling us to see and hear again. The sacrament of the present moment is the doorway to the eternal and universal; an acknowledgment of our physicality leads to an appreciation of ourselves as embodied people whose lives have been transformed by the Word made flesh. When our minds connect with our environment, we can make the whole of creation part of our prayer, recognizing that God can be found in every detail of the landscape, his unique loving signature within every living creature.

Once we can appreciate each moment, each object for what it is, we will cease to become burdened by our judgments upon these things.

Pure enjoyment in all things, in all moments, will liberate us from a pre-occupation with having, gaining, achieving, and possessing. Mindful prayer releases us simply to reflect upon the moment, not relying on our possession of it to validate it or ourselves but simply to experience it, free from the chains of thoughts that habit drapes around the most commonplace actions. “We are God’s children now” (1 John 3:2), and it is in the now, and only in the now, that we can truly serve God because it is in this moment that we are met by him. Freed from the past and the preoccupations of the past, we can forgive the past and allow ourselves to be forgiven. Open to future events we can cease our hopeless attempts to protect ourselves from it in the shape of possessions, status, or power. We will not be able to avoid the storm, perhaps, but we will no longer be threatened by it, because we face reality in the strength we are given by God. The “sign of Jonah” found in Luke 11:29 is perhaps the knowledge that is the fruit of the acceptance of suffering with a calm mind, unafraid and clear of purpose. Willingly giving up our defended state, we join Christ at the foot of the cross, prepared to face suffering but not to be overwhelmed by it, observing it detachedly within the love of God.

Mindful prayer enables us to be receptive to the whole world because we refuse to be captured by it. No longer fearful for our own safety, we are secure in our knowledge that Jesus took our place on the cross so that we could take his place in the kingdom. From this security we can reach out to others, no longer labeling them but loving them, free to serve because we no longer need to be served or to be defined by the judgment of others. Honoring ourselves, with our flaws and faults, will free us to honor others, seeing them objectively but with compassion, our clear-sightedness not masked by our own insecurity. Honoring God within us will enable us to honor God beyond us.

The space that mindful meditation releases within us reveals that this space is shot through with Christ. We are the deep that we call to (Psalm

42:7), as Christ dwells within us. Once we are aware of the infinite outside ourselves, we will be aware of it within:

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.*

■ WILLIAM BLAKE, "AUGURIES OF INNOCENCE," XVIII

Soul you must seek yourself in Me and in yourself seek Me.

■ TERESA OF ÁVILA, "SEEKING GOD"

So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. ■ MARK 11:24

Through mindful prayer, we start from where we are and with what we have, and we discover that we have already reached our destination for we journey with Christ, our companion and our goal. If we release ourselves from the internal running commentary that is the backdrop to our lives, we will discover stillness. Within that stillness, we will find an attention to the moment, to the now, in its purest form. Within that "now" we will find God.

Let this presence settle into your bones, and allow your soul the freedom to sing, dance, praise, and love. ■ TERESA OF ÁVILA



40 Days of Mindfulness

The Senses



This first section of reflections is offered as a way of experiencing and practicing mindful prayer. They are set out in a way that honors our senses, those five ways in which we experience the external world. Through the media of sight, taste, smell, sound, and touch you are invited to engage with different aspects of mindful prayer, noticing also the way that the various aspects of mindfulness run like threads throughout the Bible. A selection of Old and New Testament readings are offered, as well as prayers from the Psalms.

The reflections begin with an introduction to mindful meditation, explored through the theme of silence.



SILENCE

“I Am”

*God said to Moses, “I Am who I Am.” He said further,
“Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I Am has sent me to you.’”*

■ **EXODUS 3:14, 15**

Moses has had a life full of incident. Saved from slaughter as an infant by the ingenuity of his mother, he is adopted by the Pharaoh’s daughter and spends his childhood and youth enjoying the consequent privileges. But he remains a Hebrew at heart, and in an overflow of righteous anger kills one of those who sought to harm his people. When news of this action reaches Pharaoh, Moses flees for his life. His time of wealth and ease is over and in his new life as a shepherd Moses settles down into obscurity. But God’s people groan under the power of the Egyptians and God “took notice of them” (Exodus 2:25). Moses is chosen by God to bring his people out of Egypt, but he hesitates, seeking further instructions—why should the Hebrew people follow him, a mere shepherd, a murderer, an outlaw? So God tells Moses under whose authority he will

act—that of God himself. “I Am has sent me to you.” The Hebrew word is YHWH. It has no vowels; it is but a breath, the merest expiration, no more than a sigh. But it is the breath that gives us life that sustains us, without which we would perish. From that first breath of God over the chaos of the universe, when the spirit of God “swept over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2), we have been sustained and supported by the breath of creation, of love, the sighing of YHWH who murmurs “I Am” into our troubled turbulent lives, breathing peace and calm, reminding us of his presence, his love.

Just as God takes “notice” of the groaning of his people under the weight of their slavery in Egypt, so too does his eye fall upon us, and he takes notice. No care or difficulty is too small for him, no injury or anxiety escapes his mindful eye, for God notices and into them he breathes his spirit, healing and redeeming. But the relationship is not one-sided, for although God takes notice and acts, he chooses to do so through the agency of one of his people, who must join with him in the act of noticing. The work of rescue is a partnership, a covenant between God and Moses. The burning bush is placed as a sign for Moses, but he must turn aside from the daily tasks and investigate this phenomenon. He must not allow himself to be so caught up in the necessary busyness of physical survival that he fails to notice the task of his soul. Once he has his attention, God speaks to Moses and invites him into partnership with him for the freedom of his people, but Moses feels unworthy, afraid: “Who am I that I should go?” God must remind him that he is not alone, that the task is not solely his but the work of God himself. Further reassurance is given in the authority of God’s name—the creative, redemptive breath that gives life to a suffocating world.

EXERCISE ► At some time today, you will probably discover that you are feeling busy, anxious, or even stressed. It would be wonderful if you